



THE
MASK

不员神记

原力

ORIGINAL FORCE

The Godsfall Chronicles

– The Fallen God Records –

- Book 2 - The Elysian (I)

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[RWX (Wuxiaworld)]

Prologue

The Borderlands

Year 1016 of the Epoch of the Gods, E.G. The dry seasons of summer. Nightfall.

The expanse of desert wasn't entirely desolate. Withered, yellowed brush sprouted from the arid soil, sparse in some places and thick in others. Dead patches were interspersed here and there, like scabs or bald spots. By their very existence the shrubs proved their tenacity while simultaneously underlining the desolate landscape.

When the wind blew it rustled the plants like waves, stretching for hundreds of miles. Chirps and cries of unseen beasts were carried over by the breeze. Out in the distance the light from a fire flickered like a solitary candle in the fading light. It came from the relic of what must have been an ancient sports stadium whose one half sprouted from the side of a mountain. It had since been converted into a settlement.

The settlement relied on the brazier and its fire for illumination. From time to time people would walk down the roads with pumpkin-like fruit that radiated light. Half-collapsed buildings lined the walk with finer ones cropping up every once in a while. Engraved signs hung overhead marking them as the church, the market and so on.

Pedestrians jostled for space, each one focused on wherever they were going. There were beggars in tattered rags, wild men covered in tattoos from head to toe, scowling criminals, and merchants in tawdry outfits all together without conflict. A common sight here.

The interior of the local bar stank with the smell of booze and perspiration. Unsavory fellows shouted boisterously and drank too much while compulsive gamblers bet away their livelihoods. Travelers occupied some of the tables, keeping a low key while they drank.

A woman entered. She had bronze hair and warm brown eyes. A voluptuous chest and full bottom delineated her curvaceous figure, further outlined by tight-fitting leather garments. Covering it all was a simple traveler's cloak. Even strides brought her directly to the bar where she sat and rapped her knuckles on the nicked length of

wood. She called out in a loud voice. “A glass of your most expensive liquor. Best you got, and strong!”

A few wolf whistles answered her from several of the more salacious bar patrons. The eye of every man were on her, following the lines of her attractive frame.

Her looks and temperament were certainly a cut above average, rarely seen in a place like this. She was all on her own, which invariably planted less than wholesome thoughts in the minds of a few spectators.

A man with a face full of knife scars sauntered over to her. He pulled a bag from his waist which clinked with the tell-tale sound of cash. “How much for a good time, beautiful?”

“Oh I don’t want your money!” The mysterious woman pulled out a black staff and placed it on the bar with a crisp bang. “You just need to have the balls to follow me home.”

The man’s face froze when he saw the simple weapon. One end of it was sharpened into a tri-edged point.

An Exorcist staff. She was a demonhunter!

Scarface backed off, gentle as a kitten. The rest of the bar went silent.

The dim light had hidden it before, but now the patrons could see the markings on her clothes, designs of the order – a wandering demonhunter.

Most demonhunters came from a civilian background without impressive family lineage. They rarely held military or sectarian office outside of their holy duties. As such they were only loosely regulated, following only the general code of the order and holy city. Typically they had the freedom to go where they pleased, protecting the peace, dealing with unsavory types or eliminating monsters. Sometimes they were called Monster Hunters.

But a demonhunter was a demonhunter, by any name. No one here was stupid enough to piss the woman off.

A glass of fine liquor was pushed in front of her. The short-haired beauty lifted it to her nose and sniffed, then without so much as a look she threw her head back and

drank it all down. The comfortable burn worked its way down her throat and into the pit of her stomach, then spread all through her body. A tinge of red immediately stained her tan cheeks.

“Good stuff, very nice! More than I expected from a shithole like this.” Her boisterous voice called out again. “Another!”

“I’m sorry, you’ll have to pay first.”

A man’s deep voice delivered the ruling. The woman lifted her eyes to see a stalwart gentleman with dark and oily skin, like he was cast from dark copper. He sported a meticulous buzz cut, and three long scars traced lines long-ways over his left eye that made him look all the more masculine. A heavy leather cloak hung off his shoulder and the pommel of a bejeweled sword glinted from his waist. Sunken eyes were cold and challenging.

He was an average-looking fellow, but something about his certainly left an impression.

His interruption displeased the woman. “Are you insinuating I won’t pay my debts?”

The bar owner answered with a small smile. “Five Skycloud silvers. Thank you.”

She stared at him, mouth agape. Five silvers was blackmail – he was blackmailing a demonhunter! She wouldn’t stand for this lawlessness. Angry, she slapped the polished bar top. “Five silvers? Why don’t you just rob me?! I don’t have that kind of money, just my exorcist staff. You can try to take it from me, if you got the stones.”

“This establishment doesn’t work on credit.” The owner dropped his eyes toward her staff. “I’ll take the relic as collateral.”

When she saw him reach out to take it the woman’s face changed. Did this backwoods dipshit not understand who she was? He clearly didn’t value his life if he was going to try and take her weapon!

Despite her shock she reached out fast as lightning, ready to knock his hand away.

However, in a move no one expected, the owner turned his hand over and flicked at hers with a single finger.

The woman cried out in alarm as she was knocked several paces back. Her right hand had completely lost all feeling like she'd been hit with a jolt of electricity. She watched helplessly as the man in black leather took her staff and threw it unceremoniously behind the bar. He turned around to shoot her a glance. "I'll keep this safe until you have the money to buy it back."

The woman's face was both gloomy and uncertain. No more than three people in the bar saw their whole exchange, it was so quick. It hadn't been a real fight, but their brief clash proved definitively that she was no match for him.

He was just a hillbilly bar owner. How could he be so unfathomably strong?

"Five silver coins, that's all? I'll bring them tomorrow, then!"

A demonhunter welching on her debt and losing her exorcist staff. It certainly wasn't good for one's reputation. Yet all she could do was grit her teeth. She wasn't going to stay here, so crestfallen she exited the bar.

"Hahahaha!"

"Didja see that? Shit she's probably been a demonhunter no more'n a few hours!"

"And she couldn't even pay five silver. Poor as dirt, too!"

A newly arrived patron eyed the boss curiously and couldn't help but ask a question: "Big brother, what's this bar owner's background? I've never seen a demonhunter outplayed!"

"I only know he goes by Adder. He came about six months ago." The one who answered was a drunk patron who looked around with hazy eyes and belched between sentences. "And background? Who knows! There're all kinds of badasses hidden in the Sandbar. People like him showin' up ain't rare. Now stop askin' stupid questions and drink."

The bar returned to its boisterous default filled with cheers, drinking games and lively gambling. The night continued like nothing had happened.

Because it was nothing special. This wasn't the wasteland, nor was it the holy city. It was between the two, the borderlands.

The Sandbar was the only settlement between these two opposing worlds. Powerful travelers from both surreptitiously passed through or made their homes here. It was too close to the elysian lands for wasteland powers to try and take power, and since it didn't *really* belong to the holy city they didn't actively manage it. Over time it had become a den of snakes... like Adder.

Chapter 1

The Trade Caravan

Scalding winds burned the brush along the wastelands borderlands a withered yellow. During the dry season there wasn't a drop of water to be found for tens of kilometers around.

A caravan of vehicles were passing through, most of them animal-driven carts. They were all roughly the same size, pulled not by ugly wasteland beasts but single-horned snow white horses.

Banners flapped in the harsh winds, sporting thorny blooms on a field of green with a crimson bottom. Thirty caravan guards followed, clad in armor that bore the same thorny insignia and adjustable weapons from the elysian lands. Standard equipment around the holy city.

An old man with a head full of white hair reaching to his shoulders led the procession. The years had carved deep trenches on his face, but despite his age he was full of strength and vitality. A silken, well-tailored robe hung on his body and was embroidered with the same bethorned image. In his right hand he had a string of precious stones like a bracelet that he absently rolled between his fingers. The gems were worn but still glimmered in the light.

It was all the same: The family emblem, the carts, and the weapons. Their haul consisted of various ores, leathers, and medicines that spoke to who these strangers were. Bloomnettle Company, an unassuming trade collective from Skycloud. Old Thistle was its founder.

Citizens of Skycloud were naturally prideful, especially when compared with the poisoned wastelands. That blasted landscape was a place of carnage, rife with the derelict and the filthy. Skycloud's ban on traveling through the evil place only compounded their innate distaste.

Old Thistle was a citizen of the holy city, one with a head for business. He knew that the wastelands was rife with ores and leathers no man laid claim to. Gathering them up and bringing them back to the elysian lands was surely a profitable venture, he

thought. Out here in the margins people didn't have the same distaste for the wastelands, regulations weren't so strict.

Old Thistle established the Bloomnettle Company out here on the border, where they could exist in the space between wasteland and elysian territory. Out here they could perform their due diligence in regards to the holy city without violating their stringent laws while also avoiding having to deal with the more savage elements of the wastelands. However, it also had an effect on their status among the people. Old Thistle was in his seventies and knew the time for his retirement was fast approaching. He needed to become a legitimate business man.

"Eh?" He stopped fiddling with the bracelet suddenly. He looked all around and when he failed to find the face he was looking for, he called out to the guard captain. "Where'd Squall go?"

The guard captain called back. "I think he said he was gonna scout ahead."

"This kid's always screwin' around!" The old man's face bore an annoyed yet affectionate expression. He'd never had a child of his own but Squall was one of the orphans that had come under his care. Adopted or no he was a very talented young man. Old Thistle himself had spent half his life as a merchant, despised by the Skycloud's. The task of bringing honor to his family name fell on this kid. "It's different out here, not like the holy city... The situation has been getting more dangerous. One person running around on their own is liable to get into trouble, take a few people and go find him."

The guard captain responded with a wry smirk. "You still don't get it, Chief. Young master Squall went through the demonhunter selection process already. He isn't one of them yet, but he's already got more skill than all the rest of us. You still think he needs us to protect him?"

This made the old man's wrinkled face stretch into a prideful smile.

Demonhunter, what an honorable title. A man like him, who'd lived out here in the space between poverty and affluence, looked up to their kind with great respect. Now one of his own was found to have their talents and may one day call himself one of them. He could die in peace with that knowledge.

"Squall might be skilled, but he isn't experienced. Go take a look."

Suddenly a voice called out from ahead.

“Father! Come quickly!”

A young man around seventeen or eighteen was toward the group. He looked both clever and capable, with average features. His unnaturally gray hair was on the long side so he had it tied back behind his head in a ponytail. His bronzed skin had the marks of long years out in the open air, lending to his hale demeanor.

He was pointing at a boulder not far away. There were two people huddled behind it, one male and one female.

The girl was about thirteen and wore very simple clothing. Her hair was tousled, her face was dirty; altogether she looked in a bad way but her eyes were bright and watchful. Timid, frightened, she watched the strangers approach.

Her companion wore a mask that hid his face and made it hard to tell his age, but his body was thin and small. Based just on that he gave the impression of also being young. He was laid out on the rock like he was unconscious.

She held a knife out in front of her and waved it with jerky, panicked motions. “Don’t come any closer!”

The young boy who found them gave her a searching look. He could tell that underneath the grit she was quite pretty. He was unavoidably curious. “Don’t be afraid little miss, we aren’t bad people. That soldier you’re with looks hurt.”

Soldier was a fair assumption, since the unconscious man was clad in Skycloud armor. It was standard equipment for those in service to the holy city, but its materials and craftsmanship was too complex for any outside armorer to copy. Trying to copy or steal a suit of Skycloud armor was a dire violation of their laws and would at the very least lead to banishment.

Squall, Old Thorn and the guards all assumed he had to be a soldier, but what was he doing all the way out here? His masterful protection was caked in dirt and smeared with filth, enough for at least twenty-something days out in the wilds. He had to have come from the wastelands.

The girl didn’t look or dress like she was from the elysian lands, either.

Old Thistle and the guard captain carefully looked over the one dressed as a soldier. Even unconscious he was holding tight to one of the unique elysian weapons issued by their military. It had seen some heavy use, judging by the nicks and dents. Had he been out here on a mission and gotten hurt? He'd gotten this far, almost back home before passing out.

Old Thistle cast a sidelong glance at the guard captain. "Have the doctor come take a look."

Squall tried to approach the girl but, startled, she started waving her dagger at him. When it got close enough he reached out and plucked the weapon out of her hands between his fingers. He followed with a series of showy flourishes and said, "Don't be scared. We won't hurt you."

She was drawn away from her unconscious friend. She looked back at them pale as a sheet and trembling, so pure and innocent.

The Bloomnettle Company's physician showed up a few moments later, a tall and slender woman who held herself with a rigid posture. She started by removing the mysterious soldier's mask. Everyone was surprised to discover that the face beneath it was even younger than Squall's. He had to be around fifteen or sixteen years old.

So young. How on earth was he a *soldier*?

The doctor looked him over for a little while and eventually turned back to the others. "I can't see any serious issues, just long term dehydration. He passed out because of it. That said I find him to be very suspicious, I don't think we should get involved in whatever's going on here."

"Well now that we've stepped in it we might as well make certain. Maybe it'll earn us some good karma." The bracelet clattered as he rolled the beads between his fingers one by one. He indicated to the others around him with a wave of his hand. "Put him on one of the carts."

As for the girl, her terrified eyes watched as the strangers lifted her friend and took him away. She was certainly frightened, but she followed all the same. It seemed that the old man among them seemed friendly.

It was a common sight. The wastelands and elysian territories were different worlds. To the people of the holy land, wastelanders were synonymous with filth and sin. Even

the merchants weren't happy to have to deal with them.

Well, but for one exception.

Young Squall didn't seem to have any qualms. He didn't waste much time trying to get close to the strange young girl. "What's your name?"

She was exceptionally guarded. She stared at him with her wide eyes, too frightened to speak.

"You don't need to be nervous." Squall was close enough that he could see her cracked and blistered lips – the signs of severe dehydration. He pulled his canteen off his waist and offered it to her. "Are you thirsty? Have some water."

Her fear toward people of the holy city ran deep, but she was after all just a young girl. The burning thirst in her throat was almost more than she could take. She couldn't withstand the temptation of the water he offered, so she snatched the canteen and drank deeply of its contents.

His lips turned in a friendly smile. "Now can you tell me your name?"

The girl didn't dare drink more than she already had before responding. She paused for a few moments, weighing the options. "Asha."

Squall nodded. "Good name. Who gave it to you?"

His question opened an old wound. A carefree, kind, devout face swam in her memories – her foster father. It was quickly followed by the mass of bruises and the melted flesh that he became at the hands of a crazed mob.

Squall recognized the pain that flit across her face. He quickly changed the subject. "Is that soldier your friend? What's his name?"

Asha was young, but she wasn't stupid. When she heard him misidentify her friend as a soldier she was careful not to break the illusion. Her answer was clipped and simple. "His name is Cloudhawk. He's a good man!"

Several members of the caravan heard her impassioned answer. Cloudhawk? That was a strange name... a wastelander's name.

“Squall! Come here!”

Old Thistle wasn't pleased with how close his young charge was getting to the wastelander girl. After all, he was destined to be a demonhunter. No honorable member of their order could be allowed to carry on with the likes of her.

Squall shrugged helplessly, but dutifully trotted over to his father.

Old Thistle, Squall, the guard captain and the doctor huddled together and spoke in hushed tones.

The doctor clearly didn't like the idea of keeping them around. “We gave them water and the boy isn't hurt. We have no idea who he is, but if he isn't who he appears to be he's going to cause us trouble.”

Old Thistle nodded in agreement. “What do the two of you think?”

The guard captain was next to air his opinion. “Far as I see it the fewer things we need to deal with, the better. Besides our food and water is limited. More people means less for us, and if for some reason our schedule gets delayed that deficit is gonna cost us.”

“Be that as it may we've already picked them up. We can't just throw 'em back out in the desert.” Squall chimed in. “We're two days' journey from the Sandbar. I think we should bring them along, wait for the guy to wake up so we can figure out who he is. If he's a soldier we've done a good deed for the holy city, and if he's a deserter or traitor then we've bagged a criminal. Even if we saved someone who didn't deserve it, worst case scenario we lose 'em at the Sandbar.”

The small council exchanged thoughtful glances. He had a point. They might as well stick to the plan!

The caravan continued along their way. However, only a few minutes had passed when the rolling sound of thunder reached their ears.

No, not thunder. It was the sound of several hundred hooves beating the ground. It was loud as a hurricane and the caravaners craned their necks toward the noise with wide eyes. They knew what that sound meant.

One of them shouted.

“Shit. The Highwaymen!”

Chapter 2

Bold Bandits

The borderlands were not as cruel or unforgiving as the deserts, but nor was it the verdant lands of the holy people. The land was still desolate, the mountains arid and the water unclean. The lawless expanse still saw its fair share of bandits and outlaws from the elysian lands, who gathered together to create raider crews. A merchant company like Bloomnettle was not big enough to be a threat and not small enough to be wasted effort – just the sort of target these raiders liked.

The Highwaymen were the latest raider clan to appear on the scene. Composed mostly of criminals fleeing from Skycloud persecution, in the last year they'd accumulated a wealth of thieves, robbers and other wanted men. There were even a few wastelanders who joined their crew. Today they numbered almost a thousand, using the borderlands as their hunting ground.

They even established their own headquarters the size of a small settlement called Wayside. It was a way for them to show off how successful they'd been.

Old Thistle and his mercenary caravan could deal with a small group of thieves. With thirty or so guards they could even defend themselves against a small raiding party. But against the Highwaymen? They didn't stand a chance.

“Guards! *Guards!*”

Bloomnettle's protectors brandished their weapons and formed a protective ring around the carts. Large silver crossbows were pointed toward the sound of hooves.

Their weapons were the product of Skycloud ingenuity. In accordance with the style of the holy city, the silver body was beautifully crafted. Perhaps its largest difference from conventional crossbows was the drum affixed to the back portion. Like the rest of it, the cylinder was also etched with eye-catching patterns. It was a quill, a high-pressure repository for arrows affixed to the weapon itself. It was attached to a lever so that pulling it rapidly expelled air through vents and reset the bowstring, making it capable of firing very quickly.

One high-pressure quiver could house fifty crossbow bolts. The bolts themselves were about as thick as a finger and could travel more than a hundred and fifty meters. Commonplace though they were in the elysian lands, they were much more powerful than the ancient weapons dredged up in the wastelands. Only god-given technology could make something like this a reality.

The guard captain pulled a palm-sized cylinder from his waist. He pressed a button and *schtick!* A long blade shot out. It was another oft-seen tool of the elysians, a retractable sword. Its blade was so well polished it might as well have been a mirror, tough as steel, and sharp as a razor. Godly technology infused its make and material. The secrets of its construction were closely guarded, so the blades were mostly carried by high-ranking individuals.

Bloomnettle Company was fairly well equipped, but how could thirty guards protect them from such a large crew of bold bandits?

Crimson red banners flapped in the cloud of dust bearing down on them. The flagpoles themselves had the stripped skulls of horned beasts affixed to them, adding to the air of savagery.

At last two hundred burly men appeared. They wore heavy plate armor that protected the most crucial areas, and muscular arms waved their weapons threateningly overhead. Tattoos and red totems were common, showing their allegiance to a religion of carnage.

These were the Highwaymen, plague of the borderlands!

The captain of their small defense thrust his sword high. "Fire," he shouted.

"Fire!"

The other guards began to unload their crossbows. Sturdy bolts whistled through the air, finger-thick projectiles that shot out of the crossbows faster than a machine gun. However, the bandits were not foolish enough to attack directly. They spread to either flank, surrounding the caravan. Most of the bolts hit nothing but empty space.

"Damnit!"

The guard captain's face went ashen. Old Thistle remained dignified, if solemn.

It looked like today they were going to get robbed.

The band's leader was an ugly behemoth with red-tinted goggles. He rode on a massive ox-like creature who was so dark it looked like it was made from black iron. In his hand he held an enormous broadsword falchion. In a booming, growling voice he yelled.

"Money! Goods! Women! Weapons! Give 'em up, and we won't have to kill you!"

"Woo! Woo! Woo!"

"Goods. Women. Weapons!"

Cries went up from the other bandits.

These men were ferocious outlaws, a typical merchant caravan couldn't stand a chance. Old Thistle knew that with the guards he had there was no way a fight would go their way. He stepped forward and in a voice of appeasement replied. "Everyone, I'm just a creaky old man trying to make a living. If you would let us pass I'd happily leave you half of our goods."

"Phah!" The man shouted back. "You sorry old shit, don't you know who we are? You want to try and fucking HAGGLE with us? Men! Kill 'em all!"

The towering bull he rode started pawing the ground, all of his men prepared to charge.

They came down on the caravaners like a hurricane, as fierce and reckless as their name implied and without fear of consequences. Old Thistle and his people had become their target and they weren't getting away.

Just as the horde of bandits was about to reach them, the captain of the guards stepped out and yelled through gritted teeth. "Are the Highwaymen nothing more than cowardly bullies? Fight me one on one, if you got the stones!"

Suddenly everything stopped.

One by one the outlaws began to laugh.

"You want a duel? Cute!" The band leader sneered hideously. "Hatchet! You're up!"

“You got it, vice-chief!” a large black man yelled. He lunged forward bearing a hefty battleaxe in each hand, bearing down on the guard captain who watched him come in calm defiance. Hatchet struck the flat heads of his weapon together, producing a shower of sparks. “Bring it, you piece of shit! Three swipes, that’s all I’ll need. Bring it!”

Old Thistle eyed the large, over-confident man. He then shot a nervous glance at his guard captain. “You don’t need to fight him. We can’t believe anything these outlaws say. Even if you win it isn’t going to stop them.”

But the guard shook his head. “This is just to give me a shot. While we’re fighting I’ll find some way to get close to the guy with shitty eyewear. If I can grab him, hold him hostage, we might have a chance of getting out of here.”

The two men met in the middle of the field.

In his right hand the captain of the guard had a silver shield. In his right he held the Skycloud-made retractable sword. He crouched forward and held his shield before him, while his right hand brought the sword on top. The length of the blade peaked over his defenses. Step by step he carefully shifted closer to Hatchet. A standard fighter’s posture, both defensive and prepared to strike.

Hatchet was also clumsy by contrast, but he chuckled mirthfully at the display. Suddenly he snapped his axes up and sprinted forward. He was fast – they were separated by at least twenty meters but Hatchet covered that distance in a blink.

Clang!

His first axe struck the guard’s shield. It was also Skycloud-made, constructed to absorb sharp impact blows like this. However, the staggering strength behind it knocked him back. He promptly counterattacked, stabbing at the brute with his longsword. It was met by Hatchet’s second axe.

The sword flew out of his grip.

Staggering back again this time the guard was finding it hard to regain balance. His foe saw his opening and charged in. The guard blanched, ducking instinctively behind his shield, but instead of hacking down at him the large man threw his axe from his grip.

“No!”

Squall stared in shock and horror as he watched. The thrown axe arced high, artfully slipped passed the guard captain's shield then buried itself in his neck. Half the axe head disappeared in the gallant man's throat and he hit the ground without a sound.

"Woo-woo-woo-woo!" The surroundings bandits cried out with excited and bloodthirsty roars.

Hatchet swaggered over to the corpse and wrenched his bloodstained axe free. Then, he hacked again to sever the guard's head from his body. With his left foot he steadied the skull, then used his right foot to boot it away. The guard captain's head fell with a thud into the middle of the caravaners. Immediately morale drained from the remaining guards.

Just one of these bandits was this skilled?

However, if they thought about it this made sense. The Highwaymen had been around a while, they had to be strong if they were to continue living in the borderlands. They were hard men from the wastelands trying to infiltrate the borderlands, or hardened criminals from the holy lands. None of them were your typical scoundrels.

"Fuck, that was the best you got and you actually had the balls to call for a duel?" The goggled man guffawed through a vile grin. "Anyone else wanna give it a shot? We got some time to kill!"

The guard captain had been a part of Bloomnettle Company for a long time. He'd watched Squall grow up, and now Squall had watched him die before his eyes. The future demonhunter felt a rage well up inside him, so he wrenched a weapon from one of the soldiers' grip and – his face twisted in anger – tried to walk forward. But Old Thistle held him back.

Squall cried out in fury. "I'm gonna kill him! I have to avenge him!"

To this the old man sighed. "You're no match for him. Stay put!"

The young man really was talented. Even the guard captain couldn't beat him in a fight, but they'd just watched one of their best warriors die in three attacks. He'd been an experienced and shrewd person, so what could a greenhorn like Squall accomplish?

"Let me."

The voice came from behind the guards, deep and hoarse. The sound of it was both strange and discomfoting.

A man covered in the resplendent armor of the Skycloud army stepped down from one of the carts. The mask was back over his face and he held the dual-bladed staff at the ready. Under the curious and uncertain gaze of the guards he stepped forward.

Asha had been hiding in one of the pack horses. When she saw Cloudhawk, her face immediately lit up. He wasn't tall or strong, but to her he was the symbol of reliability. Now that he was awake, Cloudhawk would surely have a way to deal with these raiders!

The Highwaymen were equally surprised to see an Skycloud soldier step out from the crowd. However, the more he staggered their way the less imposing he seemed, like he was still young and weak. The bandits were not impressed. A single soldier? What was there to be afraid of?

Hatchet smirked and swung his axes. "Do you know why I came all the way out here? I was chased from my home for my crimes, they hunted me. I killed five of them then, I'm gonna add one more soldier to the list today."

Cloudhawk lifted his head. His calm eyes sparkled behind the mask.

When their eyes met Hatchet inexplicably felt a shudder thrill through him. Something didn't feel right, the gaze made him uncomfortable. His eyes were calm, like the surface of a perfectly still lake. But beneath the surface was a dark and dangerous undercurrent.

There was murder in there, through and through. That wasn't the look of a normal man, but the eyes of someone who'd tread the line between life and death many times. Even the guard captain hadn't given him pause. But this one... this one scared him.

He wasn't going to be such a pushover.

"How is he gonna beat this guy?" Squall said anxiously. "Even a proper soldier would have trouble, and he's weak. What makes him think he has a chance?"

The brutish bandit sneered at the detestable merchants, who he saw as hardly worth the air they breathed. The guard captain had been about as capable as a soldier and he'd lasted three moves. Unless he was much stronger than the captain had been this

guy didn't stand a chance. The real question; was he as strong as he seemed, or was he just another scrub?

Chapter 3

The Young Demonhunter

Cloudhawk held the double-edged blade before him, ready for a fight.

The standard Skycloud weapon had four transformations; bow, broadsword, dual-headed glaive, and a pair of short swords. It could be used both up close and at a distance, could change seamlessly and easily from one form to another, and its construction was nothing short of incredible. It was evidence of how great the gifts of the gods were to their chosen.

Hatchet, his stare hard and solemn, looked Cloudhawk up and down. The black depths of his pupils were stark against the white of his eyes. It was the same for his white teeth which gleamed as his black lips pulled back in a sneer. To onlookers he was like a leopard, carefully judging from which direction to pounce on his prey.

“You ready to die?”

“You still spoutin’ that shit?” Cloudhawk flatly replied. “Come.”

Hatchet attacked first. Each bounding step sent him tearing forward like the bottoms of his feet were made from springs. After three or four steps he hit his top speed, sending clouds of dust up behind him. Like a raging bull he charged toward Cloudhawk without flourish, determined to tear him apart.

Cloudhawk instinctively jerked away to avoid him.

However, much to everyone’s surprise Hatchet didn’t attack at the end of his onslaught. When Cloudhawk moved the large bandit stopped, reacquired his target then launched into the air. The mere inertia from his charge threw him a full meter into the air where he began to spin. The axes in his hands glinted dangerously and carved a three hundred and sixty degree circle. His trajectory brought him down toward Cloudhawk at a forty-five degree angle. The young defender still hadn’t found his footing.

Cloudhawk’s pupils contracted, he gripped his weapon tight. When the raider’s axes

landed, the ensuing blast of air blew his hair back. The impact struck so hard the skin between his thumbs and forefingers split open. His legs couldn't support that much force, buckled, and forced him to one knee.

The Bloomnettle guards watched in suffocating horror.

The man with red goggles and his cronies shouted praise. "Good! Get 'im!"

Hatchet's grin spread wider as he jumped up, then planted his feet on Cloudhawk's chest. Thankfully the armor protected him, but still Cloudhawk fired off like a bullet. Flailing through the air he managed to shove one end of his glaive into the ground. After carving a trench several meters long he was finally able to regain some control.

Then another gust of wind swept by.

Cloudhawk had only just pulled his weapon out of the ground when Hatchet was in his face again. He could feel the whistling air displaced by the pair of axes, he wasn't ready. When the attack fell it snapped his glaive down the middle. Cloudhawk was left with two short swords.

Clang-clang!

Hatchet spun like a tornado, a dervish of steel. His axes collided with each of the young soldier's swords. The large bandit was too strong – much stronger than Cloudhawk – and so his swords were knocked easily from his hands.

Hatchet planted another kick in the center of his tiny challenger's chest. It was impossible for Cloudhawk to keep his balance as once again he was booted away. He landed with a sickening crunch four or five meters away.

The bandits cackled while the members of Bloomnettle Company glowered. At best the soldier was as good in a fight as Squall, what made him believe he could stand toe to toe against this titan?

"I thought you had some oomph in ya," Hatchet said as the concern in his faces melted away. "Shit, you ended up just being another spineless fuck. Hahaha!"

Cloudhawk staggered back onto his feet while holding his chest. His mask had the strange effect, however, of making it seem like the two blows hadn't affected him at all.

Hatchet leered at him. “This ax here... this is the one that’s gonna take your life.”

Cloudhawk stood in the crater where he’d fallen, unmoving. “Give it a shot.”

His flippant response infuriated Hatchet. Did the kid not understand that his weapons were gone? What made him so arrogant? He grinned then lunged at Cloudhawk like a hungry wolf.

His death was certain. The caravaners knew nothing about this stranger in their midst, yet still they were sad for his inevitable demise.

But who could have expected that in this moment Cloudhawk would spread open his hands as though to invite his end, only for the earth itself to respond. A burst of intangible power surged forth from the young man that made the ground buck. Gravel rose from beneath his feet like someone had turned off gravity where it just hung in the air.

Needless to say the scene stunned every witness.

“This... this...”

The smiles on the bandits’ faces froze stiff like masks. Their gleeful facades shattered, replaced by shock and alarm as a single word took over all the space in their brains – demonhunter!

Hatchet was not immune to the surprise.

In that brief interval...

Three arrows emerged, constructed from the grit that choked the air. In a v-shaped formation they shot forth, striking their target moments later. All three passed through Hatchet’s body, carving out large and terrible wounds and sprinkling the earth with his blood.

The red-goggled bandit screamed in anger. “Hatchet!”

Hatchet impotently slammed his fist into the ground. He didn’t understand how it could end like this – his loss was too much to face!

Cloudhawk wasn’t finished. A plume of sand appeared above his head where it

gathered into a compact tornado. With a wave of the hand the tornado hurdled at the raiders and exploded into a blinding sandstorm. Terror took hold and the bandits tried to flee. Their hulking mounts crashed into one another in their hurry to escape.

The sandstorm came quickly then was gone just as fast. It left chaos in its wake, and though no one died they had been routed.

A hoarse voice rasped above the din. "Fuck off!"

The bandit leader was conflicted. His henchmen looked to him for guidance, for they did not wish to act rashly either and were waiting for him to make the right decision. In the end his face sank. A decision had been reached, one he could hardly stomach but was still unavoidable.

"We didn't expect a bunch of mongrels to be traveling with a demonhunter. The Highwaymen did not mean to offend, we apologize." The bandits turned away from the caravan back toward the expansive landscape. Their ringleader waved them off with a flourish. "Let's go!"

The raiders left them without any further molestation.

Bandits weren't known for their smarts, but they were familiar with demonhunters. No one knew how strong the masked man actually was, but they suspected several hundred bandits would be enough to do him in. The question was, how would they deal with the aftermath of their decision to rob and murder a member of that holy order?

Borderlands or not, the influence of the holy city was far-reaching. If word spread that bandits had killed a demonhunter, the whole area would be flooded with his companions out looking for blood. The Highwaymen might as well say their farewells.

For the promise of some piddling cargo, the reward wasn't worth their lives.

The Highwayman's vice chief had simply weighed the pros and cons, it wasn't a difficult decision. Retreating was the right call.

Once the raiders were far enough away Cloudhawk started to sway. He fell to the ground once again.

"Doctor. Doctor! Come quick!"

Bloomnettle's people didn't dare give Cloudhawk the cold shoulder now, practically falling over themselves to help get him back on a cart. The doctor arrived quickly and when she looked him over discovered that his chest piece had been cracked. Luckily, Skycloud armor was extraordinary at both absorbing and diffusing impact force, otherwise Cloudhawk's ribs would have been broken into pieces.

When they removed his armor they discovered the yellow brass-bound book hidden in the folds of his clothes. Surprise followed as they witnessed its beautifully carved surface undulating as though it were a real vision of the desert. None of them knew what it was, or in fact had seen anything like it, but it didn't take experience to realize it had to be one of the mighty demonhunter's relics.

And what a strange relic it was. They were from the holy city, why hadn't they had ever heard of something like this?

Cloudhawk's condition was not serious. He had been weak from the start, but his impressive armor was enough to stop Hatchet's attacks from causing much damage. His loss of consciousness this time was in part because of his weakened constitution, and the effort of galvanizing the Gospel of the Sand's power. The combined strain was too much and he passed out. But he recovered his faculties quickly.

"I had no idea... an honorable demonhunter." Old Thistle's opinion of Cloudhawk had suddenly changed dramatically. He was now far more respectful and humble. "Why are you clothed like a soldier?"

A demonhunter's prestige was lofty. A typical soldier didn't command half the respect of their kind.

Of course Cloudhawk couldn't tell him the truth. His mind churned, looking for an answer as he considered the situation. They were dressed as elysians, he noted. Meanwhile Cloudhawk – certainly no demonhunter – was clad in armor taken from the bodies of soldiers he'd slain. He couldn't let them know, and he had to be careful what he said lest they grow suspicious.

After all, it'd been ten days since the battle out in the wastelands.

Those soldiers and demonhunters must have gotten back to the holy city by now. If he was careless in his words with them they might discover his secret. For now he maintained a grim and stoic posture, unwilling to speak a single word. His response

was to pull forth a small token and hold it up for all to see.

Several of those gathered recognized it.

“A mark of the High Order!”

Cloudhawk’s token was held by the highest ranks of the demonhunters. There were only a very few number in all of Skycloud who held one of those. They were closely held badges of rank, a sign of their privilege and rank. He would only be holding it if he was a trusted officer of the holy order. As for whether one could kill a demonhunter and steal it? Laughable. Besides the fact that killing a master demonhunter was a herculean task, the patterns etched on its surface would disappear the moment its owner died. Killing a demonhunter for their token would achieve nothing.

When he saw their reaction Cloudhawk knew they were convinced. “This has been entrusted to me by an honorable demonhunter. My mission is to make my way to Skycloud, where I am to meet with the castellan. I am hoping you might be able to help me achieve that goal.”

Old Thistle, Squall and the doctor all immediately knelt before him.

Seeing a mark of the high order was an extraordinary thing. If this had something to do with the demon kin it was more grave than they could even begin to imagine.

And what were demons? Children of the holy city as young as three knew the answer – they were the mortal enemies of all who lived in the territory of the gods. They were the only creatures in all the world capable of standing up against the mighty deities. The Order of the Demonhunters was first established to battle against these fiends, and had existed for over a thousand years to serve that purpose.

The people of Bloomnettle Company were commoners. What experience did they have in such matters?

Chapter 4

Family

In the holy city, the demonhunters were a group of honor and prestige. Their organization dated back at least a couple thousand years. Back during the fall of civilization all the world had fallen to catastrophe. Demons infiltrated the lands of men and massacred the humans with their mysterious powers. In a very short period of time the entire species was almost completely wiped out.

Then their arch-rivals arrived, just in time.

The gods appeared, saving humanity from the fires of extinction at the last minute. Yet the pitiful humans could not seek protection beneath the wings of their benefactors forever. In order for humans to survive the gods chose the most talented men and women, bestowing upon them great powers. From then on they were known collectively as demonhunters.

After more than a thousand years the gods returned to the ether, and the demons absconded into the deepest pits of the world. Humanity persisted, recuperated. Over time the demonhunters perfected their craft and became the greatest protectors of the holy lands.

For this reason demonhunters were revered, worshipped as the representatives of the gods themselves. After all, they were capable of performing miracles and other supernatural feats.

However, the people of Bloomnettle Company were deluding themselves. Cloudhawk could command powers like the demonhunters, yes, but he was not one of them. He was different from those noble persons. Cloudhawk did not hold them – nor even their illustrious gods – in such high esteem. Instead he found them all suspect.

Of course Old Thistle and the others didn't know his secret thoughts. If they did the shock might well kill them.

Letting them believe he was a demonhunter was convenient, Cloudhawk wasn't foolish enough to deprive himself of the advantage. The token in his possession would

make any elysian commoner fall over themselves to do whatever he asked.

According to this token he wasn't just a demonhunter. His business had something to do with the most elite of the order, deserving of the utmost respect and critically important. If not then he would not bear the token.

Old Thistle was a merchant, and he knew business well enough to know this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. He was old, but the young man in his care was in the prime of his life. If he could befriend a demonhunter – hell, maybe even gain notice from a master demonhunter – then Squall's future road would be much smoother.

"Please, how may we be of service?"

"None of this is necessary. Everyone stand up."

Cloudhawk didn't know what all this kneeling was about. More than once he'd contradicted and argued with the token's owner. How would they react if she showed up before them herself?

Suddenly he started to feel his injuries.

He held his chest and coughed. "I need to get to the holy territories. Skycloud. If you really want to help... then I need a map and some supplies."

Old Thistle looked him over. "It's a long journey all the way to Skycloud, and the noble demonhunter is weak. As far as I see it, you should remain with our company for a time. It just so happens that our cargo is bound for your destination, the way is much easier if you ride there on one of our carts.

He was right, it was the best scenario. Cloudhawk didn't know where Skycloud was. He wouldn't even know it if he found it. Their rules, customs, or even how to enter the holy domain... he didn't know any of it.

Cloudhawk didn't ask them any of this. It would be suspicious if an illustrious demonhunter didn't even know what Skycloud looked like. His new companions were eager to help and there was no reason to turn them down.

Meanwhile Old Thistle was running through the arithmetic in his head. This kid was probably a master demonhunter's apprentice who agreed to go with him on an important mission into the wastelands. Perhaps they discovered something about the

demon kin, something so important the master demonhunter continued on and ordered the young man to bring his token back and give a report.

It would explain why this young man had such a precious item in his possession.

Of course it was only a guess, he had no way to verify whether or not it was correct. If it did involve the demons then whatever information the young man had was certainly confidential. Trying to satisfy his curiosity would only lead to problems, Old Thistle was old enough to know the limits.

As though thinking of something, the old merchant turned to Asha huddled nearby. "This is..."

"...A wastelander, but she's helped me in many ways," Cloudhawk hurriedly replied. "I'm bringing her with me to the holy territories."

"Ah? How is this proper?" It was the doctor who blurted out the question before Old Thistle could voice his opinion. "She's a wastelander, we have no authority to do this. Bringing an outsider into the holy territories goes against Skycloud's rules! We would be charged with tarnishing the holy domain. We'd be killed!"

Cloudhawk scowled. Was is that serious? It was worse than he thought!

If his ruse was discovered these merchants would be implicated. He began to go over his options, how could he enter Skycloud without potentially getting other people in trouble?

"How about this." Old Thistle saw the concern on Cloudhawk's face. He wasn't one to make trouble, but he offered an alternative anyway. "We have no right to bring her into the holy territories, but we can arrange for her to settle somewhere safe in the borderlands. For a wastelander this is the best that could be hoped for."

"Where?" Cloudhawk asked.

"The Sandbar is the most stable settlement in the area. It's got to be at least ten times better than wherever she came from. Most importantly there aren't any restrictions against wastelanders. She'll be safe there."

Cloudhawk did not like the idea. It had been a struggle to get Asha out of the deserts. He couldn't just leave her out here on the margin, with no way to defend herself.

“As I’m sure you know, young master, wastelanders are given no respect in Skycloud. The Sandbar isn’t as safe as the holy territories but does benefit from its influence. It isn’t anywhere as lawless as the other settlements out there. I have friends there who could look after her.”

“I’m not going to the holy territories!”

Cloudhawk hadn’t made a decision, but Asha took a stride forward and made one herself.

This frail and delicate young beauty looked at them with firm resolution. Many nights on their journey here she’d awakened from terrible nightmares and every time she thought about the elysian lands her whole body broke out in a cold sweat. She was haunted by the demons in her dreams, terrible images she would never be able to let go.

Cloudhawk looked at her and she looked back. Inwardly he sighed. The trauma she’d experienced ran deep, she would likely never see an elysian but through a lens of hatred and fear. No benefit would come from crossing over into the holy territories, not as far as she was concerned. He had no choice but to shut his eyes and respond in gentle agreement. “So be it.”

At least everyone would get what they wanted.

Old Thistle cast a glance to the young man by his side. “Squall will be responsible for anything you need, honorable demonhunter. Please do not hesitate to trouble him for the slightest request. And you, child, take this opportunity to seek advice from our guest.”

It was easy to guess the old man’s relationship to his young charge.

Demonhunters were an arrogant group, while borderland merchants were low on the social scale. Even the richest businessmen couldn’t buy their favor. However, since they were in a position to help each other, it was a rare opportunity for his charge to learn from a real warrior. He couldn’t let it pass them by.

The merchant company continued on its way.

Cloudhawk, Asha and Squall traveled in an emptied horse-drawn cart. In looking his young host over, Cloudhawk spied a strange tattoo on his chest.

“Heh, weird right? Truth is it surprised me, too. Old Thistle says I had it when he adopted me, something having to do with my family. That’s about all I know.” Squall sat cross-legged in the middle of the cart. “We haven’t been properly introduced. My name is Squall Rover! I’m older than you, but you can just call me Squall.” [1]

Squall did not give them the same rigid, intractable impression most elysians let off. On the contrary he was lighthearted, playful, and easy going. Compared to his respectful but cunning caretaker, Cloudhawk liked Squall quite a bit more.

He pressed for more information. “You were adopted?”

“Yup, I’m an orphan. My home was destroyed by demon kin. I was still small, I can’t really remember anything about the place or my family. Old Thistle found me before I starved and saved me. Over the last fifteen years he’s taught me to read and write, even helped me get selected by the demonhunters. He’s just the same as a real father.”

There were demons even in the elysian lands?

Cloudhawk really wanted to ask that question but he felt it would risk his cover. *You’re a demonhunter but you don’t even know where demons live?* Cloudhawk decided to speak as little as possible to keep his identity from being revealed. After all, he who spoke often erred much.

Squall, conversely, was quite the chatterbox. His eyes gleamed as he went on. “Hey, brother, you know honestly I envy you. You get to meet the governor face to face. You know he’s an idol of mine, I’d give five years of my life to say two sentences to him.”

“Why’s that?”

“Do I need a reason?” He didn’t understand why Cloudhawk would ask such a question. “Master Arcturus Cloude’s name rings across the heavens. There isn’t a person all through Skycloud City who doesn’t know his name!”

That’s his name? Arcturus Cloude?

Squall had called him ‘Master’. That could only mean one thing, the governor was also a demonhunter. About the only thing Cloudhawk knew about master demonhunters were that they could face a demon one on one.

He’d learned the strength of a demonhunter while out in the wilds. Like the strength

of a thousand men!

“Besides that, the Cloude clan has always led the demonhunters of Skycloud! They have a thousand year history, and the legends say they stood with the gods against the demons in the great war!” Full of adoration, Squall went on. “From their inception to this day, they’ve never been beaten. Master Arcturus, Master Baldur, and Master Sterling are three brothers of the Cloude clan who represent their exceptional family – and all of Skycloud! One is the Governor, one was the former Knight-Commander of the Order of Demonhunters, and one was the Grand Marshal of the demonhunter army brigades. Such a pity...”

“What pity?”

“The only brother left is Master Arcturus. Master Sterling abdicated his position many years ago due to injury. He hasn’t been seen or heard from in a long time. And Master Baldur... a year and a half ago he entered a nest of demon kin and was killed. They tried to keep it quiet but word got out. What, you didn’t know this?”

“Of course I do.” Cloudhawk closed his eyes and leaned back, the picture of casual indifference. “Master Baldur had a daughter, didn’t he?”

“Yes, that’s right!” Squall was so full of excitement he slapped the floor and rose to his feet. “Master Baldur was killed but his daughter is something else! The most incredible talent in a hundred years. No one’s seen her face but they say she’s a beauty that could topple cities and is absolutely brilliant. She’s widely considered to be the next successor to lead the demonhunters.”

1. In Chinese they call him ‘Little Wind’, which sounds like a euphemism for a fart. The ‘little’ is common in Chinese and is used in reference to people who are younger than you that you have a good relationship with.

RWX's Thoughts

This chapter was finished quite a while ago and supposed to be released yesterday, but we never came to a final decision on some names, so we took some extra time releasing to come to that final decision. This was especially tough because all three of

the Cloude brothers mentioned - Arcturus, Baldur, and Sterling - play very important roles or are mentioned often. Squall was a bit tough as well, for reasons I'll explain.

Arcturus - His name was 星光 - literally, Starlight. Again, as we referenced in a previous note, these names are all meant to sound refined and 'normal' and are set in North America, so we had to find something that was a good fit and sounded like a normal English name. In the end, we settled on Arcturus because it is the brightest star in the sky in North America, which plays well with the 'starlight' meaning of the name in Chinese. Arcturus is also a very refined and dignified, almost regal name, which suits the character well (as you'll see)... and for many, it will also bring to mind Arcturus Mengsk, the (extremely crafty) Terran emperor of Starcraft.

Baldur - His name was 绝尘, which means 'no dust' or 'without dust' - in Chinese, it brings to mind someone who is pure, flawless, perfect, without any blemishes. This was a very, very tough name. In the end, we settled upon Baldur, based on the Norse god of light and purity, who was slain via treachery on the part of Loki (read into that what you wish) ;)

Sterling - His name was 朗逸, which means bright and relaxed; it's a very elegant name. We settled on the name Sterling because it conjures images of sterling silver, a very bright, beautiful, and elegant metal.

Squall Rover - His full name in Chinese was 流离风, which means 'Wandering Wind'. Again, this is meant to be an evocative name and not a Chinese one; 流 is not an actual surname in Chinese. We settled on the surname 'Rover' for obvious reasons. Again, this is an actual surname; this was important to us.

Chapter 5

A Surprising Action

The former Knight-Commander of the Order of Demonhunters, who was Governor Arcturus' younger brother, had only one daughter. If Cloudhawk couldn't use this information to guess the rest, he would have to have his brain checked.

He fiddled with the token, passing it between his hands.

A face so beautiful it could almost be called superhuman appeared before his eyes. Now he understood how important her gift was. She'd given it to him like it was no big deal.

Cloudhawk's immature face slipped into a solemn expression. He didn't know how many wastelands there were or how many holy cities throughout the elysian lands, but Skycloud was the closest one for hundreds of kilometers around.

It sat at the heart of the elysian lands, one of its most prosperous and bustling cities. It was thick with people and was the business, authoritative, and ideological capital of the realm. The illustrious family that ran it had a background and ability that was hard to fathom. Between a Knight-Commander and a Grand Marshall, they commanded the full might of the demonhunters in Skycloud.

The daughter of this mighty master demonhunter was possessed of stunning beauty and a marvelous bloodline. What's more she was the most talented member of the family to emerge in hundreds of years. Since birth she'd carried the hopes and expectations of a brilliant future on her shoulders. If she'd remained on her set path, she would very likely have taken the governor's place when she was old enough.

Why would she go against the wishes of her family?

Why would she betray the laws of her order?

Why would she take such a risk and venture into the wastelands alone?

Whatever, it doesn't serve anything to think about it. Nothing to do with me. All I want

is some money, safety, and a nice place to call home. All this battle between good and evil shit can sort itself out without involving me!

In this era, moral integrity was a luxury. The rise and fall of the times? Saving the world and helping others? Fuck all that noise.

Heroes can go do all of that shit. If the world was counting on him, it was in for some disappointment. Cloudhawk's plan was simple; sneak into the holy territories, meet the governor, get some money and maybe a small official position after showing his proof of conquest, then live out his days in comfort. Right, maybe hire a few pretty handmaids. That sounded good to him.

Night fell on the third day of their journey.

The single-horned horses that pulled the cart began to slow, and the gentle sway of the cart eased. When Squall climbed on he saw that Cloudhawk and Asha were already asleep.

One could tell their experiences by how the two slept. Cloudhawk was curled up in a corner so he couldn't be attacked from behind. If something were to happen he could respond immediately. Asha slept like the dead, face up without a care in the world.

Squall reached out his arm.

Cloudhawk was up in a flash and his left hand had Squall by the wrist before the guy knew what was happening. His right hand whipped around with a dagger already in his grip, the tip pointed at Squall's throat. It happened in less time than it took to blink. No thinking, no hesitation, just instinct.

"Hold on!" Squall cried out in alarm. "Man, you're way too vigilant."

"It's you? How come I didn't hear you coming?" He peered through the dark and saw that it was Squall. With his brows knit he retracted the dagger. "I thought someone was up to no good. Pay attention next time, sneak up on me in the middle of the night and I don't know what'll happen."

Squall had never seen anyone with reaction times like Cloudhawk's. It wasn't a skill you could train, it was a custom from living for a long time in dangerous situations. He slept so lightly that the wind moving a blade of grass awakened his defensive reaction.

Squall and Cloudhawk had roughly the same amount of training, but Cloudhawk had far more experience. If they ever really had to fight, Squall would be no match for him. Besides, Cloudhawk had the power of the demonhunters!

Their talking had awakened Asha. She rubbed her eyes and stared blankly at the pair. "Have we arrived?"

She was pure hearted. She'd lived through the trauma and terror of being enslaved and had watched as her adopted father was viciously murdered, however she was still just a young girl. She didn't know anything about fighting.

The first glimmer of dawn's light peaked over the horizon. A moist and chilly wind rolled over the barren landscape, a cold breeze to dispel the fog of sleep. It was refreshing.

Cloudhawk removed his armor, setting it and his weapon aside. The Sandbar wasn't really part of the holy territories but it was still likely he'd come across elysians. The armor was too conspicuous and his cover too flimsy. He was going to have to give up the fancy equipment to avoid other problems.

An elysian elixir from the doctor enhanced his natural healing abilities, so Cloudhawk's wounds were basically healed. At least they weren't going to stop him from getting around.

The Sandbar was brilliantly lit, but not by electric lights.

Anything having to do with the bygone era, including electric lights, gas, guns... all of that was very difficult to find here. The followers of the gods believed that ancient man was the architect of his own destruction by relying on these evil tools. Their proof was the fact that mankind's knowledge grew out of control in the latter days of its reign. Ultimately, the world ended because of it.

Endless hunger was what led to mankind's downfall. When desire grew out of control there was no more progress. There were only two paths remaining; left or right. Both led to the depths of hell.

The faithful were steadfast in this belief.

As such, anywhere where elysians could be found was absent of these old technologies. The Sandbar might have been out here in the borderlands, but it saw

many merchant caravans from the holy territories, as well as demonhunters passing through on missions. So they obeyed this strict elysian policy.

The settlement's scale was enormous, built within a semi-circular structure left over from the ancient days. There was no giant gate or guarded entry because out here the denizens didn't need to worry about roving bands of mutated monsters. There was no threat of destruction by sweeper raids. As such defenses were lax.

This was a special place, whether you were coming from the holy territories or the wastelands.

Rampant tyranny from elysian justice wasn't a threat to wastelanders here. Likewise, elysians weren't as constrained by the demands of Skycloud law and lived out here without a master. In fact the Sandbar didn't even have a leader. Talented men and women were hidden throughout the sanctuary and their presence alone maintained a lasting peace. No one dared to upend the balance, so things have kept stable.

Cloudhawk followed the caravan into the settlement.

This place was obviously very different from other settlements of the wastelands. Its construction was similarly crude, but from time to time Cloudhawk spied merchants like Old Thistle milling around, or soldiers from the holy lands about their various missions. Sprinkled among the crumbling buildings were also a few elegant skyscrapers. Elysian-style masterpieces, Cloudhawk assumed.

Old Thistle suddenly stopped thumbing the beads of the bracelet he always carried.

"Stop! Everyone stop where you are!"

"Who are you? Do you have your papers? Present them immediately!"

A group of ten or so elysian soldiers blocked their path. Their armor was that familiar chiseled jade that glinted in the torchlight. Long bows were in their hands as they hurriedly marched their way.

Old Thistle was puzzled by their appearance. He'd never been stopped before, but something did seem different about the Sandbar this time. But suspicious or not, Old Thistle didn't dare ignore the soldiers' demands. He ordered his people to produce several pieces of proof concerning their identities and purpose.

A few of the soldiers poured over their documents while the others searched the carts, weapons in hand. Every cart was carefully searched, even going so far as to open and remove their cargo to check for contraband.

“You two, your identification?”

The guard captain used his bow to point toward Cloudhawk and Asha. A few of the other soldiers began to gather closer. They looked different from the other members of the caravan, so they weren't merchants.

“Who are you! Speak up!” The portly guard captain stood tall and threatening before them. Cloudhawk didn't react, but Asha shuffled backward a few steps. Seeing her reaction the guard captain's eyes glinted malevolently. “You're acting suspicious. Arrest them!”

Old Thistle hadn't seen this coming. The Sandbar wasn't part of elysian territory, they weren't supposed to have troops stationed here much less checking people at the entrance. If they were going around arresting anyone they thought were suspicious there wouldn't be anyone left in the settlement.

“Come now, don't be hasty.” Old Thistle thumbed the beads in his left hand while amicably pleading with them. “There's nothing suspicious about my new recruits. I can vouch for them.”

“New recruits? The Skycloud army has suffered a defeat out in the wastes. Lord Augustus Glory was injured and still hasn't awakened. Only three of the demonhunters that went with them still live, and Skycloud is in chaos! Damn merchants... the only thing you care about is money. Pagh! You actually have the balls to bring on new recruits at a time like this? Careful that you don't end up wiped out! Do you hear me?!” The anger in his voice was fevered and out of control. “Now get out of the way!”

The soldiers lifted their weapons and pointed them at Old Thistle. Bowstrings were pulled back, ready to fire.

Old Thistle could feel the murderous intent of these men. Even a man with his turbulent past shuddered at the scene, yet still he faced them as calmly as he could muster. He didn't know what to do, he couldn't offend this man but he couldn't rashly reveal the identity of his stowaways either.

“Move aside.”

Cloudhawk spoke from behind in a low voice. Old Thistle let loose a shaky sigh.

Leaving this sort of thing to the honorable demonhunter was best. He was afraid he might speak out of turn or say something improper. After all the business of the demonhunters – especially one with a master’s token – was more important than he had any right to insert himself in.

When Asha saw the Skycloud soldiers she was so frightened her legs were like jelly. She could hardly stand.

It was a fear she could not control, like a volcano erupting in the depths of her heart. In an instant it overcame her fragile will and she was struggling against the urge to run. However, despite being young Asha knew the way of these men. If she tried to run now she wouldn’t get three paces before they killed her with their bows.

Cloudhawk reached out and placed a hand on her shoulder. The sound of his voice was strange through the mask. “Don’t be afraid. I’m here.”

Just hearing his assurances eased her terror, but it was followed quickly by a bitter pain. She tightly pursed her lips while tears glistened in her eyes. It took all she had not to let them fall. Such a sad and delicate thing, even the most hard-hearted man couldn’t bear to harm her.

But not the fat man. He just looked at them with hard, soulless eyes. “Arrest them, then question them under torture.”

Cloudhawk’s eyes narrowed ever so slightly, glaring through the mask. The commotion had already gathered a group of spectators who stared and pointed at the scene. They looked like locals.

Good.

Maybe now was the time to send a message. Asha was so scared of elysians and soldiers especially. This was a new place and she was an outsider. He couldn’t guarantee she wouldn’t be bullied or molested.

Cloudhawk decided something had to be done, not just to help Asha shed her fear but also to make sure she wasn’t taken advantage of.

Two of the soldiers closed in. As they reached forward to tie them up, the unexpected

happened.

Cloudhawk's fist plowed into the first guard's face,

His nose folded as the bone broke. Clutching his face, the unfortunate man wailed and fell backwards.

Cloudhawk immediately moved on to the second. His foot shot out and caught the man square in his crotch, which elicited a shrill squeal.

Both men hit the ground crying at the same time. The young outsider's flurry of attacks stunned everyone, not just the fat guard captain. Old Thistle, Squall and all the onlookers stared in open astonishment. It was a scene that was absolutely unthinkable.

This guy was *crazy!* He was beating on Skycloud soldiers, in public no less! Didn't he know they would burn him at the stake for this?

The guard captain and the rest of his cronies gaped for a moment, hardly able to comprehend what they were seeing. When it dawned on him that it was real, the fat man snapped back to reality and shouted. "Kill them!"

But the cry caught in his throat.

Sand around Cloudhawk had stirred, coiling up his arm and coalescing into a brawny limb of gravel. Coarse fingers closed around the captain's throat and lifted him clear off the ground.

"Demonhunter!"

The rest of the guards stared in dumb amazement.

Chapter 6

The Bar Owner

It was incredible that this young man, with his ragged clothing and strange mask, was one of the renowned demonhunters!

When it was clear Cloudhawk had powers the guards were not cowed. In fact they dropped into combat posture, ready to fight.

“Bastard! Release our captain!”

“We are devoted soldiers of the gods! You’re a demonhunter, you have no reason to attack us!”

This was the quality of the holy territories’ warriors. In their eyes, faith and obligation were of the highest moral status. They weren’t going to grovel simply because Cloudhawk showed his teeth, even if it was a mistake that would cost them their lives. Everything came down to their responsibility.

Cloudhawk’s willpower was not strong and he could not summon the power of the Gospel of Sand for long. The sandy arm holding up the fat captain crumbled away to dust and he hit the ground gasping. Cloudhawk didn’t wait for the captain to regain his voice. He fished the token from his clothes and held it high for everyone to see.

“A token of the high order!”

Everyone’s countenance changed, the captain among them.

“I am on a secret mission. Do you realize that my identity has been compromised because of your stupidity?!” Cloudhawk’s loud call was full of pretention and harsh rebuke. His mask made his voice sound all the more terrifying. “Can you afford to take responsibility for ruining the assignment?!”

The fat man’s face went white as a sheet. He fell to his knees, as did the others who did not realize the severity of their offense.

They were just average soldiers, and though they'd seen demonhunters they'd never really interacted with one. Now the one before them bore the token of their most elite and they were responsible for revealing his status to everyone – putting a mission in danger. One might imagine how terrible the realization was for them.

“Your humble servant is at fault! The sin is mine!” The fat man’s moon-like face was dripping with sweat. He even went so far as to throw himself to the ground in a submissive bow. “Your servant is blind, a senseless mistake! I humbly beg for mercy!”

The others, seeing their captain acknowledge the mistake, had to follow suit. They, too, bowed and scraped pathetically.

Cloudhawk pointed at the girl beside him. “She is an important part of this task. You have frightened her, a fact that may have caused irreparable damage to my mission. Apologize and we’ll consider the matter settled.”

“S-sir...”

The fat captain and his people looked at one another in uncertainty. Both in bearing and appearance it was clear this girl was no elysian. Asking them to apologize to a denizen of the borderlands, perhaps even from the wastelands, was that not going too far?

Cloudhawk was clearly displeased he had to speak further. “What’s wrong? You seem reluctant? Should I apologize to her instead?”

“N-no sir, we wouldn’t dare trouble you!” Under threat of retaliation from this frail young man, the guard captain turned to Asha and bowed respectfully. “I’m very sorry, I hope you can forgive me.”

The ten or so other soldiers followed his lead, kneeling or bowing before her. “Please forgive us!”

Witnessing these mighty soldiers kneeling before her, bowing and begging for absolution, Asha could no longer hold her tears back. She knew it was Cloudhawk’s doing, to help ease the pain and fear inside her.

Old Thistle and the others were absolutely stunned at Cloudhawk’s actions. The old man didn’t know what Asha’s relationship with the young demonhunter was, that he would actually humiliate Skycloud soldiers for her.

What a badass! Squall looked at Cloudhawk in adoration. *We've been together for two days and I would never have guessed he had this side to him! I'm glad he's a friend of mine!*

Cloudhawk decided to quit while he was ahead. He didn't want to push these men further than he already had. After all, he'd come to learn how much pride these elysians had. If he brought them any lower their ego might make them too angry to control.

"Very well, then the matter ends here. I won't hold it against you. Rise."

The captain and his men rose from the ground as though relieved of a heavy burden. Suddenly the pudgy man's attitude was completely different, and due to the embarrassment of the situation he vigorously shook Cloudhawk's hand. "If you need any help, noble sir, your humble servant will do whatever is required!"

"For now we need nothing. Get out of the way."

"But sir –"

"Clear off!"

"Yes, sir!"

With a bitter expression the captain lifted his hand. The other guards parted to let the caravan through.

Cloudhawk led the Bloomnettle Company and Asha past a hundred pairs of eyes and into the Sandbar, swaggering through the gate like he owned the place.

Old Thistle had gone from anxious, to surprised, to excited. His merchant caravan was only average in reputation here in the borderlands, but now, with a high ranking demonhunter leading them into town, their name would be on everyone's lips. Bandits and their competition wouldn't dare mess with them now!

No one understood why Cloudhawk had done what he did, but it was nonetheless to the benefit of the caravan.

Could Old Thistle be displeased with a situation like this? He could stride through the Sandbar with his head held high!

Squall trotted over to Asha and Cloudhawk. He started with a few comforting words for Asha then spoke to his new best friend. "Man, that was something else. You were an absolute badass! No one's ever dared stand up to Skycloud soldiers before, much less make them apologize. You're my idol. I'd be proud if I could be half as awesome as you in the future."

"This is nothing." Cloudhawk slowly shook his head. "Where are we headed?"

Squall reassured him. "Don't worry, Old Thistle's gonna bring you to meet a strange character. One of the most capable people in the settlement. If he agrees to look after Asha, no one in the Sandbar would ever even think of messing with her!"

Squall really was an easy-going sort that didn't take things seriously, but Cloudhawk could tell he'd taken a liking to Asha. He believed the guy's assurances.

After arranging for the caravan's carts, Old Thistle led Asha, Cloudhawk and Squall into Sandbar Outpost's largest drinking establishment. Although it was still early the tavern already had a fair number of patrons, most of them transients resting before they went on their way. When they saw Cloudhawk enter they started muttering among themselves. Presumably a few had witnessed his display outside.

The furniture was all steel plating and riveted metal, thick and unyielding. Space-wise the bar was large, with two floors that included a boxing ring and gambling tables. People of all sorts occupied seats both in the common room and private chambers.

"Adder. It's been a long time."

Old Thistle called out to a large, burly man clad in a black leather trench coat. His skin was dark like coal and a three-pronged scar traced an angry line down his left eye. He was average looking, but something about him really left an impression.

"Well, well. If it isn't Old Thistle. Judging from that shit-eating grin on your face, I'm guessing you had a good haul?"

Adder lifted his head to acknowledge his friend, but his eyes quickly fell upon Cloudhawk.

When those eyes fixed on him, Cloudhawk's easy gait froze. Adder's gaze felt as deadly as his namesake, and it tickled at his highly-tuned danger-sense. Ever since crossing into the borderlands there were no more than three people he'd met who made him

feel this way.

This man was extremely dangerous! Who was he? Certainly no simple bar owner.

Adder withdraw his gaze. Inwardly he praised the young man's keen perception. He couldn't read him, either.

Old Thistle, meanwhile, didn't catch these small details. The wrinkles spreading across his face drew together as he frowned dramatically. "What? No, nothing like the success you enjoy, Boss Adder! I manage to make ends meet, that's all. But I won't keep you in suspense, the reason I've come by is to ask for your help."

Adder casually returned to cleaning glasses with a dingy towel. "Out with it then."

Squall took the initiative, bringing Asha closer.

Old Thistle pointed toward her. "I was hoping you could look after this girl, help set her up here in the Sandbar. At least help make sure she doesn't get bothered by the locals. I figured for someone like you it wouldn't require much more effort than lifting a finger."

As he spoke the old man placed a bag of coins on the bar top. The heavy sound of coins clinking together left no question as to its contents. "I know the rules of business, I was hoping Boss Adder could show this humble old man some face and help out."

"I like money, but I don't need any." Adder reached out his calloused hand and pushed the bag back toward Old Thistle. "The bar needs a server, the job's hers if she wants it. This is a trifling favor, I don't think it's necessary to charge you anything for it. But there is something you might be able to help *me* with."

On the surface, Adder was just your typical bar owner. However, in truth he was a man of great influence. Give him enough money and there was little he couldn't accomplish.

He wasn't lying when he said he had a fondness for money, and was not one for letting a good deal pass him by. What did he want now?

Old Thistle cautiously ventured to ask. "What do you want me to do?"

"Not you." Adder placed the dried beer glass back on the shelf. When he looked back his eyes once again fixed on Cloudhawk. "This young fellow over here."

What? Cloudhawk?!

Old Thistle couldn't promise anything. He looked searching toward the young demonhunter.

Cloudhawk replied, "Old Thistle, can this man be trusted?"

"Adder is very well respected in the Sandbar. He always keeps his promises-"

He cut the old man off. "Alright, go on then. What do you want me to do?"

Adder looked pleased with his decision. "We shouldn't speak here. Come with me."

Cloudhawk followed him into his office.

Adder's personal room was large and filled with dazzling treasures. From magnificent works of Skycloud craftsmanship like blades and armor, to restricted contraband like machine guns. There must have been hundreds of pieces to his collection.

Was this guy a hoarder? Almost every item in here was a priceless treasure.

More importantly he kept it all here, brazen as that was, without fear that someone will steal them. It gave Cloudhawk some idea of his abilities if he was this confident!

Adder lifted his hand and snapped his fingers. It was his only visible motion, and yet a delicate golden kettle in the middle of the room responded. A fine sand-like substance poured from the spout. It was extreme agile, flowing around like gravity didn't apply. Fine powder floated through the air in all directions until it hung across the ceiling like golden clouds. Whatever it was shone with a gentle yet bright light that immediately lit up Adder's vault.

The strangest part was that the light hung over everything like a fog until it seemed to be coming from everywhere at once.

Cloudhawk stared in awe at the luminescent clouds. "This is..."

"...a typical magic lamp. The most common means of light in the elysian lands. Much more useful than the electric lights of the wasteland." Adder's deep eyes glinted with a mischievous light. He looked at Cloudhawk and chuckled. "I was right. You are no elysian, and your demonhunter guise is a lie. As for that token you hold, you didn't get

that through any legitimate means.”

Cloudhawk felt like he was suddenly drenched with ice water. A bone-deep chill hung over his whole body.

Cloudhawk knew that he'd been caught, consequences would be serious. His relics and the token he held were priceless and this Adder guy had a thirst for trinkets. Things had suddenly gotten very dangerous.

Chapter 7

Bar

Cloudhawk was furious with himself. Why was his stupid mouth getting him in so much trouble?

It was too late. His identity was blown, no time for regrets.

Cloudhawk did not immediately confirm nor deny the bar owner's accusation. Instead he fixed Adder with a composed stare. Rather, more accurately he looked at the ring on the man's finger. "That's a relic, yes? How interesting that a demonhunter would be out here pretending to be a simple barkeep, with a personal treasure trove no less. If you aren't careful the news might get out, there could be trouble. Or maybe I'm wrong, maybe you aren't a demonhunter. In that case I wonder how the Skycloud soldiers would react to the news that someone outside of the order was hoarding relics. I'm guessing not well."

Adder narrowed his eyes. They glinted with a murderous light.

All of a sudden Cloudhawk felt a gripping cold overcome him. It started at his legs, then his waist, his arms, all the way up to his throat. Like a poison was working its way through his blood stream. But it wasn't, it was an illusion born from Adder's savage glare.

What a terrifying sensation!

Cloudhawk had never experienced such intense pressure before, it made every hair on his body stand on end. He was frozen in place, he couldn't move even if Adder lunged at him. Cloudhawk didn't even approach the level of power this strange man had.

Adder couldn't read the man before him. He wasn't a weakling, for most people cowered the moment his eyes fixed on them. He was a wastelander, but was also able to use relics. A wastelander, but in possession of a demonhunter token. Strange to say the least.

Interesting. Very interesting.

“I mean to say that identity isn’t important.” Cloudhawk was having trouble controlling his voice. In a rare moment of fragility his voice quavered, however his mask concealed both the look on his face and the fear in his voice. Thankfully it made him inscrutable and hid Cloudhawk’s true discomfort. “Now out with it, what do you want from me?”

“Smart man. I like clever lads like you, keeps me from having to make a mess.” Adder opened a box nestled in the corner of his vault and lifted a stack portrait from within. “It’s simple. There are a few rebels hiding out here in the Sandbar. They have a secret stronghold where they’re plotting to steal sensitive information from Skycloud City. Your job is to find a way to flush them out.”

“This is something you could bring to demonhunters or even soldiers. Why ask me?”

“Because they have something I want.”

“And that is?”

Adder was suddenly reluctant to say too much. “A map that has no use to you, so stop asking questions. I don’t want to reveal myself so I can’t do this personally, so do this for me and I’ll take that young woman under my protection. She’ll work here as a barmaid and so long as I’m alive no one will dare bother her.”

Cloudhawk leafed through the portraits.

The first was an old man with a goatee. The second was a one-armed swordsman with a large black sword on his back. The third was a hideous mass of muscle with guns at his side.

.....

Cloudhawk could tell by their equipment and the way they looked that these men weren’t push-overs. He was expected to deal with them on his own, which sounded more like a suicide mission. Adder hadn’t actually mistaken him for a high-level demonhunter, had he?”

“The old man is coming to my bar tonight to meet someone. He’ll have the information I want. Follow the target to their hideout and make your move, but do it quick and

proper. I don't want any suspicion coming my way."

"I'll need help."

"I told you, I can't reveal myself. I can't take the risk of sending any of my people either. But there is one person I can recommend."

Cloudhawk wasn't sure why Adder was so careful to keep to the shadows. He ran a watertight and meticulous operation, though. Just one person? No way that was enough! Cloudhawk was much weaker than Adder must have been expecting, he couldn't take on eight people on his own! ^[1]

"Alright." He thought about it for a moment then nodded his head. More talk wasn't going to convince Adder to help him with more people. "I'll get what you're after. You better keep your word."

"I've never gone back on a deal." Adder absent-mindedly fiddled with the green bone ring on his finger.

Old Thistle waited for them out in the common room of the bar, brows knit tight. He rolled the beaded bracelet through his fingers faster and faster. He had no idea what Adder wanted from the noble demonhunter but he wasn't going to offend either of them by involving himself. If either one took a disliking to the other, he wasn't sure what he would do.

Asha was also struggling against her anxiety. She was afraid the bar keep would demand something outrageous. If he did she didn't want to stay here.

"Don't worry, brother Cloudhawk is no ordinary man." Squall arrogantly flipped the small ponytail dangling from his head. He spoke to Asha with an air of assurance. "He's an exalted demonhunter, after all, and he holds a token. Nothing's going to happen."

Just as he spoke the words, Adder and Cloudhawk returned.

Old Thistle stopped fidgeting with the bracelet as the young demonhunter approached. Though vague, he gave enough of a description that Old Thistle understood. Rebels, even if it hadn't fallen in their lap it was something for a demonhunter to handle. It didn't seem like an unreasonable request.

Cloudhawk quickly left Adder's bar to begin his preparations.

Sandbar Outpost's narrow streets were cramped with stalls and shoppers. Many were travelers who moved through the streets like an artery, with merchants on the sides hawking cheap wares of dubious origin. People were coming and going in a tight press of humanity, trying their luck and looking for good deals.

A young woman, maybe eighteen or nineteen, was pushing through the crowd. She had shoulder-length, chestnut-colored hair and a lithe and graceful body. Her skin was white, her features unexceptional, and tight leather outlined the swells and dips that made up her figure. Covetous eyes followed the swing of her hips as she walked by.

She'd walked to and fro a couple times already, unperturbed by the hungry eyes that followed her.

Nothing about her marked her as a merchant. Her clothes were simple and she carried no visible weapons. In her hands were dried rations which she looked at with gloomy countenance. What was she doing, pacing back and forth all by herself? The people who saw her could only guess.

At last someone couldn't hold back their curiosity. A man slunk over toward her, surrounded by a cloud of sour stink. The repugnant man grinned her way. "What's a pretty girl like you doing here all on your lonesome, eh? You look like you could use some company."

She wasn't upset. On the contrary, she lit up with excitement. "You want to fuck me?"

Her response took the man by surprise. He stared at her, speechless.

She pressed him encouragingly, "If you want to fuck me you need to be more forward. You need more courage in order to make your approach work, otherwise you might as well just chop your dick off. You know what I'm saying?"

"I... are you serious?"

It was evident this was not the reaction he was expecting. Looking at the eagerness in her eyes he couldn't help but suspect that somehow the way of the world had changed and he somehow hadn't noticed. All of a sudden even someone like him was attractive to the opposite sex.

“You up for it or not?” She was getting impatient. “Don’t waste my time!”

It was all the incentive he needed, and with a nasty grin the man reached out to grab her ass. But just as he was about to make contact with her pert backside he distinctly saw a harsh glint in the woman’s eyes.

Her leg shot out and struck him in the chest like a bolt of lightning.

He was not a weakling but still couldn’t escape her blow. With a wailing cry he was knocked backward and hit the ground nearby with bone-crunching force.

What just happened?

Struggling to raise his head the man looked at the promiscuous woman. She was looking back with a mischievous grin and it was then he knew things weren’t going to go his way. The kick had proved she was more than he could handle.

Explaining himself didn’t even cross his mind. The man tried to scramble to his feet and escape.

“So you disrespect me like that and just expect to run away?”

The woman soared into the air like she weighed nothing at all. Her legs, like a pair of scissors, clamped around the man’s neck and twisted. Before he could even scream the man was flung to the ground followed by a flurry of punches and kicks.

“Disrespecting a demonhunter is a capital crime. But you didn’t do any harm and I’m a kind person, so I’m willing to show you mercy. Now give me your money!” She gave the smelly man a cursory search and found a limpid coin purse. She fished a dozen or so copper coins from within and scowled. “This is all you got and you expect to pick up a woman? Fuck off you broke-ass bitch.”

She gave him another vicious stomp for good measure. The unlucky man fell unconscious with spittle dripping from the corner of his mouth.

The demonhunter threw the coins into her own coin purse and immediately her worried expression returned. At this rate how was she *ever* going to get five silver coins?

Five silver was a pittance to a demonhunter, they made more than that on even the

most basic missions. But for a civilian, or someone who'd only just earned their title like Barb ^[2], it was no small amount. Plus without her exorcist staff, which was stolen by that weird barkeep, she couldn't do any missions to buy it back!

It was a dilemma. Five silver pieces was a considerable sum.

She was strong enough that she could steal or borrow five silver, but her pride as a demonhunter prevented it. Losing her exorcist staff was no glorious circumstance she wanted to advertise, so she decided to earn her money in a righteous and perfectly justifiable way.

Onlookers pointed at her and whispered among themselves. She was running a sting operation, so far today she'd caught three scumbags and made them pay for their crude requests.

Barb didn't care, her actions were appropriate! If these perverts weren't screwed in the head they wouldn't be propositioning her!

But making money this way was slow going. Most of the day was gone and she'd only managed to get about half of what she needed, she didn't know if she'd be able to get her weapon back by tonight. The reality troubled her.

Then she heard footsteps approaching from behind her. Were all men simply beasts who could only think with one head at a time?

Barb was overjoyed, was the pervert back for another go? She pretended as though she didn't hear him getting closer. Then he reached out...

"Deviant! The nerve!"

Without even turning to look she whipped around with a vicious roundhouse kick. But her long legs hit nothing. When she spun around she saw nothing but empty space.

That wasn't right. She was sure she heard footsteps.

Then in an inexplicable scene a figure appeared out of nowhere, gradually appearing before her eyes from the ether. Before she could react a familiar three-edged staff was held before her.

"Y-you... you're..."

“Try not to lose your staff anymore.”

Barb noticed that the exorcist staff pointed at her was none other than her own. She fought through her surprise to quickly snatch it back. But she was confused, hadn't it been in the bar? How was this masked stranger able to take it from the mysterious owner? “What's your name?” The masked man flashed a demonhunter token in front of her. “I have a mission I need your help with. Do you have the time?”

“A token of the high order!” In her surprise Barb stumbled backward. “Please give me your instruction, senior! I've only been a demonhunter for a month, but I'll do anything in my power to assist you!”

Cloudhawk paused. A greenhorn. But even a novice demonhunter was still a demonhunter. Adder's recommendation was a good one.

1. This is the first reference to a specific number of people. I assume the stack of portraits held more than three though it was not implied.

2. In Chinese her name is 'purple water caltrop' – and that fits her personality very well. A water caltrop – or devil nut – is pretty inhospitable looking. As thorny as her personality. The inside is edible, a seed that is pretty popular. I wonder if the alludes to our new demonhunter having a more appealing and agreeable personality under her uninviting shell. Keeping in line with our goal to make these names 'real', we've gone with 'Barb', an abbreviation of the real name 'Barbara' but also a reference to a spike/thorn.

Chapter 8

Elite Task Force

At the gate of Sandbar Outpost. A small temporary military outpost.

The fat guard captain was busily applying a poultice to one of his soldiers. The poor man's nose had been broken from a punch so vicious it almost caved his face in. What made it bitterer was that they simply had to accept it. Luckily the punishment wasn't serious, and with the help of Skycloud medicine his subordinate's nose would be healed in a couple of days.

"Captain, when are we going to be finished out here," the soldier grumbled. "It was so hard for us to get a chance to dispatch, but we haven't gotten anything done except to piss off someone important. It's only gonna get worse."

Their captain was just as gloomy.

Every Skycloud regiment was eager to prove themselves, but they were still in peace time. How were they supposed to earn achievements where there were no enemies? The captain was a naturally slow-witted fellow who was also a step behind others, and compounded with his humble background there wasn't much of a chance for him to get anywhere in life. It was an injustice to these poor guys that they were assigned to his leadership.

"It's been a year since I've been back and I have no idea what Jade is up to. Back in the village, I was third place in the military draft competition, now here I am. I can't even show my face back home if I could go back."

"Will you shut your damn mouth? I was *first* in my whole town!"

"Ah! Easy Captain, not so hard!"

The captain huffed in irritation, glowering in displeasure. And could he be blamed? Most of his soldiers were villagers before they were soldiers, the pride of their small homesteads. None of them figured they would end up as scrubs after joining the illustrious Skycloud military. For him it'd been a full three years since he'd been home,

and every time he wrote to his mother it was hard to find things to brag about. If his mom knew what her fine boy had really become he didn't want to think of how disappointed she'd be.

He wasn't going home, not without some honor to show for it. That was the truth of life as a soldier.

But when? When would he be able to lift his head in pride?

"C-c-c-captain!" A lanky soldier practically fell over himself as he raced toward him. He was simultaneously trying to stop his helmet from falling off his head and keep his panic under control. "The demonhunter from this morning is back!"

The captain went white as a sheet.

What was he doing back here? Was he not satisfied with the beating he'd already given them? Had he come back to teach them another lesson?!

His dull wits were still mulling over the dark possibilities when he saw the short masked tyrant saunter into view. His hoarse and unsettling voice went right to the point. "Fatty, I figured you'd be looking for a way to make up for your mistake, am I right? Here's your chance. I've come across a group of rebels here in the Sandbar, and the stakes are high. It'll be dangerous, are you up for the mission?"

"Wh-... what?" The fat man's jowls jiggled. His soldiers were stunned – the blessing was as sudden as it was unexpected!

They'd been soldiers for years and they'd barely been able to go out on patrol much less act in an important mission with a demonhunter! Now suddenly they were being asked to clear out a nest of agitators. A pleasant surprise indeed!

This was more than an honor. This was a chance to make their mark! Years of meritless labor had led them to this opportunity.

Cloudhawk hadn't expected such a positive response and was still uncertain about their attitude. So he added offhand, "This matter isn't very important to me, but I need to keep my identity a secret. For my secret mission. What that means is if we succeed you'll get all of the praise and reward. So, have you made up your mind?"

"Your devoted servant would walk through hell for you!"

The fat captain was full of admiration for the great demonhunter. Over the last ten years there hadn't been any major conflicts for Skycloud City to get involved in, leaving nothing for him to do.

Just getting a posting here at the Sandbar had been a lot to ask. They'd been desperate to arrest people from the moment they got here – not just for the sake of it, but because a single spy would be a great accomplishment. But in the days since they'd arrived, no matter how hard they looked, they weren't able to find a single one.

Then out of the blue this demonhunter appears. Not only does he forgive them their transgressions, but offers to lead them through a mission *and* let them have all the praise!

What was the definition of 'open-minded'? This was 'open-minded'! What did it mean to turn the other cheek and repay wickedness with kindness? This was the perfect example!

The guard captain couldn't express the breadth of his excitement. "Your servants will listen to whatever instructions you give, we eagerly await your orders!"

The light in the fat man's eyes stirred a cold disgust within Cloudhawk. Out in the wastelands he'd met men with zealotry like this. Clearly this fat soldier was just the same. But regardless, they were useful.

"We move out tonight. You lot start preparing."

Cloudhawk delivered his assignment then left. The fatty had to have some skill if they let him be a captain, even if Cloudhawk could whoop his ass without the help of his relics. The dozen or so others weren't necessarily pushovers either, and with them Cloudhawk had things more under control.

The guard captain showed Cloudhawk out, and when he was gone, spun around to address his men. "Brothers! Did you see that?! Our chance to do something noteworthy is finally here! The honorable demonhunter has given us this opportunity, and we're going to get it done right! Let's get ready!"

"Yes, sir!"

When Cloudhawk returned to the bar he breathed a long sigh of relief. He now had Barb the demonhunter, a fat guard captain and ten soldiers. Things were looking

better.

In reality, Cloudhawk wasn't keen on this sort of thing, but he had no choice if he wanted to win a good life for Asha. It was the only way to get what he wanted from Adder. Cloudhawk didn't see himself as a particularly responsible guy, and he couldn't really say why he was so dead-set on doing it. For some reason he saw Asha like a little sister, maybe it was guilt because of what happened to Coppertoath. He couldn't say for sure.

He never really thought about these things. He just did what he thought he had to.

Old Thistle came looking for him with Squall in tow. The old man wasted no time with pleasantries and asked if Cloudhawk would take his young charge along. After all, he assured him, Squall had some ability and he was sure to be of some help. He saw it as training and an opportunity for him to associate with soldiers and demonhunters. If he could do some work then all the better.

Cloudhawk didn't turn him down.

It was pretty clear Squall had a soft spot for Asha, too. Cloudhawk saw it clear as day. More than that, the guy seemed to know how to take care of himself, at least as much as Cloudhawk and probably stronger than most of the soldiers. The more the merrier, it just made his job easier.

Using his fabricated identity and the impressive clout of a demonhunter token, Cloudhawk had managed to cobble together a pretty good group of fighters. He had a novice demonhunter in Barb, Squall who was on the path to being one himself, a portly guard captain and the thirteen men under his command. Sixteen all together.

Twilight was fast approaching. Cloudhawk was attired in simple camouflage.

He gave a gentle tap to his mask and it changed to a brownish grinning façade. Even then he went farther, completely change his appearance. Using a small knife he cut his unkempt hair short and had Squall get him a leather outfit. In the end he looked completely different than he had when he'd arrived at the Sandbar just this morning.

These days it wasn't uncommon to see masked men traveling the roads. Cloudhawk's skinny figure also made him easy to disregard, especially below his tattered cloak

haphazardly flung over his shoulders. With a new mask, new hair, and new clothes no one was going to recognize him.

Gradually the members of his team gathered at the designated spot. The fat captain and his men were the first ones there.

To these men the mission was of critical importance, so they didn't dare show up late. Their preparations had been meticulous, and in addition to their standard equipment they each had crossbows slung over their shoulders.

They hadn't been waiting more than fifteen minutes before a pretty woman joined them.

She was dressed simply, but the weapon she carried made her status unmistakable – another demonhunter!

When Barb saw the fat captain and the others she was visibly surprised. “You lot are his Eminence's men?”

His Eminence? Oh! She must mean the masked demonhunter. If she was referring to him with such respect he had to be someone special. On top of his team, they had a second demonhunter to join them. This really was a once in a lifetime event!

“Yes yes yes! We're his Eminence's loyal soldiers!”

Cloudhawk arrived a few moments later with Squall at his side. When she saw him Barb greeted Cloudhawk with an excited smile. “Hello, your Eminence!”

The guard captain awkwardly bowed. “Everything is prepared! We await your orders!”

Squall wasn't dressed much different than usual. His hair was tied up in a ponytail behind his head and he wore his armor with the Bloomnettle coat of arms emblazoned on it. He carried a pair of two-foot short swords as his weapons. When he saw how Cloudhawk had managed to gather together another demonhunter and the soldiers from earlier his admiration for the young master soared. He desperately hoped one day he could be like him.

“Alright, everyone's here.” Cloudhawk cleared his throat, trying to assume the air of a leader. “Tonight there is a pair of rebels meeting in Adder's bar. These are their portraits. Take a minute to familiarize yourselves.”

“We can’t approach them while in the bar. If we rush to action we’ll alert the others of our plan, so first we have to follow the snakes to their nest. Then we clear ‘em out, does everyone understand?”

Cloudhawk didn’t have any predilection for leadership, nor could he think up any clever strategy. Luckily that didn’t seem to be required, after all if the scrolls were anything to go by there were only seven targets – eight including the one they were meeting tonight.

He had twice the number of people. Even if they were capable fighters there wasn’t anything for him to be concerned about.

“Squall, you’re responsible for putting eyes on our target. We’ll hang back about half a block. If anything unexpected happens we’ll move in for backup.”

“Got it!”

Everyone’s fighting spirit was up, confident in their impending success.

Barb had only just become a demonhunter, and her low upbringing meant she wasn’t going to easily achieve rank. Even after joining she had yet to complete a single mission. At last she’d been tapped to participate in a real task, and she was determined to show her thanks to her senior member by performing outstandingly.

Squall hadn’t even been accepted into the order yet, and although he wasn’t a very serious sort he had high aspirations. After all, he had a tremendous respect for Master Arcturus. If he wanted to follow in the great man’s footsteps this was a good way to sharpen his skills.

As for the guard captain? This was an even rarer opportunity to find! He joined the Skycloud army six years ago and the highest he’d climbed was squad captain. Like most holy warriors he held his faith close, but he had always been troubled that he was never given a shot. Finally, he was on a mission with two demonhunters – one of them with a token of the high order – and a young prospective demonhunter with a bright future. Him and his brothers together. Both emotionally and for his own pride, he was happy.

At last, a mission that didn’t make him feel like he’d joined the army for no reason.

Something for my mother to be proud of!

Of everyone there, the captain's fighting spirit was the strongest.

Chapter 9

Conspirators

The sky had not yet darkened to night but Adder's bar was already busy. There were borderland merchants, adventurers, heathens, believers of all sorts and more eating and drinking together. The air was choked with the smell of booze and tobacco.

A dancer twisted and swayed at one end of the common room while large men pummeled each other in the boxing ring on the other side. The whole bar was a sea of testosterone with yelling, cheering and cursing that shook the ceiling timbers.

It was certainly a rowdy place, but there were clear limits to the debauchery that was allowed.

An older man entered the bar. He was tall and lean, and a spindly goatee sprouted from his chin. His clothes were simple but surprisingly well kept. He looked like an old scholar, presentable beneath the large hat perched atop his head and covered the majority of his face.

"Sir, we have your reservation ready."

A server approached to offer assistance. He was young and his long hair was tied back in a simple ponytail. A pair of bright eyes shone with youthful vitality.

The old man nodded, though his eyes never ceased scanning his surroundings. They stopped for just a moment when he spied Adder behind the bar. The bar owner raised his head at the same moment, and for a brief second their gaze met. Then they each looked away as though they'd seen nothing.

The young server brought the man to a private room by a window before pouring him a glass of silvery wine followed by plates of food. This sort of fare was a delicacy here, but the man with the goatee seemed disinterested.

"I will not disturb you during dinner, sir."

The old man picked the hat off his head and placed it upon the chair beside him,

allowing his flowing white hair to fall freely. He didn't look exceptionally old but the blade of time had carved marks in his face. The valleys were vestiges of bitter times and his eyes were sharp and unwelcoming. Inside there was anger, pain, expectation, as well as morbid insanity mixed with restlessness.

Even his presence was uncomfortable. Calm as the surface of a lake, but in a caldera that could erupt at any moment.

About an hour later a tall man with a hooked, beak-like nose entered the bar. He looked around with beady eyes then slipped the server a scrap of paper with a number on it. The young man, without saying a word, led the newcomer to the indicated room.

While they traversed the common area, the bird-like man seemed to move both slow and fast. If one were to look closely his every step seemed calculated and precise. Especially as he threaded his way through the crowd he never touched a stool or one of the other patrons. Slippery as a phantom he quickly flit by, leaving no trace of his passage.

Without a question, this was a man of skill.

The young man stopped before a door and pushed it open.

When the bald man with his aquiline nose appeared before the goateed stranger his eyes glimmered with anticipation. He rose to his feet and addressed his guest with great respect. "Boss Buzzard!"

The one called Buzzard sized up the other one. "It's been a while, old friend. You've aged quickly."

"It's the curse of humans that we should grow old. It's nothing to fear. What we should loathe is growing old but accomplishing nothing." He punctuated the thought with a bitter sniff then waved the young man away. "Leave us."

The server glanced at the middle-aged man with the hooked nose, back at the man with the goatee, then bowed to each. He left and closed the door behind him, leaving the two men alone.

Buzzard sighed once they had the room to themselves. "You shouldn't keep this up. You aren't in the best health, come back with me. Over the last twenty-odd years you've contributed much. Enough. You don't need to spend all the rest of your time

and energy here, you need a life of your own.”

“Life? My life had already been ruined.” The man with the goatee shook his head. “The only desire I have left is to see Skycloud City in flames. If I can one day feel the warmth of those fires on my face then any price will be worth it. A few decades in exile would mean nothing if that was my reward.”

Suddenly Buzzard lifted a hand, entreating silence.

He rose and pushed open the door, his eyes darting left and right. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary, just the ponytailed server walking down the hall. He sighed.

“Relax, Buzzard. No one will eavesdrop on us here.” The older man stood as well. He understood the need for caution. “The owner of this place is more than he seems. Without his help I wouldn’t be here to collect this intelligence.”

“The bar owner? Can he be trusted?”

“It’s hard to say, but I think so. He doesn’t stand with Skycloud, they would kill him ten times over if they knew the things he’d done or the treasures he hides. It’s the same for helping me with this.”

“I trust your judgment.” Buzzard nodded. “Do you have it?”

The older man produced a black bound book from his clothes and handed it to his companion. “Everything is in here; troop counts and locations, and the names of all their captains. There are more than one thousand five hundred middle- to low-ranking officers on that list, as well as their backgrounds.”

“Hard to get one’s hands on, certainly!” Buzzard took the notebook from him as though handling a priceless treasure then began to leaf through its contents. “With this we can formulate a plan for infiltrating Skycloud. You’ve done us a great service.”

The older man’s response was forlorn. “It cost years and the lives of thirty companions to get this information. It was their noble sacrifice that built this foundation. I hope it serves its purpose, that wretched place must be razed to the ground.”

Buzzard looked through a few more pages. Although he was only scanning the entries he could tell it was both true and accurate. It must have taken years of struggle and dedication for the old man to get all this together, unfathomable sacrifice. His mission

had not been an easy one.

“Don’t be stubborn. Come back with me!”

“Everyone has their own battles to fight, and I’m not backing down from the front lines ‘till this one is finished. So long as I’m needed, I’m not going anywhere. I’m sure you understand.” The old man was steadfast. “But since you’re here I do have a few young soldiers to recommend. A few good lads I’ve dug up and kept close over the years. With the right training they’ll be of excellent use to us.”

Buzzard sighed once again. He knew the old man’s temperament.

He wasn’t going to come, but his recommendations were welcomed. Buzzard trusted his friend’s judgment, and anyone he offered would be reliable.

“It’s about time.” The old man fished a pocket watch out of his clothes and took a glance. “Come with me.”

The young man with the ponytail was wandering aimlessly around the bar, bored stiff, when suddenly he spied the man with the goatee and his companion quickly leave. After a brief tremor he dropped what he was holding and hurried after them.

The old man had planned this down to the minute. It was the busiest time for the streets of Sandbar Outpost, and the crowds were fierce. When he and the middle-aged man joined the fray they instantly vanished. The young server tried to keep up but stopped when he reached a crossroads. Several streets and alleyways slithered before him like a spider web. He had no idea which one his targets had taken.

Several minutes later, in an abandoned warehouse.

Dust and the stink of mold permeated the air. The light of a candle struggled against the breeze. Its frail light flickered against the darkness, and like the old man it just hoped to fill the world with a little light and warmth before it burnt out.

“These are the young men I was talking with you about.”

There were six people standing before the man with the goatee. The youngest of them was about twenty, and the oldest no more than forty.

“I’ve hid them here. They’ve helped me gather the information we have for the last decade or so. The product of constantly looking for talent. Every one of them has followed me through the fire and they all have unique skills. Whether you train them as spies or frontline fighters they will be your most trustworthy soldiers. I can guarantee that with my life.”

Buzzard nodded. “I’ll make sure to pass your personal recommendation on to Wolfblade.” [1]

“Wait! If we leave what about you?” One of the men with a large black sword on his back spoke up. “I’m with you. Wherever you go I’m going as well.”

“And me!”

“Same!”

Buzzard was moved by their loyalty. Most members of an independent Dark Atom cell dreamed of joining the main group. That was especially true for borderland spies like them. It was a promise that they could move somewhere without worry for food or clothing, where they would be taken care of. Who wanted to live like this? Like rats in a sewer?

Yet these men were willing to give up that opportunity to stay with the old man who led them.

“Death will come for us all one day, but faith is indestructible.” The old man answered them with a pleasant smile. He picked up the dying candles and used them to light others, spreading the light farther. “So long as we pass on the flame of our convictions, one day it will be a wildfire. What regrets would I have in death? Do not forget our goal!”

The six men looked at one another.

Buzzard interjected, curious at their reaction. “You have other goals?”

The old man nodded matter-of-factly. “There’s an inconspicuous chink in Skycloud City’s proverbial armor. Give me a little time, so long as that opening remains we can use it to administer a poison that would kill tens of thousands of city residents. It will be a catastrophe the likes of which the holy city would not recover from.”

As the plan slipped from the old man's lips his face turned monstrous and eerie.

Buzzard had never seen hatred at this level. This man's solitary purpose in life was to see the downfall of the holy city. But it was an interesting plan, and he opened his mouth to inquire further when –

Ding, ding!

The sound of a small bell softly flitted through the air. Clear and melodious, it stabbed at their ears like a poison dart.

“Shit!” One of the men by the door scowled. “Someone's trying to sneak up on us. I think we've been made.”

An enormous black man hoisted an equally massive gun from his back. He began pulling bullets the size of thumbs from the bandolier around his chest and began feeding them into the firing chamber. *Click! Click!* He stepped forward, aimed at the door, and fired.

BANG!

A shocking boom tore through the area, the warehouse door was blown to pieces.

With a cry of shock and pain the bullet hit someone on the other side and sent them flying. At the caliber this large man was using it didn't matter that the bullet first passed through the door. Whoever he hit was dead.

“Fuck!” The old man shouted. “Buzzard, get out of here now!”

“But you-“

“Now isn't the time!” He shook his head, cutting the other man off. “Think about what that notebook is worth. You *need* to get it to Wolfblade, no matter what. Otherwise all our effort is wasted! Now shut up and *go!*”

But even before his words could sink in the intruders were reacting. Suddenly the whole building roared like a hurricane had descended upon them. ^[2] The windows rattled and the wooden walls clacked as suddenly a hail of arrows fell.

“Find cover!”

Buzzard kicked over a table and hid behind it, just in time to see the deadly heads of seven or eight bolts poke through the wood. The others scrambled for protection, but one of the younger men was too slow and a crossbow bolt caught him in the eye. He was alive long enough to scream and then crumbled to the floor lifeless.

1. The name should be familiar. It's the name of the Dark Atom's leader.

Chapter 10

Sneak Attack

Ten minutes earlier Squall had indeed lost his target, but in defiance of his name did not pick a path at random. He found an out of the way corner and whistled a call, gathering the others. Cloudhawk, Barb, the fat captain and his men converged on his position.

They pressed him for information and their faces grew serious when he told them the situation. Had they already been spotted?

“I don’t think we’ve been made or you’d be dead already. It’s not uncommon for men like this to take extra precautions to stay hidden. He probably had this set up ahead of time, a safe route just in case.”

The captain wasn’t a smart man, but he did have the benefit of six years serving as a soldier. He’d heard a lot and experienced much. Here his perspective got right to the truth of the matter.

“It’s a habit of experienced insurgents, one they use whether they’re being followed or not just in case. He’s alert and that’s going to make things more difficult. We can definitely be sure we’re on the trail of a true spy.”

The captain’s soldiers were only made more excited by the revelation.

“We wanted a chance to prove ourselves, right?”

“Great. This is so great!”

“Is there something wrong with your heads? We’ve lost them!” Barb was losing her patience. “What are we going to do now? Go from house to house? That’ll take forever, and they’re sure to know we’re coming. Our targets will be gone before we even get a whiff.”

“Don’t worry, we’ve still got things under control. I sprinkled the carpet in the bar with a fluorescent powder.” Squall regarded the despairing group with a grin. He pulled a

small rod from his back and gave it a quick shake. Inside the rod was an unknown liquid which, when disturbed, began to emit a faint light. “The powder is odorless and difficult to detect. But under the right light it becomes clear as day... there! Can you see it?”

Squall swung the rod a few inches over the ground, making a few passes until two pairs of footsteps appeared. They glowed with a faint green color.

Cloudhawk was ecstatic. Squall was more useful than he'd given him credit for.

Barb was also impressed. “You've got some tricks up your sleeves, guy!”

The demonhunter's praise filled him with pride, but he didn't let it show. Instead, Squall went on trying to keep his words modest. “Just a little mischief is all.”

The soldier with the broken nose blurted out. “So what are we waiting for?! Let's get after them!”

“Shut your face! Our leader hasn't given the order, what are you in such a fuckin' rush about?!” The fat captain brought his fist down on the soldier's helmet. He couldn't say he wasn't anxious, too, but he wasn't going to presume anything with three other people above his station calling the shots. He turned respectfully to the masked demonhunter. “Sir, as you can tell we –“

Cloudhawk ignored him, and instead turned to his young assistant. “Squall, can you describe the man our target met in the bar?”

Squall's face scrunched tight as he searched his brain for details. “I remember the old man called him ‘Buzzard.’”

“Buzzard?” Cloudhawk narrowed his eyes. “Middle-aged man, kind of tall, sharp nose and a bald head?”

“You've met him?” Squall exclaimed.

Cloudhawk hadn't expected it to be him. His eyebrows drew tight together and after a moment of thought he answered. “I saw him once on one of my missions through the wastelands. He's a trusted member of the Dark Atom, led by a man named Wolfblade. He's dangerous.” [1]

The captain and his men visibly gaped at the master demonhunter.

One of Wolfblade's trusted men? This was staggering news! The Dark Atom was a group of heretics who'd been operating in the elysian lands for years – a constant thorn in Skycloud City's side. They were a group of crazed heathens who left destruction and a trail of corpses wherever they went. Everyone in the holy lands saw them as the enemy to their way of life.

Dark Atom was a well-organized group, they performed their jobs carefully and kept everything under wraps. No one had yet found their main hideout. Their leader, Wolfblade, was a madman wild with ambition whose main goal was the destruction of Skycloud City. The guard captain originally thought these men they were tracking were your garden variety schemers, but in reality they'd stumbled on a Dark Atom's plot!

Barb looked at Cloudhawk with wide eyes full of admiration. "You're amazing! I can't believe you've gone fist-to-fist with members of the Dark Atom!"

This one had quite the imagination. When had Cloudhawk said anything about fighting them?

But it was true he'd had some experience with them. And the man who'd represented the Dark Atom, who'd come to buy the twisted fruits of the Academician's labors, was none other than this hook-nosed bald man.

The world was a small place, Cloudhawk was discovering. The chances of running into the guy again here...

The realization meant this was more difficult than he'd expected.

Cloudhawk had seen what Buzzard could do, he wasn't any less capable in a fight than Hyena. Meaning, the man was downright lethal. Could they capture him with only the few people he'd brought? But whether or not they could wasn't the most pressing question. Cloudhawk didn't have any reason to make an enemy out of the Dark Atom. Trespasser, the disease gifted to him by the Academician's final treachery, still swam through his blood. Who knew what sort of mutation it was causing. Only the Dark Atom had the power to help him, picking a fight with them was like digging his own grave.

Barb was itching for a fight. "Predecessor, give the order. I'm ready to lead the charge!"

Inwardly Cloudhawk sighed. He'd found this information out too late. Once the arrow left the bow you couldn't take it back. "We can't run in half-cocked, safety is important. Let's find where they're holed up at first."

Sixteen people followed the faint green trail to a distant corner of the outpost. It ended at a derelict warehouse that was otherwise uninteresting.

The Sandbar was full of borderland merchants and out of convenience many of them would construct warehouses for their goods. Often they were only used a couple times then abandoned. Such was the case for this building, which was largely unassuming and out of the way. Of course that is what made it the perfect place for plotting. It looked like they'd found the right place.

"You, get ready to break in the door." The guard captain began giving orders in a low voice, pointing first to one of his men. "The traitors are definitely in there so everyone be ready. Once the door's open we start the attack. Kill every last one of them, no quarter!"

"Yes, sir!"

The soldiers spread out, using the cover of night and piles of detritus to hide their approach. Once the building was surrounded they hunkered down and waited for the signal. One of them then stood up and made his way toward the front door.

The guard captain gestured and the soldier charged, ready to burst through.

Then all of a sudden a loud bang could be heard from inside, loud enough to burst their eardrums. In the next instant the warehouse's sturdy door exploded outward in a shower of splinters. The Skycloud soldier went from a full sprint to an unplanned flight as suddenly he was careening backward, blasted away from the warehouse like he'd been struck by a raging bull. Four or five meters distant he hit the ground with an unsettling thud.

"Motherfucker!"

"They've seen us!"

Several of the soldiers moved in to drag their comrade out of the crossfire. His armor had been blasted to bits and shards of it littered the ground. The unfortunate man rolled around in pain. If not for the superior quality of Skycloud armor he would have

been blasted to pieces.

However just because it didn't blow a watermelon-sized hole in him didn't mean it wasn't a life-threatening wound. He was out of the fight at the very least, which meant they were a man down already. Talk about getting off on the wrong foot.

Barb stared in shock. "What is going on!?"

"They've got some fuckin' mean guns, that's what!" Cloudhawk had grown up in the wastelands. He knew what sort of damage these weapons could do, so he called out to the others. "Don't get close!"

"Son of a bitch! They've got illegal weapons! You lot are fuckin' *dead!* You hear me! Hammy's comin' for ya!" The portly captain saw his men as brothers, and seeing one of them laid out and fighting for his life threw him into a rage. "*Fire arrows!*"

The guards didn't have the long-ranged bows used by Skycloud soldiers, and had instead brought with them medium-ranged crossbows. They were not unlike the ones used by Bloomnettle's caravan guards, with a crossbow body and a high-pressure quiver. Every drum held a dozen or so bolts and each one had the stopping power of a rifle bullet. Military issue crossbows were stronger than the civilian variety as well, and though not quite as powerful as longbows they were more suitable for urban combat like this.

A dozen crossbows rose up. Suddenly a hail of crossbow bolts started tearing through the air.

The combined attack descended on the warehouse like a hurricane. The six-inch bolts were practically unstoppable within a six-meter range and punched through the building's wooden walls like butter. ^[2] The tips of the bolts were also coated with a paralytic toxin, so even if they just scratched their targets it was enough to take them out of the fight.

Drums were quickly emptied. It only took the guards three seconds to switch them out for a full one.

Removing the need to hand crank new bolts made these crossbows vastly superior to the normal kind. ^[3] In close quarters they were deadly, and any enemy turned pale when they knew what they were up against. The soldiers were busy reloading when four or five objects were thrown at them through holes in the walls.

“Move!”

All around the warehouse a series of explosions shook the earth. The detonations didn't hurt Cloudhawk or his people but it did create a screen of smoke thick enough to impede their vision. The sounds of gunfire rang out from the haze and from time to time there was the light of a fire. They were fighting back.

“Stop them! Not a single one gets out of there alive!”

As the fat captain screamed the order a figure ran out through the smoke like a tiger leaping from its lair. He swiped with the massive black sword in his hands.

The weapon carved a bloody swath through the air. A guard's head hit the ground nearby and rolled away.

“Tough one here!”

The captain raised his crossbow and fired off five bolts in an instant, but the killer disappeared into the fog. But the captain wasn't a greenhorn either, two of his shots connected – one in the shoulder and the other in the rebel's chest. The bolts were strong, but the man's constitution was stronger. The bolts only managed to cause minor flesh wounds.

The smoke began to swirl again. This time an enormous man with skin black as coal lifted an equally enormous gun.

The captain flung himself to the side just before the deafening blast of the man's gun rang out. Another soldier was thrown backward. Quickly following the man with the black sword reappeared. His wounds leaked blood and the paralytics had begun to work their way through his veins, but it hadn't taken him down yet. He charged at the guard captain like a crazed rhinoceros.

1. If you recall Buzzard was the antagonistic man who met Hyena outside of Blackwater Base when the DN was buying mutants back in chapter 109.

2. It might be strange to see inch and meter used together here. The Chinese have something they call a *cun*, commonly called a 'Chinese inch', which is in common use. *Cun* measurements are used a lot in anatomy especially so it's something I use

constantly in acupuncture practice. A *cun* is measured in several ways: The width of your thumb; the space between the interphalangeal creases of your middle finger; fore and middle finger pressed together is 1.5 *cun*; your four fingers pressed together are 3 *cun*; the distance from the middle interphalangeal joint of your first finger to its tip is 2 *cun*. So these crossbow bolts are five or six *cun* – now you can do the measurements yourself!

3. Right, so these are automatic crossbows fired by compressed air. Literally the only difference between this and a gun is gunpowder. Is it gunpowder that the elysians find so taboo? What about fireworks? How do they demolish buildings, by blowing really hard?

Chapter 11

Midnight Conflict

These guys were tough!

Fine, you'll get to see just how tough Uncle Fatty is!

The portly guard captain angrily threw his crossbow to the side, then pushing his powerful legs against the ground, he launched forward. Pulling the short blades from sheaths on either side of his belt he took three steps forward and struck them together. With a loud clang they fused into a dual-headed glaive and he brought it down on the rebel swordsman with gale force.

Clang!

Neither budged and they pressed against the other's weapon with all their might. The ear-piercing sound of metal grinding on metal followed them, sparks flew. Despite his size the fat captain was quick. The two men pushed one another away then started the deadly close-quarters dance. Their weapons whipped back and forth, striking and parrying. Neither seemed to have the upper hand.

"Everyone get in there! Stop them, don't let a single one get away! It's time to fight for the glory of the gods!"

The other soldiers heeded his call, casting aside their bows and raising their swords. They attacked heedless of the danger to themselves and ready to die for honor.

The large man pumped the shotgun's fore stock, ejecting a red-hot casing from the chamber and replacing it with another. One of the soldiers came at him with weapon raised and he pointed the black maw of its barrel in his direction. The eruption of fire was blinding, the force of the shot blasting him away.

Though their armor was as hard as steel, even Skycloud City's protection was no match. Sizzling shards of metal flew every which way.

Ka-chick! Another spent casing cleared the chamber, the whole encounter had lasted

only a second. He was on to his next target – the guard captain.

The captain heard the shot, then saw the man turn his way. He tried to move but the swipe of a black broadsword cut off his escape. The two of them were matched but the distraction lost him his edge and the captain found himself on his back foot, left with nowhere to go.

The rest of his brothers were busy with their own battles. No one was there to help him.

“Time to die, Skycloud dog!”

The black man didn't say it, not with words, but it was what he meant as he screamed and pulled the trigger of his shotgun. He was close enough that it didn't matter where he aimed or what armor they wore, no one could survive. He was certain this bastard soldier from Skycloud City was dead and the thought filled him with an indescribable sense of joy.

All of this was no accident. From the man with the goatee, to the swordsman, to the shotgunner himself, they all hated what these soldiers represented down to their bones. All of them were either criminals, expelled for their lack of faith, or shunned for trying to forge a life in those lands of plenty. Whatever the reason they all found themselves living the life of a traitor.

Skycloud's influence was vast. Ending a single life did nothing to change that. However, taking a zealot's life was always a pleasure. It was more addicting than the strongest drug.

BANG!

A deadly cloud of iron pellets spread from the barrel of the shotgun.

But the large man was surprised and infuriated as a hand shot out, grabbed the barrel, and shoved it toward the sky. It belonged to a wiry figure more bone than muscle. He wore a brown grinning mask with only his strange eyes visible from beneath.

What?! How did this happen? The smoke was thick but he would have seen someone coming.

The thought barely had time to cross the big man's mind before Cloudhawk started his

vicious assault. His left hand swung around leaving a cold gleam of steel in its wake, ready to plant a deadly kiss with the edge of his Skycloud dagger.

Thrice the dagger passed and never once did Cloudhawk let the barrel of the shotgun go.

One stab to the heart.

One to the lungs.

One to the throat.

His attack was as fluid as a swiftly flowing river and at once the large man lost his strength and released his weapon. Cloudhawk snatched it from him and used the butt like a staff, ramming it into his opponent's chest. The gun broke apart from the force as its former owner crumpled to the floor. Even the most talented surgeon in the best hospital couldn't save him.

"No!" The man with the large sword saw what had become of his companion.

The marksman had been more than an acquaintance, but there was nothing he could do for him. He was struggling to keep his own hide intact. Just as the fat captain's attack was coming faster, Squall appeared from the fog with his two swords swinging. The rebel swordsman was only just managing against one, and the addition of another threatened to exhaust him.

Suddenly, from the fog another figure emerged like a ghost from beyond the veil, appearing and disappearing through the darkness. The dark silhouette was so fast and seemed to move erratically. Two guards approached to block their path when a cold light answered. Stiletto blades, fast as lightning. Both soldiers instantly hit the ground.

Their efforts didn't slow down the agile shadow in the least. In a blink it fell upon Squall and the captain and before they could even shift their attention two more daggers were aimed their way.

Neither the guard captain nor Squall were a match for this stranger in terms of speed. They both saw the sneak attack coming but their bodies didn't respond quickly enough. Squall's face went pale. The captain could only stare in impotent shock.

No! I'm done for!

This had to be the one Cloudhawk was talking about, Wolfblade's lieutenant – Buzzard. Only a fighter of such skill could be this fast, this deadly. All Squall could think of was how much of a pity it was to die here before having the chance to meet his idol, Master Arcturus. The captain's regrets cut even deeper. *Shit. I finally got a shot, a role in something bigger than myself, then this guy shows up.* Lady Luck really had it out for him.

Both men were coming to terms with their inevitable demise when Barb came to their rescue. She dashed out from the fog while her exorcist staff howled. Even before she came within striking distance of Buzzard the force of her relic kicked up a storm of dust. The raging winds created a dervish.

She was indeed a demonhunter. Her talents and combat prowess were something to be respected!

Even without practical experience, a demonhunter's training was rigorous and their effect on a battlefield could not be ignored. She'd been lurking on the edges of the fight, looking for her opportunity. Her target had been the big one with the shotgun until she saw her superior take him out with three cuts. She found his nimble and ruthless style chilling - certainly worthy of her respect.

Then she saw Buzzard moving like a specter through the darkness. Head on, two of her still wouldn't be enough to stop him. But if she attacked him when he wasn't expecting it, even a wasteland adept like him couldn't withstand the force of an exorcist staff!

If it lands this guy's done, or at least badly hurt. Barb, you've got this! Maybe I'll earn a commendation from the senior – maybe he'll even make me his apprentice!

Barb already held Cloudhawk in very high regard. He wasn't a master demonhunter, but certainly her senior, and a guy like him held a lot of sway over someone wet behind the ears like her. If she could go on a few missions with someone like him the benefits to her would be huge.

This was just the opportunity she'd been looking for.

How could she know Cloudhawk was just a pretender? If they fought she would discover that he wasn't much better than she was. His only advantages were surviving a host of deadly situations and the relics he'd gathered.

Buzzard switched focus to Barb, forced to break off his attack on the other two. He leapt up and spun around, allowing the deadly weapons to fly from his grip.

She froze. If she threw caution to the wind and flung herself at Buzzard she would have to deal with daggers aimed for her throat and heart. Barb lacked experienced in life or death moments like this, lacked the mad boldness of wastelander attacks. She switched from offensive to defensive and protected herself from the daggers.

Whoosh!

She just managed to sidestep the two daggers when a third buried itself in her right arm. She could feel it drill into bone and the pain not only forced her to drop her staff, but knocked her off balance. She hit the ground.

Buzzard's feet barely touched the ground before he was launched back into the air. With a flick of his wrists two more spikes were in his grip, ready to taste blood. Violet was the most vulnerable, so she was his target.

"No! The lady demonhunter is in danger!"

They saw the threat to her life, but no one could help her.

Violet tried to get up, tried to move, but Buzzard had her locked down. He threw his spikes. Her wide eyes reflected their cold light as they came her way. Six months... it'd only been six months since she'd earned the right to call herself a demonhunter. She'd never completed a mission, and as luck would have it her first target would be this seemingly invincible man.

He was more than experienced, more than vicious. The spikes he threw were meant to kill, not maim, and he followed their trajectory. Both hands stretched out like a bird of prey, ready to snap her neck if the spikes should fail.

Finished!

She could feel it, his determination to see her dead. The unabating murderous intent made her cold from head to toe, a sensation she'd never felt before.

At this crucial moment the night seemed to peel away. A frail figure appeared from the ether between Barb and Buzzard, standing tall like an immutable mountain. Both the demonhunter and the rebel were shocked by his sudden appearance.

In the instant his invisibility ceased Cloudhawk lifted a crossbow.

Another demonhunter?!

Buzzard hadn't expected two, and especially hadn't expected one to appear from nothing. He couldn't stop his attack. Now suddenly the spikes' target was Cloudhawk instead of the girl, as were his claw-like hands. The dual onslaught would slay any novice who dared stand in his way.

"Eminence, watch out!"

The ground responded, so quickly she could hardly yelp her surprise. Dirt and gravel rose to form a shield that, although it looked frail, stopped Buzzard's spikes in their tracks.

The rebel lieutenant was next, swiping like a fearsome tiger. The force of his strike caused an explosion of gravel and a deafening crack. The shield was thoroughly destroyed. However, the surprise of Cloudhawk's involvement had slowed him down. Buzzard didn't have his next move planned.

The crossbow was leveled, glinting iron pointed his way. When the trigger slipped back seven or eight bolts were spat out in the blink of an eye like a deadly rain.

Buzzard was quick, and were he far enough away this weapon would not have caused him a second thought. But he was close – face to face. He wrenched around to avoid the first few but the remainder found their mark. They tore through his chest amidst sprays of hot, red blood.

"Got him!"

Barb was not one to keep her thoughts to herself. He was definitely worthy of his status as a mighty demonhunter! His plan was flawless, nothing short of beautiful. It was impressive but filled her with a sense of inadequacy. Even disregarding his mystical invisibility, the calm with which he faced the danger was outside her ability to fathom.

Chapter 12

A Soldier's Duty

Barb was no weakling, but she was new to her role as a demonhunter. A newly minted grunt. However, this second one who could appear and disappear at a whim, as well as force the sand to do his bidding. At the very least it meant he had a couple relics to draw on.

For a novice demonhunter, an exorcist staff was considered a treasure. The masked man had several, so conventional thinking suggested he was no typical demonhunter.

Thinking back on his encounters with the order, Buzzard noted that often a novice demonhunter accompanied a more senior member. After a few missions where the novice could gain the training and experience necessary, they then could strike out on their own. It was in essence a student-teacher relationship. Was this masked man the senior demonhunter?

Buzzard could feel the power of his opponent. He was weaker than he might have thought, but clearly had a wider breadth of experience. A novice used their power wildly without thought for conservation, whereas someone with more experience knew to use their limited strength at the best possible moment. The masked man had that knowledge.

News had passed through the base that an influential demonhunter had recently arrived. His first order of business had reputedly been to harass a contingent of soldiers. Was this the same man?

That wasn't important right now. Buzzard was injured and he needed to get away.

Cloudhawk was close enough to get a good look at the hook-nosed man's appearance. Sure enough it was Buzzard, the man from the Dark Atom. He had no choice, a moment's hesitation could spell disaster in a fight like this. Although he had no desire to fight with the rebel organization, he couldn't hold back or show mercy. He pulled the trigger and allowed the crossbow to spit an unending stream of deadly bolts. One after the other the compact arrows were set and fired.

Buzzard dodged as best he could but took two more in the thigh.

Seven bolts bristled from his body. They were powerful enough that at this range they could punch right through a person, but Buzzard had sturdy leather beneath his outer clothes. Add to that his sturdy physique from years of physical training and the arrows stopped when they got caught in his tough muscle. None penetrated deep enough to injure his organs.

They weren't fatal but that didn't mean the bolts were ineffective. The paralytic toxins they used were already working through his system, he could feel a creeping numbness take hold. From nearby a scream caught his ear. It was the man with the large sword he'd come to save.

He had been hit, too, and the poison had taken its toll. His mind moved slowly and his reaction time dulled, like he was trying to move through a thick sludge. How could he protect himself from the captain and Squall if he could barely move?

Thud!

He fell to the ground. Squall buried his two short swords in the man's chest. The captain followed up by beheading him with his glaive. His head rolled away, staring into the void with glassy eyes. Buzzard saw this and backed away, looking for a means of escape while Squall and the captain turned toward him. Barb had also risen back to her feet, exorcist staff in hand. With Cloudhawk, that made four to one, he was surrounded on all sides.

Cloudhawk didn't hurry to continue the fight. His voice was cold as he spoke through the mask. "Buzzard. Surrender, it's pointless to keep fighting."

Cloudhawk held no ill will toward the Dark Atom, he didn't want to offend potential allies if he didn't have to. If Buzzard surrendered perhaps he could find a way to let him go without anyone knowing. It was better than burning the bridge entirely.

"Boss Buzzard! Run!"

A figure sporting numerous wounds broke through a circle of soldiers. His abdomen was torn open and his guts had begun to spill out, but he fought on with a furious madness. He threw open his cloak to reveal a vest that was covered in sections of pipe.

Such were the men recommended by the old man. They were wounded, dying, and

surrounded by the enemy. But the cruelty of fire knew no morals, and they would die together with their enemies if it came to that.

The guard captain and Squall stared in shock. It gave Buzzard just enough leeway to leap up and over the weakest one of his opponents, Squall.

“Skycloud dogs! Tonight we die together!”

The man covered in explosives grinned in satisfaction once Buzzard got free. At least his death would mean a brother of the Dark Atom would live on. It was a worthy death. He gripped the detonator in his hand, thumb hovering over the button as a fervent madness took over his face. He ran at Cloudhawk.

Fifteen meters! Ten!

The fat captain didn't know how to stop him.

A standard explosive with a fuse was easy enough – just extinguish it. But the suicide vest this one wore just needed a half second for him to push the button. All he needed was to get close enough.

A black staff whistled through the air. With a sickening thud and a pathetic gurgle, the tri-edged point of the staff slipped through the man's throat.

Barb roared at him. “You piece of shit, you think you can take out the senior? You're dying all by yourself, douchebag!”

Cloudhawk grabbed her and yanked her backward. “Move!”

As his consciousness began to slip away the suicide bomber used the last of his strength to press the button. The resulting explosion was deafening. The Sandbar shook and fragile mud houses blocks away shook apart. The center of the detonation was absolute catastrophe.

The bomber was more than just a mindless criminal!

Many were blown back or knocked to the ground, even Cloudhawk toppled over in a blind daze. He had been closest to the blast radius so the impact had rattled his brain and he was slow to recover.

The bomber's suicide run nearly knocked their leader out. The guard captain gathered some men and raced to where Cloudhawk lay. No one gave consideration that there may be someone else in the warehouse – the man with the goatee.

His eyes were red. Tears were streaming down his cheeks.

Dead. All dead. They had been his faithful men, loyal and full of potential. Not a one of them had been spared by these murderous scum. It was like a knife to his heart.

The soldiers were still recovering from the sudden and violent actions of the suicide bomber. Buzzard managed to knock two aside, slipping passed them and back inside for the old rebel.

He'd grown weak. The poison was in full effect. "It's no good. We've got to go!"

"We can't both escape. I'll stay behind and fend them off, you need to escape!"

"No, you get out of here and I'll keep them off your back!"

"There's no time for this!" The old man glared at Buzzard through red, puffy eyes. "Do *not* forget your mission. You need to bring that intelligence back to our leader. Go quickly! Otherwise the boys' deaths were for nothing!"

Buzzard stared back for a few moments, fighting with the decision. He grit his teeth against the bitter knowledge that nothing he said was going to change what happened here. He did the only thing expected from a man and made him a promise. "We will win. So long as I breathe and there's blood in my veins I will kill every last one of these bastards. I promise you'll get vengeance."

The old man answered with a sad smile. "It's a shame I won't see your grand work for myself. Take care of yourself."

Buzzard's powerful legs were back in motion, sending him into the protective embrace of the night.

"Goddamnit! That bastard got away!"

"There's still one in here! Get him, see what he knows!"

The man with the goatee stood calmly in the face of the encroaching soldiers.

Determination burned in his eyes as he pulled out a weapon from his belt with his right hand. It was a gun, something like a handgun but its barrel about the width of a child's arm.

BANG!

The head of one of the soldiers exploded like an overripe watermelon. The old man's gun had blown it to splinters.

The unfortunate soldiers' companions stopped and stared in shocked horror. They thought he was an old weak man, not some deadly marksman. They wouldn't have run at him directly if they'd known. As they reassessed the situation the old man was on the move, for he knew his death was at hand. It gave him the courage to do what he had to.

The old man stepped over the corpse of his first victim, lifting his gun again. This time it was pointed at Cloudhawk who had just staggered back onto his feet. He still hadn't recovered from the shock of the blast much less gotten his bearing in the haze the explosion left behind. Cloudhawk couldn't see him, but the moment the barrel was leveled his way the familiar itch of danger filled his mind.

Not good! Too late to get out of the way!

The old man was an accomplished marksman. He took all his rage, sadness and regret and focused it through the barrel of his gun as he pulled the trigger. The bullet tore out of the barrel, right for Cloudhawk. Time seemed to hang on this instant when suddenly a portly but agile figure flung itself in front of the young wastelander.

Bang!

The guard captain's glaive shattered, followed by the chest piece of his armor. Blood erupted from his wound and filled his mouth as he hit the ground.

Why did he do it? The captain couldn't say. He just... reacted.

Even as the bullet ripped his insides apart there was no fear. In fact he felt pride, this was a death fit for a soldier.

He gave his life fighting the hated Dark Atom. What's more, he traded his own humble existence so that an honorable demonhunter could continue the good work. It was the

greatest moment in all his years on this world.

Death wasn't anything to be afraid of. To die for faith was to die with no regrets.

His men raced over to where he lay, trying to put pressure on the gaping wound in his chest to stem the flow of flood. Nothing they did could stop the red tide as it bubbled from him, sprinkling their faces. Hot tears mingled with the blood of their leader. "Captain!"

Cloudhawk simply stood there in shocked dismay.

The guard captain took a bullet for him.

The old man's hand cannon could only fire two rounds before needing to reload. Both were spent, so he could not defend himself when a soldier came and smashed his weapon against his skull. The old man was knocked senseless.

Cloudhawk kneeled down by the captain who was fighting for his final breaths. "Why did you do that?"

The fat man struggled to keep his eyes open, gasping as his lungs filled with blood. But his pudgy face split in a smile. "I'm a soldier."

That's what a soldier was, a defender. Protecting whatever he could was his duty.

"A group like the Dark Atom will never give up. They're always planning some way to destroy the holy city, to kill as many people as they can." The captain grabbed Cloudhawk's arm with his blood-soaked hand. "I'm done, but sir... your shoulders carry the heavy burden. You have to stop them. Protect our people. Protect our land..."

As Cloudhawk stared at the soldier, tenacious even in his final moments, his heart was heavy. These soldiers didn't know they were just tools. From the start they were so grateful to him, he couldn't take their faith or trust.

"Knives, do me a favor," the captain said to the soldier with the broken nose. He took his hand and fixed him with a solemn stare, like it was the most important thing in the world. "When I die, send my body back home... bring me back to my mother. Remember to tell her I died bravely. I wasn't an embarrassment..."

Knives rubbed the tears from his eyes. "Captain... I'll remember."

“I think she’ll be proud of me.” He smiled, a smile full of self-satisfaction. “Thank you, sir... for giving me the chance... to go home with honor. If there’s a next life... I’ll make sure to pay... you back.”

The guard captain’s eyes slipped shut.

Chapter 13

Arrangements Made

The biggest difference between the elysian lands and the wastelands wasn't the landscape. It was the people – the fact that anyone born in one place or the other was fundamentally raised differently, right down to their bones. Wastelanders were forced to consider survival above everything else, no matter the means, and they did that by succumbing to materialistic instinct. Conversely, elysians were born into a life of plenty where they could follow pursuits of faith and honor.

Honor wasn't a concept Cloudhawk had fully come to understand yet.

Therefore he didn't understand why he would choose to die out here, without compromise, and be returned to his family. He didn't know how these men could indiscriminately slaughter thousands of innocent wastelanders, but selflessly sacrifice their own life for a companion. They lived under the grace of the gods, without want for food or clothing, their minds filled with firm conviction and faith. The elysians were always ready for any chance to show their honor and worth.

Family, love, friends – even life. When placed before the altar of glory and faith they were easily sacrificed. It was the root of the elysians' strength, this conviction, and it protected them from the evils of the world.

Hundreds of thousands of soldiers just like this protected the holy lands, impregnable and unshakable. How could an organization like the Dark Atom hope to win?

He just couldn't understand and could only stand there, stunned.

The captain's soldiers carried him away. The others spread out to search the area.

"Sir! There were eight Dark Atom agents. One escape, one survived, and six more were killed."

They had lost five soldiers and three more were critically wounded. Six managed to escape the skirmish in decent shape. Three of that group began looking through the corpses for any important information, and the remaining three set about rummaging

through the warehouse.

“We found a small hidden room while looking through the warehouse. There are fifteen canisters of what we think are poison gas.”

Cloudhawk led Barb and Squall into the warehouse. Inside they found a dozen or so glass containers in a secret room, just as the soldiers said. A nasty green liquid sloshed inside, bubbling constantly like it was just looking for an excuse to blow.

“I think I read about something like this in a book. They called it green nightmare, it’s a toxic chemical. Supposedly it’s made from refined parts of wasteland animals and evaporates at room temperature into a toxic cloud. It’s really nasty stuff, if these canisters broke it’d probably kill everyone in the Sandbar!” Barb was surprised to find such dangerous materials here. She patted her full chest to restrain her beating heart. “Damn, that’s no joke. If the rebels had used this we would all be dead!”

Soldiers within ear shot heard this and felt a chill run up their spines. The spies were more dangerous than they’d thought!

No one rushed to handle the canisters for fear a single slip up could kill them all. Only Squall kept groping around. He spotted an inconspicuous dark case nearby.

“Hey, look at this!” He’d opened the case and pulled out a sheet of parchment. “This looks like Skycloud City, doesn’t it?”

The others gathered round.

It was indeed a blueprint of Skycloud, and with an impressive amount of detail.

“All this poison and a picture of Skycloud... what were they planning?”

“Whatever it was, it was nothing good.”

“Give it to me, I need to look it over.” Cloudhawk took it from Squall. Was this the information Adder was looking for? No, not likely. He’d told Cloudhawk he was looking for a map. He ordered them to keep looking. “Spread out, we’re looking for a map. Give it to me if you find anything.”

The soldiers continued to sift through the warehouse’s contents.

Three minutes later one of them called out, "Sir, I think I found it!"

Cloudhawk went to the soldier who called out and took the map from him. This one had been found on the body of the man with the goatee. It was old, and judging by the texture it was made from high-grade mutant animal leather. Cloudhawk couldn't make heads or tails of it. On one side was a mountain range, and on the other was a mess of letters and symbols that made little sense.

Strange.

It was a map, but there wasn't any sort of label or identifying marks.

Barb crept over and – curiosity getting the better of her – snuck a peak. She wrinkled her nose in thought then looked at Cloudhawk. "What's this weird thing?"

"I'm taking this with me. It involves my mission, so make sure you keep the information under wraps. We need to make sure no one finds it, do you understand?"

"Yes, sir!"

Somehow the ragged map was involved with the demonhunter's mission? They didn't understand how exactly but they were too lazy to puzzle it out. Cloudhawk took it and the blueprints for himself. The mission was done, and although there was still cleanup to do everyone had been wounded to some degree during the skirmish. The rest could be handled by their superiors.

When Cloudhawk returned to the bar he found Old Thistle and Asha, anxiously waiting.

Old Thistle stopped fiddling with his bracelet when Cloudhawk approached and he heaved a sigh. "I heard..."

"It's done." Cloudhawk nodded. "Squall was a great help, his actions will go a long way. I'm sure Skycloud City will reward him for his efforts."

Old Thistle let out a long breath. In the end it'd been more fear than danger, he'd made the right call.

Adder approached the bar with a drink in his hand. "I was right about you. I'm surprised you got it done so quickly."

“You said simple and you were right.” Cloudhawk turned to him and placed the map on the bar top. Sarcasm dripped from his answer, as well as no small amount of irritation. “Here’s what you wanted, I hope you weren’t bullshitting me.”

“You worked hard, have a drink.” Adder didn’t display an ounce of guilt. He pushed the glass in front of Cloudhawk in return for the map. As he looked it over, his pupils contracted and his brows pressed together while he muttered almost to himself. “Hm... encrypted. The guy was careful, it’ll take time to break his code.”

His reaction proved to Cloudhawk this was the map he was looking for. Where did this guy come from? What did he want the map for?

Adder lightly clapped his hands and a pair of servants brought Asha over to him. He ruffled her hair affectionately. “Alright little one, starting today you can consider me your adopted father. As long as you’re here in the Sandbar I won’t let anyone bother you. What do you say?”

Asha’s eyes flashed toward Cloudhawk for a moment before she answered. “Alright, yes!”

Adder was a mysterious man. His name smacked of wastelander style, but he wasn’t from there. Did he come from Skycloud? That didn’t seem likely, if he was, everything he was doing didn’t make much sense.

So maybe he was a true citizen of the borderlands. But really where he came from didn’t matter, Cloudhawk didn’t care. Just so long as he kept his promise to look after Asha.

She was just a simple girl, Adder had no reason to cause trouble by going back on his word.

At last Cloudhawk could put down one of the worries he carried in his heart. He took Asha outside so they could speak alone and asked her straight. “Are you sure you want to stay here? You still have time to change your mind.”

“No, I’ve already decided that I want to stay here. Boss Adder looks like a reliable man.” Asha looked back at him, her eyes filled with appreciation. “Thank you. Without your help I wouldn’t have made it here.”

“I have to take some responsibility for Coppertooth’s death. In a way it was my fault. I

owed you.”

But she shook her head. “You can’t be blamed for what happened to Coppertooth. That was our life.”

“It’s all in the past now.” Cloudhawk looked up at the dark sky, stars reflected in his eyes. “I’ll be leaving soon. I wish a long and peaceful life for you.”

Asha nodded. Suddenly she felt a great sadness... but she knew her place. Her fate was here in Sandbar Outpost.

Cloudhawk left her and made his way toward a hotel. Along the way he heard the sound of rhythmic footsteps on pavement – a contingent of soldiers were approaching, clad in Skycloud armor, about fifty of them. He paused when he saw them but kept his composure. They had to have heard the news.

Their destination was the temporary military station.

Cloudhawk watched from outside as the captain’s right-hand man, Knives, and several of the guards led a withered old man to meet them. He knew what fate was in store for the rebel. Skycloud’s soldiers would use every method they knew to torture him until he drew his final breath.

An unavoidable pang crept into Cloudhawk’s chest.

Dark Atom or Skycloud City, who was to say which was good or bad? Could either be called innocent? Cloudhawk knew so little of the world, but he’d already come to some understanding about its nature.

The cruel reality was that to get to the top you built a path with the bodies of the dead, using their blood as mortar. It was true for a single man or a whole organization. None of that interested Cloudhawk. He didn’t want to reach the top, he only wanted somewhere safe and quiet to live the rest of his life.

The cries that came out of the guard station were like poison spikes to Cloudhawk’s ears.

He pressed his hands to the side of his head to try and block it out and fled to his lodgings like a defeated soldier. With heaving breaths he stood before a mirror and slowly pulled off his mask. An immature and handsome face looked back at him.

Cloudhawk hadn't yet reached sixteen but he looked older than his years. He'd lived in an unforgiving environment that forced him to grow up, but more than that the last half a year had changed him.

He'd accepted Adder's mission because he felt indebted to Coppertooth and wanted to find somewhere safe for Asha. Finally that due was paid, but it was paid in blood. To Cloudhawk it felt like a hand from the darkness was pushing him forward and no matter how he struggled he couldn't escape its grip. All he could do was keep his eyes open.

Was this fate?

Bang!

Cloudhawk was disgusted by the face in the mirror. He put his fist through it and the handsome features shattered into a million glittering pieces. Blood was left behind, smeared across the center, but Cloudhawk didn't feel a thing. He took one look at the hotel bed and instead chose to curl up in a corner.

A comfortable bed didn't make him feel safe.

The corner, with walls at his back, was a much sweeter place to lay his head.

Chapter 14

Moving On

Cloudhawk didn't leave his room.

Meanwhile the military started their investigation.

The guard captain's men were explicitly warned not to put Cloudhawk in their report. He was erased. Squall was given the honor of being the one to discover the spies and Barb was said to be the one who led their team. The captain and his people were the ones who executed the operation.

Cloudhawk was also cautious. Since he'd never been to Skycloud or met Governor Arcturus he couldn't reveal his identity, otherwise he was just creating more problems for himself. Certainly breaking up a spy ring was a meritorious act, but compared to what he'd already accomplished it wasn't worthy of mentioning.

He decided to wait for a little while before setting out again.

A clamor from outside woke him up. Someone was screaming up and down the streets of the Sandbar:

"Burn him! Burn the blasphemer!"

Cloudhawk went in search of the source of the ruckus along with several others. A group of soldiers were escorting an elderly man with a goatee, whose ragged clothes barely left him his dignity. They paraded him around the outpost before stopping in the center of town where a stake rose from the ground.

Was this to be his execution? There wasn't any fuel around the stake for a pyre.

A crowd of all sorts began to gather. They pointed at the condemned, excited because a spectacle like this was rare in the Sandbar. There was a peculiar figure among the others who was clad in a long black cloak. He was tall and imposing, making him easy to pick out from the masses. Physically he didn't look much different from anyone else, but there was something about his bearing that made the people around him

unconsciously keep their distance.

Adder. He'd come to join in the merriment?

"Hey guy, you finally show your face." Squall spotted Cloudhawk and trotted over. "This isn't something you wanted to miss, eh?"

"What's going on?"

Squall sighed. "He's one tough old man. They questioned him for thirty hours and he never said a word. They're afraid his body isn't going to last much longer so they decided to execute him publicly."

Cloudhawk looked back toward the old man and saw the marks of torture all over his withered body. All of his fingernails had been pulled off and his hands had been badly mutilated. Wounds covered him from head to toe and blood had turned his grey robes brown.

They got nothing, so they were just going to kill him? This was a dangerous criminal, shouldn't they bring him before a judge? Did they really just execute people here? It seemed extraordinary but he didn't ask about it.

A man in a red cloak stepped forward carrying a book in his hands. With solemn countenance he looked down upon the old man who could barely stand. Before the eager crowds he announced the man's crimes, revealing him as a member of the Dark Atom terror organization. He was accused of spying for them here in the Sandbar for years and supplying them with weapons, while also planning terrorist attacks against the people.

As the man in red pronounced his judgement the old man's face never changed. From beginning to end he smirked, blood dripping from the corners of his mouth. Even facing imminent death he had no fear.

The holy man stood before the rebel and shouted over the din with a thunderous voice. "Do you repent your sins!?"

"What sins have I committed?" He remained calm as the specter of death descended upon him. Closing his eyes, the old man responded in an ice-cold voice. "I've committed no sin!"

The man in red's voice was equally callous. "You gathered prohibited goods, cavorted with the Dark Atom, performed evil research and yet you claim not to have blasphemed against the will of the gods?!"

The rebel coughed though the effort clearly pained him. His bloodstained goatee quivered. "I studied science. I search for the truth! Is science heresy? Is *truth* a sin against your gods?"

"The accused is unrepentant!" The man in red's voice was thick with condescension. "The gods have taught us that it is our desire that is the source of ruin! Desire and greed are the shackles that chain us to a past of calamity. There is no path forward, and to either side lies an eternity of damnation. A faithless heretic like you has no thought but to your own interests and care not for the peace of the world. You tread a path of self-destruction, and as a representative of the gods it is my duty to purge this dangerous element from our midst!"

"Purify him!"

"Purify him!"

The crowd raised its bloodthirsty voice, calling for a spectacle.

"Magnificent gods above, hear our prayers..." The evangelist opened the large volume in his hands, and in a low and solemn voice began to read. The prose were lengthy and verbose, and then he reached the end: "May the holy fires, birthed from the vaulted halls of heaven, descend to cleanse the soul of the unbelievers!"

The man with the goatee suddenly began to struggle. His face twisted in agony and desperation while the onlookers stared in speechless awe.

The old man erupted into a column of white fire. The flames were not inflicted upon him from without but burned from inside. Soon the sickening smell of burning flesh permeated the square.

"Why do you fear science? Why do you fear truth?!"

"What makes you think you're so righteous and noble?!"

"There are no gods here! It's a lie, it's all a hoax! We have no gods, but that does not mean we have no faith!"

“I will wait in the fires of hell for you and your gods. I will watch from the blaze as your magnificent churches and opulent palaces collapse. My curses will be in every lick of flame, haunting you until the end of days!”

The old man’s hysterical denunciations rang in everyone’s ears and it made their hair stand on end. But no matter the strength of his will, his body could not resist the hungering flames. When the holy retribution ceased there was nothing left that resembled a man. All that remained was a pile of ash, like there was never anyone there at all.

“May every soul who walks the wrong path be delivered unto salvation.” The evangelist looked into the sky with an expression of despair for the sins of mankind. He spoke solemnly to the others. “Humanity faced destruction thousands of years ago. Without the gods there would be no inch of sanctified land for us to enjoy. Without the gods our pitiful species would have collapsed under the weight of evil. Without the gods, we would be the slaves of demons. All of our power, our cities, our land, our faith, our glory, our food, and our water – all of it has been bestowed upon us by the grace of gods! But more than that, they have shown us the proper way.”

The man in red continued to expound upon the glory of the gods.

“The gods are great because they demand nothing of you. They do not interfere with your lives. They are great, they are light, they are righteousness and they are purity!” His voice was loud and crystal clear, ringing through the air with dauntless conviction. “Please, steel your faith! When a believer draws their final breath their souls are conveyed to the holy mountain where they will forever bask in the holy splendor of our benefactors. But blasphemers can expect nothing except purification by holy fire!”

A great and inscrutable power swept through the crowd, making them shiver. Many fell to their knees in devotion.

Their faces were awash with piety and hysteria. The agnostics even gave obeisance to the faith for fear of consequence. Once the evangelist finished the execution, a flock of guards surrounded him and he left. The crowds, however, remained to pray and offer thanks unto the gods.

Cloudhawk watched the man leave. “That’s...”

Squall was surprised. “You don’t know? They are from the Crimson Church.”

The Crimson Church was a church in the borderlands who believed in the gods of the elysian lands. In their zealous devotion they erected temples to the glory of the holy pantheon. In order to support religious doctrine in these heathen lands, the elysians supported their existence. So long as one didn't offend certain basic principles, any organization could claim to be affiliated.

There were churches that worshipped many gods, and those that worshipped only a few. There were many different sorts of faithful so most of the holy organizations had different doctrines. Many of the faithful worshipped in accordance with their professions and station in life.

For instance, the Church of the Artisan worshiped the Smith, god of craftsmen. Members of that church were architects, carpenters or jewelry makers. The Smith was the most creative of the gods, and it was said that the equipment of the holy warriors – from their resplendent armor to their godly weapons – were manufactured through methods taught to them by the Smith. Thus it was typical that their churches were filled with people of a similar trade.

One church worshipped many gods, and a god could be worshipped by many churches. That was standard practice.

The Crimson Church was a new organization here in the borderlands. Their bishop was called the Crimson One, thus the name of their organization. The gods they served were gods of punishment and absolution, so they often advocated for the purification of blasphemers as they were found. They were active in the borderlands spreading the gospel of their faith and delivering punishment unto heretics.

Cloudhawk couldn't understand the methods these elysians chose. What were the gods, really?

Cloudhawk had never met one. Hell, he figured ninety-nine percent of elysians hadn't, either. Most of what people knew about the gods was essentially guesses. The mysterious race of supreme beings were more legend than anything, none had been seen in years. However, Cloudhawk *had* met the creatures they'd fought against, the demons. He'd even killed one. So as far as Cloudhawk was concerned, these gods and demons were just a stronger species.

What right did they have to demand such faith from humans?

“The Crimson One established the Crimson Church about ten years ago and they’ve already become one of the most influential churches in the holy lands.” Squall pressed his hands together before him in reverence. “They summon ‘Castigation’ from heaven that causes unbelievers spontaneously burn. Thinking about it makes my skin crawl.”

“Castigation.”

Cloudhawk sneered behind his mask. These guys were making a fool of the public by making a simple thing sound much more mysterious than it was.

Just before the old man burned, Cloudhawk felt a flutter. It was a vibration typical people couldn’t feel or hear, because Cloudhawk was possibly the only person with the skill – it was a relic!

The thing they called Castigation, that holy fire? It didn’t come from any god. It was someone secretly attacking the old man. It was nothing more than a lie to the people to make them seem like they had a god’s ear!

As he pondered this Cloudhawk lifted his head and looked across the crowd. Adder was looking back at him and their eyes met from several meters away – colliding like two swords and spewing sparks. The mysterious man nodded and shot him an intriguing smile, then disappeared into the flowing press of people.

Cloudhawk didn’t want to meddle in things that weren’t his business. The Dark Atom probably knew who he was by now so it wasn’t wise to linger much longer in the Sandbar. The longer he stuck around the more likely Dark Atom assassins would come looking for revenge. He didn’t want to imagine how an encounter like that would go. Adder was cunning and wise in not getting involved directly. More than bringing the ire of the holy city down on his head, he had to know the Dark Atom would make anyone who was part of this business pay.

Things had become dangerous. He couldn’t stay here.

It was time to go. He had to move on!

Chapter 15

Departure

Bloomnettle Company was gathered and ready to be on their way. Old Thistle had finished everything he'd set out to do in Sandbar Outpost. Now it was time to set off for Skycloud City. Members of the merchant company busily transferred goods to the cart while Cloudhawk watched from one side, face hidden behind his mask.

He'd been stuck here for some time. Finally, it was time to go.

"Hey man, were you really planning to leave without saying a word?" Squall hurried over to Cloudhawk. "Come with me, someone wants to see you. I think you'll appreciate it."

"Who?"

"Stop wasting time with questions. You'll see when we get there!"

Squall was a playful sort, not too serious, but there was something strange about his expression. Cloudhawk noted it before following him toward a small barracks. Squall entered first and shouted a greeting.

A moment later several soldiers appeared carrying a sedan chair. It was a simple and crude thing with no covering, just a seat that could be lifted up. Seated on it was a familiar chubby figure. He wasn't a noble looking sort despite his royal treatment, and his wounds were so serious he could hardly move.

Cloudhawk's eyes went wide. "You're not dead?"

"That's right!" The guard captain was covered in medicated bandages and stared at Cloudhawk with his beady eyes. He looked just as puzzled and shook his head saying, "I don't get it either."

When he jumped in front of Cloudhawk the rebel's bullet first shot through his weapon, then his breastplate. Presumably that bled off a lot of the impact, and in addition Skycloud armor was designed to diffuse impact force. In the end, although

the wound was ugly, it wasn't as bad as they thought.

After he'd lost consciousness they brought him to a military doctor who went to work. Thankfully he was saved. It was not easy, surviving after such a nasty blow. But the results could hardly have been better. They killed six rebels and captured one, found the materials for a chemical attack, foiled a catastrophic assault on Skycloud and eradicated a dangerous terrorist cell. When the guard captain went back to the holy lands he was facing a promotion to some mid-range officer position, and his men were going with him.

And all of it was thanks to the mysterious demonhunter. The fat man was determined to find him and offer thanks one more time before he disappeared into the sunset.

The fat man's death had weighed heavily on Cloudhawk, but seeing him alive let him let go of that burden. He'd used them for his own ends but they were rewarded for it. That made them even.

The guard captain continued. "Your humble servant's name is Hammont Seacrest, but the honorable demonhunter can just call me 'Hammy'. It's my dream to be a general one day, and you had the grace to push me in that direction. If any time in the future you should need this simple man's services just say the word. Doesn't matter if it's to walk across a mountain of fire or a field of blades, I'll do my duty."

Hammy said it with a strength of conviction that was unmistakable. He wasn't being polite, this was a sacred soldier's pledge.

Cloudhawk responded with a silent nod. He wished him a speedy recovery then bid Chunk and his men farewell. The soldiers grinned wryly at the demonhunter's aloof nature.

Squall strode beside Cloudhawk with his hands tucked in his pockets. He muttered enigmatically at the ground as they headed back. "He isn't the sharpest blade in the armory, but the captain's a good guy. Why didn't you accept his pledge?"

Cloudhawk didn't answer.

The captain was a simple sort, but his trust and worship of Cloudhawk was built on his respect for demonhunters. If he discovered what he thought he knew was a lie – that the demonhunter was actually a wastelander with the blood of several soldiers and a real demonhunter on his hands – what would he think then?

Hammy's appreciation was for a demonhunter. That wasn't Cloudhawk. How could he accept it when it was all a lie from the beginning?

Cloudhawk didn't want to live the rest of his life behind a mask, eventually he wanted to take the thing off and let his real face free. If the day came when they met again eye to eye who could say if they would be friends? Cloudhawk didn't want these men to know the real him, they didn't need to dust the way, they didn't need to make him any promises. Let them keep their illusion of the benevolent demonhunter.

"Sir! Wait for me!"

They hadn't gotten far from the barracks before Cloudhawk heard the voice from far away. By the time the last word got out, though, its owner was only a few meters away. The short-haired woman was moving fast. She'd changed her clothes and now wore fresh demonhunter armor with an elysian bow strung across her back and a short sword strapped to her waist. Her coin purse clinked loudly with every stride. By the time she reached him her pale face was excited and flushed.

After relinquishing all the praise for the mission he lead, Barb and the others were richly rewarded in his stead. Her fancy new equipment was newly purchased, now she looked like an honest to goodness demonhunter.

"Why didn't you say you were leaving?" She asked between puffing breaths. "You weren't even going to tell me! That's going too far, sir."

The new demonhunter had benefited quite a lot from Cloudhawk and his mission. Her appreciation was evident. Barb was different from Hammy because she was more than thankful, she worshipped what she thought was a superior of her order.

Cloudhawk looked at the bold young woman, and for reasons unknown she reminded him of someone. Someone he remembered fondly, but who sadly he'd had to bury in the center of Greenland Outpost with his own hands. One more grave amidst countless thousands in the wastelands.

Yeah... she was a lot like Artemis.

But she was still constrained by the laws of her order. She didn't have the wildness or surliness of his dead friend, but she had a quicker wit. Unfortunately they came from different worlds so a friendship was out of the question.

A woman's eyes were often described as twinkling like the stars. Barb's burned like a supernova. "Sir, I want to come with you!"

Cloudhawk shot her a sideways glance, his eyes as calm and unscrutable as an ancient well. His response was cold and distant. "And do what?"

"I want to follow in your footsteps, be your disciple!"

"Absolutely not!"

Dismissing her out of hand she grew desperate and irritated. She pressed her hands together pleadingly. "I have some money now. I can pay my own way, even pay for you to teach me! Please take me on missions with you, I'm not strong but I promise I won't hold you back! Please!"

Cloudhawk was already getting impatient. "I said no, that means no!"

Barb's eyes dimmed, like frosted glass at the break of dawn. It made sense, it certainly wasn't hard for a man like him to find willing disciples. She was just a greenhorn of low birth, not especially skilled, with no background to draw on. What right did she have to ask him to take her on as a student?

"Everyone has their own road to follow, you shouldn't try to imitate someone else. You've got talent, you just need to reach your potential. I'm confident one day you'll make a fierce demonhunter."

His words shook her to her core. Barb lifted her head to look at the taciturn senior demonhunter.

Cloudhawk didn't know why he said it, he didn't even really understand what he was spouting. He shook his head, waved farewell and began to leave.

"Thank you, sir. I *will* become a demonhunter, as fierce as you say!" She held out a clenched fist toward Cloudhawk's retreating form. "Could you tell me your real name? Maybe we'll meet again."

"If fate decides we should meet again, that'll be the time for you to learn my name."

Barb was unsatisfied with the answer, but didn't press it further.

She saw Cloudhawk as a dignified and shrewd superior. If he didn't want to share his name there had to be a reason. She knew that demonhunters were often sent on secret missions and knew how they were expected to perform, so she thought she understood Cloudhawk's choices.

Squall walked along beside Cloudhawk, and he found the whole thing funny. No one else had seen his real face. He thought he knew the situation clear as day.

This guy wasn't a senior demonhunter, he was at least three years younger than Squall. Just an immature kid, yet he was able to put on a show that convinced the merchant's son.

What was his life like before now? What was it about him that gave people this feeling?

Squall broke the silence. "Are you going to say goodbye to Asha?"

"No, it'll just make her more upset. She's got a job and Adder's protection, no one would dare bother her. My wish for her is a long and quiet life here."

He met her out in the wastelands and they traveled together for almost a month. He saw her like a little sister, the only person he was surrounded with who knew his face. Who knew who he was.

He really did wish her a good life. Cloudhawk didn't know if he'd ever see her again.

Fate was like a surging river and all living things were just things caught in its current. Sometimes fate's waters smashed two unrelated things together and then tore them apart, thrusting each into a new and unknown world. The depths of the river was vast and inscrutable, no one knew what was around the next bend. Sometimes when two people floating on the waters split, they separated forever.

Bloomnettle Company was almost ready to depart. Single-horned horses strained against carts laden with goods. Cloudhawk saw in the gently rocking cart with his eyes closed, pondering matters. Perhaps he didn't consider that fate was sometimes like a petulant child, pulling him along an unpredictable path.

At the gates of Sandbar Outpost.

A frail and pretty girl stood by the exit, watching the carts rumble into the distance through teary eyes. Her tiny hands were folded in front of her in perhaps the last time

she would ever pray.

“Gods. If you’re really out there, if you really are kind, if you can really hear me... please take care of Cloudhawk. Keep him safe.”

Chapter 16

Skycloud, the Holy City

Cloudhawk traveled with the Bloomnettle Merchant Company North for a few days, and then they reached their destination.

“Everyone off, get ready for inspection. We’re about to pass into the elysian lands.”

The caravan guard sounded exhausted. It was to be expected after so long on the road. However, along with exhaustion there was relief in his voice. Cloudhawk felt the cart slow then pulled open the door and joined the others outside. He still wore his mask but had changed into more presentable clothing. At least he didn’t look like a beggar anymore.

No sooner had Cloudhawk’s feet touched the grassy ground than his eyes were struck by the scene before him. They were passing through an enormous canyon with towering mountains on either side. They rose so high it was like their peaks were piercing heaven, tall enough that their peaks were obscured by clouds. The canyon itself was dim since no direct light could reach them.

Cloudhawk had never seen majestic mountains like this in all his life, but that wasn’t what gripped him. His eyes were pasted to the fifty-meter-tall wall before them that blocked their path. The thick wall was different from the ancient mountains to either side, glowing with a dark gold metallic light like it was made from the precious stuff.

It was absolutely *huge!* The people he saw walking along the ramparts looked as small as ants.

This was the great wall of the elysian lands, one mountain pass among many bestrewn throughout the area that connected the lofty mountains together. It sprawled across the land culminating in a giant circle and acting as the border of the elysian lands. Everything inside was the realm of the gods. Wastelanders had never crossed over, no measure of force could breach the impregnable walls. To the people of the elysian lands their great wall was their greatest defense against the evils of the outside world.

Every pass was guarded by a thousand soldiers.

Bloomnettle Company, as borderland merchants, had special permission to come and go as needed. However, each time they passed the walls they had to allow their goods to be checked. The soldiers had strict orders not to let any elysian goods leave their borders, or allow any banned substances from outside get in – including any suspicious persons. Their insurmountable walls and strict inspection protocols ensured the elysian lands stayed safe.

There was no question they would find Cloudhawk.

He leaned on his disguise as a demonhunter. He made sure to find a reason to show off his token and his ability to use relics. As far as these soldiers knew there had never been a wastelander who had the power of a demonhunter, much less carried a token of the high order. So no one gave him any trouble and instead treated him with the utmost respect.

Getting here sure as hell wasn't easy! Without the Bloodsoaked Queen's token he wouldn't have been allowed to take a single step inside. Now he finally understood why the Queen had laughed at his determination to get here.

He passed inspection and traversed the mighty wall, finally emerging out onto the other side. When he did, suddenly it felt like he'd crossed over into another world. Everywhere he looked the ground was carpeted in green grass and pockets of wildflowers. The mountainsides were thick with trees. Everything was so vibrant, so *alive*.

Two worlds, separated by one wall.

All the life in the world seemed to be concentrated here. The vast terrain he'd come from was barren and toxic, while before him stretched rolling green hills and a climate perfectly suited for comfort. He wouldn't have believed it except here it was in front of him. There was no natural explanation that could account for such a dramatic change.

Every seedling was blessed here, fated to grow tall and bear fruit, whereas if it were unlucky enough to exist outside the walls would die before night fell on the first day.

They were only separated by a hundred meters or so. Only a hundred meters made all the difference.

It was like a line of judgment, a wall where life and death were determined, the border between heaven and hell. The walls encircled an area of hundreds of thousands of

meters where some supernatural power beyond the scope of human comprehension brought the blasted landscape back from desecration. It stood in defiance of the wastelands on all sides and refused to be swallowed by its filth. No matter who you were the stark difference would shake you to the core. What could be responsible for this but for a miracle hand crafted by the gods themselves?

But Cloudhawk was surprised too early. Once Bloomnettle Company passed through the valley they were met with a fleet of massive ships.

The exquisite vehicles were simple yet refined. Each one was a hundred meters long and made of artfully carved wood. What really stunned Cloudhawk, though, was how the ships moved.

They didn't float on water. No, instead some inexplicable power lifted them up off the ground where they were suspended in midair. They were all linked together and people passed from one to the other using slides and suspension bridges, creating a floating, bustling town.

What *was* this place?! The shock Cloudhawk felt couldn't be expressed in words.

And yet to the elysians this was nothing to get excited about. In fact no one seemed to pay it much attention.

Old Thistle hailed a hovering barge nearby. It floated down and opened its hull whereupon the merchants hustled aboard without a word. Cloudhawk figured this had to be a transportation hub of some kind. These artfully crafted, absolutely gigantic flying ships were a form of mass transit.

Cloudhawk was the farthest thing from a man of culture, but he got the basics.

But how could a wooden boat fly? He couldn't see any engines or devices that could explain it, much less a source of energy. What was making them rise off the ground? After asking roundabout questions he discovered that the boats didn't need any sort of energy at all. Whether they were in the air for ten years or a hundred, it didn't cost them a drop of energy.

If the elysians had this sort of technology, why didn't they just take over the wastelands?

Eventually, Cloudhawk learned that the boats had to abide by stringent restrictions.

The moment the ships, or in fact ninety percent of the elysians' tools, left the holy lands they lost their mystical abilities.

The boat they soared on now was such a tool. So long as it remained within the elysian borders it could go where it pleased without the need for any sort of energy, gas, wind or manpower. Some mystical and unfathomable power kept it aloft.

Yet if it tried to float over the walls, it wouldn't get a meter into the wastelands before crashing into the earth. Even to this day no one knew why, they just chalked it up to the mysterious and incomprehensible will of the gods. Just like how the wastelands were a place of jagged mountains and turbid water, the elysian lands were the polar opposite – a mysterious and picturesque land of plenty.

The elysian lands were a place that had clearly been blessed by the grace of the gods. It was a land filled with miracles. Be it the endless flora and fauna, or the limitless energy, everything was beyond comprehension. It could only be explained through the lens of godly intervention.

Cloudhawk sat upon the boat as it soared through the heavens toward Skycloud City. The boat was quite fast and he was told they would reach their destination in two days or so. He spent the time looking out over the sprawling horizon, constantly barraged by visions of harmonious and verdant landscapes. Sparkling rivers traced paths like silvery arteries to deliver life-giving water to every corner of the domain.

It was intoxicating to behold. He was so enthralled he hardly noticed the passage of time.

On dawn of the third day one of the crew shouted out to the passengers. "Everyone out! We'll be arriving in Skycloud City in twenty minutes!" [1]

The clouds were painted gold by the rising sun, and when they parted a city was revealed that was more magnificent than anyone could imagine.

Cloudhawk raced to the deck where he stared in awe at what appeared before him. It was a belt of jewels suspended in the clouds. Not real jewels, of course, it was actually a river that snaked across the clouds and tumbled from the sky. From deep in the clouds water bubbled upwards in columns of silver springs. They gathered together into a waterfall which fell to the lakes beneath.

From a distance all one could see was the waterfall, tumbling from endless cloud-born

springs. Upon getting closer the raw power of it could be felt, like a hundred thousand water dragons roaring toward the earth. The source of the lakes below was this celestial waterfall, and the lake then split into rivers and tributaries to feed the entire basin. This was the source of all the land's vitality. This was the heart of the holy domain.

A heavenly river! A heavenly waterfall!

It was the most incredible miracle in all the elysian lands!

Cloudhawk was frozen solid, robbed of both his ability to move and think. His eyes played over the undulating surface of the lake, like a picture from some fairy paradise. Countless rainbows traced paths all around and there, on the banks, a city emerged.

It was a shimmering city of holy light with scores of ships coming and going, thousands of magnificent boats criss-crossing. It seemed so full of life and exuberance. From overhead Cloudhawk could see every street, every building, every paving stone perfectly and meticulously placed. It was like a dream.

Cloudhawk felt hot tears in his eyes.

Ten years. *More* than ten years!

All that time he fought and struggled through the wastelands, every day a nightmare, of fear and hopelessness. In his dreams he'd longed for a place like this... just like this.

Were his dreams coming true?

Skycloud City. This was it, the most vibrant destination in all the Skycloud Domain. [2]
A paradise adrift in a sea of purulent wasteland.

"Hey, you alright?" Squall saw that Cloudhawk was shivering. He gave him a pat on the shoulder. "Get ready, the ship will be descending soon. We'll bring you to the Governor's mansion. Soon you'll get to meet the man and complete your mission."

Cloudhawk was almost desperate to see every part of Skycloud City, but he couldn't forget himself. Restraining his wildly beating heart he followed Squall from the deck. The ship began to slow and coast toward the ground until eventually docking in its designated area. The hull opened up and the merchants disembarked in an orderly fashion, flooding out into the holy city.

1. For some reason this reminded me of train travel through China. Some people love it, I did not. The two cheapest ways to get around are sleeper buses and sleeper trains. Sleeper buses... well, suffice to say avoid them unless you wish to be intimately acquainted with the urine of a dozen or so other people. Maybe I'll have a reason to share that story one day. Sleeper trains are boring as shit – nothing to do but stare out the window and smell everyone's feet. For hours. Conductors show up twenty minutes or so before arriving at your destination and tell you to get moving, and if you're too slow they'll just go to the next stop and make you pay for the return trip. If it isn't clear I'm not a fan of the 'travel' part of traveling.

2. He makes the distinction here between *city* and *domain*. Skycloud is also the name of this whole area in addition to the city.

Chapter 17

Entering Skycloud City

Cloudhawk rode into Skycloud City inside a merchant's cart.

Setting the stupendous and seemingly commonplace miracles aside, Skycloud was still an incredible city.

The buildings came in many styles. The ones with steeped roofs were homes, but there were also ovals and rectangular buildings strewn without. The most common colors were white for holiness, silver for purity and golden accents to represent divine glory. When the sun shone on the glimmering architecture it was like walking the streets of heaven.

They picked their way through the city until the cart reached a crossroads. There, stretching all along the block, was an arcade that had to be ten thousand meters long. It was so wide that eight horses could ride abreast through it, and on either side was a procession of beautiful sculptures. They were tall and dignified and full of majesty – images of the gods as imagined by master craftsmen.

All throughout the city there were idols, altars, fountains, markets, and doves to populate them. Every corner had a unique style, and every building, paving stone, mural and statue had unique flavor.

Cloudhawk could exhaust every word he knew and still couldn't describe one one-thousandth of the holy splendor that showered him.

Squall sighed deeply. "It's always so chaotic out there. It's good to be home."

Cloudhawk couldn't help but respond. "Have you ever been to one of the other domains?"

"Other domains? Never even heard of them!" Squall shook his head. "There's nothing but wastelands for thousands of kilometers in all directions outside of Skycloud. How could normal folk like us cross that kind of distance? I just want to be a demonhunter like you someday, then maybe I'll have the chance to see other places. Really though,

Skycloud's great in and of itself, I doubt there's any place better."

Truth be told, Cloudhawk was pleased with what he saw as well. He could tell by the people walking the street that they were different from the outside. From their clothes to their bearing the people were elegant and noble, and their eyes were full of spirituality.

Yes, spirituality.

Cloudhawk believed that a person's eyes were a window into the truth of their soul.

In the eyes of a wastelander you could see blood and madness, but in these people he saw tranquility and peace. They were eyes he'd only ever seen in old pictures from the ancient times. The people here were similar. Maybe this was the place he'd been looking for all along.

Cloudhawk trundled along the road surrounded by the vitality of the city. It wasn't just that the streets were busy, he could see all manner of family crests, shops, and artisans prospering on every corner. It was clear green spaces were also an integral part of the city's designs. There was everything from small potted plants to towering trees that filled the streets with life.

There was a sense of harmony in every building, tranquility in every street. From the color to the style to the materials, everything was in balance. A single, unified work of art that needed nothing added nor taken from it. Simply exquisite.

The flora around the city was also unique.

Cloudhawk saw a tree slender as a mushroom a hundred meters tall whose canopy tickled the clouds. Its surface was etched with lines which pulsed like veins, full of a glowing fluid. It was veritably gushing with vitality.

The plants were chiefly for decoration and lent a vibrancy and beauty to every corner. However, they also played an important role in the city. During the day they gathered both light and warmth so that at night their peaks glowed like street lights. They turned Skycloud City into a golden paradise when darkness fell.

In addition, some of the plants discharged water into the air to regulate humidity. A few of them with big leaves and thick branches bore fruit. They grew amidst the flowers, glittering and juicy, coming in any number of colors, so numerous it could

feed an army.

All of them were edible. Sweet, tasty, and practically endless. All could be picked today and by tomorrow they would return. As such they were a principle part of the peoples' diet.

A waterfall tumbling from the heavens, a beautiful holy city, inexhaustible food... Cloudhawk didn't know how many incredible surprises this place had in store, but what he saw already was more than he could fathom.

He'd spent so long fantasizing about a promised land. Now that he was here he realized how inferior his dreams really were.

Cloudhawk's eyes suddenly went wide as before him was revealed the center of Skycloud City. Therein rose a soaring temple that was so large it took up a tenth of the total area of the city. It was pure white and whatever it was made with had the texture of polished jade – a colossal white-jade pyramid. The space around it was empty, a large public square lined with smaller churches and magnificent buildings of all sorts. Scores of devout surrounded the structure, kneeling in prayer.

And the pyramid itself? The whole thing floated a hundred meters above the ground.

That's right! It flew!

This grand and magnificent structure, silently dangling overhead, cast a light over the whole city. It served to deepen the feeling that all were in the presence of the divine. No wonder the citizens revered the gods, they were gifted this magnificent city to display their glory. Even the least pious would shake and fall to their knees in awe.

“Eh?”

Cloudhawk hadn't made a sound, afraid that he would give away his ignorance and surprise. However what he saw next forced him to voice his shock. People... or, something. They surrounded the floating temple awash in halos of golden light. Held aloft by iron wings, they flew back and forth above them.

To the citizens of Skycloud City this was no unfamiliar sight.

They were the seraphs; defenders of the temple sanctuary, keepers of the peace, and guarantors of safety. They were also the holy city's greatest artisans and technicians.

After establishing the holy city, the gods left these treasured servants behind to maintain their creation. They did not age or grow weak, and were eternally loyal. So long as the holy lands existed they would watch over the city.

Cloudhawk felt them even from far away. The seraphs – they were relics.

He could hear the resonance from the bodies of the automatons, there had to be some special power directing them. However this did not in any way make them less capable city guardians.

“Ahead is the temple square. No vehicles are allowed to enter. The governor’s castle is beneath the sanctuary, we can only bring you this far.”

Old Thistle and Squall brought Cloudhawk to the entrance of the temple square where he climbed out from the cart. He peered up at the pyramid-shaped sanctuary and it made him speechless. It was beautiful. He didn’t care what reward he was given, if he could live here as an ordinary citizen Cloudhawk would praise his lucky stars.

“Thank you. This is fine.” Cloudhawk said his goodbyes to the old man and his ward. “Don’t tell anyone about me or what I was doing. When things are settled I’ll make sure to find you.”

He had to be careful, he was no elysian. Just the fact that a wastelander was here in the city was a big deal and he didn’t want to involve Bloomnettle Company in any possible consequences. It was important he disassociate with them as much as possible to make sure they didn’t get into trouble.

Squall took Cloudhawk’s hand and shook it vigorously. He was clearly envious. “You’re going to meet Lord Arcturus, whose name rings across the elysian lands! I have to say I’m jealous!”

It was no secret Squall saw the demonhunter governor as an idol. He wasn’t alone, probably eight out of ten young men in the city worshipped the man as well. The prestige and station he held in the city was evident.

Cloudhawk said so long to the other members of the merchant company and went on his way. The governor’s castle was not difficult to find, sitting right below the temple just like Old Thistle told him.

Cloudhawk had to admit he was surprised and a little curious. If the city’s governor

lived in the castle *below* the temple, who lived inside the floating pyramid? If the governor was relegated to the shadow of the sanctuary was there someone more important than him?

“Halt!”

Cloudhawk yelped in surprise, and amidst the sound of clattering armor a squad of soldiers marched his way. He was quickly surrounded.

“The temple square is sacrosanct land. You tarnish its glory, dressed as you are. Masks are also prohibited, take it off!”

Cloudhawk hadn't expected he would be challenged.

He looked down at his clothes and though it was a little sullied he was at least fully covered. In fact, Cloudhawk could count on one hand how often he'd had a clean pair of clothes to change in to. As for the mask he hadn't been aware there were rules against them.

Judging by the look of these soldiers they were itching to teach him a lesson.

Under the circumstances Cloudhawk didn't have many choices. He had to rely on his secret weapon, the token of the high order. He fished it out of his clothing and called out to them in the most authoritative voice he could manage. “This is a token of the high order. I demand to see Governor Arcturus, I have important demonhunter business to report. Who dares impede my mission?!”

Without the token, Cloudhawk couldn't have entered the Skycloud Domain, but with it he was ushered across the wall like royalty. It had to be some sort of all-access key. One could only imagine the clout its true owner possessed.

Only, this time things were different.

After flashing the token, the soldiers were unmoved. Their leader shouted back. “Even demonhunters must show respect here. Flaunting your token here is an affront to the glory of the gods. Take it off!”

Cloudhawk was struck dumb. The token wasn't going to help him here?

As the soldiers were preparing to pounce on him a cold and solemn growl arose. “Have

you forgotten where you are? What is this ruckus?!"

A young man in non-standard white armor walked over to them. There were at least a hundred soldiers in his wake, different from the kind Cloudhawk had encountered before. They were even better equipped, they had to be Skycloud's elite!

The young man looked like he was in his early twenties, maybe a hundred and eighty centimeters. He had big eyes with thick eyebrows and handsome rugged features, a dignified bearing, and looked regal in his fancy armor. His stony visage carried with it an arrogance that seemed to cut everyone he looked upon down at the knees.

For a young man to command so many elite soldiers, he definitely wasn't just an ordinary man!

"Milord Frost de Winter, this man is making a scene. I was about to arrest him for interrogation."

"A scene?" The one called Frost de Winter scowled. He stared at Cloudhawk with a glare like jagged icicles. "It's been years since anyone's dared cause trouble in this holy place. Your impertinence is extraordinary."

"I want to meet the governor! That's all I ask, then I can explain everything!"

Frost's response was frigid as an icy stream. "The High Priest has summoned him to the Temple on official business, he is not in the estate. In any event, who do you think you are, that you have the right to meet him?"

The first soldier to accost him repeated his command. "Remove your mask!"

Cloudhawk's heart began to thud.

Frost then noticed the token clutched in Cloudhawk's hand. Suddenly the chill of a thousand blizzards melted from his face. "Where did you get this token?"

Cloudhawk realized then that he didn't actually know the real name of the token's owner, but he was clever. He didn't answer the question directly, instead choosing another strategy. "Since you are Lord Arcturus's disciple you must already know who this token belongs to. What's the point in wasting time asking?"

Frost de Winter's face darkened once again. Cloudhawk wasn't sure whether he

imagine it or not, but he thought he felt the temperature drop several degrees. The ground even seemed to develop a film of ice. He also didn't know if it was due to his attitude or something else: "Where is she?"

Cloudhawk didn't hesitate this time. "There are some things that aren't appropriate to say here. I must see the governor."

The soldiers around them were unsure what to do. Where they supposed to grab this troublemaker?

"Stand down." Frost de Winter lifted his hand, waving the soldiers back. He fixed Cloudhawk with a penetrating stare and a light he couldn't place flickered behind his eyes. "You. Come with me."

Chapter 18

Hostilities

The tea was good.

Purple-gold leaves floated in the hot water. Cultivated here in Skycloud, each harvest was quite limited. This was from the governor's own supply, among the top ten percent in quality. Normal citizens didn't usually have the opportunity to taste it. Whatever strange properties the tea had it was incredibly refreshing. However tired one was feeling, a few sips would be completely rejuvenating.

The snacks were also quite fine.

They were some sort of pastry that were a pleasant honey gold in color, made from wine-pickled fruits and locally cultivated vanilla bean and wrapped in the highest quality grains. Each one looked like gem-encrusted gold nuggets placed on a jade platter, so beautiful it was almost a shame to eat them.

Frost de Winter sat beside the tea and refreshments table while a team of servants stood nearby. They were so still they could be mistaken for statues. Aside from the servants there was only Frost de Winter in the waiting room.

Before he could be allowed to enter the governor's mansion, Cloudhawk was forced to scrub himself clean. From head to toe and behind the ears, designated serving women helped him wash. His hair was trimmed and the ragged traveling clothes were replaced with fine silken garb. Only once he was presentable was he brought to the hall.

Never in his whole life had Cloudhawk been this *clean*. It actually made him uncomfortable and his skin crawled like he was covered in lice. Especially unnerving was this silk robe they made him wear. It was like he wasn't wearing anything at all.

As he entered, he walked across a delicate rug. It was probably made from the neck feathers of some rare bird and every step he took from the door to where Frost de Winter waited was like trampling on what a normal citizen's monthly salary.

Cloudhawk couldn't really grasp the worth of all of this. Coming from the wastelands he was like a gutter rat who suddenly found himself in a golden palace. Everything was so different, he felt completely out of place.

“Sit.”

Frost de Winter's face might as well have been carved from a block of ice. He was infinitely cold and implacable and didn't raise his head even as Cloudhawk approached. The soldier just busied himself with looking over the mask, token and book Cloudhawk had brought with him.

The seat was soft and comfortable. When he sunk into the cushion Cloudhawk felt like he never wanted to stand up again. The level of comfort and relaxation was foreign to him so he perched on the seat with rigid posture. He looked ridiculous.

Of course the seat was bound in the neck leather of some rare creature. Its worth wasn't even worth trying to measure, suffice it to say no normal person could afford it. With no thought to propriety, Cloudhawk picked up one of the delicate cups and brought it to his lips. The purple-gold liquid steamed with an attractive scent and he drank it down in one gulp. Instantly, his pores opened. It was only his first time trying tea, but he liked it.

Frost de Winter carefully put the demonhunter token on the table between them. “You know the real identity of the one this token belongs to.”

Cloudhawk poured himself another glass of tea without reservation. “Master Baldur's daughter.”

“Her Excellency Selene Cloude is indeed Master Baldur's daughter. She also is the most outstanding demonhunter Skycloud City has seen in a hundred years.” He picked up the mask. “Unless I'm mistaken this is Master Baldur's ‘Mask of a Thousand Faces’. She would only give this to someone she trusted completely. But if I know anything about Lady Selene, it was that she had nothing but contempt for even the most talented people of Skycloud City. How could a beautiful, proud, talented woman like her have any interest in someone like you?”

So that was her real name, Selene Cloude? It certainly sounded highborn!

The mask's name was also fitting, seeing as it could be changed at a whim. It was excellent for keeping one's identity hidden. As for Frost de Winter's question, so full

of contempt, Cloudhawk didn't pay it much attention. He'd never been much for caring about what people said. Anyway, he was right.

She was remarkable, becoming a high-ranking demonhunter at only fourteen. The mere thought of someone like her being friends with a wastelander like him was surprising enough to make peoples' eyes roll out of their skulls.

"I can explain this to the governor." He took another sip of tea. "When will he be coming back?"

Frost de Winter returned the mask to the table. "Probably not anytime soon. He is in conference with the High Priest. Selene was like a sister to me, and I am the governor's only disciple. Telling me is the same as telling him."

"Yeah?"

"Whenever the governor is not here I have the agency to act in some limited authority." He spoke earnestly. "Please tell me what's happened. It's been a year and a half since Selene snuck out of the holy city, an act which violated the laws of Skycloud and the demonhunter order. She's caused quite a controversy, and though her family will try to redeem her honor, she faces the threat of having her status as a demonhunter stripped. We need to know her whereabouts so that we can help her."

"The Queen-... Lady Selene had gone off into the wastelands. Her goal was to kill a demon known as the Caliph of the Sands, who she said was responsible for the death of Master Baldur."

Frost de Winter listened in silence as Cloudhawk shared his tale. He listened carefully to every detail, hardly breathing, deconstructing each word and mulling over it. Cloudhawk spoke for nearly half an hour, omitting the more inconvenient details and focusing on the more important facts – especially the fight with the demon.

Cloudhawk's story eventually came to an end. Frost de Winter stared at him with his brows furrowed.

From beginning to end he'd had no questions or reactions, just sitting there like an ice sculpture. He was probably organizing it all in his mind. Cloudhawk wasn't concerned, he'd been preparing what he would say ever since he left Greenland Outpost. He'd had months to deliberate and fine-tune his answers so there were no gaps in logic or careless omissions.

At last Cloudhawk couldn't help himself. His hand stretched out and grabbed one of the delectable-looking pastries and popped it into his mouth.

His senses exploded with flavor, fragrance and tender texture. He'd never had anything like this before, but it was so delicious he would swallow his tongue for the residual taste if he could.

Frost de Winter rhythmically tapped his finger on the table. After careful thought, he asked a single question. "You killed the demon?"

"No, not me. Us. Selene and I. We almost died and only managed thanks to luck. The thing was too strong even for Lady Selene. Really, it's a fluke we're still breathing."

Cloudhawk wasn't foolish enough to claim he'd killed the demon on his own. He had been the one to cleave the beast in half with one blow, but he wasn't stupid enough to tell anyone he had that kind of power. Even just claiming that an amateur like him had a hand in killing a demon seemed absurd when the monster's six lieutenants had been ten times his match.

"What is your purpose for coming here?"

"Lady Selene thought I had served the demonhunters well, that I had the potential to become one myself. So she sent me here. She gave me proof to show the governor so he could help me build a life here."

His requests weren't outlandish. He'd killed a demon, it was a great accomplishment. Nothing else mattered, he just wanted to live here. Have a small house, drink tea like this, eat pastries like these. Be safe, that was all he really wanted.

Frost de Winter proceeded to pick up the Gospel of the Sands and look it over.

He was still young and his insights were limited, but the governor's disciple knew of the more famous demon artifacts. The Gospel of the Sands was an important one, only a powerful demon would be able to command its power.

If it had come into this young man's possession it meant what he said was likely true. The demon was dead.

Furthermore, the Mask of a Thousand Faces was one of Selene's most cherished possessions. After all, it was the last thing her late father had given her. The token was

also one of a high-ranking demonhunter's most important means of identification – and the marks were still there. Selene was still alive and well so Cloudhawk couldn't have taken the token by illicit means.

His evidence was all there, the story was ironclad. What he was saying had to be true.

"I have one more question." Frost de Winter put the book down and proceeded tactfully. "If Selene got her revenge, where is she now? Is there anyone besides you who can corroborate your story?"

In that time Cloudhawk had already stuffed three of the pastries in his face. He wasn't one to take advantage of others, but this stuff was *incredible*. He didn't hear anything unusual in Frost de Winter's question. "She said she found a new lead and wanted to stay in the wastelands for a while longer to check it out. This whole thing was so big I didn't think it was smart to tell anyone, otherwise it would get attention. How else was I gonna get into Skycloud Domain without causing a stir?"

Frost de Winter's face darkened. "What did she learn?"

Cloudhawk answered with a shake of his head. "I don't know. She didn't tell me."

"Well, it seems like your luck really is something extraordinary." The soldier's brows scrunched then relaxed then contracted again as he muttered. He said it not to agree with Cloudhawk, but rather like he was trying to convince himself. When he lifted his head his eyes bore a strange look. Then he said it again as though for emphasis. "Yes, very lucky."

It was then Cloudhawk sensed something wasn't right. He pulled back his hand which had reached out for the forth treat. "Do you have any more doubts? If not I'd like for you to arrange a meeting between me and the governor."

"I'm afraid that isn't going to happen."

Cloudhawk's face froze. "What?"

"Men! Grab this spy!"

Elite guards surrounded him faster than Cloudhawk could think, each one brandishing their weapons. Their weapons were different from typical soldiers as well. Sheathed they looked similar, but the blade structure was strange. They were clearly unique.

Cloudhawk hadn't seen this coming. "What are you doing?! You're making a mistake, I killed a demon! How could I be a spy?!"

"You think your clumsy tricks can fool me?" Frost de Winter glared at him down his nose as he arose from his chair. "A miscreant like you doesn't even have the qualification to carry Lady Selene's luggage. You dare claim to have stood against a demon and won? Preposterous!"

Cloudhawk's anger got the better of him. "The evidence is right there, and I have her token! What reason do you have to doubt me?!"

"Evidence? Token?" Frost de Winter looked down at the table. "I believe Lady Selene must have been captured by the demon. She has not been killed and instead the monster sent you with her token as 'proof.' This evidence you claim is a ruse, all to install you here within Skycloud City as a spy."

Cloudhawk's face was twisted in shock and fury. "Every single word I've said is true. Slander, you lie!"

Frost de Winter chuckled coldly. "Then let me ask you, how could a weakling like you help Lady Selene? How were you able to traverse thousands of kilometers across the wastelands? Very well – if you claim to have this ability, then I will give you a chance to prove yourself. Defend yourself against just three of my attacks and I'll believe you. I'll bring you to the governor myself. If you can't, then it's confirmation that everything you said is fiction and you are a spy. You will not be allowed to waste the governor's time with your poisonous lies!"

Cloudhawk didn't understand. What happened? Why had it come to this? This was not how any of this was supposed to go!

Frost de Winter was Lord Arcturus's hand chosen disciple and a man of reputation in the holy city. Why was he so determined to frame Cloudhawk? He could sense their hostility, the situation was very bad.

"Are you afraid you'll be found out? You dare not even accept my challenge and you somehow have the gall to claim you can slay demons?!"

Cloudhawk grit his teeth. "*Fine!* Bring it on!!!"

Chapter 19

Frozen Dirge

Eight of the bodyguards stepped back in perfect precision and synchronicity. After retreating several paces they rested the ends of their glaives on the ground and stood at attention with their hands on the handles. Sharp eyes peered from heavy armor that sparkled white and gold in the light. They were like eight statues, arranged in a circle to mark the edges of an arena.

Frost de Winter snatched the items from the table. Cloudhawk's mask, the token, and the gospel of the sands were safely in his grip. Frost de Winter returned his equipment to him – not out of respect for the young man, but simply because he didn't take him seriously. The kid didn't stand a chance.

Cloudhawk could tell that this young man, as arrogant as a lone pine on a snowy mountaintop, was also a capable demonhunter. From the moment he met him Frost de Winter was covered in a pervasive, brutal aura that came from an internal strength. Just being around him made Cloudhawk's skin tingle like it was being stabbed by a chill wind.

How was he a match for these soldiers, much less Arcturus Cloude's personal disciple?

Frost de Winter's chiseled body towered over him, like an icy mountain stabbing the sky. His delicate, jade-like armor was immaculate and without a scratch. A white cloak tumbled from his shoulders like a frozen waterfall. His weapon was a near-translucent spear that seemed as though it'd been carved from thousand-year-old ice and wrapped in a silvery material. The blade sparkled and reflected the light around it like a flawless mirror.

A pale blue gemstone was inserted in the body of the blade that added to the dignified beauty of the tool, injecting it with a sense of soul. The melody of a relic's resonance wafted from it. A link to a world of ice and snow.

He stood one hundred and eighty-five centimeters tall. His skin was white as the tundra, his features resolute, and his face was handsome like it'd been masterfully chiseled from stone. His white clothing, silver weapon, the jade headband that held

back his hair, his overbearingly arrogant and daring posture... as much as he made Cloudhawk uncomfortable, he had to admit Frost de Winter was the most gallant man he'd ever seen. From his noble countenance to his chilling aura, Cloudhawk couldn't find a single flaw.

With his reputation, might and bearing he was undoubtedly the dream lover of many Skycloud women.

Why was such an outstanding man so stubborn and unreasonable? Rather than chalk it up to a character flaw, Cloudhawk felt like there had to be some reason. He was an insightful and sensitive young man, so he knew there was more beneath the disciple's prideful exterior. There were more sinister intentions at play.

In this magnificent place, faced against the towering and heroic man, a single frail form seemed like nothing. Like putting a piece of polished jade beside a common rock, Cloudhawk might as well have been a street urchin. Their contrast was as sharp as their confrontational feelings.

Frost de Winter's eyes burned with thinly contained loathing. He stared down with regal bearing at the wastelander, almost unable to stop himself from gagging in disgust at the mere sight of him. His words cut through the air, frigid as a winter storm. "You wastelander scum, you think you can stand against three of my attacks? Killing you will be as easy as a wave of the hand."

Cloudhawk had enough sense to know he was in a bad spot, but in the face of the young soldier's aggression he just sighed. "Winning and losing, that's something else. All I can do is try. More than being unreasonable, you're just a bully. You get off on pushing around people weaker than you. And yet you walk around like some self-righteous asshole. But that's all you are. An asshole."

Even against impossible odds, Cloudhawk wasn't going to admit defeat.

He was under no illusions that he was this man's equal, but he wasn't afraid to provoke him. He'd fought through the wastelands, escaping one near-death experience after another, struggling through constant tests and frustrations. He was a stubborn kid, and sometimes it was better to die than to yield.

The silver spear shout out at him like a wild dragon.

Cloudhawk first felt the power emanating from the pale blue gem set in the voulge's

blade. It flooded the area with a surge of cold that caused the temperature to plummet five or six degrees and chilled Cloudhawk to the bone. The cold was so intense it swept through a person's soul.

Frozen Dirge! That was the name of this magnificent weapon.

Cloudhawk didn't know the full strength of it, but before his opponent's attack even formed the audience hall was covered in a layer of hoarfrost. Snowflakes whipped through the air.

What an incredible thing! It was no less powerful than the Bloodsoaked Queen's sacred crossblade!

Frost de Winter's skills were nearly on par with Selene's as well, in fact he might have even been better at handling the power of the relic. No wonder, then, that he should be chosen as Lord Arcturus's disciple. With talent like his he had to be head and shoulders more capable than anyone, with the exception of the Bloodsoaked Queen.

This man was a true high-grade demonhunter! Cloudhawk's face was dark and solemn.

He already knew Frost de Winter was no weakling but this was more than that. The likes of Claudia Lunae and Raith Umbra – novice demonhunters only – were difficult enough for him to contend against. How was he supposed to stand against a master and his legendary relic?

Cloudhawk still didn't understand how this could have happened. Hadn't Selene told him everything would be alright? All he had to do was bring the governor the token and the book. That should have been enough to win him a comfortable life in the holy city.

So... what the *fuck*?!

He didn't have time to puzzle out all this nonsense.

Frost de Winter was coming at him with the full force of his abilities. He threw the spear at Cloudhawk and it came down on him like a meteor. Frost de Winter was confident in his superiority and so forsook any efforts to feel out his opponent. His opening attack was to throw Frozen Dirge for a quick end to this farce.

The spear was almost on him, bringing with it a brutal wind and stinging flecks of ice. They sliced at him like tiny frozen blades and he struggled to keep his eyes open. Cloudhawk was forced to stumble backwards.

From the moment Frost de Winter launched his attack, Cloudhawk knew he was in dire straits.

Frost de Winter had said three strikes, but clearly he never intended for the fight to get that far. This was his first and there was no holding back, he was planning to kill Cloudhawk with the opening blow. The young wastelander held out the Gospel of the Sands, putting anything he could between him and the lethal spear. All of his psychic will poured through the demon artifact.

A sandstorm was whipped into existence.

Countless flecks of sand danced on the wind and amassed to form a bronze-gold shield.

This was Cloudhawk's strongest line of defense. As Frozen Dirge drew near, its mere presence froze the sandy shield, then pierced it through as easily as a sheet of paper.

There was no question, no suspense. The shield was useless.

The instant Frozen Dirge passed through it the shield shattered, falling to the ground as lumps of crushed ice. Pouring all of his psychic power into a shield like this would stop a rifle bullet, but it might as well have been made of silk the way Frost de Winter's spear passed through it.

"Son of a bitch!"

Frozen Dirge kept coming and like the shield Cloudhawk felt a frigid, bone-deep cold fall over him as it got close. He couldn't go anywhere, but standing in place was only going to get him skewered. With no other options he shrunk behind the gospel of the sands for cover.

Clang!

The spear's mirror-like blade sunk into the book's metallic cover.

A gust of cold white light burst forth, visible to the naked eye. At first Cloudhawk

thought the force of the blow would knock him back, but the result was different than he expected. When the spear struck the book indeed there was a blast of force, but it was no typical kinetic energy. It was pure cold, like being caught in a sub-zero ice storm that flooded into his every pore.

As the power enveloped him the gospel of the sands began to freeze solid and his hands along with it. The cold crept up through his body, from his palms, to his wrist, then up his arms.

Not good! I'm gonna freeze!

It was the first time Cloudhawk had faced an attack like this. He wanted to turn and run, but his legs refused to budge. They'd already been frozen to the ground. With no way to fight back he stared in horror as inch by inch, ice covered his body. It spread up to his face, covered his mask, and up over his ears. Finally the unnatural frost covered every hair on his head leaving nothing free. Light glittered along every facet of his frozen prison.

"One attack and you couldn't handle it. So weak, and yet you claim to have slain a demon?"

It was the last thing Cloudhawk heard before he lost consciousness. The cold claimed not only his body, but his mind and will as well. As completely as though he were in shock, all systems shut down. He was a living statue.

The blast of cold not only covered Cloudhawk but the five or six meters behind him as well. The fine carpet was covered in frost, all the way back to one of the columns holding up the ceiling. The ice glittered like crystal.

Frost de Winter gripped the shaft of Frozen Dirge and pulled it free. He swung it around and reattached it to the holster on his back, never taking his eyes off of Cloudhawk. A mocking sneer split his lips as he dismissively waved his left hand. "Put him in solitary confinement to await death. Put five times the guards on him, and never let him out of your sight."

"Yes, Master Frost!"

"Wait. Take the rug, table, chair, and anything else he touched and burn it. I don't want the governor to see any of it when he gets back." Frost de Winter patted his snow-white cloak like a man afraid of being infected after being forced to walk through a

cesspool. He felt so inundated with filth he might vomit. The only thing he wanted was to go take a shower. He could soak dozens of times and it might not be enough, he feared. However, he choked back the discomfort long enough to continue giving orders. “Send someone to the Temple to tell the governor. Have him come back as soon as he can.”

The guards left to perform their tasks.

Frost de Winter left to take a shower.

Chapter 20

Arcturus Cloude

Above the governor's mansion.

Four gryphons appeared.

The back half of their bodies were like lions, covered in golden-brown fur. The front half was like an eagle, bristling with golden feathers. Its two massive wings were a silvery white, the same color as the center of the creature's chest. Dangling below were four powerful limbs. Sharp eyes were capable of spotting the smallest target from ten thousand meters away. They had the frightening strength of apex predators.

Standing atop the beasts' broad shoulders were towering men covered from head to toe in full plate armor. In their left hands they held the gryphons' reins, and in their right were spears stretching two meters high.

These majestic gryphon knights were but drivers. Aside from the men the gryphons also hauled a gem-encrusted carriage carved from jade. It looked like it weighed a ton, and yet the carriage floated through the air effortlessly. The beasts and their chariot descended to the governor's mansion.

A welcoming contingent of ten soldiers fell respectfully to one knee as the chariot made landfall.

A middle-aged man in his forties stepped into view. Although he was getting on in years his skin was still fair, every movement was heavy with noble bearing and authority. It was none other than the man who had failed so spectacularly in the wastelands, Augustus Cloude. He'd been badly injured, and was returned here to the holy sanctuary where he was given treatment. By now he had almost entirely recovered but for the dark light in his eyes. The stain of his failure was one he would never be rid of.

Once Augustus stepped out of the carriage, he then moved respectfully to one side.

After him another man then exited. He was in his late fifties and the raven black hair

he'd had in his youth now had sprinkles of grey, especially his temples where streaks of white appeared like the first frost of winter. His age had begun to show on his head but the man's face was as young as someone half his age. The occasional line wrinkled at the edge of his eyes, badges of time gone by.

This was a man who'd lived through a turbulent past, whose life could be called legend. His many deeds could be compiled into volumes, grand tales that were oft shared by the denizens of Skycloud.

Every soul within this divine territory knew him: He was the greatest demonhunter throughout all of Skycloud Domain, and the city's governor – Master Arcturus Cloude!

Frost de Winter had washed repeatedly, desperate to get the foul residue of the wastelander off his body. Now he stood waiting patiently in the gardens, white armor gleaming and silver voulge at hand – gallant as ever. He had all the qualities of a stellar disciple; loyalty, youth, courage, vigor, ambition, and talent. He had an unparalleled drive and whatever he put himself to, Lord Arcturus was satisfied. He was more than a disciple, he was the governor's right-hand man.

But of course, he was not perfect. If Frost de Winter had one failing, it was that he was young.

Lord Arcturus was still in his prime. There was time enough still to make Frost de Winter better.

The young demonhunter always unconsciously restrained his natural arrogance when he stood before the governor. Like a peacock who flaunted before all the average birds, he dared not reveal his pride before a phoenix. Or like how the presence of the moon dimmed the brilliance of the stars but could not compare to the mighty sun. Arcturus Cloude was an example no demonhunter could hope to reach – a mountain no man could conquer.

In fact, it was chance that brought Frost de Winter before Lord Arcturus.

Ten years prior, on a wintery night, an extremely talented waif captured Lord Arcturus's notice. The childless man was moved by what he saw, and after testing the child took him under his wing. The lucky child was named after the night he was discovered – Frost de Winter.

The orphan adored his master. To him, Lord Arcturus was invincible.

Be it his manner, work, cultivation or ambition, all of it affected Frost de Winter deeply. Lord Arcturus wasn't just looked up to, he was the wisest, strongest and most clever man of his generation – innately superior to all, who stood with all the majesty and commanding presence of a mountain before Frost de Winter. What he felt was adoration.

As a result, Frost de Winter was extremely diligent in all his duties, almost to a fault. He wasn't just in search of power, he wanted to be everything that his teacher was – not to surpass him, but to perhaps come close to his glory.

“Master, allow me to explain what happened.”

The governor, clad in his plain robes, listened patiently as his disciple shared the tale. He looked at him with eyes that were not too large, filled with a vast and erudite depth. The lines that gathered at the corners of his eyes were signs of his long years of service. He held himself with the quiet confidence of a learned man. Anyone who did not know him might mistake the governor for a kindly old teacher, for he hardly looked like one might expect the great demonhunter and governor to appear.

“This is certainly unexpected.” Frost de Winter could not read his teacher's opinion on his inscrutable face, and could not help but inject his own. “I figured she might be able to escape that creature's clutches, but it seems they actually managed to kill him. Now it's hard to determine how deep they've gotten. Things could have taken a turn for the worse for us.”

But the governor remained calm. “Tell me your thought process.”

“Selene hasn't come back yet. If she really has learned the truth, it's going to shake Skycloud to its core.” Frost de Winter heaved a sigh, taking a moment to settle his thoughts. “This matter is very serious. I underestimated Selene. All of this is due to my lapse in judgment, it is my fault.”

“You are at fault, but not in the way you think. No one can know everything. Even the sages make mistakes from time to time. So long as you subject your ideas to careful scrutiny and rational consideration, there is no need to regret your errors.”

The governor spoke softly, as gently as a schoolteacher educating a perplexed student. Frost de Winter, faced with this man's wise and noble character, felt like a humble devotee kneeling before his god.

“You must remember, do not believe for a moment that you can control everything. There will always be things that you cannot predict, like luck. No one is omniscient or omnipotent. The sages are called wise men, not because they planned for every conceivable eventuality, but because they make the most reasonable and appropriate decisions for the time. The most correct decision for the time, and the most suitable response when that time has passed. All that remains must be left up to fate – we can only do what is within our power to achieve. Failures should not become regrets, we should accept them calmly.”

“Yes, Master.” The young student carefully absorbed his teacher’s every word. “So where have I made my mistake?”

“How much do you think Selene knows?”

“I...”

“This is your weakness. You are too arrogant. It is reflected in the way you deal with problems, always making yourself the center. This is a bad habit, so you must learn to change your point of view. Otherwise, you will fall to confusion. You fear Selene has learned everything, but is that really the case? If she had, she would not have sent her friend here, to his death. Nor would she have sent this news.” He gave Frost de Winter a reproachful look, then sighed. “Also, how have you chosen to deal with Selene’s friend?”

“I have him subdued and locked in prison.”

“Why did you choose to do this?”

“So that he would not reveal what we want to keep secret. I went no further because I did not want to presume. I waited for you to come back in order to deal with the matter.”

The governor sighed once again. “And how did you anticipate I would deal with this when I came back?”

“This young man might know something he shouldn’t. The longer he lives the more likely he’ll let it slip. The best way to make sure he keeps silent... is to kill him!”

“That’s correct.” The governor continued to deftly instruct his young apprentice. “Since you understand that every moment he lives makes things more dangerous for

us, you clearly have grasped the hidden danger he poses. You also know what I will do, so... why have you not done it yourself? Why wait for me to return? The world changes every moment in incremental ways.”

“Well, after all, this – “

“Frost de Winter, you adhere too rigidly to formalities. The rules help us to deal with matters, but if they one day stand in your way you must have the courage and resolve to break them. If you cannot cultivate this boldness in yourself, you will never become a man of valor.” The wizened warrior’s penetrating gaze fixed Frost de Winter as he spoke every syllable. “No matter what the situation, you must learn to assess the matter at hand adequately. Reason and judgment are not predicated on rules!”

Frost de Winter hung his head. “I understand. I will go deal with him now.”

Governor Arcturus gave him a warm smile and nodded his head. His was an intelligent young disciple, he was just too young. But it didn’t matter. Sooner or later, unpolished jade became priceless in the hands of a master jeweler.

Chapter 21

Phasing

Cloudhawk lost consciousness after the blow from Frozen Dirge.

Frost de Winter was stronger than he could fathom, and his relic weapon only made him more terrifying. The spear was flung at him faster than a bullet from a gun, and he was frozen in its power before he could react. His organs and consciousness didn't stop but they might as well have. Frozen Dirge had put him in a sort of hibernation.

A man could live for twenty-four hours in this state. Unless he found a way out or if Frost de Winter released him, after twenty-four hours he would die. But how could he get free? There was no way for Cloudhawk to resist once he was already locked in ice. All of his faculties, even thought, were frozen solid. He could wield the might of the heavens and still be stuck. And even if by some miracle he escaped, so what? He wasn't getting out of Skycloud's richly guarded prison.

Yet Cloudhawk was far from a normal man. The moment he started to freeze his body began to unconsciously react. His skin tightened and his internal organs were stimulated, all as a means to stave off complete shock. The result was that the slightest bit of vitality sparked within him. Four or five hours after he was locked away, elements in his blood began to stir. A sluggish pulse began to pump through him, his heart struggling to manage twenty beats a minute ^[1]. His body reacted to the environment more like a cold-blooded animal. For a normal person it would be worse if shock did not completely set in. With the body's processes and metabolism slowly churning they would quickly spiral into disarray and death would come within seconds. ^[2]

But Cloudhawk wasn't dead yet. He was coming back to life.

Cold! So goddamn cold!

Those were his first thoughts as his brain reawakened. The cold seeped down into his soul, he couldn't feel anything but the biting freeze. He couldn't hear, see, or even breathe – there was only the cold like a bottomless black pit he couldn't crawl out from. His mind filled with despair and terror.

Awakening from within the block of ice was an incredible display of survivability and adaptation, but it wasn't a happy occasion. Sure, Cloudhawk was awake, but he still didn't have a way to get out from inside the icy prison. His limbs were stiff and without sensation, the ice was as solid as iron.

Frost de Winter, this absolute fuck! When I get free I'll make sure to tear your corpse apart and piss on the pieces!

Cloudhawk was too upset to give up. He hadn't walked thousands of miles and worked this hard to get into Skycloud Domain, only to see the inside of an elysian dungeon. He'd only seen a fraction of the city before that rat-faced prick framed him.

He trusted Selene. She wouldn't have done anything to harm him.

His heart started to beat faster and the blood rushed through his veins. But the more he came back to life the more suffocating his situation became. Calling to any of his relics was difficult beyond measure. His only hope was the stone around his neck.

His predicament was strikingly similar to the one he'd found himself in when locked in a tank under Blackwater Base. If the stone listened to him maybe he could phase out of here like last time. He shut his eyes and tried to think back to when the stone had answered him.

Empty... Empty... completely empty your mind.

With every passing moment the cold became more intense, a rebound reaction from the hot blood struggling to warm him up. But he pushed it out of his mind and tried to focus. He eventually slipped into a complete state of emptiness.

The world around him disappeared. Only his consciousness remained.

Cloudhawk listened to the strange stone's melody. Its abstract song grew louder until in the end its resonance became countless threads of light. They shivered like the strings of a harp and coalesced at a single point. A door... they made a strange, shimmering door.

The door opened. A flood of light from inside swallowed up the darkness that consumed him.

The guards posted outside, wfrom where they were standing, could see a light shining

from the human ice sculpture where the chest would be. Like a star it glinted beneath the layers of frost, bringing with it an old and vigorous power.

As for Cloudhawk, he found himself somewhere strange and new.

All around him was a vast and turbulent sea, and from within it an ancient consciousness stirred.

He knew everything he saw around him was an illusion, it was all coming from the stone. The sea wasn't a sea at all, but the psychic force of its previous owner that he'd somehow sealed within the mysterious item. Only Cloudhawk could resonate with it, only he was able to make this psychic will his own – an inheritance left behind by the enigmatic former master.

Now, once again, it roused from its slumber.

Cloudhawk was pleased to be here again and knelt amidst the undulating waters. As he concentrated his will again the sea became a whirlpool, spewing violent power from its vortex. Cloudhawk knew what was coming, the pain that it would bring. But he also knew that it meant he would awaken stronger than before. He had been confronted with just how feeble and pathetic he was, so he welcomed the pain no matter how excruciating. It could crash down on him like a sea of knives and he would accept it gladly.

As the surging tides continued, it began to show signs of evaporation. The young wastelander focused as much as he could, persisting against the agony. He could feel that this time he was absorbing much more than either of the two times before. When he finally reached his limit Cloudhawk's psychic powers felt more expansive than ever. He felt as though he could finally master the stone. All he had to do was bring the full might of his mind to bear and the artifact would respond.

Quickly! Quickly! Just as he was about to lose control the stone erupted with a pulse of radiation invisible to the eye.

Rays of power didn't shoot out but instead permeated through time and space, infusing this pocket of reality with its will. The prison cell was transformed into a font of potency. Then, with a flash of light, cracks began to appear all across the icy sculpture. However the prisoner inside had vanished without a trace.

In an instant, Cloudhawk was transported to a strange reality without sound or light

or life. There was nothing except threads of vibration. Some were linear and others were closed loops but every one of them hummed. Like strings from an instrument each of them had a unique melody, incessantly plucked by an invisible hand.

They were all around him, hundreds upon millions of threads reaching into the infinite distance. However, as he watched they gathered together like a tapestry and the world was rebuilt.

What happened? I didn't phase out of here!

More than once Cloudhawk had experienced the power of the stone, he was expecting it to work the same way this time. Only, that wasn't what happened. He was stuck here in a place between reality and illusion, somewhere both real and false. The physical world was still there all around him, but somehow he had become dislodged from it.

Perhaps his current situation could be explained with a strained metaphor. If he could stride from one dimension to another then he was stuck here between steps. One foot was planted in the reality he'd come from, and the other was stuck in the one he'd wished to go to. Now he was caught in the between place, separate from the material plane but not from space-time.

Or maybe it could be put another way.

He was caught in the middle of a doorway. He felt weightless while a repulsive force thrust him away from the block of ice. He simply floated away like a balloon.

"What the hell...?"

Cloudhawk floated in the aether, impotently flailing his arms. One hand struck a wall, but to his surprise he felt nothing. In fact he never touched the wall at all, his hand just slipped right through it. Shortly afterward another resisting force knocked him back.

Cloudhawk looked down at his hand then back at the wall.

He saw it with his own eyes, his fingers had passed right through but he never felt a thing. They passed through without any sort of reaction at all, not even leaving a mark on the wall. Like it never happened.

Was he unable to touch anything?

Next, Cloudhawk looked down at his chest where the stone was gently humming. All around him was a field of mysterious power that was quickly draining his psychic energy. He thought for a moment and then his situation became clear.

The stone was like a relic, one that allowed him to pass between dimensions. Only, phasing was an unreliable and random process, Cloudhawk didn't have the power to move freely from one to the other. However, after drawing more power from the psychic sea he'd become stronger – strong enough to call on the stone's abilities.

But summoning the power of the stone didn't mean he could slip from one reality to another at will. Strictly speaking, he was in a between space where he could see everything around him but couldn't interact with the world.

That was how he was able to get out of the icy block. And now that he was free from it he could escape this prison. Cloudhawk tried to move forward, but in this weightless state suspended in air he couldn't budge. As the seconds ticked by and his psychic powers diminished he grew more and more anxious. If he didn't think of something soon he wasn't going anywhere.

Right! The cloak!

Cloudhawk channeled some of his will into the cloak. Its special properties made moving easier so that even here he could move around with a little effort.

The two relics together synergized well.

Cloudhawk couldn't waste any time. Like a swimmer he desperately swung his arms and legs, heading for the wall. His head reached what should have been an impenetrable obstacle, but within the sphere of power created by the stone it felt more like pressing against the edge of a balloon.

“Shit, goddamnit!”

Cloudhawk's head passed through the wall then stopped. The rest of his body was stuck on the other side. He flailed and kicked and wriggled in all sorts of ways that made him look utterly ridiculous. But no matter how he tried he was being stopped. He discovered that the obstacle was the layer of metal coating the other side of the wall.

Now he was understanding the boundaries.

Using the power of the stone Cloudhawk could dislodge himself from his dimension. It made him effectively a ghost. However, everything that existed in real space left its mark here in the between place, and the more mass it had the more dense it was here. The more powerful the energy within it was, the more repulsive it became.

Floating through the air took no effort at all, but trying to slip through a wall was much more difficult. This went doubly so for metal prisons. Metal was, after all, much more dense than air or stone. He struggled and struggled, using all the strength he had until eventually he managed to slip passed the barrier.

“Da-... damn! That was tiring!”

His whole body hurt after that ordeal like he was being suffocated. He’d used a lot of his psychic energy, to the point where he knew he only had a few more seconds left. Once he was out of the prison he saw that the whole area was crawling with guards. Luckily, he swam right passed them and no one seemed to notice.

Great, but not something he had time to gloat over. He had to go!

Cloudhawk floundered like a man about to drown, his limbs flailing comically in exaggerated motions. He darted up toward the ceiling then bounced off like a soap bubble. However with another few moments of struggle he bungled through.

Great!

Ah! He felt a deep sense of relief. It felt pretty great when walls couldn’t stop you!

Quite a helpful ability to those in the business of theft and murder, he had to admit. He could move around this heavily fortified place like he didn’t exist. There wasn’t a prison in all the world that could lock him up!

1. Sixty is normal.

2. Shock and hypothermia, which presumably Cloudhawk is suffering from, are different but present similarly. Shock is the rapid drop of blood pressure which leads to cell and organ death within a few hours. Hypothermia is defined at a body temperature below 96 degrees, sever hypothermia below 90 where fatality is almost 100% without severe intervention. Hypothermia causes heart dysrhythmias

(abnormal heartbeats leading to heart attacks and/or clots) and renal (kidney) failure within a few hours.

Chapter 22

The Manhunt

On the road, near Skycloud's prison.

Two young boys tussled in a street corner, each with a sugar sculpture in hand. Suddenly there was a flash, and a masked man fell out of thin air right in front of them. No warning, no way for them to prepare – a moment ago there was only empty space and now there was this stranger.

“Ah! *Ghost!*”

The two boys screeched and turned to run.

After returning to reality Cloudhawk doubled over and gasped voraciously for air. His muscles screamed and threatened to give out, and fighting exhaustion he reached out with bolds hands and grabbed the kids before they could get away.

“Shut up!”

Both the little boys were only about five years old, they'd never met anyone as dangerous and aggressive as Cloudhawk. What's more the way his voice made him sound was like something out of a nightmare.

“If either of you tell anyone you saw me I'll squish your heads until they *pop!*”

He let them go after delivering the threat, but not before snatching the sugary treats out of their hands. The kids couldn't believe it – not only was this guy gonna kill them but he stole their *candy* too! Looking forlornly at their empty hands, they threw themselves on the ground and began to wail.

A couple came over to see what the ruckus was about. “What's going on?”

“We saw a monster!”

“Monster? What are you talking about?”

“Really, we did! A candy-stealing monster!”

The men and woman exchanged a questioning look. What sort of monster was this?

The candy stealing monster brazenly walked down the street a little ways up the road with his mask perched on the top of his head. He munched on the brittle sugar sculptures while deftly avoiding passersby. *Man, he thought, this place sure it different. These candies are delicious!*

But what now?

His recent troubles had been a blessing in disguise. His psychic energies had improved by leaps and bounds, at least several times stronger than ever before. By now he had to be more capable than someone like the two apprentice demonhunters he had first fought. He'd also learned out of necessity what his stone could do. Being able to phase through things was going to come in handy, both in a fight and sneaking around.

But Frost de Winter wasn't going to let the matter drop once he discovered Cloudhawk had escaped.

It didn't matter that the young wastelander had been empowered by the stone, he still wasn't Frost de Winter's equal. He had to think of a way to put some distance between them. But what he really wanted to know was whether the governor's disciple was working alone, or on his master's behalf.

Lord Arcturus was Selene's uncle. It didn't make any sense for him to distrust his own niece.

Cloudhawk thought it might be a good idea to go back to the manor. Maybe he could find a way to meet the governor face to face.

However, no sooner had the thought crossed his mind than Cloudhawk's old instincts took over. He'd spent long years in the wastelands and didn't trust strangers easily. ^[1] Since he didn't know anything about Starlight's stance or attitude, he decided not to put himself in potential danger. Frost de Winter was strong enough, if Starlight caught him Cloudhawk didn't think even phasing through walls would save him. After all, the governor was a master demonhunter!

Clang! Clang! Clang!

The sound of clattering armor reached his ears, moving quickly. A man in white with a silver spear was coming his way with several dozen soldiers.

Cloudhawk immediately flung himself around a corner. He didn't see his face but Cloudhawk knew that sound – it was Frozen Dirge. The one who led the group had to be Frost de Winter. They were headed for the prison, oozing with the threat of murder.

Heading over to execute me? Fuck I was in more danger than I thought!

If he'd been even a few minutes later he'd be a dead man.

When they found out he was missing the soldiers would definitely seal the streets and start looking for him. The city was going to get very dangerous for him very quickly. Slipping the mask back on his face he tapped it gently. A foolish grinning face in white appeared and his voice took on a comical warble.

The clothes he wore were the ones they'd given him at the mansion. It was definitely something the soldiers would be on the look-out for, so the first place he looked for was a place to find a new outfit. He found one quickly and helped himself to a simple overcoat without any trouble. It helped him look more the part of a typical citizen, out for a stroll.

Now that was settled, where should he go? He didn't know, he needed help. But the only person he knew in the city that he could trust was Squall.

That wasn't an appealing option, though. It would almost certainly mean disaster for the Bloomnettle Merchant Company if he involved them. Cloudhawk was drowning in a sea of uncertainty.

Those locked in up Skycloud's jails were all offenders who'd dared ignore the laws of the holy city.

Even in a place of unified faith and ideology like the elysian lands not everyone was good or devout. There were always those who violated the law, those who stole or fought or sometimes killed. It was an inevitable flaw of humanity, and even though faith could weaken the urges they wouldn't always be wiped clean.

In this section of the prison most of the incarcerated were marked for death. As such

the security was higher and the guards more numerous. In all the history of the prison they had never had a single prisoner escape. Unfortunately, however, today it seemed that sterling reputation would be broken. Seeing as this was no small matter, Frost de Winter immediately sent for his master.

Lord Arcturus stood before the cell. Inside a block of ice in the shape of a thin man stood, radiating cold vapor. However, the previously flawless exterior was now covered in cracks and the features of the one it used to hold were unclear. What was clear was the man-shaped cavity inside.

Cracked, but not broken, the statue remained. The cell itself was undamaged. No signs of struggle were evident.

This cell didn't have a drain much less a window. How could someone simply vanish from what was essentially a stone cube?

Arcturus stepped into the cell with an attendant in tow. It was Augustus. He stood outside while the governor took a closer look. He had to admit, it'd been a very long time since he'd seen Arcturus at a loss. His deep, wise eyes were fixed on the statue with great interest as though he was appreciating a piece of art.

Frost de Winter stood to one side, hanging his head in shame. "I didn't think he could escape."

Lord Arcturus's response was gentle as ever. The low volume didn't sacrifice any of his majesty. In fact, at the levels of prestige he held he didn't need to try to be dignified. It had seeped into every fiber of his being, every movement he made. His royal bearing was difficult to describe but easily felt. "Interesting," he murmured, "Very interesting."

Puzzlement evident in his voice, Frost de Winter went on, "I've never heard of a method like this. How did he do it?"

Lord Arcturus Cloude slowly extended a finger. At once the ice sculpture skipped liquification, became a cloud of chilly vapor then vanished on the stagnant breeze. "Only phasing relics can do this, as far as I'm aware. Only, such rare and powerful relics haven't been seen since the end of the god wars. Even if that were the case, a young man like him should not be capable of employing its powers. There are secrets we are not aware of at work, secrets we must come to understand."

"I'll gather my men and hunt him down!" Frost de Winter promised.

“Hunt him down? How will you do that? You rush ahead blindly in pursuit of what you can’t grasp. We must lure him out, something large that is sure to get his attention. Only, if it comes to involve the sanctuary this matter will be difficult to explain.” Lord Arcturus spoke to his disciple. “Whatever the plight you must never abandon the light of reason. This young man still does not know the true reason for our actions. Even if he should escape, insignificant people such as him can do us no harm. But if he should be moved to seek answers as a result of your pursuits, then he could threaten everything we’ve built.”

“What should we do?”

“Quietly establish a cordon around the nearest streets. It couldn’t have been more than half an hour since he’s escaped. A penniless outsider who knows nothing of our city won’t be able to find transport, so I suspect he’ll be contained to a five thousand meter area. He is in unfamiliar territory so he will be reticent to assume risk. Prepare a small squad of demonhunters and pick up his scent. When we know his next target we can be there to meet him.” He paused, then continued after a moment. “He went to the mansion you say. Go and bring me everything he’s touched.”

“Huh?”

“What?”

“I felt that the things he came in contact with were sullied. I had them disposed of.”

Frost felt Lord Arcturus’s eyes swing toward him and instantly every hair stood on end. The governor had no reproachful words for him, but his look alone caused the disciple to break out in a cold sweat. All of a sudden he remembered something then hurriedly spoke. “Right, the clothes he was wearing when he arrived should still be there.”

Cloudhawk had been forcibly made to wash and change his clothes once he was brought to the governor’s mansion. The outfit he’d been wearing for a week or so hadn’t been destroyed yet.

Augustus Cloude left to retrieve them. He was back in a few short minutes.

Arcturus looked them over when they were delivered. “This will be enough.”

The expression on Frost de Winter’s face said he did not understand. “It’s just a set of

clothes...”

“You must learn to be observant and to see things from different angles.” Lord Arcturus lifted the clothes higher to illustrate. “Look closely. Marks on the clothing reveal that he’d worn them for roughly five days. This would also be the last time he washed and changed. Working backwards with this time frame in mind it isn’t difficult to ascertain that he came from Sandbar Outpost, in the borderlands; a two-days journey from the mountain pass and another two traveling by airship.”

Frost de Winter drew himself up, ready for action. “Then I’ll go immediately to question the crews of all the ships that’ve come to Skycloud in the last day.”

“Your proposal will accomplish nothing. Listen until I have finished.” Lord Arcturus then pinched the fabric between his fingers. “This material was made in Skycloud Domain, exceedingly cheap but both practical and durable. Most importantly, it is designed to keep out sand. Judging by the pattern it was made in bulk. If we look at a combination of the workmanship, material and style, we learn that only someone who often traverses the borderlands would order something this cheap and convenient.”

Lord Arcturus spotted a stain he couldn’t rub out and took a closer look, whereupon he found small traces of an herb. “The stains and the presence of these herbs suggest a connection to merchants, specifically those who trade in herbs and minerals. What you should be looking for is a small group of merchants arriving today from Sandbar Outpost with a cargo of minerals and herbs. Augustus, accompany Frost de Winter.”

Augustus responded with a slight bow.

Lord Arcturus had given them a target using nothing more than a set of clothing. He’d shrunk their scope of focus into something far more manageable. Frost could not admire his master any more than he did in that moment.

Chapter 23

The Ambush

“Governor, sir!” Lord Arcturus had just finished explaining his findings when one of the guards came rushing in. “You have an urgent summons from the Temple. They ask that you answer immediately.”

He answered with a nod. “I leave this matter to the two of you.”

“Your disciple obeys.”

“Your subordinate obeys.”

The young man wouldn't get far, not so long as Lord Arcturus was governor. With his skills and knowledge every move the escapee made would be followed, every action monitored. However, it would be strange for the governor to handle such a seemingly small matter himself. It would draw a lot of unnecessary attention.

Skycloud Domain was not under the control of the governor alone.

He had many old adversaries throughout the territory, and the Temple always hung over his head. He had to be careful of what he did, and what's more the Temple's summons meant important matters were at hand. Lord Arcturus didn't have the focus to spare on this piddling young wastelander.

Augustus was no simple man himself. He was prudent, cautious, and a loyal follower of Lord Arcturus for over a decade. Frost de Winter was also resolute and intelligent, talented, capable. The two of them were Lord Arcturus's most trusted men and together there was very little they couldn't accomplish. Their target this time was a young convict – nothing outside of their capabilities.

Lord Arcturus's body slowly grew translucent, then faded from view. He disappeared leaving nothing but a swirl of dust where he'd stood.

Augustus bowed as his master left them, then arose once he was gone. “So what is your plan, my dear nephew?”

Frost de Winter thought for a moment. "A few hundred men is more than enough to deal with one person. However, he is crafty and has unique powers. I'll need a demonhunter who is adept at tracking. I would like to ask for your help, Uncle Augustus, if possible."

"This... is not a problem."

In his last excursion into the wastelands Augustus had lost many demonhunters. It was a tragedy, not just for him but for the whole of Skycloud domain. Until now they still had not recovered so there weren't many demonhunters left. However, there were enough to spare to catch a single escapee.

A few minutes later...

Three hundred disguised soldiers had gathered. They were not in the standard armor they were accustomed to, forsaking them for civilian clothing.

Augustus approached Frost de Winter with six demonhunters in tow. Each of them were experienced trackers. Frost de Winter nodded in satisfaction, this should be more than enough for the task at hand.

At this time a young woman appeared in the doorway. She was pale and haggard, and her eyes were unsettlingly empty. She walked with the help of her exorcist staff and a beautiful torque embraced her frail neck. She hobbled their way like a walking corpse.

"Claudia, you haven't yet recovered. What are you doing here?" Augustus wrinkled his eyebrows as he looked sternly at the wounded woman. "We don't need you for this mission."

"Master Augustus." Her face had no expression like it was nothing more than a mask. "My wounds are healed. I can help, I request you allow me to participate."

Augustus was about to speak when he was interrupted by Frost de Winter's cold and dismissive voice. "Leave, I don't need half-dazed garbage like you endangering my mission."

Claudia's pale face flushed red. She clenched her fist and fought back the urge to argue.

Augustus intervened. "You aren't at your best. Go back and rest."

Claudia hung her head, grinding her teeth. Disappointment was clear on her stiff face as she turned and left.

Frost de Winter heard what happened to Claudia. She failed her very first mission and hadn't been able to recover from the shame. Her incompetence earned nothing but his disdain so he paid her no mind and spoke instead to the others. "Starting today your mission is to spread out through the main areas of the city and keep your eyes open for our suspect. The person you are looking for is about one hundred and eighty-seven meters tall, thin, with a grey cloak. He may be wearing a mask. We assume he has trained to the equivalent of a novice demonhunter. If you see someone who matches this description detain them immediately, and if they attempt to escape or resist you are authorized to kill them."

Claudia was walking toward the door but she hadn't yet left. Frost de Winter's description tickled at something in her mind.

Her dim eyes suddenly lit up and a vibrant fire burned behind them like a pair of furnaces. Was it... was it even possible? How could he be in Skycloud Domain?!

Claudia wanted to question Frost de Winter and get more information, but the governor's disciple was as cold as a glacier. To him she was less than nothing. She remained nearby as he dispatched his people, then held tight to her torque. Gritting her teeth, Claudia made her determination.

If you won't have me on your mission then I'll do it myself!

I'll wash my hands of this disgrace once and for all!

Cloudhawk had only escaped from prison not thirty minutes ago. Completely unfamiliar with the city he decided to make his way back to the foliage-strewn parks near the temple square. It was quiet there and suitable for hiding.

He felt haunted by the situation he found himself in. His hunters had to already be drawing the net closed.

His condition had gone from bad to worse, but he needed to keep his wits about him. He couldn't go rushing to Bloomnettle Company, they didn't have any way to help him anyway. Besides, Cloudhawk was poison, and anyone he touched would be in danger

just for associating with him. The best decision was to keep his distance as much as possible, hopefully that would be enough to keep them out of harm's way.

As for whether or not the recent circumstances would affect his merchant friends, Cloudhawk couldn't say. He hadn't broken any laws that he knew of. He'd only did what Selene instructed, even showing her token. Their reactions didn't make any sense.

Cloudhawk's stomach loudly complained that he was hungry.

The elysian lands were not so backwards as the wastelands and used hard currency, casted by methods taught to them by the gods. They had bronze, silver and gold coins. Standard conversion was one hundred bronze to one silver, and one hundred silver to one gold. All the lands under the auspices of the gods was available to its people to use, and so long as you had the money anything could be bought.

This was not the case for Cloudhawk. He had no shelter or coin and had begun contemplating whether he should steal some to purchase food.

Just then two dark figures appeared among the trees. Cloudhawk was instantly on alert – they were following him!

Between the coat and the new face on his mask they wouldn't be able to easily recognize him. If they had they wouldn't be leisurely headed his way, there would be scores of burly men trying to take him down.

Cloudhawk vanished right in front of them.

The two men gasped and looked at each other in shock, then raced ahead to where he'd been. When they got there they saw nothing.

"Looking for me?" As the two men were beginning to doubt their eyes a cold voice reached their ears. Their eyes went wide as a hand came up on either side of them and smashed their heads together. They collided like a pair of melons to the sound of a sickening crunch.

Cloudhawk's strength couldn't be underestimated!

Without a helmet the two soldiers had nothing to protect their skulls. The bones fractured easily, leaving them with nasty concussions at the very least. It would take them the better part of a week to recover. It would be a mistake to consider Skycloud's

guards to be this weak, however. He'd managed to use his cloak to catch them by surprise, giving them no chance to fight back.

Cloudhawk stooped over them and began to sift through their pockets. Perhaps they had something he could use, like money or a way for him to fake his identity. But just as he stretched out his hand to start looking a flood of anxiety overcame him. Danger.

Something wasn't right.

Six more men appeared out of the blue with swords in their hands. Six white blades came at him like coordinated lightning strikes.

As they lunged at him Cloudhawk's eyes picked out one in particular, a demonhunter. He could hear the resonance of a relic in use – this demonhunter had a way to conceal their entire group from view which was how they appeared so suddenly.

No wonder he'd heard nothing, nor felt their murderous intention.

Fuck! I didn't notice them in time! They'd probably spotted him a while ago but they didn't move in right away because he'd changed his appearance. The demonhunter had probably sent the two soldiers out as decoys to see how he'd react.

He couldn't run or disappear, but instead he chose to deal with what he thought were just two guards – falling right into their trap. The angry whistle of six swords chopping his way filled the air making his every nerve go tense.

A moment ago he was alone, now he was in the center of a deadly storm – too quick for him to react.

Cloudhawk's hearing seemed to bypass his brain and move right to his limbs. The moment the sound of those tearing blades arose he was on the move without a second thought, retreating backwards. The swordsmen closed in, the light from their quivering swords creating a rapidly closing net. No matter where he tried to go, Cloudhawk had half a dozen fatal blows waiting for him.

Boom!

The area around Cloudhawk exploded.

Explosion wasn't the right word. A cloud of yellow sand sprang up suddenly all over

like the earth had spat it out. In the course of his escape from prison Cloudhawk's psychic powers had improved, which in turn made him more dangerous with the gospel of the sands.

Each bit of gravel was like a biting thorn and in the midst of the cloud were deadly sand arrows as well. Faced with the sudden and unexpected counter attack the soldiers were forced back. They were able to protect themselves by using their swords to deflect the more dangerous arrows, and the captain of the strike team was even quick enough to thrust his sword into the center of the cloud of dust.

Cloudhawk dodged to the side but the man's sword sliced a hole in his clothing revealing a golden book cover underneath. Cloudhawk, with his left hand covered in a layer of sand, grabbed the blade as it swung by. With his right hand he grabbed the swordsman's wrist. Before he could break it and take the sword the strike force leader let go and wrenched his hand free. He pulled out a dagger and stabbed at his target.

He gave up his sword and answered with a dagger. His reaction times were incredibly fast – no doubt an accomplished holy warrior.

Cloudhawk's left hand held the blade and his wrist swung around to grab the hilt. His opponent was too close, so when he lunged in and attacked with his dagger Cloudhawk didn't have time to respond. With both hands on the sword he pressed them together, the combined stress bending the sword blade. *Snap!* Shards of metal were launched outward and buried themselves in his enemy's face.

A normal person would stop fighting the moment they suffered an injury like this.

But this soldier, his face already slick with blood from the wound, never stopped. He never even blinked and kept the dagger aimed at Cloudhawk's throat. This level of steadfast determination could only be tempered from years of experience and training. Never give up a chance to put down one's enemy. Disregard your own safety for the mission, do not fear death. He came at him with the knife like it was the purpose of his whole being.

This fucker was one tough son of a bitch!

At the same time the demonhunter was behind him, slowly drawing back the string of his bow. The other five swordsmen were closing in to follow their captain's lead. Yes, Cloudhawk was stronger than he ever was – but he was in worse danger than ever

before.

Chapter 24

Around Every Corner

The invisibility cloak reacted once more. Cloudhawk vanished from view.

He couldn't completely avoid his enemy's attack, but by hiding from view perhaps he could force the attack off target. The soldier's dagger was aimed for his throat but missed and struck his shoulder instead. Cloudhawk had grown tough, so when the dagger dug into his flesh he reacted by kicking the soldier square in the chest. The man's sternum shattered and he was thrown away.

Cloudhawk deftly eluded the other attacks aimed his way.

Most of these men were too weak to be a problem. If he fought without concern for safety he could likely take out most of them without much trouble. But it wasn't worth it, he didn't want to die with these assholes. So... he looked for a way to escape.

The vibrations of a relic hummed louder. He didn't need to see it to know the demonhunter's relic bow was ready to fire.

Cloudhawk could tell from the demonhunter's aura that he was stronger than the one he'd fought and killed before. This guy's bow could blow apart a steel plate with a single shot. Free from the captain, Cloudhawk grabbed another one of the soldiers and yanked him in front as a meat shield.

Tang! The exorcist staff loosed its arrow.

Cloudhawk watched as a hole opened up in the man before him, like he was the target of a massive rifle shot. There was nothing like watching your own attack tearing a friend apart, but the demonhunter still kept fighting. The man he shot didn't scream or protest – he understood.

These fucks are crazy! I'm so tired of fighting these zealots!

Cloudhawk held up a shield of sand. The blood and bits of flesh blown out of the soldier splattered on it with such force that the shield fell apart. He was tossed into

the air but wrenched around, using the momentum to run along an adjacent wall. With his bearing regained he used the cloak to vanish from view and escape.

The demonhunter lowered his bow. His face was downcast, angry.

The ambush looked complicated but it happened in a matter of seconds, only enough time for him to fire one shot. Their target was quick, agile, and his psychic energy was stronger by comparison. That's how he was able to escape.

The demonhunter galvanized the power of his relic but found no trace of the culprit. His invisibility relic shielded his presence and made him quick. Following him would be a tall order.

Cloudhawk got a clean escape, but it brought him no joy. These lackeys had caught his scent and found him fast. He worried next time things could turn out much worse. Now that they spotted him they were going to call more to the area, and although Cloudhawk had gotten stronger they were going to get him sooner or later if he got trapped here.

Run! He had to find a way to run far from here!

Cloudhawk's mind raced for a solution. If he ran where would he go? It was a life or death question and he didn't have any time to think of a good answer. The guards here were not to be trifled with and the demonhunters were unpredictable. If this were the wastelands he might have had a chance to get away, but this was Skycloud Domain. Who knew how many soldiers and demonhunters were after him.

Frost de Winter was the governor's disciple, so gathering a bunch of demonhunters who could track him wasn't unthinkable.

The last one was able to hide a whole group and get close without him even knowing. That alone was a problem. Demonhunters had all sorts of strange abilities, different from any of the ones he fought before. He didn't like having to contend against them.

Right! Didn't he find a map in the Sandbar?

He hadn't shown it to anyone when he went to the governor's mansion. He'd spent some time on the way into the city studying the map and found that it had a very complete architectural record. It even described the area *under* the Skycloud which was a series of interlinking pipelines. If he remembered right they should lead him out

of the city.

Skycloud City was covered in an energy field that kept out those of unknown origin. No one could leave without proper authorization, either. If Cloudhawk wanted to get out of here the city pipes were the way to go.

Suddenly he remembered the toxic weapons the Dark Atom had prepared. Hadn't they been planning to use them in these secret tunnels and attack Skycloud?

It was more than likely. If they were going to use the tunnels to attack the city why couldn't he use them to escape? He was planning to find a safe spot to study the map when all of a sudden he was splashed in the face with some unidentified liquid.

He was invisible but still corporeal, so when the liquid hit him it traced out his body from head to toe. It was followed by an intense burning that made him yelp in pain and surprise.

Son of a bitch! What the hell?!

Cloudhawk stopped. A delicate and attractive figure blocked his path with a spinning exorcist staff in her hand. A pair of burning eyes alive with hatred stared at him, and with a voice thick with loathing she hissed. "It is you!"

There were enemies around every corner! He couldn't catch a goddamn break!

Cloudhawk recognize Claudia right away. He knew what they had was a blood feud that would only end in someone's death. She was the one responsible for wiping out Lighthouse Point. He had answered by killing a bunch of them – her compatriot and a dozen or so soldiers. But a failure like she suffered, for a citizen of the elysian lands who honored glory above all else, was a fate worse than death.

There wasn't time to think about it. His body had started to go numb and the liquid she'd thrown on him smoked and stained him with color. His cloak turned anything it touched invisible so any normal fluid would have vanished as well. However, the stuff Claudia used evaporated fast and the steam that rose off him wasn't affected by the cloak. A colorful cloak of smoke hung over him that left no question as to where he stood. His cloak was useless now.

Worse still, whatever this shit was she'd infused with some kind of numbing agent. Cloudhawk felt like he was turning into wood.

“The potion will paralyze you, it’s strong enough to knock a bull out for three full days.” Claudia’s ice cold eyes never left Cloudhawk’s steaming outline. “Do you have any last words?”

Cloudhawk shook his head. “I’m going to die sooner or later. But not today.”

Claudia grit her teeth. “Is that right?”

“Frankly, you aren’t any match for me.”

Claudia was already angry and his words threw her into a fit of rage. She rushed at him with her exorcist staff.

Cloudhawk threw the Gospel of the Sands at her. However, it dissolved in midair, into a clump of yellowish sand. The grains grew in number until they became a wall of gravel that blocked her path.

Bang!

She struck the wall with her staff hard enough to break it apart, but much of the sand fell onto her. They clung to her like a magnet, getting thicker by the moment. No matter how she raged, the layer of sand only got thicker, but still she struggled forward like a lioness. Each step came slower than the last yet she got close enough to swing her staff at Cloudhawk’s head. Just as it was coming down to split him in two the sands held her fast. She’d become a sand sculpture.

Cloudhawk hadn’t moved an inch since the start. Claudia’s exorcist staff was frozen five centimeters from the top of his head.

With a wave of his hand, streaks of glimmering sand coalesced in Cloudhawk’s palm. They gathered into the shape of a book. She couldn’t see it but sweat had started to accumulate on Cloudhawk’s forehead. He smirked at her. “You aren’t strong enough to kill me.”

Claudia was sealed up tight, as immobile as a snowman. But her burning eyes were open and she watched with immeasurable hatred as Cloudhawk walked over, picked up her staff, then swing it around like he was getting ready to use it.

Why? Why does it have to be this way? Why does he have to be so strong?

Cloudhawk could see the despair in her eyes as he slowly pushed the exorcist staff into her body, inch by inch. Blood permeated the gripping sands and as the pain wracked her body Claudia's pupils contracted.

"Remember this pain, remember this humiliation. Remember your failure." Cloudhawk relinquished his grip on the staff and stepped away. "I'm not going to kill you this time, but if you still want vengeance feel free to come find me."

Several minutes later...

People appeared all around. The soldiers discovered Claudia locked up in her prison of sand. They were stunned by the bizarre scene.

All together they chiseled away at the sand until she was free. Cloudhawk had pierced an artery, but luckily the pressure of the sand had prevented her from bleeding out. Once they could get to it the soldiers used medicines to stop the hemorrhage and save her life.

The fires in Claudia's eyes had turned to dying embers.

In sparing her life had Cloudhawk shown her mercy? Was it meant as an insult? Was he mocking her? Her loss in the wastelands could be almost forgiven since her enemy was cunning and sinister. But this time, this loss... she was beaten. Cloudhawk not only won, he had destroyed her confidence.

Claudia's insidious toxins hadn't fully paralyzed Cloudhawk, and he knew why. His blood burned as factors inside dissolved the poison working through him. It was 'Trespasser', the final gift of the Academician from his time in Blackwater Base.

Somehow it was able to determine if something was harmful and devour it. Put another way, the more infected Cloudhawk became with Trespasser the less poison was an issue for him. Was he now effectively immune? He didn't know whether it was something to celebrate or fear.

He didn't kill Claudia not because he was softhearted – he wasn't. He didn't kill her because he clung onto hope.

He didn't know what was going on so he still held on to the hope that he might live

here someday. Killing a few soldiers while defending himself might be pardonable, but killing another demonhunter... there probably wasn't any coming back from that.

Trespasser was busily cleansing his body of the toxin, but its speed was limited. He was finding it difficult to move so he had to find someplace to hide, and fast, otherwise the next group of enemies he ran into would mean his end.

What was close where he could get out of sight? He went and fought with the question over and over again in his mind until it struck him and he slap his forehead.

Moron! The most dangerous place is the safest, hide where no one will expect. They could tear Skycloud down to its foundation and never find me there.

Chapter 25

Survival

“Everyone come quickly. The masters have returned!”

Skycloud dwellings were typically prismatic, tower-like structures, and the Bloomnettle Company’s home was no exception. It had a silver columnar body that arose to a golden peak, ten floors in total, and surrounded with a small courtyard. It was rather remote but that just made it more comfortable and quiet.

Squall strode into the courtyard with a smile on his face. It didn’t matter how exhausted he felt, coming home always filled him with a sense of pride and contentment. This simple and unassuming abode was the product of many years of hard labor. Aside from the company members there were also the administrative staff; over a hundred men, women and children. Women and the elderly where the majority. Most of them were relatives and family members who had lived her for many years, living with each other in peace and harmony.

Old Thistle, Squall , the doctor and twenty-some caravan guards filed into the courtyard, laden with fatigue from their long journey. They were greeted with excited shouts. People jumped for joy when they saw their friends and family return.

“Auntie Lotus!”

A pair of young girls with tufts of hair poking from the top of their heads ^[1] tottered over to the doctor’s open arms. Their ruddy cheeks ^[2] were so full of vitality and excitement, nothing short of adorable. Doctor Lotus lifted them up, one in each arm. Her voice was tender and affectionate as she greeted them.

“Ah, you work so hard, Squall has gotten dark from the sun.” An elderly woman amiably fawned over the young man before turning her attention to Old Thistle. “Did everything go well?”

“We were caught out in the borderlands by a band of brigands, and there was some conflict with Dark Atom conspirators in the Sandbar. All these years with the old man I never thought we’d see so much action.” Before Old Thistle could even open his

mouth Squall was animatedly describing the whole thing. Then his face grew solemn. “But... Uncle will not be coming home.”

‘Uncle’ was Bloomnettle’s guard captain.

The other people of Bloomnettle Company began to notice that the man who was never more than a few inches from Old Thistle’s side was nowhere to be found. Everyone knew what this meant. Misfortune had found the loyal old man, and he would not return to them.

For merchants who traversed the lawless borderlands this was not uncommon. For a time they stood in silence, grieving for their loss. For everyone here was family, even if they were not related by blood.

“Do not be saddened.” Old Thistle thumbed the beads of his bracelet. “He’d been doing this job for many years and understood that these risks were a fact of life.” He had lost an old friend, and though his heart ached there were others to consider. He tried to comfort them. “This time we’ve managed to bring back much more than usual. Uncle’s sacrifice is tragic, but he did it so that our lives might be better. May the gods above welcome his soul and bring him solace. Lotus, make sure his wife and children receive compensation. Keep an eye on his family from now on and make sure they grow up to honor his name.”

The doctor solemnly nodded her head. Those who returned were the fortunate ones.

The Highwaymen had a reputation for their bloodlust and barbarity. Merchant caravans unfortunate enough to cross their path were destroyed, their women and valuables taken without exception. Were it not for the appearance of the mysterious demonhunter, Old Thistle’s Bloomnettle Merchant Company would have been erased.

Without his intervention, the guard captain’s corpse would have been joined by Old Thistle, Squall, and all the rest of the caravan. They would all be rotting under the borderland’s sun. All except the doctor, who would have been captured and used by the bandits as they pleased, a terrible life where she’d wish for death.

Old Thistle waved his hand, motioning for everyone to disperse. “We cannot forsake our laws. Everyone go get ready.”

After each successful return the members of the caravan were expected to bathe, make obeisance to the gods, then hold a banquet in celebration to thank the gods for their

protection.

Night fell over the magnificent city.

The canopies of the city's curious trees glowed to lend warmth and light. They towered aloft, bathing large swaths of the city in luminescence like magnificent umbrellas. Skycloud was a portrait of peace and serenity, a paradise on earth. Even the greatest evil of the world would feel their cold hearts thaw at the sight.

People lit their lanterns.

Sand-like particles of light floated from the tea-pot shaped curios, and the sands floated around the air making beautiful patterns. Some were majestic horses, sprawling trees, some of which moved and others that remained static. Each one was a masterful work of art that lit up the area around it.

At the apex of every civilian dwelling was an altar dedicated to the gods, and within it were lanterns and other tools of worship bestowed upon them by the sanctuary. After bathing and changing his clothes Old Thistle lit every lantern himself, and from them arose the magnificent and sacred images of the gods.

As merchants, Bloomnettle Company's altar was a simple thing, but much care went into its use and maintenance. Every plant was meticulously cared for.

By now it was six o'clock in the evening and the sun's rays had disappeared from the sky. ^[3] The solemn toll of the bells from the sanctuary filled the air with its melodious sound. It had a transcendent quality that carried across the city without losing intensity or volume. It rolled across Skycloud, cleansing every heart of impurity, dispelling every evil thought.

It was Skycloud's evening bell. The day was done, the time for evening prayer had arrived.

Old Thistle and Squall had changed into traditional clothing for sacrifices. The doctor had changed into a spotless white robe that made her look all the more pure and beautiful. The three of them stood in front while the rest of the company stood dutifully behind.

The twenty or so other travelers had also bathed and changed. Their faces serene and pious they stood before the altar and prayed.

As a merchant, Old Thistle was perhaps shrewd and covetous, but he was like all the rest of Skycloud's citizens, he was a devout believer. He believed that everything he owned was thanks to the grace of the gods.

They escaped from certain death, met demonhunters, worked in service for the army and made many connections that would help Squall become successful in the future. How could these not be gifts from on high?

"Thank you, great gods, for our shelter."

"May your light shine upon us for all time."

"May we bask in your grace and glory."

Old Thistle, Lotus and Squall bowed low before the altar. The others prostrated themselves respectfully.

Squall was a little different from his devoted foster father. He found this whole process rather boring. He didn't believe the righteous and mighty gods listened to the prayers of ordinary men. Squall wanted to be a demonhunter, not in order to serve the gods, but because he respected the job.

Of course, boring as it was, he still had to pretend.

The prayers continued for two whole hours.

Old Thistle was getting on in years and after such a long time stretched on the ground he needed Squall and the doctor's help to rise back up. However, he was doing well. The old merchant felt like they had been blessed. He never felt more assured in his faith.

"I'm sure we're all tired of waiting. Now it's time for our dinner!"

The young children leapt about and cheered for joy.

Their banquet was a plentiful one, another tradition the company enjoyed. Every safe return was celebrated with hearty dishes and flowing wine. It was the most joyous day of every month, like a holiday. This was especially true for the most gluttonous of children who could savor more food than they could fit in their bellies.

In these holy lands fruits and grains grew swiftly, and livestock reproduced with alarming speed. So long as they remained devoted to the gods no one went to sleep with an empty stomach. After all, Skycloud was the capital of this land of plenty, nowhere else could match its affluence.

After the ceremony, Squall went right back to his uninhibited and unabashed persona. He jumped up onto a stool and held a cup of pale gold ale over his head. "Tonight we drink!"

"Young master Squall, there won't be many more days you'll be able to drink like this with us!"

"Yeah, master Squall will be a demonhunter soon. How will His Excellency have time to drink with lowly people like us after that, eh?"

"Bah! What kind of nonsense is this?" He pounded his mug against the table top ^[4]. "No matter what I become in the future, you all are family. How could I avoid the people I love? You people, cursing my names. You should be punished!"

Raucous laughter filled the dining hall.

Old Thistle smiled but he spoke seriously to his young charge. "Remember your behavior and your faith, Squall. You are to be a demonhunter, you cannot be so frivolous. Come down!"

Squall impishly shrugged at the old man.

This exchange was not just flippant talk. It wasn't easy for Bloomnettle Company to get where it was today. In the ten years since Squall had been with Old Thistle, they'd gone from a small outfit with no home to living in Skycloud City. It was all thanks to the old man's ceaseless efforts that at last they had a life to take pride in.

Squall was also filled with a sense of pride. He was liked here. They weren't notable people in the elysian lands, but these were his people. This was his family.

Squall idolized Lord Arcturus, and deeply desired to be a demonhunter so that he could protect those around him. He worked hard so that one day he could achieve that dream.

Over a hundred people were busily eating food and loudly celebrating when –

Thud!

The front door was shoved open. The sound of clanking armor filled the air.

A hundred soldiers surged in with their weapons held ready and before anyone knew what was going on, they were surrounded. Their armor glinted in the dim light, cold and uninviting. The area was suddenly enveloped with a menacing air. Like ice water poured on burning charcoal, suddenly the whole courtyard felt cold.

A group of people dressed as demonhunters entered.

A young man and one in his middle years led them. The younger one was especially gallant looking with his white armor and silver spear. The other man was clad in a white demonhunter cloak and held himself with a lofty and learned bearing. Both were illustrious figures in Skycloud City and instantly recognizable. The younger one was Lord Arcturus's disciple, Frost de Winter, while the older gentleman was Lord Arcturus's younger brother and his right-hand assistant, Augustus.

Obviously, the two were the governor's close subordinates, with a contingent of demonhunters in tow. If any one of them were to show up alone it would be a stunning happenstance for these simple merchants. How could they ever even imagine entertaining so many illustrious people all at the same time? They stared dumbly at the scene, unsure of what to make of it.

"Most honorable gentlemen." Old Thistle got the sense that their visit did not bode well. Trembling, he rose to his feet and made his way over to them all bows and respectful addresses. "What brings you venerable sirs to this humble man's home?"

With a cold smirk on his face Frost de Winter swung his spear to point at the old man. Its silvery light streaked prettily through the air. "You traitors have been found colluding with the agents of a demon. You dare stand before me and feign ignorance? We have already learned everything. I recommend that you cooperate. Speak! Where is the demon's spy hiding?!"

"Impossible!" Old Thistle was a man of great poise, but the accusation shook him to the core. "We're a simple merchant company, how could we ever cavort with demons? We are devout followers of the gods. What you say is impossible! Honorable sirs, you must have made a mistake."

"You still dare to conceal him? Open your eyes and look, is this item not yours?" Frost

de Winter threw a robe onto the ground before them. It was the clothing they had lent to Clouthawk. Frost de Winter's voice was cold as the grave. "You are responsible for bringing a demon spy into the city. Do you still deny it?"

Fear stole the color from their faces. They looked at one another, sharing the same silent question. Him?

It didn't make any sense. How could he be a spy?

But the truth of it didn't matter in the moment. Whether he was or not, they could not admit culpability. If they did, it would spell their end.

Squall, inexperienced and unable to restrain himself, shot to his feet. "It's a mistake! You're wrong, how could he be a spy? He saved our lives and even exposed Dark Atom agents in Sandbar Outpost. He's a *demonhunter*, there's no way he would work for demons! He came to Skycloud in order to meet Lord Arcturus. I'm sure the governor couldn't accept seeing a good man slandered!"

Augustus's eyebrows slowly knit together.

Frost de Winter's pupils shrunk to tiny black points and his eyes filled with the promise of murder. His voice sounded like it bubbled up from the depths of hell itself. "It appears you know quite a lot."

They were done for!

Old Thistle was a man of rich experience. He didn't know what was going on, but he knew one thing instantly from the look on Frost de Winter's face. It made his heart go cold.

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1. This is the premo hair style for young girls in China. They look like onion sprouts.
 2. Also a staple of small children, especially those who live in rural environments. It's taken as a sign of vivacity and youthfulness. Actually it's a physical reaction to something in their lifestyle but I can't for the life of me remember what my instructors told me.
 3. China uses a universal time zone for the entire country and doesn't account for

daylight savings. That means they'll have sunset at *midnight* during the summers. Just an interesting factoid

4. A form of cheers in China, like clinking your glasses together

Chapter 26

Shattered Faith

In the heat of the moment Squall let his mouth lead the way. It was too late to take it back now.

Old Thistle didn't know why this was happening. He didn't want to know the story and how it involved them. All he knew was that Frost de Winter was one of the most capable men in all of Skycloud, and was Lord Arcturus's disciple. The governor had to know that he was here, and what he was going to do.

That meant that everything Frost de Winter did was a reflection of the will of the governor. If Frost de Winter felt that the young man was a demon spy, that meant Lord Arcturus shared his idea.

As this realization dawned on him, a cold sweat broke out on Old Thistle's forehead. It didn't matter what the truth was. Who would dare contradict Lord Arcturus's decree? His people were responsible for bringing an enemy agent into the city, and whether or not they did it consciously didn't matter. There were going to be consequences.

Banishment. Death. At the very least his family would be cast from Skycloud.

Old Thistle was an old man so he didn't mind shouldering the ramifications, but he did fear for Squall. If this matter ruined the young man's prospects to become a demonhunter, what effect would that have? He would rather die than to have to watch the future splendor of his adopted son cast into the mud.

"No! No, this is all a mistake! We didn't know anything!" Old Thistle stepped forward, putting himself between him and the boy. "Master Frost de Winter, I am a moral businessman. Squall is just a boy. If there is any fault it lies with me, you cannot unjustly punish a faithful servant!"

Frost de Winter's face turned deathly cold. "Unjustly punish?"

The accusation hung in the air between the two men when suddenly a carved blade flashed. As it traveled its intricately carved surface refracted the light and traced a

beautiful arc, somehow whipping around Frost de Winter's neck and straight for Old Thistle. The old man's head was flung into the air where it tumbled end over end. Shocked and stricken, his family watched as it struck the ground with an empty thud.

That sickle blade was thin, sharp and blindingly fast.

It happened so quickly the blood didn't start to flow from Old Thistle's neck until his head hit the floor. It spurted into the air like a grotesque fountain.

"Father!"

"Boss!"

Horrorified cries rang out from Bloomnettle Company.

Squall scrambled over to his dad's body and gathered it into his arms. A few feet away the old man's head stared blankly into the sky. His mouth opened and closed, working desperately to speak but no sound would come.

"No!... NO!"

Squall wailed at the sky, clutching his dead father.

Augustus stood nearby, unblinking. The sickle blade returned to his pale and slender hand like it had a mind of its own. The weapon, exquisite and thin as a cicada's wing, spun in his palm.

"Why act so quickly, Uncle Augustus?" Frost de Winter was clearly dissatisfied. "I hadn't even had the chance to question him."

"Your method of questioning is too slow." The man's face, fair and rich in dignity, maintained a cool expression. He spoke without hurry. "They have admitted to consorting with the spy. That is enough. Putting them all to death isn't even sufficient punishment. But the spy is hiding somewhere and we don't have time to waste on traitors."

There was a murderous fire in the hearts of these men. Cloudhawk's capture and escape was revealed by Augustus' words.

So far several soldiers and one demonhunter had been injured. One soldier was dead.

The matter was still under wraps, but it was impossible to hide flames behind paper. Eventually news would get out if the situation wasn't contained, and if Lord Arcturus' enemies catch wind – or if word got to the sanctuary – other powers would become involved. Things would become far more complicated.

It was just as Lord Arcturus said. Rules existed for the sake of convenience, but when they got in the way of real work they needed to be broken. That was what Augustus was doing. These were critical times that demanded critical measures and they couldn't afford the luxury of doing things the 'right' way.

Augustus lifted his left hand and the spinning blade rose into the air as though on cue. Its shrill sound was like the voice of death. He looked out over the crowd. "Our patience and time are limited. Tell us everything you know, or pray for mercy from chakram."

A demonhunter, killing the faithful without a word? This was Skycloud City! Even sinners had the right to judgment under the law before being convicted!

Under what authority was Augustus allowed to cut down a pious believer? In the face of this heartless act, Frost de Winter just frowned and let it be. He understood the gravity of what they faced. There wasn't going to be any public trial. All of these people knew too much. They all had to die. Killing a few earlier meant nothing.

"You animals!"

Squall sprang to his feet and ran at them. It was unthinkable that his father would die at the hands of an esteemed demonhunter.

It was undeniable that Old Thistle was a businessman, one who curried favor and had a lust for wealth. But for decades he was a devoted follower of the gods. He prayed every night, observed every tradition and was never consciously wicked.

Why? Why!

Squall was especially hurt by the fact that these men were the trusted agents of Lord Arcturus! The man he respected the most, idolized above all others. Was all of this his will?

In a blink, Squall had the person he loved the most stolen from him. In that instant, whatever faith he had shattered. His eyes were red and wild from fury and though he

knew it would mean his death he ran at the men responsible.

Lotus shouted after him. "Squall!"

Bullshit! This whole world, it's all bullshit! Kill me, just kill me!

Augustus flicked his left wrist and in response his wisp-thin crescent blade shot out once again, its cold silver light marking out its path. Augustus was outstanding even among the great demonhunters: he was known as the Moonlight Crescent that could overcome all defenses, while his Celestial Sphere was a weapon a hundred crossbows could not pierce. Be it offense or defense, no other demonhunter came close. How could Squall stand a chance?

Venting his pain and anger through a bestial scream, Squall rushed forward. When the blade came his way he threw himself to the ground and the deadly weapon swept by. It missed.

Augustus was a man of ability; for him, killing Squall required no effort. Without any hurry he flicked a finger and his weapon responded by whipping around in midair. Two more heads were severed as easily as plucking the tops off dandelions.

Augustus's bloody methods were meant to inspire the others to comply. "The rest of you still have nothing to say?"

"We'll talk! We'll all tell you!" The caravan guards dropped to their knees. One of them flung himself bodily to the ground cravenly. "Don't kill me, please don't kill me!"

Maintaining his dignified scowl Frost de Winter looked on. He disdained killing those without the means to defend themselves. Augustus' unmitigated murder wasn't something he agreed with, but he couldn't argue with his results.

Augustus called his chakram back. "Where did he go, what did he do? What did he tell you? Tell me everything and don't leave out a single word."

"Don't say a thing!"

Frost de Winter turned his eyes toward Squall who was picking himself up from the ground. Beneath his lacerated clothes where the blade passed he could see strange tattoos. The sight made Frost de Winter's pupils contract, as the situation suddenly changed.

Squall hefted an automatic crossbow. A hail of steel-tipped bolts screamed through the air.

Was he actually lifting his hand against a demonhunter? He was signing his own death warrant!

Augustus was still recovering from the wounds he'd earned out in the wastes, but even injured a crossbow posed no danger to him. He fished out another relic, this time an exquisitely fashioned metal sphere. It hovered over his hand for a moment before flooding the area around him with an invisible power. The instant Squall's crossbow bolts crossed the border they stopped dead, frozen.

Augustus stood before his young attacker, with the sphere of defense in his left hand and the chakram blade suspended above his right. Both relics hummed with intense power. Skycloud's illustrious demonhunter bore family relics that were just as storied. The likes of Selene and Frost de Winter were demonhunters of unparalleled talent, however in the face of this man – twelve years in service of the order – it was unclear whether either of them were a challenge to him.

A dozen crossbow bolts hung in the air before Augustus, jutting out around him like the spines of a hedgehog.

A flash erupted from the orb in his left hand and the steel bolts were blasted outward with hurricane force. They pierced trees, walls, the floor – everything, and with unthinkable force. More than a few of them became buried in the unfortunate merchants.

These sons of bitches! Why is this happening?!

Were these really what demonhunters were like? Was this the 'glorious' order he'd yearned to join? Squall was overcome. Cruel reality shattered his dreams, in the unkindest way possible.

Augustus's chakram blade didn't rest either, and whipped out with incomprehensible speed. Squall couldn't get out of the way this time. Yet just as his life was about to be carved out, a beautiful silver spear inlaid with a pale blue stone flashed before his eyes. It, too, was too fast to follow. With the majesty of a dragon it swept forth, the perfect representation of speed and power!

Clang!

The mirror-like blade of the spear and the petal-thin crescent blade collided. Their point of contact was a fraction of a centimeter for how thin the crescent blade was, too small a target for any normal man to deflect. One could imagine the level of skill the spearman would have to possess to accomplish such a feat.

The crescent blade was knocked away, covered in frost after just a moment of contact.

Augustus scowled. "Nephew, what is the meaning of this?"

"They have agreed to confess. Leave a few alive to testify. This young man in particular seems to have associated the most with the spy. We don't even know the culprit's name. We need to gather more information." Frost de Winter stood before his elder and spared him no words of respect. He served only one man, and that was his teacher: Lord Arcturus. As for Augustus, his master thought highly of him but that was all. "I imagine Uncle Augustus wouldn't refuse this order."

The demonhunter didn't know what had gotten into Frost de Winter, but he respected the younger man's talent. Blocking his relic proved it; were it not for the glory of Selene's abilities, Frost de Winter's light would shine all across the holy lands.

"Very well. He lives."

"All of you, come with me!"

Squall tried to resist until an officer came and knocked him out with a vicious chop to the neck. The rest of Bloomnettle Company cried and shouted as they were rounded up.

Four people had died in the raid, including Old Thistle. Once everyone was gone a group of soldiers set about cleaning the aftermath. Every trace of blood was removed and in the end it was like the raid had never happened.

Two days later.

Skycloud's government disseminated a bulletin, indicating that Bloomnettle Merchant Company had violated city laws by trading in illegal goods. Word spread that the whole outfit had been taken into custody.

Chapter 27

Prison

Skycloud's prison was home to eight hundred criminals; murders, blasphemers and other perpetrators of violent crimes were the majority. This malignant place, where the sun never shined and all the evil of Skycloud lived, was the shadow to the glimmering light of the elysian lands.

Normal citizens of Skycloud could not even imagine that beneath their precious, prosperous city was a place of blood and torture.

"You're new."

There were twenty criminals locked up in this particular cage, some only for six months and others for over forty years. Their sins were numerous, but what they all shared was no hope for a future. At best they could hope for exile to the wilds, but for most death was the only escape for a life of imprisonment. Harsh conditions and cruel torture had twisted their minds.

Bullying newcomers was tradition down here.

The moment someone was locked in this pit all concept of human rights, basic respect, and freedom was stripped from them. Ninety percent were men and the few unfortunate women who were brought down here couldn't count on their own cell. Single cells were reserved for particularly dangerous criminals, so most women were thrown into cages with all the rest where their fates could be guessed at. Most didn't live longer than a month.

Rape wasn't just a danger for women, either. Some men were subjected to the same torture.

For instance, this young newcomer was only fifteen or sixteen years old. He was a little thin but delicate of feature and smooth of skin. He was shackled like everyone else but his eyes had a strange light to them, not the look of a prisoner.

"Why'd they throw you in here, eh?"

“What was it? Murder? Rape? Theft? Heresy?”

When they went to sleep last night none of the prisoners had seen the kid, then when they opened their eyes this morning he was there. What did someone so young do to get themselves thrown in a place like this? A tender morsel like this was a rare treat down here!

A pair of fat and muscled men trundled over to the quiet young man squatting by the wall, chains in tow. The newcomer stared calmly at the hay covering the floor as though he were waiting for a flower to sprout. The two men’s faces were twisted in vulgar sneers that revealed their dark intentions.

“What are you, deaf? Didn’t you hear me ask you a fuckin’ question?!” One of the large men barked.

Resigned, the young man rose to his feet. “What is it?”

“Newcomers gotta learn the rules down here so you do what I tell you. Don’t waste my time with bullshit, you hear me?” One of the men jabbed his meaty finger at the kid’s chest. “You fight back, you’ll regret it all the way to your next life, got it?”

The other one eyed the kid up and down. “Take off your pants. Let me see what kind of ass you’re workin’ with.”

The kid’s response was matter-of-fact and polite. “I really wouldn’t piss me off.”

“You lookin’ to die, you fuckwad?!”

“We’ll kick the shit outta you, kid!”

The two men lifted their shackled wrists and swung them down to hit the kid with the sturdy iron bracelets. Suddenly, the meek kid became a different person. His shackles popped open of their own accord and he buried his fists in each man’s gut. Both of them sputtered as they lost their breath and fell to their knees. They doubled over and squirmed like fat worms, faces red as pork liver.

The young guy was too fast to follow. He struck each of his would-be attackers with the edge of his hand and knocked them out cold.

The rest of the men in the cell, who’d been ready to follow the big men in their

pleasure, looked at the scene in total shock. How did he open his shackles?! It was unthinkable, too fast for anyone to see how he did it.

Cloudhawk rolled his wrists for a few moments then snapped the restraints back into place. He swept his gaze over to the others and greeted their surprise with a cold laugh. "Anyone else wanna check out my ass? Stand up and make yourself known."

A palpable air of violence filled the cage to dissuade any takers.

The men here were hardened convicts. Many had taken lives. But not a single one of them dared even look at the young man. Just his presence made their hair stand on end, the promise of blood that surrounded him was different from other violent men. It was the temperament of someone who'd stared death in the face countless times. Any normal thug went weak at the knees just looking at him.

The men sat quiet on their best behavior, so Cloudhawk returned to his spot by the wall.

This was his plan: the most dangerous spot he could think of was actually the safest. That asshole Frost de Winter could think until his skull cracked and blood leaked from his ears, but he'd never think to come back to the place Cloudhawk had run from.

His men could scour the whole city, but they'd never come looking here!

Hiding in the prisons was just a temporary plan. Personally, he didn't want conflict with the people of Skycloud. On the one hand, it's a fight he would lose, and on the other he still hoped this was a matter that could be reversed.

He'd sacrificed so much to get here, fought so damned hard. If the elysian lands were closed to him he didn't know where else he could go. Go back to the wastelands? He'd dreamed for years of any chance to get away from that damn place!

Cloudhawk mulled over the conundrum, his back pressed against the cold stone of the prison wall. *At least in the wastelands, I wouldn't have faced a problem like this.* Out there he killed who he needed, fought who he liked, and went where he pleased. Tough as the environment was, sinister as the people were, at least he wasn't afraid like he was now.

The thought swam up at him but was just as quickly snuffed out. The wastelands were the wastelands. How could they compare to this place?

No, he'd wait here and behave himself. Maybe all of this was that asshole Frost de Winter playing a trick. At worst, he'll wait until Selene Cloude returned. Cloudhawk was sure she wouldn't treat him wrong. She had no reason to. Once she got back, everything would be straightened out!

Cloudhawk was at a loss, but he also had no choices.

Silence returned to the stuffy prison. Guards constantly patrolled outside but not one of them realized there was an extra body locked inside. However, as Cloudhawk sat there with his eyes closed, meditating on his situation, a sense of danger washed over him.

An old man with a head of white hair tottered over to him. He was as frail as withered grass but Cloudhawk could feel a hidden threat lingering just below the surface.

Cloudhawk started by quietly observing the stranger. He had to be the boss because everywhere he went the others looked at him with fear. The sense of danger had to be more than just his imagination.

"You're a demonhunter." It was the first thing he said. The frail old man hunkered down beside Cloudhawk and spoke softly so that no one else could hear. "Last night I know how you got in. Only a demonhunter has power like that."

"What about it." Cloudhawk glared at the old man with a hint of violence. His head was a mess of grey and white hair and his face was lined with scars. The largest was an angry line that carved a path across his left eye and left his cornea a cloudy white. It made him look savage and hideous.

He introduced himself. "My name is Majjhima. You could say I'm a heretic. And what I want isn't important – what's important is that you look like someone who needs help. Help I can give." ^[1]

It was the first time Cloudhawk had ever heard someone introduce themselves as a heretic. He found the whole situation interesting. "You don't know anything about what I'm doing, but you want to help. Why?"

Majjhima chuckled dryly. "You might be a demonhunter, but you aren't a dutiful one. If you were you wouldn't be skulking around down here. I've been living in this city for thirty years, I know it well. I've been down here a long time, but I know people back up top, so I figured maybe I've got something you need."

Cloudhawk's curiosity was piqued. "I don't imagine you're willing to help out of the goodness of your heart."

Majjhima's voice got even softer. "I've got my own ends, like everyone else. I just want to get out of here."

There wasn't anything Cloudhawk could say in protest to that idea. He looked the man over, saw the signs of torture writ all over his body. Some of his wounds were old and others new, proving that he'd been down here for a very long time.

But whether or not he could really help wasn't clear.

Cloudhawk had never shared what he experienced in the wastelands with anyone except Frost de Winter. When he had, the asshole governor's disciple responded by trying to kill him. There was more to his ordeal than there seemed, and Cloudhawk wasn't going to forget about this hard-learned lesson after one day.

But the cat was out of the proverbial bag.

Cloudhawk thought for a minute. He didn't have much in the way of hope, but he did need help. Maybe telling him would give him a different perspective.

Cloudhawk was getting ready to share the tale from start to finish when the sound of footsteps reached his ears.

The door to his cage was opened and a woman, covered from head to toe in bruises, was thrown inside. Her hands and feet were bound. The guards never even looked toward Cloudhawk who stayed curled up in the corner. Once the new prisoner was delivered they shut the heavy iron door behind them and left.

This cage was full of men, and the guards knew what putting a woman in here would mean. They were complicit in whatever happened. It was a kind of torture. After a few days in here and the more tight-lipped might be convinced to talk.

The outlaws' eyes immediately snapped to the newcomer where they were pleasantly surprised to find that she was both voluptuous and attractive. What did these outlaws do to deserve such a treat? Their dark eyes glittered with malevolent intent.

After all, those who were interested in men were in the minority. Most preferred the embrace of a woman.

Terrified, the woman curled into a ball. She felt their eyes wander over her and horror gripped her. “What are you doing?! Get away from me!”

Cloudhawk froze. He knew this voice.

As the men were getting ready to pounce on their prey, Cloudhawk’s shackles popped open. He unfurled and bound to his feet, jumping off the wall and into their midst like a cheetah. Whipping his legs around he viciously knocked two men into a distant corner.

“What are you doing?!”

“We didn’t do anything to you!”

The convicts stared at Cloudhawk with wide eyes, full of fear and hate.

Cloudhawk paid them no mind and instead helped the woman up. “What are you doing here?!”

It was Bloomnettle’s doctor, Lotus. Besides Old Thistle and Squallj, she was the only other person to have seen Cloudhawk’s true face. When she saw him looking down on her she was just as bewildered.

1. This character is named 深中道, ‘deep middle path’, then described himself as a heretic. The Buddhist term for middle seemed fitting.

Chapter 28

A Crazy Decision

What was Bloomnettle's doctor doing in a place like this? What happened to Squall and Old Thistle?

"What is going on?"

Cloudhawk helped her up from the ground, and that's when he saw the burning hatred in her eyes. She shoved him away and spat her words at him in fury. "It's you! You're the reason for what happened! Old Thistle was killed by Augustus and the young master was taken away by Frost de Winter with all the others. Over a hundred people in Bloomnettle Company and now they're gone. All gone!"

The doctor broke down into tears.

Cloudhawk sat on the floor like he'd been struck by lightning.

How was this possible? He'd been careful not to do anything to implicate Bloomnettle Company, he never mentioned a thing about them. No one else in Skycloud saw him and he hadn't let anything about his identity slip. How could they have found out about Old Thistle and his people?

But even so, how did they factor into any of this? He'd tricked them with his demonhunter powers and used Selene's token to buy passage. The merchants were just normal, innocent people!

The surrounding convicts started to gather round, itching to try their luck against this irritating young man who'd stolen their prize.

"What the fuck are you assholes looking at?" Cloudhawk was already on the cusp of flying into a rage, and when he saw a few of the convicts slithering up close he immediately kicked a few back. "Put your hands on your heads and squat, all of you. If anyone moves, I'll rip out every bone through his ass!"

Cloudhawk was a product of the wastelands and had lived with mercenaries. As such,

sometimes his words were a little crass. The others looked at Majjhima, who answered their unspoken question with a nod. They were forced to swallow the bitter pill of capitulation and did as Cloudhawk instructed.

Lotus continued, "Are you a spy for the demons!?"

"Horseshit!" Cloudhawk was furious at the accusation. "Frost de Winter is spreading lies! How could I possibly be working for demons? What makes you think I could be a spy?!"

The sincerity in his voice eased her shock and anger. Cloudhawk was somewhat responsible for what happened, but he didn't deserve her hatred. If they hadn't run into him on the road the Highwayman would have destroyed the Bloomnettle Company before they even got back to Skycloud.

She could see from his expression that he had no idea what had happened.

She looked into his eyes. "But why are you in prison?"

Frost de Winter's inability to capture Cloudhawk enraged him, and he vented that frustrated on innocent people. If he was already captured why did the governor's disciple bother to harm them?

"I'll explain it to you." Cloudhawk brought her to a distant corner so as not to attract the attention of any guards. "But first tell me what happened? Tell me everything!"

Lotus heaved a sigh then shared her story, describing everything in detail.

He listened as she told him about Frost de Winter and his guards, how they showed up during dinner to round them up. She told him about how they killed arbitrarily, including the cruel death of Old Thistle. He heard all of it, up to where Squall and the others were taken away. Anger welled up inside him like a lake of fire.

For reasons he didn't understand, Cloudhawk was being framed by Frost de Winter. They were even trying to kill him! His escape from prison had somehow prompted them to go after the Bloomnettle Company and led to their destruction. Conspiracy, tyranny, murder... how was this place any different from the wastelands?

Old Thistle, Squall and the family they guided were good people who didn't deserve this. Right and wrong, good and evil, truth and falsehood... where was the border

between these two supposedly different worlds?

A crushing weight of sadness and rage hung over Cloudhawk. He thought this place would be paradise, but it was nothing more than a rotten corpse in a fancy coat. In the course of this single day, Cloudhawk had gone from shock, to anticipation, to anger, and ultimately despair. *This* was the world he'd struggled so desperately to get to?

Laughable! It was all a sick joke!

Frost de Winter, Augustus and the other demonhunters had been dispatched to hunt down one small insignificant man. Cloudhawk knew at least one thing – Governor Arcturus had to know all about it. Deploying so much manpower would require his approval.

Either Selene lied to him about everything... or maybe even the Bloodsoaked Queen didn't know what was going on here.

The truth of things wasn't important just this minute. Cloudhawk's rose-tinted glasses had come off and he learned that this seemingly faithful land of the gods was actually a den of snakes. It was nothing was like he thought it would be.

"The elysian lands have always been this way, it's nothing to be surprised about. The faithful use piety as a means for the ones in power to control their subjects and nothing more." Majjhima saw the look on Cloudhawk's face, and although he didn't know what the young man was thinking he understood his heart. He'd experienced all of this himself. "Look around you. There are thieves, murderers, ruffians... but most of them are ideological criminals. What does that mean? Anyone who questions the gods, breaks one of their precious lamps, or shows irreverence in the temple square is labeled a blasphemer and thrown in here. It would be ridiculous if it wasn't so sad. If the gods were so great, why resort to these methods to control thought? Why is there no room to question the way things are?"

Everyone sat in the gloomy darkness, crestfallen. Anyone who dared act against what the gods supposedly wanted was courting death.

But Majjhima seemed unwilling to give in. "Help me get out of here and I will do whatever you need me to do."

Cloudhawk paid the old man's pleas no mind. He kept his attention on Lotus. "What about Squall? What's happened to him?"

“The rest of the Bloomnettle Company is locked up on the floor above. Me and any of the guards who went on the expedition to the borderlands were thrown in this dungeon. Since Squall had the most contact with you they took him for more intensive questioning. He was taken away by Frost de Winter. I heard they’re going to parade him through the streets and burn him in the public square as a blasphemer in two days.”

Burning heretics wasn’t Frost de Winter’s goal. It didn’t make any sense to put on such a show for a single merchant’s son. No, this spectacle was intended to bring Cloudhawk out of hiding.

All the people of Bloomnettle had been captured, over a hundred of them. A hundred people, old and young among them, whose future was uncertain.

Lotus gripped Cloudhawk’s arm. “You need to find a way to save them.”

Cloudhawk frowned. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to, but how could he? How was he supposed to save anyone? His eyes turned toward the withered old man beside him. “You said you’d help, right? Here’s your chance.”

Majjhima had been locked in this hell for thirty years. Death was going to come for him sooner rather than later, so he couldn’t refuse no matter what danger Cloudhawk thrust him into.

Cloudhawk shared all he’d experienced with his co-conspirators, in even more detail than he’d given Frost de Winter. He needed their counsel and he couldn’t afford to leave anything out during this crucial time.

Lotus was flabbergasted by his tale. Suddenly everything made sense; why he had a wastelander’s name, why he appeared in the borderlands, the relics and demonhunter token. Who could imagine Cloudhawk wasn’t a demonhunter, and yet killed a demon with his own hands!

With her hands balled in fists, Lotus spoke up. “There hasn’t been any news of a slaying. Your story would be huge news for the people, so why would Frost de Winter want to cover it up – much less kill you!”

That was exactly the question they needed to answer. It’d been over ten years since a demon had been put down.

Wasn't this a time when humanity needed heroes and role-models? Killing a demon was an astronomical deed for someone like Cloudhawk, enough to lift him to the ranks of nobility. Wasn't Governor Arcturus lauded as a fair leader, justly meting out punishments and rewards? Why then would he want to silence Cloudhawk rather than honor his service?

"The answer to that question lies with the demon. They must fear that something on the creature's body would fall into your hands – something that would threaten their positions, or even their lives." Majjhima mulled over the question quietly. "Hmph. Arcturus Cloude's hands are as dirty as the rest of them, he's in collusion with those devils. Trying to shut you up is proof."

Skycloud's preeminent demonhunter, in bed with demons? If news like that got out it would shake the world to its very core! How could a glorified and legendary slayer of demons be in league with their sworn enemy?

Lotus, thrust suddenly into this situation, could hardly believe what she was hearing. And yet, if this were not true what would Governor Arcturus have to fear? What else could inspire him to bring the whole might of Skycloud against a single outsider?

"While making my way here I came across this map." Cloudhawk carefully pulled the city map from his pocket and handed it to Majjhima. "Can you read it?"

Lotus looked at the paper in surprise. Didn't they search everyone before throwing them in prison? How could they have missed a map? He wasn't captured and brought here, he had to be hiding in this place...

"This looks like..." When his eyes fell on Cloudhawk's map Majjhima's face lit up. It outlined the whole infrastructure below Skycloud City. "Unbelievable. Where did you get this? The whole pipeline route in perfect detail. The gods themselves built Skycloud and everything in it is perfectly precise. Even the city leaders don't understand it completely. Whoever put this together was no ordinary person."

Was it really that miraculous? It was, after all, in the possession of that ordinary-seeming goateed man.

Cloudhawk remembered him clearly. How could a simple agent of the Dark Atom make this map, or who gave it to him? Someone important, who knew the city even better than its leaders. Then for someone like this to meet the goateed man, a representative

of Dark Atom, in the Sandbar... it was all so strange.

Cloudhawk pointed to the markings, indicating a path. "A place this complicated to get around would make a good hideout. Most importantly, it's a way to get out of the city while avoiding guards. Even if things go wrong and we have to run, this is how we do it."

Majjhima was almost shaking with excitement. "What's your plan?"

Cloudhawk fixed him with a sharp, resolute stare. "I think it's time I met with Frost de Winter and Arcturus Cloude. I'm going to free Squall and the others from Bloomnettle, and along the way cause a little pain for those two assholes!"

Majjhima and Lotus looked at him like he'd lost his mind.

Was he a moron? Did he understand what he just said?!

Chapter 29

Home Invasion

Obviously, this slipped out of his mouth before passing through his addled brain.

Frost de Winter was one of the top five most outstanding people in Skycloud City and he was still young. Now that Cloudhawk was in his sights, the wastelander's capture was preordained. He didn't fear anything Cloudhawk could do to him, only that the coward would escape before he could be killed.

Be it strength, experience or influence the two young men were leagues apart. As such the chances of dealing with Frost de Winter were monumental – even the thought was absurd. So what made this kid think he had any right to hoot and holler at Arcturus Cloude? He was asking to die.

“Listen to what I have to say,” Majjhima began in low tones. Even a sinner with his experiences had to bow their head in awe of the governor. “Arcturus Cloude is one of the most illustrious people in all of Skycloud Domain. He didn't get to where he is today with luck and family ties. Everything he's done is the stuff of legends, and if you had even the slightest inkling of what he is capable of you wouldn't be stupid enough to challenge him. Just drop the idea right now.”

Just the title of master demonhunter was enough to make common demonhunters drop to their knees in awe.

Master demonhunter wasn't just an honorary title. It meant the bearer was one of the strongest people alive, capable of facing demons on their own. The might behind someone like that could only be guessed. What's more, Arcturus Cloude wasn't all brawn and no brains. His wisdom, foresight, depth of consideration and keen insights were of rare quality. Simply put, Skycloud City would not be the grand and prosperous city it was today without years of his leadership.

He was a man who occupied the jade throne of the governor with deft control. A man who had the blessing of both the Temple and the people.

Didn't it make sense? If a scrub like the young wastelander could challenge their

governor, Skycloud's current status would be nothing short of a miracle. They couldn't expect any better future built on a fraud.

But Cloudhawk wasn't convinced. "Is he really that awesome?"

"I promise you he is." Majjhima was deadly serious, for Cloudhawk's idiocy could squander his one chance to escape. "The governor hasn't dealt with this situation personally yet. If you run into him, I promise you won't survive to tell anyone about it."

Lotus looked sick with worry.

Even without the governor's direct involvement, how was someone with such limited strength and influence as Cloudhawk going to save a hundred of her people? They were putting a huge task on his shoulders. The prisons were heavily guarded and they didn't have any near the manpower to storm it. Trying to free Squall out from under the noses of these powerful men seemed impossible.

Cloudhawk was tired of arguing over it. "What are our chances of escaping using these tunnels?"

"If you can get these people out and into the tunnels, they're complicated enough that we have a good chance of shaking any pursuers." Majjhima pored over the map for a few moments committing the escape route to memory, especially the places where it opened to the surface. His eyes burned with anticipation as they scoured the paper. "There's an entrance close to the dungeons. That's where we can make our escape. What do you think? Let's give it a shot!"

Lotus certainly didn't agree with the idea of Cloudhawk facing the governor, but the thought of Squall being executed in public forced her to speak. "What about young master Squall?"

"We don't have the time." Majjhima pressed Cloudhawk again. "Frost de Winter is obviously trying to bait you. Governor Arcturus or others will be waiting, and the minute you show your face you're dead. Think it through."

The task was hugely difficult. How could Cloudhawk not understand the implications?

Cloudhawk had only known Squall for a few days. No matter the reason it didn't make much sense to risk his life for someone he barely knew. Leaving him wasn't the wrong

decision, but Cloudhawk's heart wasn't in agreement. He'd worked so hard to get here, but in the end the holy lands wouldn't have him. This deception stoked the rage and despair within him until it was a raging pyre. He couldn't tolerate the thought of slinking out of here with his tail between his legs like a beaten dog.

He couldn't stay here, but this wasn't how he was going to leave.

Cloudhawk was determined that something had to be done. At the very least these arrogant fucks had to know how much they'd pissed him off. He would make them remember his presence here – so Squall had to be freed. What's more, he'd do it and leave the governor with a slap in the face!

Cloudhawk didn't answer, but the light in his eyes spoke volumes. Majjhima scowled, wanting to say something more, but bit back his objections. "What do you need me to do?"

He thought on their predicament for a moment. The biggest problem was time and the fact that Cloudhawk didn't know the city. He made up his mind. "I need men."

This wasn't difficult.

Majjhima had been locked up for a long time, but he still had significant clout among his people. All he had to do was drop Majjhima's name and secret cipher and he wouldn't have any trouble getting help.

"Most of these people are the lowest rung of Skycloud society, the homeless. They have channels they use to trade contraband and a well-informed network of informants. If you want them to do something for you, it's as easy as paying their price."

Majjhima gave Cloudhawk all the details of where to find them and how to get in contact.

It was very useful information. Cloudhawk instructed Majjhima to look after Lotus, then filled his stone with psychic power. The stone responded immediately, creating a translucent field of energy. Cloudhawk floated up into the air, his grey cloak flapping, and then suddenly he was gone.

Cloudhawk's head collided with the roof of the cell. It was like the walls of an enormous balloon pushing back at him. It offered stiff resistance, but Cloudhawk still managed to force his way through and escape the prison.

Lotus and the others gaped at what they'd just witnessed.

Demonhunters were capable of all sorts of strange feats, but a display like this was rare. To escape from total enclosure... there wasn't any demonhunter they knew of with that sort of ability.

This guy was definitely different.

Cloudhawk made his way back to the temple square, eluding the guards while his mind raced. He didn't have much time to get things in place, so he had to take advantage of every second.

The foes he squared off against now were different from any time before.

He'd faced all kinds of dangers in the past, but they'd mostly been sweepers or wild creatures of the wastelands. In those cases all he needed to do was face them head on. This time it was a battle of wits and courage, his enemies were a prominent disciple and one of the greatest demonhunters to have ever lived.

He had a hundred people to save, and one of them was under the watchful eye of those two bastards.

It was completely different from the pitched battles he'd fought before. He wasn't even in the same class as his enemies this time, and a single mistake could spell his doom. His first order of business was to get Squall out of prison before his execution, but he didn't know where the guy was being held. Beyond that, Squall was definitely being closely guarded so going in the front door didn't seem like a good plan.

He needed to find another way, and the first step was finding some funds.

Coins were the stuff you needed out here. Those glittering metal things bought you whatever you needed, and without them getting anything done was difficult. But how was he supposed to get his hands on some? He didn't have any marketable skills except fighting, but he was quite confident in his ability to steal.

Cloudhawk wasn't burdened by moral imperatives. He did what he had to do according to his own terms. Besides, pocketing some riches from these affluent folks wasn't such a terrible sin. With that thought in mind, he made his way to the biggest

house he could find.

The place was similar in scale to the governor's mansion, just maybe not as opulent. It was a combination of several large towers with flags on their spires displaying the image of an eagle. Their wings were outstretched in an imposing and impressive manner. Cloudhawk had no idea who this house belonged to, but he knew at a glance they weren't hurting for wealth. Whatever he grabbed from inside was sure to pay for everything he needed.

That's the place! His phasing abilities were used once again.

Cloudhawk barely got his head through the wall before he was struck dumb by the scene. The entire place was *crawling* with well-armed guards. From the floors to the rafters, yard to the dinner room, they were practically coming out of the woodwork. There were even more men than there were in the prisons, and each one could clearly hold their own. They looked more capable than your average Skycloud soldier.

Cloudhawk nearly swallowed his tongue. Wherever he was, judging by the guards this had to be one serious family!

The phasing stone demanded a lot of psychic power so he didn't have the energy to find somewhere else to loot. He wasn't thrilled with his pick but he'd just have to toughen up and bear it. He'd made up his mind to steal something so the bigger the haul the better.

Cloudhawk stole into the home under the cover of his invisibility cloak. The place, besides crawling with guards, also had several patrols wandering from room to room. He could even feel the resonance of relics coming from them.

Demonhunters! And more than one!

Demonhunters as patrols? Who the hell had that kind of clout! Cloudhawk could tell that some of them were good trackers, too. He'd have to give them a wide berth and that meant the main tower was off limits. After watching the patrols for a little while he decided on the right tower as his target, where security didn't seem as tight. Maybe there was something there he could sneak off with.

Chapter 30

The Dreadful Woman

Even just the minor tower was big enough to give someone pause. Fifteen meters of sturdy white stone, this tower didn't have any fancy carvings or artsy construction. Compared to the rest of the house it was simplistic, in an austere military style. The front door was a slab of iron flanked by gold-plated statues of wild beasts in action. Each one had to weigh thousands of kilos, intimidating enough to refuse visitors from hundreds of kilometers away.

The thick and heavy door was a significant impediment to Cloudhawk's phasing abilities. When he tried to push through it was like being knocked away by thick rubber. But where the door was proving intractable, Cloudhawk chose to try the wall of a nearby corner, which proved much more inviting.

Cloudhawk walked up the carpeted stone steps and into a bedroom. The first thing to greet him was a faint fragrance, and the light of several elegant lamps illuminating the room. A jade bed with a pink gauze canopy along with a silver dresser marked this as a woman's room.

In the center was a large screen that blocked his view of the rest of the chamber.

The folding screen was ingeniously placed to separate the room down the middle. Its panels were painted with vaulted mountains, precipitous seas and a ferocious beast. The scene had a deep romantic charm, but looking at it filled Cloudhawk with an inexplicable sense of oppression.

Cloudhawk looked around the several hundred-meter large room and saw that it was stuffed full of all manner of things. There were complete suits of armor, a model of a delicate and beautiful rare sword, beast heads mounted on the walls, and beautiful tapestries. Power and beauty, carnage and grace, blood and art – both came together expertly here.

One could not help but wonder what sort of person stayed in this room.

His heart thudded audibly in his chest. Everything he looked at seemed incredibly

valuable, he was definitely in the right place. However, even though Cloudhawk had no experience with this level of luxury, he did still have his basic faculties. The splendor of it all didn't steal his focus so he didn't just grab the first thing he found. Besides, none of it would be easy to carry out.

He pulled open the cabinets and began searching through them one by one until he came upon a small box. Inside was some exquisite jewelry along with a heavy pouch. He pulled it open and dumped its contents into his hand; a shower of red, blue, green and yellow gemstones tumbled forth. All different colors and sizes, but each one of the highest grade. They glimmered with an entrancing light, any idiot could tell they would fetch a fortune.

Excellent! Whoever lives here has money to burn!

Cloudhawk, with his heart racing, made to leave. He had to admit, thievery felt pretty good.

Cloudhawk let the gems topple back into their bag. There had to be almost twenty of them! Not bad! That should be more than enough. He tucked the bag away and got ready to make his exit.

But just then a wave of danger tickled at the back of his mind.

A cold wind brushed the back of his neck and the temperature in the room plummeted. The warm and humid room became bone dry and cold as the grave. Threatening growls tickled his ears as his sense of peril grew.

Not good!

When he realized something was gone Cloudhawk whipped his head around, just as the door burst open as though from a gust of wind. A young woman who looked fresh from practice, clad in warriors gear, stalked inside. Her figure was tall and well proportioned, with hair like spun gold and eyes of the same color. A rare sight, certainly, like captured fire. Her skin was uniquely pale, like she was carved from alabaster and yet smooth as silk.

She was a beautiful contradiction, equal parts stunning and confusing. Graceful, powerful, noble, wild, aggressive. She obviously saw him and every step made the whole room seem to tremble. She wasn't a young woman, she was a beast!

“Alright!” Her sweet-sounding voice was at the same time sharp and ferocious. “So a petty thief thought they could steal into my bedroom, hm?”

The terrifying woman seemed to hardly move when suddenly she was standing right in front of Cloudhawk. Her golden hair flit on the breeze as though agitated by its owner’s dour mood.

Bean-sized beads of sweat rolled down Cloudhawk’s face. His mind was blank. There had only ever been a few people who froze him solid just with their presence; Mantis had been one, while Frost de Winter was the other. This woman was more imposing than either one of them!

She gripped the hilt of a sword sheathed at her waist and pulled it out an inch.

What sort of weapon was this? It looked like a sword, but it filled the room with the force of a crushing waterfall. Cloudhawk knew that whatever it was, this was no ordinary weapon. But it didn’t really matter what was in that scabbard; what really mattered was the person. Cloudhawk was convinced that even if she just wielded a sword of charcoal, she’d still be able to use it to cut a thief in half.

Time to go!

Her brows furrowed tight, her sword was halfway out of its scabbard when suddenly the thief vanished into thin air. Did this scoundrel somehow have demonhunter abilities? Her reaction was to immediately shut her eyes and reach out with her other senses, but there wasn’t a single sound. It seemed he got away.

Did he really? Impossible! She was blocking the exit and she would have known if he slipped past her. Although she found it hard to believe she had to accept the scum had escaped her grasp. For all her knowledge and experience she’d never heard of anything like this.

Very odd.

She would have to tell her father. Maybe he knew something.

Cloudhawk stumbled away from the building and didn’t stop for a second as he made his escape. Although they didn’t actually clash, Cloudhawk could tell the twenty-

something-year-old woman was a talent of the same caliber as Selene or Frost de Winter.

Yet another tough character. He seemed to have a knack for finding them.

Cloudhawk had a nagging premonition that things were only going to get more complicated but there was nothing for it. What was he going to do, return the goods and prostrate himself, beg for forgiveness?

Not fucking likely!

He could tell just by the way she walked in the room that an apology wasn't going to pacify her ferocious heart. He couldn't stay here, what did it matter if he pissed off one more person before he left? His only concern had to be getting out of here as quickly as possible.

Cloudhawk made his way to an unassuming pub where he dropped Majjhima's code name. At the mention of it the tavern owner's face changed suddenly and he brought Cloudhawk to the largest of their private rooms. In less than an hour it filled up with twenty other people.

"You're Majjhima's man? He's been missing for a long time, how is he?!"

"The Wasteland Club has been a total mess without a leader."

Cloudhawk was surprised by the old man's clout. After years in prison his name still drew a crowd. However something bothered him about what they said. What was a 'Wasteland Club'?

From the outside this bar looked ordinary, but in fact it was home to a wasteland appreciation club. In effect the members of the club hated life in Skycloud City. The freedom of the wastelands – a place without constraints – was something they found enticing.

"There are actually people who *like* the wastelands?" Cloudhawk thought he must have heard wrong. He had to speak up. "Do you even understand what it's like out there?!"

Generally, members of the club were natives to Skycloud, people whose family history in the city stretched back generations. They were spoiled layabouts with nothing better to do than rebel, so they decried Skycloud's strict rules. They longed for the vast

expanse of the wastelands where they could do what they pleased, kill who they liked, and curse the name of the gods all day long.

“Who are you that you think you can belittle our beliefs?”

“Even at its worst, the wasteland is *ten times* better than this place!”

“That’s right. If you weren’t one of Majjhima’s people we’d break your damn legs!”

“Yeah! The wastelands are a place of freedom. Dangerous, sure, and evil, but at least we’d have true liberty! Dying for a goal like that is a worthy way to go.”

Everyone glared at him. When they spoke about the wastelands their eyes burned with passion and enchantment. Cloudhawk almost wanted to slap the stupid out of every one of them – did they think the wastelands were really free? No water, no food, mutants, sweepers... despair every place you looked! But he swallowed his words because he knew in the end he wasn’t any different from them.

He’d come all the way here because of a fantasy. And what was there to greet him? Cloudhawk wasn’t going to waste his time disabusing them of theirs.

“I don’t care about what you believe. Majjhima said if I gave you money you could help me.” He pulled out one of the gemstones and put it on the table before them. Every eye lit up when they saw it. All this adoration about the wastelands was bullshit – just poor men dissatisfied with real life. No one could ignore the allure of money. “I don’t need to tell you what you can buy with a gem like this. You in?”

“Since you came with Majjhima’s blessing, we trust you. What do you need us to do?” The one who seemed to be the leader spoke first, but he added more. “But let me tell you now, we aren’t killing anyone!”

“I need you to use your back channels to buy some things for me. Then I need you to spread out around the temple square and feed me news about what’s happening – especially anything concerning the governor’s mansion. In addition, there are some special instructions...” He pulled out another gem and put it between them before going on. The rest of the precious stones in their tiny bag clattered audibly and shimmered in the light. “For the next few days I need you to be ready to do whatever I ask. If you do this whole bag belongs to you. You have my word.”

“Yes, absolutely, no problems!”

“You’re the boss, we go where you tell us!”

Cloudhawk was convinced that there was no risk in revealing his plans to these men. A single gem could set someone up comfortably for a decade, it was a hard offer to pass up. With the promise of wealth they agreed to help without qualms. After taking the two gems as pre-payment they left the bar walking on air.

Chapter 31

Hatred

Within the mansion of Skycloud's commander, a terrible scream rang out through the halls. It was like the rage-filled scream of a lion that made far away windows rattle in protest.

In the four-hundred-square-meter hall, a contingent of a hundred guards were arrayed in columns. They knelt with their heads bowed while a dazzling woman with golden hair stood among them. She did not wear armor, only the simple underclothes of a warrior, and a gem-encrusted sword was strapped to her waist. She was surrounded by the conflicting essence of grace and barbarity.

Before them was an elderly man, his face twisted in anger. A rosewood table lay in pieces, smashed to bits beneath his feet. He hovered over the others like a feral beast. "They'll even steal from a commander's home? Who would dare be so bold?!"

This stately, lion-like man was Skye Polaris. He had seventy years under his belt, but was still built like a bear and shivered with rage. His eyes were especially daunting, dual copper furnaces that burned as they swept over the house guards. They were so intense it was like a single glance could burn them all down to ash. With long silver-white hair and a curly beard, the elderly man gave precisely no impression of weakness. Every wrinkle oozed intimidation.

This was the man responsible for all of Skycloud's armed forces, leader of its military. And the most explosive temper in all of Skycloud Domain.

The Skycloud military system was organized as follows; ten men made up a squad, fifty men were a platoon, two hundred made a company, and a thousand or more was a corps. Generals commanded corps, senior generals directed ten thousand men or more, and above them all was the Commander-In-Chief.

Even Governor Arcturus had to show respect to Skye Polaris, for who did not know that just the slightest implied disrespect could throw the veteran into a frenzy. Now he learned that a thief had snuck into his home – while he was *inside* – and managed to escape with stolen goods. Swaggered in and out, like he owned the place. How could

anyone suffer such disgrace?!

“Dawn, how could this happen?” After the commander gave vent to his anger, it immediately started to melt away. He returned to his seat, mulling over the strange circumstances. “There are few in the city who could beat you, not to mention escaping right from under your nose.”

The commander had a high opinion of his daughter.

She was a particularly privileged girl, kissed by splendor from the moment she was born – a phoenix touched by the sun. Skilled with both pen and blade, brave and intelligent, she was considered the future of military command. There were only a few who could stand shoulder to shoulder with her throughout Skycloud. Besides that devil woman Baldur Cloude spawned, Selene, who else would have the gall to claim they were Dawn’s equal? Even Starlight’s disciple who he was oh-so proud of was inferior, or so the commander firmly believed.

With so few lacking the qualification to even stand before her, how could someone face his daughter and escape unscathed?

“The thief had strange powers.” Dawn stood before her grandfather with one hand on the pommel of her sword. Her temper was an inheritance from him, a staple of their family. She was a well-known mad woman among the citizens of the city, one who never accepted being taken advantage of. How, then, could she stand back and accept this tone? “I was about to behead him when the guy up and vanished.”

“*How* could he just disappear?! He had to have a concealment relic!”

“Grandfather, you insult me!” She stared back at him with wide anger in her eyes, puffed up with incredulity. “If it was *just* a concealment relic, do you think I wouldn’t be able to see through it? *Dis-a-ppeared!* Completely gone, like a snowflake under the sun.”

“Is that so?” The commander-in-chief ran his fingers through his beard, staring down his nose at her with a regal expression. “I have memorized every high grade demonhunter in the order and I’ve never heard of anyone with this power. Strange indeed. This matter won’t stop here, it involves the prestige of our army. Dispatch people to search for the culprit even if it means we tear this city apart. Get this thief, no matter what!”

Dawn immediately volunteered herself. “Don’t bother. I’ll handle this myself.”

Her grandfather nodded consent. “Very well, you handle it. The Polaris family has *never* been insulted without consequence. We won’t allow a thief to get the better of us. Take five hundred men with you, and don’t worry about anything else. You have my support.”

Five hundred men just to catch one thief!

If word of this got out it would do more than raise eyebrows, but this was the way the Polaris family did things. Not even the Cloude family would dare provoke them.

Lord Arcturus returned from the sanctuary.

Frost de Winter explained everything that happened once they were face to face. He spoke with downcast eyes and a guilty countenance. “Your disciple is useless. I’ve been unable to capture Cloudhawk.”

“You must learn something from this experience, an important lesson – never underestimate your opponent.” Governor Arcturus spoke with his student calmly and without reproach. He sipped at his tea like there was nothing to be concerned over. “When someone is thrust into a hopeless situation they will grasp at any straws that promise to save them. It is a natural reaction. He is unfamiliar with the city and can’t tell one street from the other, and what’s more he has hunters around every corner. It would make sense for him to seek out help from the Bloomnettle merchants that brought him here, but he did not. He must have known contact would implicate them, and what would happen if they were discovered. Using Bloomnettle to try and flush him out of hiding was the proper decision, however...”

Frost de Winter was confident it would work.

He arranged for two hundred men to escort Squall for his execution, but only ten visible to manufacture a false sense of security. Fifteen demonhunters and others remained close, dressed in civilian clothes and hiding among the crowds.

Cloudhawk just needed to show himself, then where could he run?

This was Skycloud City! Soldiers were deployed, defenses were strong. If he rushed in,

the power of the heavens would smack him down! Frost de Winter was sure this method was the best way to draw Cloudhawk out. Even if this didn't force him to attempt a rescue it would anger him enough to make a mistake. So why was his master still unsatisfied?

"Despite it being a decent plan it is entirely predicated on Cloudhawk revealing himself." Lord Arcturus raised his head from his tea and fixed his student with an erudite gaze. "You don't understand your target. You can't be sure Cloudhawk will reveal himself, there are too many variables. If he doesn't then your well-laid plans are useless."

This is precisely what Frost de Winter worried about.

Would Cloudhawk risk himself for Squall's safety?

Lord Arcturus slowly replaced his tea cup onto the table and released a long sigh. "I've told you that you could do everything perfectly and still not have a situation one hundred percent under your control. There are many methods to get Cloudhawk out of hiding, but it must be one he can't afford to ignore. For instance, we can leak the news that Selene has returned and Cloudhawk has been absolved of all wrongdoing. He would certainly reveal himself then, if just to see if it were true."

Frost de Winter was visibly struck by the thought. Selene would have been much better bait than Squall! He knew the kid for only a few days, not long enough that he'd risk revealing himself. But it was different with Selene. She was the one person Cloudhawk was desperate to see, so he would take all manner of risks if he thought she were here. He'd have to react!

But the news was out. It was too late to take it all back.

"A clever trap isn't always subtle. Sometimes your target will be willing to jump in with both feet if they can't avoid it. Based on the nature of a man's heart you can discover where they are weak, what they desire, then you will be victorious in all of your endeavors." Lord Arcturus's lips turned in a gentle smile. "Things are what they are. Proceed as you've planned, and if he shows himself I will help you from the sidelines."

"As you command, master!"

Lord Arcturus's help guaranteed there would be no risk. If Cloudhawk showed himself he would fall into their clutches.

The governor's mansion had a secret prison, and inside Squall knelt in chains. Six guards surrounded him, unmoving. When Frost de Winter walked in he gave them a salute and bade them clear the room.

"We'll be leaving for your execution soon." Frost de Winter stood before the young man, and spoke in a cold and detached voice. But his eyes were full of meaning. "Before we put you to death we're going to march you down every street. We'll test your friend's loyalty."

Squall struggled futilely against his restraints and stared daggers at his captor. "If you were a real man you'd just kill me and be done with it. What self-respecting demonhunter would stoop to nasty tricks like this? What right do you have to be the governor's disciple – you're nothing but a disgrace!"

"Heh heh... so sure and adorable." Frost de Winter grabbed Squall by his collar and lifted him up. The light in his eyes was like an icy blaze, both turbulent and heartless. "Do you really believe demonhunters are this just order committed to the glory of the gods? Let me tell you, the demonhunters do far more than your little mind could handle. And as for my master? I might as well tell you the truth. To maintain the security and prosperity of our holy domain he would do anything. In the eyes of the elite there is only the pursuit of power. Emotion, morality, honor – even faith. Bullshit, all of it. Do you understand? You couldn't even begin to grasp it."

Squall's hands curled into fists.

"You know, I hate wasting time." He released Squall and patted his clothing as though trying to free himself from the young man's filth. "Every second of every minute is precious, and they should be spent only in that which is worth investment. That which will net a return. A man's goal in life is to rise ever higher; more authority, more strength, more prestige. You peasants who muddle about and waste you lives, to me you're nothing but contemptible worms."

"You have two more days to live, but don't worry. I'll make sure you witness Cloudhawk die before then. After all he's the one who brought tragedy down on your family, isn't he? Don't look at me like that, I know you hate me. But hate has no use, it isn't going to change anything. You're weak beyond contemplation, and the weak must learn to accept their fate."

Squall grit his teeth and watched Frost de Winter saunter from the room.

That contemptible bastard. If his goal had been to get him mad then he succeeded. Squall was so enraged he wanted to peel that snake's skin from his bones and drink his blood!

"AAAHHH!"

Squall screamed and struggled as hard as he could against his chains. If he lived through this he swore he would pay any price to become stronger. He would sacrifice whatever it took for vengeance. From the moment he watched his father die the carefree and kind-hearted Squall was gone. What was left was a man full of hatred and rage.

Chapter 32

Burning Down the House

The prison was dark, moist, still, and silent. From time to time the quiet would be broken by a pained scream that would trail off to be lost in the shadows. This prison of the forgotten suffocated under a blanket of hopelessness.

Lotus sat in a corner, nursing the unease that made her heart race.

Despite Cloudhawk's threats and Majjhima's protection, she could feel the hungry eyes of the inmates as they trailed over her body. She knew these men couldn't control their urges forever, and when they broke Majjhima wouldn't be able to stop them. Two days and one night had passed since Cloudhawk left. What was happening? What was he doing?

Tomorrow was the day master Squall was scheduled to be killed. Was there still enough time to change his fate?

This was no average danger, no typical threat. The slightest misstep could end in a young man's death. The fact that Cloudhawk was so willing to risk his life for Squall's surprised Lotus, for she knew that even the bravest men would think twice when faced with a situation like this.

The sounds of footsteps rang against the moist stones. It immediately put her on edge.

"Don't be scared, it's me!" Cloudhawk slipped a key into the door and pulled it open. He threw a ring of several more into the cage which rattled with a metallic clatter. "These are the keys for the whole dungeon."

Majjhima snatched them up. "How did you get these?"

"Now's not the time." Cloudhawk kept his voice low. "There are patrols all over this place, we need to get out of here while we have the time."

Cloudhawk followed the same protocol he'd used in Blackwater Base to sneak around the labs. Only, in the wastelands he'd been avoiding men in animal skin. These were

beasts hiding in the flesh of men.

Majjhima didn't press him further. He knew the danger they were in. He passed the keys out to a few people near him and sent them to open the other cages. Soon the halls were filled with convicts.

Next he went to the solitary confinement rooms, where particularly depraved people were locked away; like a man who killed twenty soldiers in one rampage; or a thief who'd tried to infiltrate the sanctuary. These are not simple men, but Majjhima was a crafty one. Freeing them himself meant they'd owe him.

When the crowd got to the nearby guard room they found a dozen or so unconscious. Some were slumped over a table and others were piled in a hallway. Cloudhawk's handiwork, they speculated. He must have taken advantage of a shift change to spike their food and drink with narcotics. Only, how he managed to get passed the outside guards, all through the upper levels, then down here to do all this... the criminals couldn't begin to understand.

He was like a ghost!

They ambushed and overcame a patrol, then proceeded to release more prisoners. Eventually there were several hundred of them, a considerable and frighteningly motivated force.

A thin man called out. "What are we gonna do with these guards?"

"I say we kill every one of these sons of bitches." A fat and hideous looking man seethed with hatred. "Chop them into paste and smear them on the fuckin' walls!"

"Everyone, hey. If we provoke Skycloud it isn't going to end well for us. Listen to your boss' instructions."

Everyone's eyes swung toward the frail man who stood in the middle of the group. They were hardened criminals but they knew they had Cloudhawk to thank for their escape. If they wanted to get out alive they had to listen to this resourceful demonhunter with whom they shared a common goal. If they didn't, even if they got out of the dungeon they wouldn't get far.

"We need their weapons and armor. Strip 'em, then throw them in the cages." Cloudhawk's eyes swept across the faces of Skycloud's fiercest criminals. There were

a number with considerable strength, ten or so that even made Cloudhawk uncomfortable. They were stronger than him but kept their abilities hidden. He saved them from this hell and so they were willing to do as he said. "Fighting our way out is a sure-fire way to get us all killed, so no one act stupid."

A one-armed man spoke up. "If sir is letting us out I assume it's because you have a plan."

"That's right." With his mask in place no one could tell Cloudhawk's age. "The next guard shift isn't until after morning, so you all are safe until then. Before they come and find out what's happened I'm going to set the governor's mansion on fire. Everyone will be distracted, and that's when you make a break for it. At that point whether you make it out is up to you."

Hiss! It was the sound of dozens sucking in surprised breaths.

Countless pairs of wide eyes stared at him like he was a freak. This guy was insane, he didn't fear death. Set fire to the *governor's mansion*? He dared spit in Lord Arcturus's face! There were a few in the ground who could beat the shit out of Cloudhawk if they wanted, but the thought of pissing off the governor terrified them.

"No more talk!" Cloudhawk didn't care what they thought. He slowly started to vanish. "If I'm lucky enough to survive we'll meet again!"

Outside the sun was beginning to blanket the land in its warm glow.

Frost de Winter's procession was gathered and ready.

The sense of urgency grew in Cloudhawk as he left the prison and made his way toward Starlight's manor. When he got near he gave a soft whistle and a group of the wastelander club members gathered round, slipping out of nearby hiding places. They'd been arranged here by Cloudhawk, who instructed that they hunker down through the night and wait for his arrival.

"Boss, a carriage left the mansion about ten minutes ago. The governor isn't home."

"You all did good work." Cloudhawk produced one of the gems and threw it their way. Immediately their faces lit up. "Make sure the others follow my instructions and they'll be rewarded the same."

“Thanks boss, thank you!”

The men were ecstatic that making money was this easy. This mysterious stranger was pleasantly liberal with his funds. After Cloudhawk dispatched his spies he activated his phase stone and snuck into the mansion.

The manor complex was surrounded by a particularly thick and sturdy wall which cost Cloudhawk a considerable amount of energy. Ultimately he got through, where he was greeted with a host of guards wandering the halls – demonhunters among them. If Cloudhawk tipped them off he was as good as dead.

Luckily his invisibility cloak was an excellent relic, one that the demonhunters couldn't easily pick out. Cloudhawk made his way through without a fuss, working toward the manor's center spire where he found himself in a study. Bookcases twice as tall as he was stretched overhead stuffed with scrolls, inscribed wooden manuscripts and thick tomes.

This had to be the old scholar's personal reading room.

Cloudhawk picked a book at random from one of the shelves. This one appeared to be a tax record of the city. Cloudhawk's mouth curled into a sinister grin. *Cause me trouble, will you,* began the nasty thought. *Make me leave... well if I can't whoop your ass I'll drive you fuckin' crazy!*

Cloudhawk poured the fuel he prepared over the bookcases and set them alight. Without wasting a second he rushed into the next room and repeated the process.

By the time guards smelled the smoke the study was already engulfed in flames. They stared in horror for they knew the fires were consuming critical paperwork and documents. The consequences of this fire were unbearable to contemplate.

The blaze was growing.

Everything here was combustible, perfect fuel for the flames. It was already too late for the guards to try and keep it contained. At the same time several more fires were raging through other rooms and before long the manor was engulfed in turmoil. Even an idiot could tell this was arson!

But arson? Was this a revolt?!

Men were quickly gathered to hunt down the culprit. Any one of them was strong enough to cut Cloudhawk down if he was captured, but that was the rub. Between his invisibility and phasing abilities he was gone before anyone could catch a whiff of him.

By the time the guards caught up with Lord Arcturus he had settled in and was preparing to watch Squall's final march. Augustus stood respectfully by his side with a small smile on his lips. In order to make this farce legal they'd drawn up several charges, each one seemingly legitimate and backed up with evidence, and each one resulting in a judgement of death by execution. On the outside the whole thing seemed just.

"Sir, bad news!"

"The manor's on fire!"

Augustus' lordly smirk vanished in an instant, replaced with thinly contained rage. "How could the manor have caught fire? Who would be so bold?! We should return at once, governor. There are many important things in the manor that should be saved."

"Do you not find it convenient that there should be a fire just this moment?" Lord Arcturus's eyes peered thoughtfully into the distance and then lit up. "So this is how you intend to draw me back? Such a childish ploy."

Augustus began to understand what was happening. "Cloudhawk is the arsonist?"

"If not him, then who? We don't know his true abilities but it is clear he is no weakling. He is at least skilled at lurking about. If he can enter the mansion unseen then there is nowhere in Skycloud aside from the sanctuary that he cannot slip into. It is likely he used this ability to hide somewhere we wouldn't think to search."

"So what should we do? I'll return to the mansion and grab him."

"No, no need to bother. He'll come to us." Lord Arcturus looked ahead like his eyes could pierce any obstacle, like he could see all. "Take the griffin carriage back to the mansion. I'll remain here and see what he has in store."

Augustus finally understood.

Wasn't this a trick to lure the tiger from the mountain? Lord Arcturus was answering the young man's tricks with a plot of his own. Augustus would make a show of

returning to the mansion in the carriage, and when Cloudhawk thought his gambit had succeeded he'll make his next move. Then his fate would be decided.

He was clever, but Cloudhawk was no more than a petulant brat before the wisdom of Lord Arcturus. His efforts were almost laughable. So long as the governor was here, Cloudhawk didn't stand a chance.

Chapter 33

The Rescue

The streets around the center of Skycloud City were choked with people. Whenever news spread that a blasphemer or turncoat had been captured it inevitably drew a large crowd. They all wanted to watch the punishment unfold. Only, this time there seemed to be more young women among the spectators than usual.

The fresh-faced girls whispered to each other. Their sometimes blushing faces, sometimes wide adoring eyes, made the men around them envious.

He was coming! He was here!

Giddy cries rang out from the girls.

A majestic Pegasus floated overhead, pure white from head to hoof but for the slender golden horn in the center of its head. The brilliance of it eclipsed all the rest of the light around the square.

Only the most magnificent of people would appear on the back of such a spectacular animal. ^[1]

A young knight sat upon its back, clad in armor white as snow and bearing a silver spear. His face was a chiseled representation of fortitude, glimmering eyes framed by razor sharp eyebrows. He was righteousness given flesh and his every glance set the girls' hearts aflutter.

It was Lord Arcturus's chief disciple, Frost de Winter, Inquisitor General of the Order of Demonhunters. His reputation, strength, and position were unmatched. This spectacle of a man was the dream of every girl and woman in Skycloud City.

Unfortunately for them, no matter how hot their desires burned, none could thaw Frost de Winter's cold persona. In the eyes of the great demonhunter women were synonymous with trouble – and he hated trouble.

This time the procession consisted of only ten soldiers. In the center of them was a

disheveled and wild looking young man who was shackled at the wrists. Heavy chains rattled against the ground, dripping from cuffs around his ankles. The accused was eighteen or so and of moderate build, neither tall nor short, and handsome with an easy-going face. His hair had grown down to his shoulders and jutted out at odd directions. The jaunty and unfettered air he used to have was gone now. It was replaced with a loathing that ate at his bones.

Frost de Winter approached the dais that had been erected before the crowd and began to read out Squall's sins.

Smuggling contraband, human trafficking, blasphemy, and conspiring with enemy agents.

Frost de Winter and Augustus had fabricated these claims and every accusation bore a heavy penalty. The least was banishment from the holy lands. Taken together Squall was instantly seen as a monster whose name dripped with the stains of sin. Even before they began presenting evidence the crowd were outraged.

"Burn the heretic!"

"Burn the non-believer!"

Loud cries were shouted at him from all around.

Everywhere he looked, Squall was met with twisted angry faces. It filled him with pain and sadness. His father had been a pious and prudent man all his life whose greatest desire had been to see his son succeed. Reality was cruel, and instead now he would die with his name in tatters – loathed by everyone. Overnight his life was thoroughly destroyed and now they paraded him toward the pyre while his countryman spat vitriolic hatred.

If the gods were real, how could they stand by and watch this happen? If the gods were real, how could they permit these dark acts to go on?

The guards started to move and the crowds on either side pressed in closer. In a city of several million people it was inevitable that there were sinners, but the majority were devout followers of the gods. Even if they weren't truly passionate, their fear kept them faithful. They kept their sentiments a secret, for otherwise it was the same as inviting death. Smart heretics stayed silent, so only a few were caught every year.

They were the public enemy. Hidden dangers to their perfect society! Such wickedness could be chopped into a thousand pieces and their deaths would still not be cruel enough!

Eventually their curses were not enough and some in the crowd decided to take action. First it was a few copper coins viciously flung at Squall's head, then nuts and other detritus. Projectiles came at him from all sides and even the guards who led him got some of the punishment inadvertently.

Squall wanted to scream, he wanted to fight back. But he was powerless.

He saw it in the monstrous faces of the crowd. Anything he did was hopeless, no amount of struggle would save him. Whatever he said would be ignored, no one would believe a word. All of these people were living in a beautiful dream, and if it continued maybe they could live out their days in blissful ignorance. But if they woke up they would be faced with the cruelty of the world, and they would end up no better than Old Thistle. The blind were better off.

Hard glares from the guards escorting Squall had no effect, the mob only grew more agitated. Meanwhile Frost de Winter watched as the young man waded through the sea of curses. His eyes swept the crowd and he spoke to one of his subordinates. "Does anyone seem suspicious?"

"No one stands out," one of the soldiers accompanying him replied. "Should we go out and search the crowd?"

"No need." Frost de Winter shook his head. "Keep our men hidden, but remain vigilant. If they see someone thin and wearing a mask they should grab them immediately. Do you understand?"

"Yes sir! I'll relay your orders."

The rest of the soldiers hidden among the rabble continued to wait. Meanwhile curses and rubbish continued to be flung at Squall.

About a hundred meters away Lord Arcturus watched it all unfold with calm demeanor. Frost de Winter's plan wasn't perfect but it should be more than Cloudhawk could overcome. Freeing Squall from under their noses was practically impossible.

Faced with a suicide mission, would the young wastelander still try to save his friend?

Anyone with a modicum of intelligence would abandon the thought. To try was like a moth trying to capture the flames. However just as the thought crossed Lord Arcturus's mind, his keen eyes spotted a figure trying to sneak among the spectators.

Thin, masked, covered in a black cloak, the mysterious person was craning their neck to look for something. If Lord Arcturus could spot him from so far how could Frost de Winter miss him? He shouted:

“Grab him!”

In a flash demonhunters hidden among the crowd surrounded the masked man. Frost de Winter leapt off his horse, striding on the shoulders of several citizens to quickly approach. He dropped down and pressed through agile as a sparrow.

The masked man had no time to escape. Starlight's disciple was almost too fast to follow as his silver spear was flung forward. Even before the spear struck its target a blast of white energy engulfed the masked stranger, covering him in frost. With a cry he hit the ground.

When they heard the sound nearby spectators yelped and backed away. The press of humanity was stifling here. As everyone struggled to get away they began to trample one another.

Frightened screams of the citizenry fell on deaf ears as Frost de Winter forced his way forward. He snatched up the frozen, half dead man and tore the mask from his face. But when he saw what lay beneath his expression twisted. It was shame, and anger!

This man wasn't Cloudhawk! He was a decoy!

It was obvious. Here, now, with these clothes and such a similar build. Frost de Winter could figure it out even if he was using his ass for a brain. This was part of Cloudhawk's scheme.

As the yells of the crowd increased and their shoves grew more intense, another cloaked and masked man appeared. A second, then a third, fourth, fifth... *twenty* of them!

Frost de Winter, the demonhunters and all the rest of the soldiers looked around in

confusion. All of a sudden there were twenty targets, any one of them who could be the young man they were after. But there was no way to tell who the real Cloudhawk was.

“Grab them all!”

The demonhunters spread out through the crowd and fell upon the masked imposters. Those soldiers escorting Squall also had their attention split between suspicious persons who'd gotten too close.

Frost de Winter's order was to grab any suspects, but now suddenly everyone seemed suspicious. Soldiers knew the ones they grabbed probably weren't who they were after, but they couldn't take that chance. What if Cloudhawk was one of them?

A nefarious wind blew across the square, and with it came choking eddies of sand that covered several dozen meters around Squall. There was nothing harmful about the sandstorm, but it did restrict vision. The guards around Squall could hardly open their eyes.

“Pay it no mind, this is just a trick to give them cover!” Frost de Winter knew it as one of Cloudhawk's tricks the second he saw the golden sands. He called out to his people. “Form up around the criminal! This fiend can become invisible, don't give him any opportunity to exploit it!”

Ten or so soldiers fell back and surrounded Squall. They kept their backs to him while brandishing their weapons toward the crowd. Although Cloudhawk had planned several distractions and could cloak his presence, he still only had one target. So long as their prisoner was locked down he would not succeed.

But none of them anticipated the sudden and inexplicable sense that gripped their chest – or where it came from.

Frost de Winter looked over his shoulder toward Squall and discovered what the problem was. He'd arranged ten soldiers to stick to the prisoner. There were eleven. In all the confusion those soldiers hadn't notice the difference.

Bang, crack!

Cloudhawk burst into action and immediately several of the soldiers were flung away. He grabbed Squall and tried to pull him into the crowd where they hoped to disappear.

When Frost de Winter saw his soldiers outplayed his indignation turned to a seething rage – this wastelander was treating him like a fool!

Cloudhawk had already puzzled out Frost de Winter's plans. The paltry group protecting Squall had to be backed up by more plainclothes soldiers and demonhunters. He had no way to tell who the soldiers were, but he picked out the demonhunters easily enough by the resonance of their relics. Knowing this, he picked a direction where the demonhunters were light and in a matter of seconds plunged into the mob. As it was, Frost de Winter couldn't stop him, for if he lashed out the danger to the citizens was high. He had no love for these commoners, but as Lord Arcturus's disciple he had to keep up appearances. It wouldn't do if he killed innocents in full view of everyone while pursuing Cloudhawk.

Cloudhawk lifted his hand. Clouds of sand answered, and suddenly Frost de Winter couldn't tell which direction was which.

Watching it all unfold from afar, Lord Arcturus simply sighed and shook his head. He stretched out a hand from his wide sleeve with a needle – thin as a strand of hair – captured between his first and middle finger.

Arcing bolts of electricity slithered through the air around him. About two seconds later all that electrical power gathered at the tip of the needle.

With all the concern of a man sipping his afternoon tea, Lord Arcturus flicked his fingers.

Woosh!

The needle rocketed forth faster than the speed of sound, with nothing but a subtle gust hardly within the ability of an ear to pick up. It crossed two or three hundred meters in the blink of an eye, more accurate than a sniper's bullet. It slipped through the cloud of sand and buried itself in Cloudhawk's kneecap. The needle was precisely forceful enough to slip entirely into his leg so that no part of it showed, but not so strong as to pierce through the other side.

Cloudhawk lost his balance.

No, not just his balance. It wasn't that simple. It was like he lost all control of his body, and he hit the ground with a thud.

Son of a bitch! What the fuck is this?!

The needle was not only piercing, but uncannily accurate like its trajectory had been perfectly calculated. Most importantly the needle itself was brimming with energy, and once the needle hit him Cloudhawk was wracked with spasms. They were so intense he lost all muscle control.

“Cloudhawk!”

Squall reached for him, but the moment they touched Squall was struck with an intense pain. The electric power that flowed through Cloudhawk jumped into his body as well. Frost de Winter used these few seconds to close the distance and surrounded the pair with a contingent of his soldiers.

1. The word he uses to describe the Pegasus here is ‘bao ma’ or treasure horse – which is also what they call BMWs. In China the car you drive is *the* indication of status, with large black BMWs being the standard of ‘I’m important’. If this was intentional phrasing on the part of HDW then it’s pretty damn clever.

Chapter 34

Under Arrest

Cloudhawk had lost all ability to move. Frost de Winter didn't need to guess to know his master had helped.

“That fuckin’ dog Arcturus Cloude finally got his hands dirty.” Cloudhawk’s anger had reached the boiling point. His eyes began to simmer with red light as, unexpectedly, he fought off the numbing power of Starlight’s attack. Rising to his feet, every hair of his body stood on end, though it wasn’t clear whether it was from sheer anger or the electricity coursing through him. A ferocious and murderous aura poured from him, like a devil’s soldier clawing his way from the pits of hell. “You scum, in league with demons – you think you’re worthy to govern Skycloud City? Are the people so blind? Are the *gods* so blind!?”

Suddenly everything went quiet.

Everyone seemed to forget their fear and stared with wide-eyed shock. Was he accusing Lord Arcturus of working with demons? It was an astounding accusation, one that shook the mind of anyone who heard him say it.

Frost de Winter’s cool and unshakable exclamations woke the crowd from their stupor. “This man is a demon’s spy, brought into our city by Squall. Do not let his poisonous words confuse you – get him!”

That’s right!

The young man’s allegations were so outrageous that the crowds were stunned stiff. They didn’t even think about it, but indeed the very thought was ridiculous!

What sort of man was Lord Arcturus? The very backbone of Skycloud Domain. If he were cavorting with demons how could Skycloud enjoy the safety and prosperity it had today? What traitor could be considered a good and truthful person? How could anything they say be believed? He was a sinner, one who disrespected their illustrious leader to his face. The citizens repented for even entertaining the idea.

Cloudhawk said nothing further, for three more imperceptible needles came flying his direction. Soundless and faster than bullets they penetrated the sandstorm. One buried itself in his left kneecap, and the other two in each scapula. Even though his nerves were like steel Cloudhawk couldn't withstand the onslaught.

Lord Arcturus was indeed a master demonhunter, and he proved it by single-handedly incapacitating Cloudhawk from hundreds of meters away. What's more no one knew who or how. It was as though Cloudhawk simply collapsed under his own weight.

Frost de Winter waved his hand toward the wastelander. "Take them!"

Squall was immediately surrounded by a group of soldiers. His heart beat furiously in his chest, angry and incredulous but entirely helpless. "Why did you come here? Did you think you could save me?! You jackass!"

"It's not over yet. Get over here!"

Cloudhawk's will wasn't spent. He spat the words at Squall through gritted teeth but the young man didn't know what he meant. However as the guards closed in around him, Cloudhawk held tight to his strange rock and it surged with power. As the light from it washed over him Cloudhawk felt the force of the electricity weaken considerably. He groped for Squall like a lion lunging for its prey.

Through the stone a strange and enigmatic energy spread outward. This time it enveloped not only Cloudhawk, but Squall as well – at the cost of several times the effort for Cloudhawk!

Summoning the stone's power was demanding for Cloudhawk under normal conditions, much less extending it to another. As such he didn't have the psychic will to spare to use his cloak. The soldiers rushed in to grab them, but their hands passed right through.

These weren't men anymore, they were illusions, and they weren't going to get their hands on specters. It was the strangest thing the soldiers had ever experienced, and they watched speechless as the pair soundlessly started to sink into the ground.

The soldiers piled on but hit nothing but solid ground. Bizarre! How could this happen?

"Get out of my way!"

Frost grabbed the soldiers and flung them to the side, only to find that they were piled on empty space. He roared at them. "What is going on here?! Where did they run!"

"Lord Frost de Winter, sir. They, well they sunk into the ground. He was able to pass right through it!"

Frost's face turned dark as a blizzard. What sort of power allowed a person to simply slip through the earth? He stomped on the spot where Cloudhawk disappeared as hard as he could but it did not give. Once he was sure it was solid his furrowed brows shot up, and he pointed to a couple demonhunters nearby. "You there, dig this area up!"

"But sir, this-"

"If I tell you to dig, you *dig!*"

"We obey!" A group of demonhunters brandished their exorcist staffs. They were capable members of the order so when they struck the ground with their weapons it began to give way. When the earth buckled they found a hole below.

At last Frost understood why Cloudhawk had chosen this spot to make his move. Just below their feet was one of the tunnels that honeycombed below the city. Cloudhawk had to know that trying to escape with Squall was impossible – unless he had a special escape plan.

Cloudhawk's verbal abuse of the governor was a ploy for gaining precious moments, winning enough time for him to use his stone. Despite Lord Arcturus's quick response in subduing him, Cloudhawk was still able to flee with his friend.

Burning the mansion, confounding his ambushers, slipping in among the guards, and then eventually escaping. The whole thing was well thought out, logical, purposeful. The wastelander was young and green, but they had to acknowledge that he had guts. The resourceful young man was much more capable than he looked.

"Get after him!"

Once the tunnels were revealed Frost hefted his spear and jumped in. The demonhunters followed close at his heels.

After phasing into the tunnels, Cloudhawk and Squall hung on to each other and stumbled a little way through the dark. Eventually they fell, exhausted.

Squall was caught in his chains and couldn't move very well, while Cloudhawk was mentally drained. His arms and legs might just as well have been made out of scrap. As wondrous as the stone's powers were – in fact, precisely because of that – it demanded a high price in psychic energy. The excess when carrying another person wasn't as simple as simply doubling the effect, it was orders of magnitude more difficult.

Squall helped lift Cloudhawk back onto his feet. "How are you holding up?"

Cloudhawk shook his head, stumbled forward, then collapsed again. Lord Arcturus's needles were buried deep in his knees and not even the ends jutted out. With these needles in him he wasn't going anywhere, so he shoved Squall away: "I can't. Get out of here as fast as you can!"

Squall shook his head fervently. "I'll carry you."

He frowned the moment he said it. His hands and feet were bound in thick iron, how would he even be able to get him up on his shoulders?

"I'm Frost de Winter's target, if you try to help me you'll get caught up in his bloodlust. Then we'll just end up dying together." Cloudhawk was covered in sweat, clearly in pain. The wounds Arcturus caused were serious and excruciating. "Listen, I don't have any friends... except maybe for you. That's why I had to save you."

"Why did you do this? Why risk your life!" Squall's hands were clenched into fists, his eyes were red. "None of this is your fault, so why? Just so I owe you again?"

Cloudhawk could barely hold himself together. He was dripping sweat and wincing against the pain. He fought through it to try and speak. "I guess the fact is my life doesn't hold much promise. But it's different for you. You need to keep living because you have a reason. Revenge – for me, for Old Thistle. Remember how your father died. Is that how you want to go out?"

Images of his poor father floated up through Squall's mind. His hands tightened further.

"As for the other members of Bloomnettle Company, don't worry. They've already escaped by now." Cloudhawk was trying to talk through gasping breaths. He lifted his head, peering through tousled hair with calm expression. He shared a mournful smile with his friend. "The elysian lands were the dream I chased for longer than I can

remember. Now there's nothing for me... I don't know where to go, back to the wastelands? Somewhere else? I'm tired... I just need a fucking break. Get the hell out of here!"

Squall looked into Cloudhawk's eyes and saw his hopelessness turn into conviction.

He didn't say a word. Squall turned around and hobbled into the darkness.

Cloudhawk watched him go and felt relief. Two minutes later Frost strode up to the immobile Cloudhawk. He knocked the young man unconscious with a single blow, then waved to the demonhunters on either side of him. "Get him and let's get out of here."

One of them, a tracker, ventured to ask. "The other one's run off. Should we go after him?"

Frost de Winter peered into the inky blackness before them. "That one's just a small fish. He isn't worth our effort. Come!"

The demonhunters hesitated, but they had no reason to question their master. This talented young master had other ideas, and although Squall was in the wind the others paid him no more mind.

Cloudhawk, on the other hand, had been difficult to handle. He'd run away repeatedly, but finally he was back in their grasp.

"Stop where you are!"

Frost had just stepped out from the tunnels when a melodious, regal voice called out to him. The woman's voice was pleasing to the ear, if imperious and self-assured – sharp was a masterwork blade.

One didn't even need to look at her to know who the voice belonged to.

Frost's path was blocked. The young woman's skin was an alabaster white, almost unnatural, with hair the color of spun gold. Sunlight played around her like a halo, seeming to embrace her almost like a goddess.

"Dawn. What's all this commotion!"

“Shut your mouth!” Dawn didn’t even feign respect for Frost de Winter. Both of them were the pinnacle of their generation’s talent, and as such were often at odds. Their conflict was more than just a passing matter, and her barbed words weren’t a rare thing. “Leave that one to me. Be on your way!”

“Under whose orders? Yours?”

“That’s right, mine!”

Every syllable dripped with aggression!

Chapter 35

Two Talents Contend

Frost de Winter wanted to avoid a scene and had thus tried to avoid areas with a lot of people. They'd left the tunnels at a distant location and tried to slip away through an alley. Despite his efforts, however, their way was blocked by this thorny barrier. Dawn's fame and power was in no way inferior to Frost de Winter's, and in addition she was Skycloud City's youngest templar.

The templars were a sect of holy warriors under the direct command of the Temple. Its members included demonhunters as well as normal soldiers, with the prerequisite being that they were among the best of their class. A templar's background, service record and capabilities had to be stellar in order to earn a position, which meant that each templar was a brilliant dignitary in their own right.

Dawn was strong, but her accolades were thin. Originally, she did not hold the qualifications necessary to join the temple. However, her father was a direct heir of the Polaris family, while her mother was an oracle of the Temple, one of their high priests.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that Dawn was born under the blessings of the gods. Noble and flawless, her rare golden tresses were seen as proof. The things she experienced while growing up all pointed to her status as a child favored by heaven. She was Skycloud City's most comprehensive talent; a talented demonhunter, a unique intellect, a gifted artist with pen or paintbrush, she could master whatever craft she put her mind to in no time at all.

She made history when she joined the temple before her eighteenth birthday.

This year marked her nineteenth and she already held herself with ecclesiastic regency. However, the unbridled defiance of heaven and earth that was her family's character remained alive and well, evident in her bearing. She was a dignified she-devil who was known for her brazen and erratic actions.

Her lauded background alone ensured no one challenged her.

Of course, that was only true for the common man. Frost did not fear her, and Cloudhawk was too important. Nothing could be allowed to stand in his way.

When she saw that he did not immediately comply, Dawn lost her patience. “Hmph. You must be deaf. Or are you so eager to pick a fight? I’ll say it again – hand him over!”

She clapped her hands together regally as she made the demand.

The alley began to ring with the sound of clattering armor. In a blink a hundred soldiers appeared from all around with glimmering weapons in hand, hostile eyes fixed on Frost. These were the loyal house guards of the Polaris family and it didn’t matter who they fought. They followed their masters’ orders.

“Are you challenging me?”

“So what if I am? Stand up for yourself if you got the balls!” ^[1] The peerless beauty spoke in a surly tone which was in direct opposition to her appearance. She interlaced her fingers and pushed, a series of pops followed. Her hand then went to the sword at her waist and started to pull it free. “It’s been a little while since we’ve danced. I’m anxious to see if you’ve gotten any better!”

The moment her sword cleared its sheath the alley was flooded with a terrifying aura. Dust and gravel shivered from an invisible force. Its blade was the width of three fingers and refracted light like the surface of a lake. Metal rang against leather with a resonance that seemed to fill the world.

Her weapon was anything but average. Like Frost her blade was a famed relic – Terrangelica! And like Frozen Dirge it was capable of terrible things.

Frost de Winter was a proud man, and he wasn’t going to stand for this mouthy bitch’s disrespect. Her threats would be met with a frigid answer, for as he planted Frozen Dirge’s blade into the ground, an area several meters in diameter was immediately covered in ice. He spoke back to her in mocking tones. “Terrangelica is a treasure of the Polaris family. It’s tarnished in the hands of a reprobate like you.”

She threw back barbs of her own. “Frozen Dirge is also an impressive weapon. Such a shame that it should pass to the equivalent of a stuffed shirt. I weep for its spoiled reputation.”

Dawn’s temperament was molten fire to her core, but she was not reckless or stupid.

She would not let his pompous words infuriate her, and now was not the time to waste bickering. Soon this dog's master would arrive, at which point she could forget about taking the thief.

A quick battle to force his hand! She shoved the blade of her sword into the earth.

Dawn poured her power into it, sending a wave of incorporeal force through the ground. It blasted out in all directions, kicking up clouds of dust with it.

The two clashed with the speed and ferocity of clashing lightning bolts.

Frost keenly felt the attack closing in and jumped up to avoid it. Moments later a series of spikes shot up right below where his feet had been. He managed to avoid the first two, but the second and third reached higher toward him.

This attack came entirely from underground and so where practically untraceable. Were it not for Frost's exceptional speed and perception he would have been impaled by the first one.

He was slowing down. Another spike was rising up toward him.

Dawn wasn't showing him any quarter, her opening attack was lethal. The jagged spikes reached up for the vulnerable place between Frost's legs, but he would not idly let it come. He swung Frozen Dirge in a pendulous arc that chopped into the spike, instantly freezing it. He used the momentum to launch himself toward Dawn.

A deadly arc of silver came down from overhead.

As Frost closed the distance the light from his spear bloomed like a silver lotus. Fast – too fast. Before she knew it a dozen blinding thrusts were aimed her way, and though he was still too far for the weapon to connect this was not so for the energy released with each strike. White gusts of power blasted at her, so cold that it froze the water particles into deadly icicles.

Woosh-woosh-woosh-woosh-woosh!

Trailing beautiful white tails like comets, each strike came crashing down on Dawn in a frigid and deadly rain.

Her reaction to the awesome display was a dismissive snort. She wrapped both of her

hands around Terrangelica's pommel, but did not pull it free. She instead thrust it deeper, another foot into the ground until two thirds of it was hidden. Galvanized by some unseen power, the soil and rock sprang up to form a wall.

In half a breath the hail of icicles slammed into the rock wall. They pierced her defenses, but none could pass through, and remained glittering against the dirt like inlaid gemstones. Brutal residual cold covered the rock wall in ice almost immediately.

Frost crashed into it. *Crack-crrrACK!* The whole thing shattered like a pane of glass and crumbled away.

The barrier gave out and Frost's momentum pushed through unimpeded. Like a silver dragon reaching out from the sea, Frozen Dirge stabbed at Dawn.

He knew the abilities of every notable weapon in Skycloud City. While Terrangelica was powerful, its weakness lay in slow reaction time. To defeat Dawn one only needed to know the trick to handling it.

That trick was speed!

His execution was perfect; Frost de Winter broke through her barrier then followed up with a quick and decisive strike. With only a few meters between them Dawn could be twice as powerful and still couldn't rely on Terrangelica to save her.

He'd robbed her of her advantage. Victory was assured.

Just as Frozen Dirge's edge was about to run her through, however, Frost de Winter was taken by surprise.

Ting!

No more than ten centimeters from Dawn's body, his spear struck a clear glass-like shell strong enough to knock the blow aside. After the collision, lines spider webbed from the point of impact, forming intricate patterns like some occult diagram. Amidst the sound of cracking the lines split and bright light poured forth, revealing the once invisible shell that protected the templar.

Frozen Dirge was impotently knocked aside. His victory was stolen.

Frost de Winter, high up in the air, snatched his spear back and then landed back onto

the ground. He stumbled backward a few steps and stared at his opponent with surprise in his cold eyes.

Dawn's hands were still on the hilt of her sword. It was then he saw the light radiating from a jade mirror tucked into her clothing. Her invisible defense had come from it, repelling Frost de Winter's determined strike.

"The aegis mirror."

Frost de Winter recognized the Temple relic the moment he saw it. Dawn's skill and reputation were such that of course she'd be given treasures from her family and the Temple both. Terrangelica was from her family, but the mirror came from her templar masters.

"You underestimate me. I know my vulnerabilities far better than you."

Terrangelica was counted among one of the greatest weapons in Skycloud, alleged to be capable of summoning earthquakes and raising mountains. A master of its power could wipe out a battalion on their own. In exchange for such power its attacks were slow, ponderous, which was what Frost de Winter had hoped to use to his advantage. But how could Dawn not know this herself? If she dared to fight with him in such close quarters then of course she had a plan.

She was instigating him to attack. But he was not her target.

Frost de Winter reacted the moment the thought crossed his mind, flinging an icicle at Cloudhawk. Bringing him back to Lord Arcturus alive was more valuable, but he was given no choice. Either he came back with them or he died.

"Too late!"

Dawn's pretty face split into a sly grin. Terrangelica was already prepared, she was one step ahead. A pulse of energy reached out, knocking Cloudhawk away from Frost's men and into a crowd of her own. They quickly surrounded him, shields raised in a defensive posture.

Dawn and Frost de Winter were well matched. It was not clear who would win, nor would that be determined now. Lord Arcturus was on his way and would arrive soon, so this exchange had to come to a close.

She ignored her rival and raced for Cloudhawk.

The templar pulled Terrangelica from the ground and quickly joined her soldiers, her golden hair splaying out behind her in her haste. She stood before them, facing Frost de Winter and the others with her sword held before her. She smiled as the light played over her mystical weapon. “The challenge is done, now it’s time for the melee. Are you sure you still want to fight?”

“Dawn!”

Frost de Winter grit his teeth and fought the urge to charge. Over fifty crossbows were pointed right at him, and behind them all that damn woman. He’d brought only a few men with him into the tunnels, they were outnumbered.

“I’m taking him with me. You and I will finish this later.”

She knew the longer they stayed the more likely things would turn bad. Her soldiers moved in to block Frost as Dawn and the others fled with Cloudhawk in custody.

Chapter 36

Forcibly Remanded

Dawn frantically dragged Cloudhawk back to the commander's mansion. When she got there she heaved a sigh of excited relief. It felt *good* to give it to that ice cube, Frost de Winter.

"You've brought him back fast. Damn right you're my granddaughter. *Ha ha ha ha!*"

Skye Polaris charged at them like a grizzly bear, with the valorous posture only a general could command. He peered regally down at the unconscious form of Cloudhawk and his face hardened. This idiot thief who dared to steal from him was going to be taught a painful lesson.

"Wait... this one's different."

"I don't care where he came from. He chose to mess with my family, he has to die."

Skye Polaris was getting on in years, but his explosive fury was no less potent. It was so powerful it imprinted on the soul of his family, intractable and eternal.

"Let me *finish* first, will you?!"

Dawn barked the sentence at her grandfather. It caused him to freeze but resentfully grow quiet. She went on to explain to him in detail everything she'd heard and seen and his face gradually swapped anger for surprise. A lot had happened in the city and he was just now hearing about it.

"Get someone, call Mr. Ink!"

An oddly dressed man appeared in the mansion's main hall. He didn't look very old, maybe thirty or forty years old. A mask covered half of his face and he was dressed in all dark grey tones. As he walked toward them not a single sound arose like he was hardly more than a spirit.

Mr. Ink approached Cloudhawk and gave the unconscious man a cursory glance. He

reached out a hand and gently slapped his kneecap, retracting with it a hair-thin needle caught between his fingers. Mr. Ink then brought the needle close and inspected it for a few moment. “These are Arcturus Cloude’s lightning needles. He’s the only one who can do this.”

The old man already knew that answer. He pressed for more personal concerns. “How is he? Crippled?”

Mr. Ink examined Cloudhawk more closely and then answered. “With wounds like this the chances are significant. However, it appears Lord Arcturus was not deliberately trying to butcher him. Also this young man has a unique constitution – certainly not typical. His wounds are serious but nothing out of the scope of a little treatment. I suspect he can be repaired with minimal permanent impact.”

“Fine, then I leave him to you.”

While Mr. Ink plucked out the remaining needles, Skye Polaris scratched his beard and looked at Cloudhawk. Interest glimmered in his eyes, there was something special about this one if Lord Arcturus got personally involved.

“This one’s got balls. He broke into the Polaris family home to steal, then turned right around and burned down the governor’s mansion.” Dawn thought she was the most lawless and reckless person in the city. Compared to this one she was a master of etiquette. “Unique at least. It would be a shame to waste him. Leave him with me to play with for a while, what do you think?”

“Play, what the hell is he a toy?” He fiddled with his beard and shot her a sidelong glance. “If we want soldiers we have soldiers, horses we got horses. But the one thing that’s hard to come by is people of real talent. The Cloude family has all of them. You’re right that killing him outright would be a shame. He’s rough, but he makes a good sculpting block. Actually...”

Just then a sound arose from outside. One of the soldiers burst and immediately went to his knee before the commander. “Sir, Governor Arcturus is here!”

Dawn’s pretty face revealed surprise. “This fast? How?!”

Her grandfather rose to his feet with a grunt, lumbering like a great big bear but with the stately command of a dragon. “I’ll deal with him, bring the kid below. Let me greet our friend from the Cloude family.”

A few minutes later Arcturus Cloude strode into the room. He was flanked on either side by Augustus and Frost de Winter. Augustus's expression was dark and intractable, while Frost de Winter was seething with fury. The governor led them, clad in a simple grey robe and with the same professorial calm as always. His salt-and-pepper hair was meticulously groomed without a strand out of place, and he looked at them with soft but penetrating eyes – as deep and unfathomable as the ocean.

The commander and the governor, two men in stark contrast, faced each other from across the room.

Skycloud's chief military commander wore his emotions out in the open, and most who caught his eyes immediately started trembling at the knees. He wasn't a man, beneath the skin he was a wild beast. Up close it felt like he could bite them at any moment.

The governor stood as light and lazy as the clouds. Everything about him showed perfect self-control and constraint. To anyone that didn't know him the governor was the image of an amiable scholar.

Bathed in the imperiousness that flowed from Skye Polaris, Augustus and Frost de Winter both felt they were pierced by needles. In fact walking toward him was like fighting a current, it sapped the energy from you and the sense of danger was stifling.

If the two other men were described as boulders suffering the surge of a river, then Arcturus Cloude was like a net. All the force of the commander's presence washed through him like he wasn't there. The net didn't budge, especially when it was closing in.

"Haha, governor! It's been quite a while!" Skye Polaris bellowed at them as he lumbered forward, his face wide and inviting like he was greeting old friends. "I heard your mansion burned down! Ahh, terrible thing. News of it is all over the city. All those tax records – what a mess. They didn't all go up in flames, did they?"

"Be at ease, commander. There was some slight damage but nothing worth mentioning. We always keep backups of important documents so the matter isn't serious." Lord Arcturus smiled graciously and nodded his head. He certainly looked as unconcerned as he sounded, treating it more like someone had broken one of his cups. He went on. "Actually I'd heard someone broke into your home a few days ago and stole some things. Young Miss Dawn suffered no insignificant loss. Has the culprit been

found?”

“Hah hah, ah! Our governor surely is well informed. Just a petty thief, eh? If we wanted we could snap him up without a problem, but what concern is it of a commander?”

“On the contrary you shouldn’t take this lightly. Stealing into the home of an official puts sensitive government documents at risk. An intruder in the home of our highest military officer puts our whole domain at risk. As governor, I’m duty bound to see to this matter personally.”

“Relax. I’ll make sure I find this thief.”

That wouldn’t be a problem. Any scapegoat could be conjured up.

“Actually I’ve already managed to trace the contraband. It was found with a group of seditious renegades, though under the direction of a mastermind. I also heard that there was some trouble at the prison, that *all* of the prisoners escaped through the city’s tunnel system. More than a few of them were decreed public enemies by The temple. I have reason to believe that the one who stole from you is the same person who instigated these terrorist acts.”

Skye Polaris’s face darkened.

“That is a matter I promise the Temple takes very seriously.” His tones were even, never fast nor slow. Sincerity seemed to coat every word. “I look forward to the commander’s help in apprehending this criminal. We must be vigilant. We wouldn’t want to learn of mistakes – for instance, harboring criminals. That would certainly draw the ire of the Temple and they would demand an explanation.”

The last few words stripped the jovial mask from Skye Polaris’s face. The old fox was clever as he ever was. It’d taken him no time to learn of the break in, even tracing it. He even brought it to the Temple. It wasn’t a serious problem, not yet. He had to wait and see what the governor chose to do with this information.

Theft from the home of the commander was a real threat to national security. What’s more, evidence of that break in was found in the hands of an illegal organization. It was enough to fuel suspicion that important military documents had been leaked.

The same person was also responsible for the jail break.

It was perfect fuel for whatever Arcturus Cloude's aim was.

"The governor speaks and the commander listens, what else can we expect? But there is something else, I hoped I might ask for some help."

"Speak your mind, commander."

Skye Polaris danced around it. His tone became thoughtful. "I did come across a young man, one I thought could be turned into someone useful. I wondered what could he have done to earn such hate from the governor? Kid's barely an adult, not a day in Skycloud City. A man of your stature, I'm surprised you took such a personal interest at all. I figured he must know something he isn't supposed to. Just... something that makes me curious."

Frost de Winter could no longer restrain himself and stepped forward. "Cloudhawk is an agent of a demon. Shielding him is an affront to the gods!"

"A demon agent? That's quite the accusation! If you say he is, I guess I'd have to ask for proof. Do you have any? Proof? Has he been afforded any trial? Maybe 'I am a demon spy' is carved on his forehead? I must've missed it. It seems to me he's condemned on your word alone – you say he's a spy and that gives you the right to make him disappear. Is that right?"

Frost de Winter took another half a step forward as his anger boiled over. "You-!"

Lord Arcturus cut him off with a wave, then turned his eyes on the commander. "Are you sure you want to protect him?"

"Your family has always been rich in talent. Three masters in one generation, leaders of their field and knitted into the city's landscape, even the Temple. And at your side is more than just Augustus. You have Selene, Zephyr, Frost de Winter, and more. Your family has control of eighty percent of the domain's demonhunters and more hidden agents than I can count. My family only has Dawn to put forth. Good seeds are hard to come by, do you think I'd let one go? I've already thought about it – he should be sent to Hell Valley. The gods will decide his fate. If he dies then so be it, but if he lives then he belongs to the Polaris family!"

Beyond expectations Lord Arcturus did not seem to take long to consider. "Very well. Seeing as the commander is adamant, I'd be happy to oblige. We'll be going."

Frost de Winter couldn't believe it. "Master, but-"

"Come."

Frost de Winter couldn't grasp what had come over his master. He had the upper hand! No one was a match for Lord Arcturus in this sort of verbal contest, so why did he give in?

Chapter 37

The Price to Pay

“Come out.”

When Dawn approached, there was surprise in her platinum eyes. She'd expected at least a heated exchange, maybe even the promise of a long-standing conflict between their families. Instead it all was resolved in a few words.

Lord Arcturus seemed cool and refined, but in reality he was a difficult character. Dawn followed her own rules and paid little care to authority. But even though there were many in the city without clout and prestige, the one she never dared cross was Arcturus Cloude.

She could hardly believe their exchange, it seemed uncharacteristic of the governor. Could Lord Arcturus have other plans?

Skye Polaris said something the young woman didn't understand. “You're too young to understand Arcturus Cloude. His decision shows he thinks things can still turn his way. It's fine, go check on the kid.”

Cloudhawk gradually awoke from the coma, and the first thing he saw was the ornate ceiling. Gold dust had been used to draw out beautiful pieces of art, canonical scenes that were skillfully and beautifully made.

Where was he? Cloudhawk wanted to get up but the wounds Arcturus had caused were not gone. He felt like a thousand ants were crawling over him, biting his skin.

Three people were standing by the foot of the bed talking. He recognized Dawn at a glance – but hadn't he been captured by Frost de Winter? Why would he suddenly be here?

Mr. Ink cast a sidelong glance toward where Cloudhawk lay, then spoke to the older master. “My medicine has already begun to have an effect. It looks like he's awakened.”

Skye Polaris clearly had deep respect for the man who addressed him. “Thank you for

your efforts.”

Mr. Ink clasped his hands respectfully before his chest, then retreated a few steps.

The elderly man didn't immediately speak. It was Dawn who approached Cloudhawk first, giving him a chance to see her more clearly. She was about a hundred and seventy centimeters tall and shunned armor for a simple white warrior's robe. Her platinum blonde hair hung loose and orderly around her shoulders.

She was so white.

Unnaturally white, but not sickly.

A beautiful woman's skin was oft described as alike to creamy white jade, but she seemed carved from it. Not only was she abnormally white, but there were no visible pores either and her skin shone with a gentle glow.

This beautiful woman, standing there unmoving, was like a noble and tempestuous goddess. Her arms were folded in front of her chest as she glared daggers at Cloudhawk. “You're in my hands now, little thief. If you have anything to say for yourself, say it now!”

Cloudhawk still hadn't regained his bearings.

“Don't make a fuss, Dawn.” Skye Polaris's towering form appeared beside her. As he approached, Cloudhawk felt his aura wash over him, like he was being crushed beneath the weight of a mountain. He was making an effort to be friendly, but his fierce features made that difficult. “You nearly died. Luckily, Dawn brought you here and we saved your life. You're in the home of Skycloud's commander-in-chief. I believe you've been here before.”

Cloudhawk didn't know what a 'commander-in-chief' was and his face showed no change in expression. “Oh,” was his response. Then he closed his eyes and laid back. “Are you going to kill me?”

“Kill you? That would be far too simple! I could kill you with one finger, but if I was going to do that why would I risk offending that old fox, Arcturus?” Skye Polaris paid no mind to Cloudhawk's lack of respect. “Alright, tell me what is going on. Why cause all this trouble for the governor?”

Saving him from the hands of Arcturus Cloude was no small thing, but Cloudhawk had to wonder what his motives were. He had no way to tell what the old man really wanted, but by now he had no reason to hide what happened out in the wastelands. So, he told him.

“So that’s what all this is about...” Now he understood. The old commander heaved a breath. “From now on, don’t give any more thought to Selene. This matter is much more complicated than you know.”

“How has she not died yet!” At the mere mention of Selene’s name Dawn’s whole body went rigid. Like a snake coming face to face with a mongoose, or a spider freezing under the shadow of a bird. Her hands clenched tight into fists. “She ran from this city because she was afraid to face me. She never gave me a chance to break our stalemate when I got back from the sanctuary, but I *am* the greatest talent in the whole domain!”

Clearly there was something going on between Dawn and Selene, but Cloudhawk didn’t give a shit. “Lord Arcturus really is working with demons, isn’t he.”

“As I said, it’s complicated and way above your pay grade. The answer wouldn’t mean anything to you.” Skye Polaris knew something, but he wasn’t going to say it. Still, his reaction was interesting. “Alright, I’m not the sort to beat around the bush. Let’s get to the point. You stole from my family and the fact that you’re still breathing goes against my usual temperament. Saving you might also have put us at odds with the governor – I hope you understand how serious this is.”

“Well I’ve lived a pretty shit life,” Cloudhawk replied. How was he supposed to repay him? “If you want it, just go ahead and take it.”

“Gladly! But it isn’t your life I’m after.” The grizzled man chuckled. “You seem like a gifted kid, that’s why I kept you from Arcturus. From now on you’re a soldier. I’m going to send you to Skycloud’s best training outfit to get you polished, then when you get back you’ll serve our family to pay back what you stole.”

Any pretense of friendship was gone.

Skye Polaris definitely seemed like someone with influence and had a breadth of talented people at his command. Why save him? Cloudhawk had some real skill but it was limited. He felt like finding someone more capable than him here in the city was as easy as plucking someone out of a crowd.

The old man had called him a soldier. Did that mean they were going to put him in the army? Any way you looked at him Cloudhawk wasn't the army type, nor was he one of the faithful. So how was he supposed to make a good soldier?

"I'm a wastelander, I don't believe in your gods."

"That's why you aren't joining the conventional troops. Instead, you're going to be a hand in the shadows. There are regulars and irregulars, those who live in the radiance of the gods and others who have never seen the light. In this world justice needs to be protected, but there are some evils that are necessary."

"What are you talking about?"

"Put it this way. There are some less glorious missions a normal soldier can't do, and a member of the family can't be involved in. That's where people like you come in. Any family or organization has a group that do what others can't. Sometimes special situations require special tactics."

"You aren't afraid I'll escape?"

"Feel free! Only, there's a slow acting poison I had Mr. Ink inject you with while you were unconscious. It'll stay in your system for five years or so, and every six months you're going to feel a reaction. Without the antidote, it will kill you. You're going to pay me back one way or another. Either you work or the poison will make sure you pay another way."

Dawn was clearly displeased with his punishment. "Why rely on such sleazy methods? It's disgraceful!"

Skye Polaris disagreed. "This is us handling the matter once and for all. Five years is practically nothing!"

"I'm not strong enough," Cloudhawk responded.

"You are just unpolished, that's all. It doesn't matter. With the right materials you can cast a fine sword." He went on. "This training is the perfect furnace. You could throw the most useless piece of trash inside, and so long as they live they come out able to hold their own."

He'd had this planned all along!

Refusing the old man's 'generous' offer was the same as accepting death by poison. Anyway, could he carve a place out for himself in the elysian lands any longer? If he left Skycloud, where would he go?

He thought he was going to die, and once he stopped breathing all his problems would be over. But he didn't and there was no reason to go out looking for it.

"I have one condition."

This idiot had the gall to make demands? He'd be dead if it weren't for the old man!

Skye Polaris was clearly annoyed, but he still asked. "What is it? We'll see."

"The Bloomnettle Company is innocent. Leave them alone."

This took Skye Polaris by surprise. He'd expected the kid to demand something that would benefit him, but instead he used his last bit of leeway for others. The grizzled soldier scowled as he thought it over. It wasn't an easy request, but after a few moments he answered. "I can think up ways to pardon everyone except that one called Squall. But they won't be able to stay here in the city. They'll have to live the rest of their lives out in the villages."

That was enough.

Cloudhawk knew there was nothing but darkness in Squall's future. He was publicly convicted of crimes against the domain and was saved by a suspected demon spy. Nothing was going to clean those stains off his name. The rest of his family knew nothing about it and could be forgiven. Cloudhawk would never forget the image of Squall disappearing into the darkness of the tunnels. The guy's world had been turned upside down overnight, but there wasn't anything Cloudhawk could do to help him.

His quick and quiet acceptance pleased Skye Polaris. Young men like him were increasingly harder to find.

The city was full of soldiers, but they were inflexible. After studying Cloudhawk's actions over the last few days he knew the kid was the sort that would do whatever it takes to reach his goal. This sort of diamond in the rough was exactly what Skycloud's army was lacking!

"Dawn, take him to go get ready. Tonight we're bringing him to meet someone."

“Who? Where?”

“The governor’s mansion. We have an appointment with Arcturus Cloude!”

Cloudhawk froze solid. Was this old man insane? Arcturus Cloude wanted to kill him and they were going to march him right through that bastard’s front door. Nevertheless, Skye Polaris seemed unconcerned. He knew the governor wouldn’t do anything untoward.

Dawn didn’t care one iota what Cloudhawk thought.

Once he’d recovered some, Dawn dragged him toward the family carriage. They left directly for the governor’s mansion. Skye Polaris explained that this wasn’t his idea, but that they were coming at Arcturus Cloude’s invitation. He wanted to meet this young wastelander face to face.

Chapter 38

Entertaining Guests

The carriage was a fine one, cast in copper plating.

The animals that hauled it were fine animals, elk with pure white fur.

The company was fine company, a woman of stunning beauty.

Dawn had exchanged her warrior robes for a formal party gown. Beautifully sculpted legs appeared from within the folds from time to time. Her curly platinum hair had been painstakingly plaited and arranged atop her head. From head to toe, from inside out, the young woman exuded the air of a princess... that is, except for the sword she held close to her chest.

Even attending a banquet, Dawn wouldn't be without a sword by her side. The long and wide blade was embraced by a gem-encrusted sheath to match her regal appearance and she held it close. The pressure squeezed her full bosom, resulting in an eye-catching display.

Cloudhawk sat across from her, rigid and uncomfortable. His fear was only in part because they were on their way to meet Arcturus Cloude. The rest of it came from the hard glare Dawn had been giving him ever since they left the commander's mansion. Her glittering jewel-like eyes seemed to pierce right through him.

At last she spoke. "Let me ask you a question."

When the tension broke, Cloudhawk breathed a sigh of relief. "Go ahead."

Dawn sat up straight, forcing her chest to jut forward. "Do you think I'm attractive?"

It was not a question he expected from a woman like her. "You're pretty."

Her eyebrows shot up in indignation. "What kind of answer is that?!"

Cloudhawk didn't understand this lady. What did she mean? Did he give the wrong

answer somehow? Maybe she didn't like compliments, she was mostly crazy after all.

"'Pretty' is the only word you have to describe someone who looks like me?" She spoke to him with accusatory and demeaning tones. "'A beauty to overthrow mountains', or 'as gorgeous as the faeries of legend.' Maybe 'a face that would shame the sun', or even just 'unparalleled beauty' would do! That's how I expect you to answer the next time. Otherwise, you can expect me to beat the shit out of you."

Cloudhawk just scowled.

He'd known more than a few shameless people, but no one like her. If he had thought it wouldn't end in his immediate death, he'd reach out and smack her in her big mouth.

"Alright, now that we have that out of the way I have another question." Her displeasure with his first answer was only half-hearted. She went on. "Do you think I'm more attractive than Selene?"

What kind of fucking question was this?! How was he supposed to answer?

Before he could make up his mind Dawn's hand went to the hilt of her sword. A dangerous light burned in her eyes. "I advise you to think very carefully about your answer, otherwise..."

What was the point of asking if she was just going to threaten him? Was she *actually* mentally unstable?

Physically, Selene and Dawn were about the same. If he were forced to choose one, Cloudhawk still had a preference for Selene. After all, the two had spent a significant amount of time together out in the wastelands. Beyond her outward beauty, Selene also had an inner charm he'd uncovered. Of course, right now Cloudhawk was afraid this she-devil would stab him with her sword if he gave the wrong answer.

"You are, slightly."

Slightly?! This was not what she wanted to hear!

"And between the two of us, which one has more ability?"

"I can't answer that question, I've never seen you fight."

Dawn realized he was right. When she fought with Frost de Winter, Cloudhawk was already unconscious. Anyway, how could anyone tell someone's skills in such a short skirmish? Regardless, Dawn was certain she was better than Selene Cloude. She was hiding out in the wastelands because she was too scared to answer her challenge!

"Not bad. At least you're honest!" She peered down her nose at him. "If you make it out of Hell Valley you can be my manservant. That'll annoy that snobby harlot to no end. What do you think?"

She knew that Cloudhawk's relationship with Selene was more than just a passing acquaintance. Stealing him away would be a good way to piss the bitch off.

Cloudhawk was just confused. *What sort of grudge was going on between these two women?* He could almost hear Dawn grind her teeth any time Selene was mentioned.

He guessed that she must have been insulted by Selene somehow. Winners didn't bother with the ones they beat, only losers held on to resentment. Especially arrogant people like her.

"Nah."

"What was that? Say it again!" Dawn's good mood soured in an instant. "Do you think that old man back at the house is a softie? Heaven knows what sorts of suicide missions he'd send you on. As my manservant, not only would you have the pleasure of seeing an incomparable beauty every day, you get to live in the lap of luxury like me. It'd be better than pointlessly risking your life every day."

"I said no. No means no!" Cloudhawk would have none of it. A manservant? Slave would be more like it! Putting aside the fact that she looked down on him like an insect, arrogant people like her were precisely the kind that Cloudhawk couldn't stand.

Dawn couldn't believe this insufferable bumpkin would refuse her. "There are very few people in Skycloud City who would dare refuse me. Do you understand the consequences of turning me down?"

Cloudhawk had always been a feisty one, and neither was he the sort to fold easy. With things as they were he stood steadfast by his opinion. "It doesn't take any skill to push people around all day. What gives you the right to make anyone serve you?"

Dawn's mouth nearly fell open.

Just the fact that this lowly wastelander cretin is sharing a carriage with me is a gift from the gods. On top of that I'm ready to make him my sidekick – people would line up for the chance! And he says no!

I simply can't believe that me – a lady of House Polaris, the youngest templar in Skycloud history – isn't enough for a redneck like you. Well, just you wait and see!

Their carriage arrived at the governor's mansion. The sky was already dark as they stepped out.

The mansion was lit up by a host of light. Above in the night sky one could see the faint outlines of winged seraphs, flying to and fro like busy worker bees. These puppets left behind by the gods had no capacity for thought aside from maintaining the city. Any time a building was damaged they showed up and set to work repairing it.

The fire damage to the governor's home was extensive. It caused more than a little irritation to its occupants.

However, it wasn't irreparable. The seraphs worked diligently and the parts they finished looked good as new. Damage to the items inside was also nothing to be concerned about since Lord Arcturus was a fastidious man. There were backup copies of every important document held off site, so the impact of losing the originals was minimal.

The mansion's main gates were open and an inviting red carpet led the way inside. House guards stood on either side like statues. At the entrance a portly middle-aged man with squinty eyes and a kind smile was waiting to greet the guests as they arrived.

"Welcome, mistress Polaris. Please, come in."

"Thank you, uncle Clay."

The amiable man was manager of the governor's mansion, Clay Cloude. He was an important man in the mansion who typically preferred to handle things out of the spotlight. He was always seen with a welcoming smile like his face just wasn't capable of expressing anger. In truth, even the likes of Skye Polaris feared him a little.

Simply put, it was never safe to scorn a member of the Cloude family. ^[1]

Dawn gave Cloudhawk brief introductions of the people they passed while she led him

into the banquet hall. To him it felt like a dream, just yesterday he was running through the halls setting things on fire. Frost de Winter and Arcturus Cloude had almost killed him. Now he was waltzing in through the front door. It didn't matter who you were, that was a hard shift to get one's head around.

The mansion's banquet hall was huge, it took a total of one hundred and forty lanterns to illuminate the whole thing. Each of the mystical light sources produced a different image, but the largest was in the center. It released a sea of glimmering sand that roiled overhead like clouds.

People took their seats in accordance to status, perched on beautiful chairs carved from purple heart wood. All manner of delicacies had been arranged on the table and attendants stood patiently beside each guest. Meanwhile, a group of musicians entertained the crowd as beautiful women danced.

All of it just made Cloudhawk more uncomfortable.

Shit, we're just here to eat some food. What's with all this nonsense?

Cloudhawk's eyes landed on a grey-headed man at the head of the table. Despite his simple attire and a lack of any sort of aura, Cloudhawk knew right away he was Skycloud's governor.

Lord Arcturus regarded everything with a perfectly even gaze, like the mirror surface of an ancient well. There wasn't even a hint of anger in them, in fact he looked as though he was enjoying himself.

Smile never once faltering, the mansion's overseer led Dawn and Cloudhawk to their seats. They had places arranged on the left side of the banquet table near the front. "Please," he said, indicating the chairs.

"It seems everyone has arrived."

If Cloudhawk was half a moron he'd still recognize how strange this whole situation was. He'd gone from a public enemy to a guest in his accuser's home. Ten other people had been invited to attend, including the one face Cloudhawk was entirely sick of seeing, Frost de Winter. Also present was Old Thistle's killer, Augustus, who he loathed though they'd never personally met.

There were no ordinary folks here. Cloudhawk could feel the pressure bearing down

on him from all sides. If Lord Arcturus decided to stop this farce, there wasn't anything Dawn was going to do to stop him.

"You don't need to worry. If I wanted you dead you'd have stopped breathing already." Lord Arcturus stood with a smile on his face and a drink in his hand. "Cloudhawk, is that right? I'm surprised at your age. Today we'll share this cup and put aside our quarrels."

Once he stood everyone else also rose to their feet. Frost de Winter never took his cruel eyes off Cloudhawk.

The banquet officially commenced and they set about eating without any concern, just like any other feast. Cloudhawk couldn't sense an ounce of threat, not from Lord Arcturus at least.

Is he really gonna leave me alone? Cloudhawk wasn't inclined to believe it.

It went on for an hour. Although all the food was spectacular, Cloudhawk's heart wasn't in it. Suspicious, he hardly ate anything by the time their dinner started to wind down.

Lord Arcturus addressed him. "It's still early. Let's take a walk in the garden, what do you think? We can discuss this matter between us."

When she heard the suggestion, Dawn wanted to rise in protest.

Governor Arcturus passed his eyes over her in the briefest of glances, but it was enough to steal the protests from her throat. Cloudhawk, on the other hand, had a litany of questions he wanted answers to. Lord Arcturus was strong enough that he could kill who he wanted without the need for dancing around. Now that the invitation was given, Cloudhawk wasn't going to disgrace himself by being timid.

"Good."

The two rose and left the banquet hall together.

1. 'The petite cloud family had no fuel-efficient lanterns.' So according to some guy on the internet to describe someone as a non-efficient lantern harkens back to the days before electricity. Lanterns that used oil were exclusive of families that had enough

money to waste oil on lights. In a round-about, then, describing someone this way denotes them as a person of means and ability. Chinese is f'in weird, yo.

Chapter 39

Currying Favor

The governor's mansion. The gardens.

Lord Arcturus stood across from the young man. He was born to a desolate place, lowly and uneducated, and looked at everything like a dullard. However, facing the man who could kill him – in fact, who had tried to kill him not long before – Cloudhawk stood without pride or pretense. Calm, unmoved. He was certainly quite a special child.

“Truth be told, I'm impressed. Your actions yesterday were something to behold.” Lord Arcturus spread his hands, voice even, elegant as ever. There was no fluctuation in the way he spoke. “I know the kind of woman Selene is. Her pride runs to the bone, deeper than even Frost de Winter's. She also has a good eye for talent. Those she trusts must be special in some way.”

“So you decide to kill me, to keep me quiet,” Cloudhawk tepidly replied.

“That's right. Killing people like you is, without question, the correct decision.” He said it without an ounce of anger, just matter-of-fact. “This matter with Selene has far reaching implications. I made this choice in order to maintain peace and stability in Skycloud City. A normal citizen can never understand the weight of responsibility that lies on a governor's shoulders. We must have a view of the whole landscape. Decisions are made based on the big picture – even if they are sometimes contrary to our own desires. Is this not so?”

Cloudhawk frowned. “Big picture? What big picture?”

“You still don't understand? Selene raced off to the wastelands to hunt her demon. She went alone, without aid or backup. Does this not seem odd?”

In truth, it was a question that Cloudhawk had puzzled over before.

Selene Cloude's family was powerful, with command of a great many demonhunters. Surely they could have spared a few? Why did they simply sit calmly by as she went out on a suicide mission? Against someone like the Caliph of the Sands, ten or twenty

more demonhunters wouldn't have been overkill.

Admittedly he was curious. "Why?"

"It's a long story, one that involves the reputation of our family we are not eager to disclose. However, things being as they are, I might as well share it with you." When he began his tale, for the first time this inscrutable man's eyes revealed a hint of disquiet. "My younger brother, Baldur, was always an exceptionally talented man. He held the post of Knight-Commander for the Order of Demonhunters and led the entire force. Here in Skycloud, he was a giant among men, with brilliant prospects that stretched far into the future. Then he had a daughter whose talent was just as vast, only later... he was led astray."

Cloudhawk didn't understand. Baldur Cloude was a renowned master demonhunter, what could he have done?

"You heard correctly. Baldur was privately in contact with demonkin. More than once he was implicated in plots to have the citizens of our city killed. The Temple had concrete evidence of this, but when they tried to bring him in for a trial Baldur caught wind. He fled, another indication that he'd thrown his lot in with demons."

Cloudhawk was surprised by the revelation. A demonhunter caught colluding with demons, and fleeing when he was discovered? If this were true the news would have spread all over Skycloud.

"What happened afterwards to my brother remains a mystery. Perhaps he knew too much and the demons saw him as a threat. Or maybe there was some other dispute with his new masters. All we know is that in the end he fought them and lost. This is how this all began."

Laughable, Cloudhawk thought. Lord Arcturus story was too clumsy. Was he trying to paint Selene's father as a traitor, now?

The governor continued. "Baldur was my brother and the pride of our family. More than that, he was a celebrated master demonhunter. If word of his betrayal got out the consequences could be ruinous. So, in order to preserve order, we doctored a story that he was lured into a trap and murdered."

Cloudhawk found it all rather hard to believe.

Lord Arcturus saw it in his face. “Think back to the time you spent with Selene. Recall the details.”

The wastelander knit his brows. He remembered that every time her father was mentioned there was a thirst for vengeance, but also shame. If a demonhunter really did die hunting his prey, there was no cause for humiliation. It would be their highest honor. Why, then, was she so torn up with grief? Why would she violate the laws of Skycloud and her order, give up her bright future and seek vengeance?

At the time Cloudhawk didn't care, it was none of his business. But thinking back on it now, this had to be the reason.

This sort of thing created chaos. The normal folk could be shielded from it, but Selene had to have known. Yet she didn't believe it, nor could she bear the disgrace. That was why she decided to leave for the wasteland, so that she could learn the truth and put down her father's killer. Once she knew the truth she'd reveal it to the whole domain.

The problem was this evidence they had tying Baldur to the demons. It left no room for doubt, and there was no way for her to clear her father's name. She couldn't be allowed to come back with anything that contradicted it, or it would only make matters worse!

The government of Skycloud kept the news of Selene's violation from the public. As far as they knew she'd been locked away in training or had been sent away somewhere on a mission.

Cloudhawk's return was exactly the sort of news they didn't want. What he knew was precisely what they feared. Killing him to keep that information from getting out was the only option! It made sense, but something still didn't feel right.

“I can see that you're smart and talented. What you lack is training, guidance.” Lord Arcturus spoke earnestly. “Would you be amenable to working for me, as one of my assistants? I can offer you whatever Skye Polaris has proposed and more. I swear to help you cultivate your potential and become one of Skycloud's most celebrated demonhunters.”

The offer struck Cloudhawk deeply. How could it not?

This calm and intelligent man was widely accepted as the greatest demonhunter in all the holy lands. He was solely responsible for molding Frost de Winter into the

powerhouse he was at such a young age. Cloudhawk was human. He yearned for power and capability the same as anyone else.

But faces flashed across his memory then. Squall. Selene Cloude. Old Thistle and the others.

This man who gave off such a sense of geniality and trustworthiness... could he really be believed?

As a child of the wastelands, Cloudhawk had never experienced intrigue like this. But he knew human nature, how ugly and pessimistic they could be. He'd seen enough of that to leave an impression.

Appearances. He wouldn't fall for it this time. ^[1]

The terrible things that happened to Squall were not performed by Lord Arcturus, but he was still responsible. Killing innocent, devout people without a blink – Cloudhawk couldn't do that.

"I'm tired of this whole mess. All I want is to be a normal guy, living a normal life. I appreciate the governor's kindness, but I have an agreement with General Polaris. I'll work for a little while and buy my freedom."

Lord Arcturus nodded his head, but he sighed and the edges of his eyes crinkled slightly. "It is never a good thing for youth to seek leisure. For some, destiny demands a difficult road. You can avoid it for a time, but you cannot run from fate. However I respect your decision, but know that the offer remains if one day you should change your mind. My door will always be open to you."

Cloudhawk's countenance visibly changed. His words were moving.

Governor Arcturus was a man above all others, respected and revered by the people and protector of the city. This man - rich in power and prestige, of title and right - regarded Cloudhawk with patience and an open mind. The young wastelander was struck by it.

However, he knew that manipulative power of the governor, and Cloudhawk rightfully feared him. This fear was different from any other he had ever felt. The difference between them wasn't just in physical ability. The difference there could be seen at a glance. The gulf of intelligence between them was vague and unknown, but Cloudhawk

felt like he was staring out into an unfathomably vast ocean as he stood across from this man. On the surface was tranquility, but who knew how deadly the currents beneath really were, or what dangers hid in the water.

If Cloudhawk agreed to Arcturus' offer, who knew how long it would be before he was totally brainwashed. He figured it would be only a short time before he was completely loyal to the man.

Something seemed to occur to Lord Arcturus then. "As for the matter with Selene, I've been very forthcoming. I hope I can trust you to remain discrete. After all, this is in order to protect the security of our city's people. Sometimes sacrifices are necessary, but in return the majority gets to live in peace and well-being. It's as crucial as it is unavoidable."

Cloudhawk was certainly not interested in causing any more problems for himself. "I won't tell a soul."

Dawn tracked Cloudhawk down and gathered him up to go. She asked for information as they walked back out toward the carriage. "What did that old fox say to you?"

Cloudhawk only shared Arcturus's offer to come work for the governor's mansion. Her lily-white face darkened into a scowl. "That's one no-good snake! Don't forget that you owe the Polaris family for what you stole. You're not going anywhere till you pay off your debt!"

Lord Arcturus stood alone among the finely cultivated plants of his garden.

The soft sounds of footsteps approached. Frost de Winter stopped by his master's side and in humble tones ask him. "Master, your student has a question."

"You want to know why I'm letting him go, and why I tried to bring him into the fold."

"Yes."

"Even if he is under Skye Polaris's protection, I have ways to deal with Cloudhawk, but he's not worth antagonizing the general's family over. As for my offer? Remember that sometimes the most effective way to deal with an entrenched enemy is to make them your friend."

Frost did not like the answer. Friend? How was such a base and unworthy person even

to be considered?

Lord Arcturus sensed the dissatisfaction in his disciple's posture. "I've told you many times not to look down on anyone, or to underestimate their potential. Cloudhawk has as much aptitude as anyone else in this city. He just had the misfortune of being born where no one would teach him. From today forward, you are forbidden from seeking him out to cause trouble."

Frost de Winter's brows furrowed tight. His response was quiet. "I obey."

Chapter 40

Strange Little Bird

Cloudhawk looked into exactly what Hell Valley was about. Put simply, it was a secret training location.

Reputedly, it was a dangerous place where every year the best families and organizations sent their brightest young members. Some were family heirs with great potential, others were particularly talented members of an organization's lower ranks.

There was only one thing that was certain.

Everyone who was sent to Hell Valley was more than just capable, they were ready to die. The rate of deaths during the cultivation process was staggeringly high, but anyone who survived emerged as a finely honed tool for whoever sent them.

The hope that Cloudhawk would survive to become a powerful soldier was the reason Skye Polaris saved him. A decision like that for a man like Skye Polaris wasn't made off the cuff. Advantages and disadvantages were weighed, and in the end he chose to make the investment.

Cloudhawk figured the training camp would be dangerous, but to what degree took him by surprise. Skye Polaris wasn't doing Cloudhawk any favors, for if he died out there it wouldn't make any difference. If he lived the General was sure to find some way to keep Cloudhawk under his thumb.

But he had no choice.

Cloudhawk wasn't about to change sides and join Arcturus Cloude. If he tried to run from the Polaris family he was burning bridges with no way to make amends – no one in Skycloud would take him in. Skye Polaris was leader of all the armed forces, so Cloudhawk had no reason to suspect there wasn't any method the commander would use to get what he wanted.

As for this poison they injected him with? Cloudhawk wasn't too worried. Over the last couple days he felt the trespasser virus activate inside his body.

Whatever this stuff was, he felt confident it could halt the poison's spread. He didn't know whether it could neutralize the toxin entirely, but at least Skye Polaris wasn't going to use this trickery to control Cloudhawk so easily.

Escape wasn't going to happen anyway. Where would he go?

At first, his goal was driven by the goal of escaping from the wastelands. He'd been desperate for somewhere without murder or cruelty, only to discover that his assumptions of the elysian lands was a pipe dream ^[1]. Whenever there were people the environment was the same. The only way he was going to escape it was to live a life of seclusion, otherwise it was bound to follow him like a curse. There was no way to escape.

The realization filled him with depression and he sat sleeplessly up in his bed.

For some reason an item in his pocket caught his focus and he reached in. When he pulled his hand out the golden egg from his last phase adventure was nestled inside.

He'd almost forgotten about it. Cloudhawk remembered when he found the bored egg in that strange land. Carrying it all this time it was easy to overlook – small and inert, but somehow he knew that it had a connection to relics.

Cloudhawk believed that demonhunter relics had to be created by some mysterious practice he knew nothing about. It was something maybe only gods and demons really understood, destined to remain a mystery to humans. Each relic he'd encountered had a special cadence and sound which Cloudhawk could use to determine where they were and how they were different.

There were all sorts, it didn't seem like relics had any shape requirements.

Cloudhawk could feel a similar resonance coming from the egg so he figured it had to be some sort of relic. Only it was much different from any other relic he'd encountered. He'd been carrying it around for two months already and still had no idea what it did.

Maybe, he thought, it was time to give it a try.

Cloudhawk settled cross-legged on the floor and cradled the egg in his palms. He focused his psychic energy to hum in tune with it but no matter how he tried the egg drank up his energy like a sponge. It swallowed everything Cloudhawk directed at it but offered no response. He was getting no feedback at all.

Still the same? He'd tried before over the last two months with similar results.

Every time, his efforts were met with silence, the egg just drank his psychic energy and kept it trapped inside. This fist-sized egg acted like a bottomless vessel.

Cloudhawk was skeptical. Sure it didn't respond to his attempts to use it but he tried nonetheless. For several minutes he persisted, pouring all of his focus into it until Cloudhawk had to stop. He slumped, dizzy from the effort and at his limit. The egg still did nothing.

What the hell was the point of this egg?

Cloudhawk was so frustrated he wanted to chuck it at the wall.

Just then, he felt the stone hanging from his neck awaken. A surge of energy spread out from within like a sea of clouds, ten times stronger than anything Cloudhawk could produce. Cloudhawk sat in stunned silence. He knew there was more to the stone than he realized and it only revealed this power under certain circumstances. He wasn't sure what had awakened it this time.

The strange script etched all over the egg began to glow.

It was finally reacting!

Now Cloudhawk understood that the problem wasn't the egg, but his psychic energy had been too weak. He didn't have enough to reach the needed threshold, but after several attempts and with the stone's help that appeared to have changed. At last it was working!

Cloudhawk could feel the psychic energy from within the stone gushing out like a raging river. At the same time the tumultuous sea of energy began to evaporate. As the egg was bathed in this power the etching glowed brighter, it became hot to the touch, until at last Cloudhawk was forced to drop it.

The dark bronze-colored eggshell became a brilliant gold, then shimmering white. In the end it radiated illumination like a lightbulb. This didn't continue for long, maybe three or four minutes. Then the crisp sound of cracking arose and fissures appeared in the egg's surface, spreading quickly.

Cloudhawk had even tried breaking the egg open once.

He'd shot at it, hacked at it with an ax, and nothing left a mark. Seeing the cracks on it now shocked him, but he quickly found his surprise had only started. Something inside started to move. Something in there was alive.

Cloudhawk rubbed his eyes and stared like he was staring at an apparition.

It was a creature, something he'd never seen the likes of before. It was about one third the size of his palm and naked from head to toe. From the moment it hatched from the egg Cloudhawk felt a resonance he'd never experienced before. Different from all the other relics he'd encountered, this creature had a rich emotional air. It filled Cloudhawk with a sense of affection.

The first thing this bald, ugly, tiny little thing did after it was born was begin to peck at the egg shells scattered over the floor. The pieces of it, harder than iron, still glowed with a faint light like they'd come fresh out of a furnace. The heat had made them brittle, so now each time the strange little bird pecked at a piece the eggshell broke apart and it gobbled them down.

The bird was slow and meticulous as it ate every single piece of the shell. Five minutes later there was nothing left.

All the while Cloudhawk sat silently by, watching. Surprised, he stared as while the bird ate its shell glimmering golden feathers sprouted all over its body. Immediately the ugly thing was clothed in gorgeous plumage. A pretty little mystery bird.

It tried its wings for a moment before eventually taking off into the air. Its maiden voyage was clumsy but it flitted before Cloudhawk's face leaving streaks of golden light. Then there was a loud bang like a bullet fired from a gun, and when he turned to look Cloudhawk saw the bird had crashed into a column.

The thing was *fast!*

He looked closer and saw that a chunk had been taken out of the pillar and the goofy little bird's head was lodged in the hole. Its little legs churned and struggled as it tried to get free, eventually managing to yank its head out after considerable effort. From that point on it flew with more caution, taking a few circuits of the room and getting the hang of its new wings.

It settled on his shoulder. The bird bobbed its head, looking at Cloudhawk first with one eye then the other.

He was taken aback because he'd seen what happens if that bird didn't stick its landing. It hit the column like a bullet, imagine what it would do to his shoulder. If it could punch most of the way through stone and come out alright the bird's body had to be like steel. This little guy had the potential to cause some damage.

Once again that strange flood of energy emerged and Cloudhawk knew that bird bore no hostility toward him. In fact the bird seemed to depend on him, like a puppy would its master.

Something caused Cloudhawk to subconsciously feel at ease. As he looked down at the small bird on his shoulder the light from it dimmed and Cloudhawk could get a better look at it.

It was a tiny thing, which was to be expected since it'd just been born, about one third the size of a fist. Besides that it was a very strange little thing, unlike any other bird Cloudhawk had ever seen.

Firstly, it had mammalian eyes that were bright and filled with intelligence. Its skull was perfectly round, sort of like an owl but with a wide duck-like beak. It was a little on the puffy side but its wings were short which made it a mystery how it was even able to fly. With its wings folded back it looked like a little dust bunny on stilts, really rather cute.

It was a bird that actually hatched from a relic! It must consider Cloudhawk his master because he'd been filtering his psychic energy through it.

Cloudhawk didn't know anything about this little creature, but that didn't stop him from speculating. The relics he'd seen so far didn't have a standard shape; books, swords, stones, jewelry, cloth – why not an animal?

Cloudhawk thought that maybe this bird was a special sort of relic. Like the difference between a knife and a trained beast. A guy with a sword could kill, so could an animal. Knives were tools of war and creatures could be trained to fight too, only they were living weapons. This little bird had come from a relic egg, so it had to be some sort of special relic itself. Just, one that was alive and intelligent.

1. Apparently the origin of this phrase is fanciful dreams that would happen to people who smoke opium pipes. The more you know...

Chapter 41

What is Heard and Seen

The strange little bird, still in its infancy, was clearly still trying to get a handle on this thing called life. It flew around on unstable wings and would still sometimes smack into walls. Its round and clumsy body made the cute little thing look rather stupid, but after about an hour it learned how to get around.

Interestingly, Cloudhawk and the bird shared some sort of spiritual link.

It was difficult to describe, like sound but nothing that you could hear. It was communication on a higher level, where they didn't need to speak to be understood. They didn't even need to see each other, Cloudhawk could feel the joy and simple consciousness of the bird as clearly as though it was his own. It felt wonderful.

Cloudhawk wondered if it worked the other way around. He tried a command: *return*.

The little bird immediately rolled its pudgy body around and flew back to his palm. It stared at him with those strange eyes set in a cute owl-like face and blinked curiously. The wide duck bill that spread across its face just made the bird all the more endearingly goofy looking.

Yet despite how it looked the bird was not stupid. Cloudhawk felt its distinct emotions and critical thought through their connection. Besides it was only minutes old, but it already responded to Cloudhawk's commands.

He reached out with his free hand and patted the tiny bird's head. It was warm and soft, and pleasant to touch. The bird liked it too, enjoying the attention. Cloudhawk already felt himself taking a liking to the little thing, even if he didn't know what to do with it.

At least having it around, he wouldn't feel so lonely.

When his thoughts turned to this his face fell. The world was a big place, vast and full of people, and the only company he had was this little bird. It was like a joke.

His new companion seemed to sense Cloudhawk's dour mood. It beat its tiny wings, lifted off his hand and flew a few circuits over his head before landing on his shoulder. With its soft feathery head it nuzzled Cloudhawk's neck, perhaps trying to comfort him.

It was certainly a novel experience. He felt happy and grateful for the affection.

The bird's empathic abilities were not what Cloudhawk expected, but they were obvious. It'd hatched from that strange egg after absorbing a demonhunter's psychic will, so it certainly wasn't going to be a normal critter.

Suddenly it took off again and began to dart about, chirping to try and express something. Cloudhawk hesitated for he understood what it wanted. Power.

It wanted 'power', but what did it mean? A thought suddenly crossed his mind.

Cloudhawk reached out with his psychic energies as though he were trying to call on a relic, and the bird answered. It absorbed the power Cloudhawk conveyed and what followed took him by surprise. The bird reacted.

A whole world of new sights and sounds sprang up in Cloudhawk's mind.

These weren't his experiences, these were what the bird was seeing and hearing. Somehow it was able to connect with his mind and insert auditory and visual signals directly into his brains. It was like having a separate pair of eyes and ears. It was a strange experience he'd never felt before, something he couldn't put into words.

Just like he'd figured, the little bird was exactly like a special relic!

Like any other relic, of which there were all sorts, they couldn't produce power from nothing. Only once a demonhunter lent it his psychic energy could they awaken and produce a resonance. The bird's own special powers were also only available once Cloudhawk fed it his power. With his help the bird was able to use its extraordinary abilities.

Incredible! Really amazing!

It was a novel and enlightening experience, having access to two consciousnesses. However, after a few minutes he began to feel dizzy and nauseous. The human mind was only able to handle so much input and the flood of information he was getting

made it all hard to keep straight.

Cloudhawk sat on the floor, shut his eyes and covered his ears.

He tried to shut out as much as he could so that all that was left came from the bird. He started to feel better. Then he realized that how the bird experienced the world was different from him.

The bird's vision was brighter, clearer. It could pick out details even in the darkest corner of the room, and it was even more sensitive to shifts in color. There were shades Cloudhawk never knew existed that the bird saw all around that made everything look so vibrant.

Its hearing was just as sharp. Cloudhawk could hear a lot of things that were too soft for him normally. Obviously the bird's hearing was much more sensitive.

The intensity of it was staggering.

The bird could pick out every crack in the wall and gusts of wind down the alleyways outside. Even if you somehow empowered a man's senses he wouldn't experience the world like this.

It filled him with excitement.

They were more than just linked empathically, his new friend made an excellent scout. The tiny thing could get to places he couldn't, sharing whatever it saw and heard. The implications were obvious, this relic was going to come in very useful.

The bird continued to fly around and Cloudhawk saw himself from all angles. It was weird to see himself like that, like someone else would see him.

He wasn't satisfied with just the room anymore. He wanted to know just how strong this bird's abilities were.

It soared out of the window and into the night, and just like Cloudhawk suspected the bird's senses were exceptional. Even in the darkness every detail was visible and everything stood out in stark colors to make it easily identifiable.

It wasn't long until Cloudhawk found how far before their connection waned. Around a hundred meters away the things Cloudhawk saw became very unclear – likely the

limit of his current strength. Obviously the bird couldn't get too far away if Cloudhawk wanted to use its powers.

Alright, that was enough testing.

Cloudhawk was almost ready to call the bird back when he heard voices from Dawn's room. She was talking to someone.

"So irritating! That old fogey Skye has *no* ambition! It's just a broken dagger and he won't allow me to keep it. Outrageous!"

"Miss, you shouldn't blame the general. The dagger you saw was dug up from the ruins of the old world. It's contraband! These sorts of thing are evil and the sanctuary has forbidden anyone from carrying them. What's more, you're a templar!"

"Bah! The Sanctuary... what good is it being part of the Sanctuary, anyway? I only joined to pressure that skank Selene and turn the public toward me. You think I had any interest in being a templar?"

"Hush! Keep it down, you shouldn't let anyone hear you say that!"

"I want that damn dagger!"

The Polaris family's pride and joy was throwing a temper tantrum. Cloudhawk found it quite amusing. He had the little bird fly over for a closer look, and when it arrived the scene it revealed made Cloudhawk freeze.

In the large room two young girls of fourteen or fifteen were kneading Dawn's shoulders.

The beautiful templar sat in a bath filled with steaming water without a stitch of clothing. Her arms were thrown over the sides of the tub to keep her up while she enjoyed the massage. Most of her body was beneath the glass-like waters while what remained above was slick from moisture and smooth as silk. Her long platinum hair was loose and clung to the front of her body, concealing her firm breasts ^[1]. From time to time the water would shove strands of hair away to reveal a peak of what lay beneath.

The young woman of noble blood appeared less brutal now, more like a little girl who didn't get any candy. She hunkered in the tub with a petulant expression. Her long legs

like ivory chopsticks swirled the water and her feet kicked little splashes at the edge. Ripples pushed the rose petals that sat on the water's surface around like boats caught in rough water, blocking the private view below.

Her maidservants patiently rubbed her shoulders while trying to ease her fiery temper.

Even in his wildest dreams Cloudhawk wouldn't have imagined a scene like this.

Dawn was no normal woman, however. As though sensing something her eyes snapped right toward him. Cloudhawk froze, for an instant feeling like he was there in the room staring at her face to face.

"What a pretty little bird! Grab it, quick!"

The covetous young woman stared at the bird excitedly as her alluring body rose from the water. Little did she know this was more revealing than she thought. However Cloudhawk had no time to admire the view, Dawn was a keen one and if she got her hands on the bird it would end poorly.

The bird tried to flee.

Dawn's face immediately froze nervously as her prize made to escape. She snatched up a fruit pit discarded on a nearby plate, lifted her snow-white arm, and threw it hard. It struck the bird in midair, and with a pained squeak it tumbled to the ground.

"What are you two idiots staring at?" Dawn had covered herself with a towel. "Go get it and bring it here!"

Cloudhawk was stunned. The sounds and images stopped. Had this crazy woman knocked it out?

Her strength was incredible. She threw a fruit bit as fast as a bullet, but Cloudhawk also knew the bird was stronger than it looked. The blow couldn't have killed it.

As Cloudhawk was preparing to run out and look for his companion a streak of golden light dashed through the window.

"You're alright!"

Cloudhawk could feel that the tiny bird was in pain. He cupped it in his hands and saw that the bird's left wing had been injured. The poor thing pressed its beak into the wing, but it didn't look like it was anything serious.

Cloudhawk sighed in relief. It wasn't because the bird was seriously hurt that he lost the connection.

If the bird was like a relic, then its powers should presumably work like a relic's powers. Cloudhawk had enough experience with them to know that how much energy was poured in was what determined the strength they produced. A few minutes of scouting used up quite a lot of his psychic energy.

So the limits were three or four minutes within a hundred meter radius.

Strict limitations, but Cloudhawk figured it was just for the time being. The stronger he got, the farther his friend could go and the longer their link could persist.

As he looked over the bird and helped soothe its wing a problem occurred to Cloudhawk. Dawn was definitely going to keep an eye out for this little thing. If he didn't find a way to keep it hidden she was going to find and take it. He looked around for somewhere to stash it when suddenly he heard Dawn outside.

Bang!

His door flew open.

1. 'Double mountains' in Chinese. Hah!

Chapter 42

In Deep

The Polaris family's young mistress burst through the door without so much as a knock. Her long eye-catching legs brought her inside wearing nothing but a loose-fitting night robe with nothing beneath. Her platinum hair was still wet as it hung loose around her shoulder. She stood imperiously over him like she was nailed to the ground.

Cloudhawk was still a young man but not without experience, so his feelings toward women weren't as vague as they used to be. This was especially true after what he'd seen moments ago while she was bathing. With Dawn standing like this in front of him now, Cloudhawk couldn't help his heart from beating faster.

Her eyes immediately darted toward his hands, where he hadn't had time to hide the little bird away. She was pleasantly surprised. "I saw that bird first, give it here!"

"I raised it! I'm not about to just give it away."

Dawn's eyebrows slowly lifted. Was she just supposed to believe him? She didn't see his name written on it anywhere!

Cloudhawk answered her with a sad and bitter expression. "Anyway it's hurt. What kind of asshole would do that?"

Dawn froze. She *had* thrown that pit rather hard.

The little bird curled up in Cloudhawk's palm and didn't move, like it was on death's door. Its pitiful appearance made her frown in concern. She'd never seen a bird like this before so she'd gotten excited, she didn't mean to kill it.

Cloudhawk was well aware the sort of bully this she-devil Dawn was. Here in the elysian lands the truly religious were gentle and forgiving. But the militaristic Polaris family was violent by nature, Dawn especially. She was rich both in ability and background, which resulted in her pushing others around because there were no consequences. This was especially true for Cloudhawk, a low-class wastelander.

This kind of person was dealt with through force. Nothing good would come from that.

However, Cloudhawk was willing to protect his new companion from her, no matter what. He understood its powers already and knew they would make a great team. Being able to scout through the bird's eyes would keep him out of all kinds of danger.

"It looks like it's been seriously hurt. What happened? This is an adorable little thing. Who would be so heartless?" Suddenly she was all full of tenderness and concern as she reached out. "Let me see."

Cloudhawk pulled away and fixed her with a suspicious look. "You really don't know who hurt it?"

"You don't think it was *me*, do you? Where's your proof?!" She was a bold one – a supposed believer in the gods and one of the sanctuary's holy warriors, but capable of lying to his face without batting an eye. "I love small animals, how could I hurt one? Look at it, the poor thing is in terrible shape. You should give him to me and stop wasting time."

Cloudhawk was stunned at how full of shit an elysian could be. She was probably planning to stuff the bird and keep it as a trophy when it died.

Dawn's compulsion for hoarding was well known throughout the city. Weapons, armor, jewels, plants, animals – so long as it was novel or expensive she wanted it for her collection. The addiction had earned her a number of enemies, too, since she wasn't above robbing the object of her desire. Taken together with her domineering nature it was no wonder she wasn't very popular.

"No!"

"What did you say?" Dawn's face slowly coiled together in fury. Her lust for the bird had already gripped her, she was determined to take it from him. "It's just a bird. Don't forget that you owe me. Either you pay me with it or I kick your ass 'till our score is settled, every day until you leave for Hell Valley!"

It was a harsh threat.

A bag of jewels was a drop in the bucket to Dawn and her family, but she was incensed and would not go easy on him. The peculiar, cuddly little bird had caught her fancy. Trading it to forgive his debt seemed like a kindness to her.

When he refused her Dawn's first instinct was to raise her fist in a blatant show of force. "You better think about the consequences!"

Fucking hell, this woman is impossible!

Of course Cloudhawk wasn't without fault. He'd stolen from them, after all. Skye Polaris wanted him to pay back the affront with his life, his daughter wanted a bird.

Cloudhawk knew she was not a patient woman. If he kept it up she was just going to take the bird from him. He certainly wasn't going to be able to fight her off, and besides this was her home. All she had to do was raise her voice and he would be minced meat. What could he do?

"It doesn't matter what you say," Cloudhawk replied matter-of-factly, "I can't give the bird to you."

Dawn was *not* known for her patience and this conversation had already gone on too long. She was warring with her temper, both hands clenched into fists, and the threat of her brutality was almost palpable in the air. "You don't think I can take it from you? You sure look highly on yourself!"

Cloudhawk saw her getting ready to lunge at him but he didn't want to suffer. He tried to persuade her. "I can pay you back in another way. For example, I can help you get that dagger you want."

She slowly let her hammer-like fists fall to her sides. Anger was replaced with curiosity. "How did you know about the dagger?"

"That's not important. What's important is that I can get it, and I can bring it to you." He wasn't afraid of her, no matter how fierce. He spoke to her without deference or irritation. "I can't fight you off and you could beat me to a pulp, but you'll never force me to do something I don't want to do. I'm a wastelander, you know that. I've lived through all sorts of shit."

What he was really saying was that he didn't fear a beating. *You could ruin my body, but you're never gonna break my will.*

Dawn wavered, for in that moment she saw the quality of this young man. He was an average fighter maybe, but one hell of a thief. A thief that could break into the general's mansion and set fire to the governor's compound. Outside of the Sanctuary, there was

no place in Skycloud that could keep him out.

Frankly, Cloudhawk could hardly beat a fart in a straight fight. He'd only managed to deal with a few novice demonhunters. Anyone from the Order worth their salt would be able to put him down easily, she figured. But he was the best damn sneak in town, and even a high-class demonhunter wouldn't be able to pick him out.

Dawn suddenly knew how Cloudhawk could be useful. Damn, she'd almost lost sight of what made this guy special!

But wouldn't she be losing face by letting him have his way? The likes of Frost de Winter, Selene, even most senior Skycloud officials hardly caught her eye. There were even fewer who could get the better of her. Was this wastelander actually one of them?

Her face was uncertain for a time and then eventually her fists relaxed. She rearranged her clothes, then when she spoke again it was a deathly seriousness. "Fine. You're such a weakling that whooping you won't give me any sense of accomplishment. It's just a bird, it isn't worth anything."

She said it as rude as she could manage, but Cloudhawk didn't care.

Dawn hesitated for a moment then asked, "Could you really help me get that dagger?"

The corners of his lips curled into a grin. Strength didn't mean shit; the slightest benefit and she was ready to bargain. "All you need to do is tell me where it is. I'll go tonight and have it in your hands before morning."

His confidence thrilled her, but still she hesitated. "Even just possessing contraband is asking for trouble. Stealing one..."

Cloudhawk shrugged. "If you don't say anything then I won't. Who'll know where it went besides you and me?"

"This... let me think."

Truth be told she was thrilled. She knew Cloudhawk's worth, with a master thief like him by her side she could have anything she wanted. There were countless things scattered throughout the city she was desperate to get her hands on, and he was the key to satisfying that lust.

The problem was that all this was illegal.

For her this was treason. After all she was an elysian, a high-grade demonhunter and a warrior of the Sanctuary. With so much on her shoulders this was a serious decision for her to make.

Cloudhawk was quietly scheming as well.

Dawn was a respected and influential person in Skycloud. She wasn't the strongest, but at least she was among the strongest fighters in the city. More than that she came from a background tightly involved in the military. If he could make her think he was a help and kept her close, Cloudhawk was sure he could use their relationship to his advantage.

Really though he was just tired of her shit. If he wanted to gain the upper hand and get her to shut her goddamn mouth, the best way to do it was to keep her distracted.

"What, you don't have the guts?"

She saw the taunting light in this wasteland bastard's eyes and it made her furious. Dawn had never been one to follow the rules, only she couldn't do this otherwise she would have already done it herself. If this guy was so eager to help then let him try, she thought.

"Alright, bring back the dagger and consider your debt paid."

"It's a deal."

Dawn told him where the dagger was being kept, then after gathering his things Cloudhawk went after it. Contraband was kept in a place they called the vault. Items were gathered up there until it reached capacity then the contents were destroyed. Aside from being heavily guarded and fortified, the only people who got into the vault came bearing signed documents from either the governor or the Sanctuary.

Dawn wasn't sure Cloudhawk was actually capable of pulling this off.

He was back in thirty minutes.

Clang!

He threw a simple silver dagger at her feet.

She stared at it with eyes so wide they threatened to roll out of her head. She snatched it up as though it were a precious treasure, and there was even a rosy hue that sprang up on her snow-white cheeks. It wasn't clear whether it was because she was nervous or excited. "This is the ancient relic they dug up? Why does it look so simple?"

"Give it here."

He grabbed it out of her hands while fishing a few coins out of his pocket. He chucked the three coins into the air and whipped the dagger around. Six distinct *clinks* hit the ground – all three coins had been sheered clean in half.

Dawn stared in disbelief. "Is it really that sharp?"

"I've seen a relic like this once before. I think it's called a high-frequency particle blade. It's a rare and ancient weapon." He handed it back to her. "You're lucky."

She was beaming with pleasure. "This is quite the treasure!"

As she fawned over it Cloudhawk felt relief.

Dawn looked about nineteen, a few years older than him, but she was nowhere near as mature. She was obstinate and unruly – in short, a child.

What was complicated about dealing with a girl whose life was so easy? She was simple to deal with; give her a toy and she's happy.

Cloudhawk was pleased with his handling of Dawn. If he'd tried this on the pious and stubborn Selene, or someone arrogant and self-centered like Frost de Winter, it wouldn't have worked. He probably wouldn't have found a way to keep them happy.

He saw this as the beginning.

Man's desire had no limits; no one was satisfied with one, or two, or even three. Once Dawn saw what Cloudhawk was capable of, and knew that she could request his skills at any time, she would be less likely to insult and abuse him.

She had tasted the sweetness of Cloudhawk's sins, but what she didn't realize was she'd just bought into his ploy. The more illicit goods she yearned for the deeper in

she would be until there was no way out.

Chapter 43

Food For Oddball

Cloudhawk was a godless heathen from the wastelands, without morality or respect for laws. He lived by his own code – don't kill if you don't have to, and don't take someone else's food. In his eyes he didn't live an evil life, and taking a dagger that was slated for destruction was no big deal. Certainly nothing to feel guilty about.

Not so for Dawn.

She was a bit of a rebel, but regardless she'd grown up under the rigorous demands of religion. Sure she'd bullied people now and again, but never anything that crossed the line into egregious sin. At worst she'd gotten disapproving looks, but because of her family background there was nothing anyone could do.

This was different. This was taboo.

She liked the dagger, that was undeniable, but it was a relic of the ancient past dug up from the ruins. Collecting things like this was expressly forbidden and if word got out it would cause a scandal for their family. For this reason even holding it made her nervous, but once she took a couple swipes she was convinced.

It was the first time something like this was added to her collection. The excitement was delicious.

So she followed Cloudhawk's example, cutting a few coins in half to test it for herself. The more she saw what the dagger could do the happier she became. "This thing definitely isn't a relic, how can I cut metal like it was mud?"

Currency in the elysian lands were called gold, silver and copper. Although they resembled those materials in texture and color, in fact they were made from a special material given to them by the gods. No typical artisan could work with it and the coins were exceptionally resilient. Typical steel weapons – even if honed to a fine edge – couldn't mar the surface.

"Look at the blade." Cloudhawk pointed out the almost imperceptible black line along

the edge. "I don't understand it well myself, I've only seen one other like it in the wasteland. The secret is that black line. They say it's only a few atoms thick that vibrate very quickly. When it comes in contact with normal materials it slices right through them, that's how it does it."

With nothing beneath her thin robes the curve of Dawn's breasts could be glimpsed from time to time. She wasn't a particularly voluptuous woman, but she wasn't thin either. Her body was covered in finely toned muscle and though her breasts weren't large, they were well proportioned for her figure.

They were close enough that Dawn could feel the heat from Cloudhawk. They were very different, but she didn't find him detestable much to her curiosity. This young man was a filthy wasteland heathen, just coming near her was reason enough to break several of his bones!

The young guy had a peculiar, innate temperament.

Cloudhawk didn't respect her because of her background, nor did he fear her because of her strength or attitude. It seemed that in Cloudhawk's eyes humans weren't separated by class. It didn't matter if you were a noble denizen of the elysian lands or a scavenger eking out a miserable existence in the wasteland. Underneath all that everyone was the same.

Low birth wasn't something to pity. It was no reason to feel inferior. The assertion made Cloudhawk special.

When she looked at him Dawn saw that he was young, but much more was written on his face. She saw a turbulent past, his wild nature, and loneliness. A lone wolf who crossed many leagues of inhospitable desert.

He was a man with a story.

He didn't look special, not outstanding in any way, or even very handsome. Compared with Frost de Winter he couldn't match either, either in appearance or temperament. But he had delicate good looks, pleasing enough to the eye.

It was about then Cloudhawk noticed Dawn staring at him and returned her gaze. He was a plain sort, in not so many words, but if there was one thing that made the wastelander stand out it was his dark eyes.

“You don’t understand much of anything.” [1] When their eyes met Dawn suddenly felt nervous, she wasn’t used to standing so close to other people. She pushed the dagger into its special sheath and backed off a few steps. “How could the wastelands have such curious things? You’re from there, is it fun?”

For a second Cloudhawk didn’t know how to respond. He frowned and dropped his eyes a little, looking off into space. He said before giving his answer. “It’s not someplace you ever want to visit.”

“Why?”

“Too dangerous.”

“Doesn’t that bitch live fine out there?” Her irritation with him was renewed. “Why can she go and I can’t? What does she have that I don’t?!”

There was clearly a *lot* of bad blood between these two women.

Dawn, a woman who grew up in the lap of luxury, a halo over her head and a silver spoon in her mouth, only understood the wasteland based on stories and rumors from other people. She never experienced it for herself, so how could she understand? Selene Cloude had also been cut down several times in their journeys, and even now he couldn’t know whether she was alive or dead.

Dawn was older than Selene, but it was clear to everyone she was much more impulsive. This clueless, dangerous, blindly arrogant woman wouldn’t last a day in the wastes without her family’s help.

“I brought you the dagger you wanted,” Cloudhawk said, looking at her. “My debt has been paid.”

“I keep my promises, no one has ever said otherwise. However...” She lifted the sheathed dagger and, with a harsh light in her eyes, drew it illustratively across her throat. “You and I are the only people who know about what happened today. If a third hears about it, you can bet I’ll...”

Threats like these didn’t frighten Cloudhawk, so he didn’t give it much thought. He’d got what he wanted, to keep his strange little pet safe. And his collusion with Dawn had been established.

That was important. Cloudhawk knew that out here no man could stand alone.

Commander Polaris saved Cloudhawk just so he could use him, and there wasn't anywhere else Cloudhawk could go. That narrow-minded shitkicker Frost de Winter had a hard-on for making his life hell, and Cloudhawk had no other friends in the city. Dawn was the only one he could turn to.

She still hadn't left his room, in fact she still stood there with her eyes fixed on the tiny bird in his hands. A strange expression crossed her face. "Eh? It's better already?"

Indeed the tiny bird's recovery was impressive. It'd been only a little while but it was back to normal already.

It gave its wings a tentative flap then flitted up onto Cloudhawk's shoulder. With its fuzzy little head it nuzzled his neck, which only served to fuel Dawn's jealousy. Such a smart little thing, she thought. What a pity...

Cloudhawk kept his eyes on her warily. "Why are you still here?"

"I go where I want and leave when I feel like it. What's it to you? Don't forget your place, I'm the master of this house and you're a servant who depends on me for a living." Her brows shot up as she made it clear in no uncertain terms what their respective roles were. She punctuated this by walking closer to the bird and looking it over. "Strange, it seems sort of listless."

Cloudhawk also noticed that something didn't seem right. In confirmation a single sensation was shared through their link: *Hungry*.

Cloudhawk frowned at it. "You hungry?"

Dawn, unable to keep her mouth shut for any period of time, replied. "Well if it's hungry then feed it."

"I don't know what it eats," he said with some exasperation.

She looked at him like he was an idiot. "You're a terrible owner, you don't even know how to feed your pet. This is cruelty, you know that?"

The thing had only just been born!

Cloudhawk had never had to look after an animal before, how was he supposed to know what to feed it? Mammals drank milk from their mothers, but birds like this probably ate worms or insects or something.

Dawn saw his confusion and flicked her wrist at him. "Come with me!"

She led him to the mansion's food storage, wherein were stored all sorts of fruits, vegetables, meats and more. There was enough here to feed a thousand people. Crystal-like pillars were interspersed around the room that pumped it full of frigid air. This had to be some sort of cooling equipment they used to keep food fresh.

Like an inexhaustible ball of steam one of the magic lamps illuminated the room. The refrigeration equipment was also constant and so long as it was here in the elysian lands it had plenty of energy to work. Just another perk of this place.

"We have everything here. Seafood, poultry, meat, vegetables, fruit... take a look."

Cloudhawk put the small bird in front of a pile of food, but nothing caught its attention. This took him by surprise and caused some embarrassment. Did it not eat normal food? He stood looking at it, puzzled, when suddenly through their connection he felt the little animal perk up.

It flew over to one of the nearby crystal pillars and proceeded to peck at it with its beak.

"What's it trying to do?"

"I don't know!"

Rattle, rattle.

The energy crystal cracked and a small portion fell off. The bird flew down to where it landed and gobbled it up. Cloudhawk felt its satisfaction. Both he and Dawn stood to the side with surprised expressions as the bird ate another six or seven pieces until its little belly protruded.

How weird that this is what it would eat!

Oddball, he thought. *That seems like a fitting name.* [2]

Dawn pointed at it. “What kind of freak are you raising here?”

Cloudhawk had to wonder what sort of thing this bird was too. A little hesitant, he still shared how the bird was hatched with Dawn. When she heard her face drew together in a frown as though she were thinking deeply, but she’d never heard of anything like this.

Lost in thought she didn’t notice that her robe had come a little loose. Cloudhawk’s gaze just happened to wander and catch a good eyeful of what was beneath.

It was cold in here, didn’t she feel it?

Suddenly she slapped her forehead. “I need you to steal something else.”

1. Parallels?

2. In the interest of full disclosure the writer doesn’t give the bird a name and this sentence is entirely mine. In fact there are several characters who are never given proper names, or even nicknames. For instance the demon’s lieutenants were called ‘the freak in black’ (Stranger Black), ‘big guy with horns’ (Longhorn), and ‘young man with wings’ (Vulture). They follow the pithy naming conventions in Chinese of three syllables, but that doesn’t work in English. It’s the same for the bird, which the writer calls ‘little strange bird,’ but I have chosen to call Oddball because it’s weird and round.

Chapter 44

Divine Creatures

When Cloudhawk came back he was laden with several thick tomes.

Each one looked very old, bound in black leather and engraved with gold filigree. Exquisite and fine, they were absolutely high-value items.

“Oh, back already?!”

Dawn exclaimed when she saw him staggering toward her. It wasn't long ago that she sneered down her nose at him, but now she had a deep respect for his abilities. You couldn't throw a rock in the holy city without striking three fighters, but master thieves were few and far between.

These books had been housed in the library of the Church of Everbright, under the watchful eye of a lauded bishop. Dawn had always wanted to look through them but was never given the chance since the bishop's influence was greater than hers. The Church of Everbright was a mighty organization that even the commander couldn't manipulate. She'd been denied every request to look through these volumes, but now they were hers.

It was nearly dawn.

“This time from a church's collection.” This was his second trip in one night, using his phasing stone to slip away with stolen goods. Each time it was draining, he felt exhausted. “What did you need these for?”

“This fine lady is helping you learn about your bird! Come with me!”

The two sat together and began to peruse the books.

Cloudhawk flipped one open and found that it was an illustrated record of relics. There had to be three hundred or more detailed pictures of relics and a description of what they did. There had to be a couple *thousand* between all these tomes combined. Every notable item throughout Skycloud Domain was recorded here, even a few demon

relics.

Cloudhawk's exhaustion melted away. Suddenly he understood just how valuable these were.

If he could learn what all these relics did, where they were, and who held them he would be an absolute nightmare for the city's demonhunters.

He finally figured out what Dawn was thinking, too. If Oddball was a relic there had to be some record of it somewhere in these books.

They sat side by side and started leafing through pages. Dawn had ordered Cloudhawk to steal these books so they could learn about the bird, yes, but also because she wanted to see all of these entries herself. Her greedy nature was on full display.

One thousand two hundred relics were recorded here. Eight or nine hundred of them were held by known persons while the three or so others were still lost. Some of those were gone because they'd been misplaced, but others were in the care of secret guardians that weren't even written in the books.

"Skycloud Domain has this many relics? It's... quite eye-opening!"

Dawn pored over the contents, even coming across the entry for Terrangelica. However, she came to the end of the first book without any more information about the little bird.

Cloudhawk came across an interesting article in his tome.

The Gospel of the Sands, it read.

A relic from the war between gods and demons a thousand years ago. This demonic tool is possessed of great and mysterious power and is oft in the hands of demonic elders and high-stationed commanders. It was once used to summon a sandstorm a thousand li in diameter that swallowed an entire army. It has also been said to have summoned more than a hundred sand beasts. At its most potent the relic can summon a sand mirror image of the bearer.

Below was more specific information about the gospel. For instance its last known location, the dates it was witnessed, who had it, what battles it was used in and so on. For Cloudhawk it was almost surreal. He knew it was pretty good the times he'd used

it, but from what he was reading here the Gospel of the Sands was pretty incredible.

The relic's strength was beyond his imagination.

What especially caught his notice was the bit about a sand avatar that possessed some of the power of the person... Cloudhawk couldn't fight back the creeping terror that welled up inside him. What if the demon he fought wasn't actually the demon? What if the Caliph of the Sands wasn't really dead?

Cloudhawk quickly turned the pages. Near the end of the book was a section on legendary relics.

Relics were divided into categories, weak and strong. There were simple relics, high-grade relics, epic relics, and the most powerful called legendary relics. Simple relics were weaker, like Moonspirit's tracker torque or Traceless Shadow's arrow. Epic relics were powerful tools that only high ranking demonhunters could command. Examples were Selene's Crossblade of Light, Frost de Winter's Frozen Dirge and Dawn's Terrangelica.

Legendary relics were something else entirely and the prerequisites to use them were even more daunting. They were far more powerful than even their epic counterparts, while also being more complex and involved. Each one had a rich backstory and were almost exclusively in the hands of master demonhunters.

Legendary relics were so strong that usually it required more than one person to activate them. They were analogues to the incredible power of gods and demons. From ancient times to this day there were only very few of them, and even fewer that were recorded here. Like a flash fire they raged during the great war, then vanished just as quickly from the world of man.

What was written here were some of the greatest secrets ever written!

Dawn's attention was drawn to his book as well, and as though of one mind they looked in shock through the pages.

'Mace of Belial.' A legendary demon relic witnessed at the outset of the War. Bearer, unknown. Appearance, unknown. Whereabouts, unknown. Reputed to be capable of opening a portal to Hell, resurrect the dead as mindless servants, and command them as an undead army.

'Blade of Oblivion.' A legendary demon relic that appeared during the middle period of the War. Said to be the weapon of the demons' commander. Pointing it at the sky made the heavens fall, piercing the ground caused the earth to collapse. Gods and demons alike could not stand against its power. It was destroyed in battle by the king of the gods, and what remains of it has been lost.

"The Demon King's Cuirass." Its true name is unknown. Specific powers, unknown. Appearance, unknown. Only the ruler of the demon horde may wear it. It is said to be capable of destroying space and time. It was destroyed during the War through the combined effort of the gods, and thus defeated the Demon King.

The relics listed here were fabulous and terrible. All of them were the tools of the demons, and that made sense for they were incredible items that commanded world-rending power. The gods were mysterious and did not want to reveal their secret powers, so they were not gathered here.

Dawn was more and more stunned from one relic to the next.

Only Cloudhawk's gospel was recorded here, an epic-level relic. His invisibility cloak and the phasing stone were nowhere to be found.

Perhaps that would be expected. The cloak had come from a strange and alien place, and the stone was the key to other dimensions.

If those two relics didn't appear here it meant they weren't of this world. So where did they come from?

Dawn recognized this as well. She knew Cloudhawk had two distinct abilities; the first was disappearing like a ghost, and the second was being able to pass through almost any barrier. That's how he was able to be a thief no demonhunter could rival.

How odd that those relics wouldn't be here.

They'd gone through the books once already and there were all sorts of relics with all sorts of spectacular powers. One of them could be embedded in the body, and another that could fuse to it. Strange and incredible things.

"I found it!"

In fact there were two that seemed to fit.

One referenced the city's seraphs, who served as protectors and maintainers. All they did was work tirelessly. They were different from Oddball in that they didn't have free will or felt emotion. They also didn't need to eat. They didn't seem to be what they were looking for.

The second were mythical protectors of the Sanctuary: the Manticor.

Dawn had seen a guardian once. She thought it was just another sort of animal that grew and reproduced normally. However here it showed that these creatures were anything but normal. They were created, artificially made servants – relics that they called divine beasts.

“Here it says divine beasts can be thought of as growing relics. They develop through all the stages, from infancy to adulthood and as they grow older they become more intelligent. Look here, they need energy but far more than normal food can offer. You should remember that you can't let the bird go hungry otherwise the consequences could be serious. It could degrade.”

“Anything with a lot of energy would work?”

“Special-made Temple beast feed is best. It'd help it grow quicker.”

She continued to squint at the paper. These creatures and relics were remarkably similar, only some special process gave divine beasts a simulacrum of life. The one who hatched them became master, and only they were able to command them and their abilities. No one else would get a reaction.

Ugh! How unfortunate!

Dawn had to ultimately give up her covetous thoughts. “Why couldn't I have been so lucky? It looks like the bird belongs to you through the will of the gods. A heavenly gift, make sure you treat it well.”

She then gathered up the books and put them away in her library.

Cloudhawk gaped at her. “Now that we found what we wanted why are you keeping the books?”

“Hmph, now that they’re here they belong to me!” She spoke like she had all the right in the world to demand them. “I worked so hard to find the answer for you. I deserve something for my trouble.”

All of this hadn’t been a guise, had it? A ploy just to have him fetch something else she lusted after? Perhaps. After all they didn’t learn much and now the books were safely tucked away with her other toys.

Dawn patted his shoulder and smirked. “Oh, stop it with the ugly faces. You know what these books are worth. How could we just give them back? Relax, I get our relationship. From now on you get me what I want, and I do the rest. Split the take thirty-seventy, what do you say? I need money to buy new relics and you need cash to feed your pet. You can’t just let it eat anything, and feed is expensive. In fact I’m the only person who can help you get it. I’m the only person who’ll help you!”

Over the last few days Cloudhawk had built up an image of elysians in his mind – obstinate, inflexible, and righteous. This woman proved him wrong.

The next day.

News of a theft at the Church of Everbright began to spread. The bishop even ordered a special task force to sift through every corner of the building, re-cataloguing every book, but to no avail. The circumstances of their disappearance was too bizarre, for there was no sign of forced entry or any indications of foul play.

And so word of a mysterious thief began to spread throughout the city.

Cloudhawk and Dawn began their sordid partnership. He stole the goods and she got rid of them. In just a matter of days the city was busy with a slew of unsolvable thievery cases. For instance, an army general’s precious sword up and vanished like it grew legs. A few legendary gemstones from a local merchant princess were suddenly gone. Special mystical ointments and medicines had disappeared from family vaults.

The crimes were numerous but spread out, and the victims were different every time. Cloudhawk made things more confusing by planting false evidence and misleading clues to keep investigators off the scent.

Cloudhawk went out every night and brought his ill-gotten goods back to Dawn. She then concocted different ways to fence them, and in the process they both made a pretty penny.

Chapter 45

Home of the Demonhunters

A precious gem was sold, exchanged for a clinking pouch of a few hundred gold coins. The sound they made was elating.

The Polaris family was among the top five most influential households in Skycloud Domain, yet compared to their peers they were poor. In addition to Dawn's spendthrift nature, it was the first time she'd ever had access to so much money.

"Maybe we've gone a little too far these last couple of days." Cloudhawk tried to drop the hint, seeing that the young templar had become giddy from their success. "Enough is enough, if we keep this up there's gonna be trouble."

"Bullshit!" She snorted at him. "You think I need your warnings? Don't forget your place!"

She fished out some of the coins after her harsh response and shoved them into Cloudhawk's hand. When she saw the surprised look on her face she added imperiously, "So long as you keep loyal to your master, you will be generously rewarded. This is for bird food."

Yet Cloudhawk scowled. *Who would want you as a master*, he thought bitterly. However he bit his lip once he considered how much taking care of Oddball was going to cost.

Dawn's brows began to rise. "Is there a problem?"

"Nope!"

Cloudhawk looked down at the coins. It was better than nothing, and gold coins had prime purchasing power in the city. He only had a vague understanding of how money worked but he remembered what happened to Barb in the Sandbar. Five silver coins earned her one drink. He also knew one trip for the Bloomnettle Company earned them forty or fifty silvers.

One gold coin would buy him fifty glasses of booze, and would have saved Old Thistle

the danger of two trips.

There were enough coins in his hands to set a common man up with enough food and drink for the rest of their life. And it was only a tenth of what Dawn pocketed!

No wonder she was so thrilled. Even born into a powerful family this was a princely sum. He saw it in her eyes, Cloudhawk had become Dawn's cash cow. Still he had to admire her on some level, boldly walking around with ill-gotten riches in her pocket. Once again his vision of the elysians was turned upside down. If she'd been born in the wastelands she would have done very well for herself.

No wonder Dawn and Selene were at odds, too. Selene was firm in her religious zealotry, aloof, and cold of temperament. She absolutely would have despised stealing like this, even if it meant starving to death. Yet Dawn walked around unburdened. To her the ones they were stealing from were the uber-rich. The losses meant nothing to them but loomed large in her eyes. She was basically robbing the rich to pay the poor.

Cloudhawk put the coins away. "So what's the plan?"

"With all the money you've saved shouldn't it be obvious?" She rolled her eyes. "Buy your generous and beautiful hostess a drink."

Cloudhawk had spent enough time with Dawn to know she didn't give a shit about anyone but herself. She didn't even know the meaning of the word respect, especially in the words she chose. Cloudhawk was a stranger in a strange land and she supposedly considered herself hostess. Still she hadn't said anything nasty, it was just the way she was.

"Where?"

"I'll bring you somewhere nice!"

Dawn hailed the family carriage and they left for a secluded sector of the city.

They came to a street lined with colonnades, each one a thousand meters tall and lined into the distance. The road was wide enough that four or five carriages could pass through side by side. The edges were lined with finely decorated shops, yet strangely there weren't many people.

A sign hung on the entablature, clear as day – Home of the Demonhunters.

This stretch of street was designed for members of the order specifically, and they were the only ones allowed in. That meant ninety percent of the city's inhabitants were forbidden.

No one gave Cloudhawk any trouble since he was there with Dawn. She explained their surroundings as they walked further in. "This area belongs to the Order of Demonhunters. It's where most of them live, eat, drink, and play. There are stores where they can purchase supplies, buy relics, and so on. Everything a demonhunter could want is here. It's also where they come to sell off anything they picked up on a mission. All sorts of things are thrown together, but if you're lucky you might come across a treasure or two."

It wasn't the first time Cloudhawk had heard about the demonhunter order.

It was the largest collection of demonhunters in the elysian lands, apparently. It was a semi-official collective with a loose organizational structure. Barb was a member. The majority were common demonhunters like her, along with a few of nobler standing who preferred their freedom. Accept a few missions from the order, collect the commission, and avoid any administrative constraints.

Dawn's purpose in coming here was obvious – spend! There was no better place for a demonhunter to get rid of the coin burning holes in their pocket.

An equipment shop came into view, complete with a smoldering forge that gave it a rough-and-tumble atmosphere. The walls were lined with triangular steel weapons instantly recognized as exorcist staffs. Their size and make were not completely consistent and they could be bought or custom-made to fit a specific need.

Exorcist staffs ranged from one or two gold to a dozen or so. Higher cost meant better quality. Besides staffs the store also had demonhunter armor, combat boots, and so forth. Cloudhawk saw how impressive this stuff was while out in the wastelands. Demonhunter leather was lightweight and thin so that it didn't get in the way of fighting, but also firm. Typical guns couldn't penetrate it. Like the staffs there were also a wide range of prices – basically, you got what you paid for.

The sprawling market had more stores than he could count.

One of them was in the shape of an oversized treehouse and it served as a pharmacy. It had all sorts of precious and expensive medicines on offer, some which aided in

healing and others that improved combat prowess.

Another place looked like it'd been carved out of moonstone. The lamps inside filled the area around it with fantastical glowing images. It was a bar.

The most eye-catching was the main building which was a miniature white castle. Travel-weary demonhunters came and went with regularity. This was the 'Home of the Demonhunters,' headquarters of the order and the heart of the eponymous street.

Cloudhawk had never seen so many demonhunters in one place. Each one of them seethed with ability. He figured everyone here had to be people of significant talent, and what's more they all seemed to be avoiding the woman he was with. When they recognized Dawn they either went out of their way to give her room or simply turned around. Not a single one was in a hurry to come and talk. It wasn't hard to guess how popular she was around these parts.

"Is that the young mistress of the Polaris household?"

They'd almost reached the end of the street before someone was brave enough to approach them.

He was a young man of obvious talent. If Frost de Winter was described as cold then this guy was lava. If Frost was a glacier, then he was the sun. They were completely opposite.

The guy was a mass of muscle, chiseled and all hard angles, big but not heavy. He had a head of red hair and a face that couldn't be described as handsome, certainly in contrast to Frost de Winter's gallant look. However, from head to toe, from the inside out, he was bursting with masculine charm. Intense, but not overbearing. He had a pleasant aura that made you feel safe, so he probably wasn't far behind Frost de Winter in competing for girls' hearts.

Dawn saw him coming and twisted her pretty mouth into a smirk. Her eyes narrowed. "Blaze!" ^[1]

Cloudhawk had never heard of this guy Blaze before. However he could tell just by Dawn's reaction that he was strong and came from a respected background.

"You're probably still not convinced I'm better after the last time I spanked you, huh?" As she spoke she tapped the hilt of the sword she held against the ground. "Wanna go

another round?”

She said it loud enough that it caught a few ears. Demonhunters started to gather round. It was also good for some drama when a pair of big names met here.

This she-devil put the fear of the gods into everyone when they saw her. It didn't matter how pretty she was, she didn't have any fans. Blaze was the opposite, and despite being young was also one of the order's vice-commanders. He spent a lot of his time managing things here, so he had a good reputation and close contacts.

If these two were going to spar then the onlookers were certainly hoping Blaze would teach Dawn a lesson.

Blaze answered with a bitter grin. “Mistress Dawn hasn't changed one bit. Unfortunately, today isn't a good day for a rematch.”

She sniffed. “If you're scared, just say so. There's no shame in losing to me! Everyone knows the order's gone downhill without Master Baldur's leadership. Not one of you is worth your salt!”

Her crass words angered the demonhunters who'd stopped to watch. Cloudhawk stood to one side and could only manage a wry smirk. ^[2]

Dawn definitely had a barbed tongue. She seemed only too anxious to piss off everyone she came across. Blaze's amicable face wrinkled into a scowl when she said it, but to Cloudhawk's surprise he didn't take the bait.

“Don't you get bored with fighting all the time? Today is the order's treasure drawing. I wanted to make sure the Polaris family's representative didn't miss it.”

“Oh yeah? Well that's a happy coincidence, I guess I can cut you some slack.”

She always had to get in a slap to the face. Her dismissive answer was insulting and thick with contempt, but Blaze didn't seem bothered. His gregarious personality didn't match his fiery appearance.

“I don't think I've see your friend before,” he said, looking Cloudhawk over. “He new?”

Cloudhawk had slipped his mask on when they left the commander's mansion so Blaze couldn't see his face. He could see the bird on his shoulder, though, and gave it a

curious stare.

He got a good feeling from this guy, but as he was about to introduce himself Dawn cut in. “Take a good look, this is my loyal manservant. If any of you dare bother him I won’t stop punching until you’re looking for your teeth!”

“Is that so.” Blaze did as she asked and peered closer at Cloudhawk. “Well, if you’re with Miss Polaris then you’re welcome to join the festivities.”

Dawn shot Cloudhawk a sideways glance as if to say, “What about that? Big sis can take care of you, eh? No one will bother you so long as they know you belong to me!”

Cloudhawk felt a dozen pairs of angry eyes settle on him, and suddenly he was *very* happy he’d chosen to wear his mask. If he hadn’t, the next time he went out he’d probably wind up dead.

1. His name is ‘Burning Yang’ – yang is a complicated character, the same one used in ‘yin-yang.’ It’s a very on-the-nose choice for this guy because it’s indicative of everything the writer just described him as; masculine, positive, forward in personality, powerful, bright, fiery. Alternatively yin is feminine, weak, dark, low, slow, introspective. Be careful not to conflate them with good and bad, though, because that is not how they’re defined. Instead they’re meant as reflections of one another, two sides of a coin irrespective of moral assumptions. Anyway, rant over.

2. I see this a lot. Typically if you see the term ‘wry smirk’ it evokes a sense of dry or mocking humor, maybe even self-effacing. Here, though, it seems clearly meant to display annoyance for her actions from Cloudhawk.

Chapter 46

The Collection Convention

Bad company... the worst! Cloudhawk had to draw the line in the relationship between him and this crazy woman somewhere.

His plight in this city was already a difficult and awkward one without her making it worse. Frost and most of the Cloude family already had it out for him, especially after he'd tried to burn down the governor's mansion. Lord Arcturus might have chosen to let it go, but it wasn't so easy for the others. The longer he spent with Dawn the more enemies he made, soon there wouldn't be anywhere in the city he could go safely.

You have your family and the sanctuary to back you up. I got nobody!

Dawn was simply incapable of restraining herself. Holding Terrangelica tight in her arms she strode into the bar with head held high.

The Fiend and Huntsman pub was the only establishment that catered exclusively to demonhunters. Seeing as these hunters were highly respected in the city, their chosen watering hole could not be expected to be humble. Cloudhawk got the strange sensation he was walking into a jungle as he stepped inside

Everything was covered in shrubs and foliage. Fruits as large as pumpkins hung from tree branches and glowed with gentle light. No insects buzzed and the whole place was comfortable and clean. There weren't many tables or chairs, but everything was exquisitely decorated and fastidiously cared for. Even the servers were newly minted demonhunters of the order.

In other words, no one here was your typical citizen. The Fiend and Huntsman was built specifically for one group of people.

An imposter like Cloudhawk wouldn't be allowed in normally, but his relationship with Dawn bought him entrance. Blaze was a vice-commander of the order and one of this area's administrators and was as magnanimous and accommodating as a man should be. Dawn's biting words hadn't gotten his blood up, instead he led them over to one of the trees and up the ladder to a platform built in its canopy. It was actually a

beautifully decorated private space where you could see the whole bar below.

Blaze offered them a seat. “The collection convention will start soon. I hope Lady Polaris comes away with a few things she likes.”

Dawn showed him no gratitude. “So chatty. You’re like a cursed rock, how am I supposed to feel lucky with you around?”

Blaze forced a resentful smile. But before he left he gave Cloudhawk one last curious look.

Dawn settled into a large chair, her long pale legs folded beneath her. As she plucked fruit from a wooden bowl before her, she stared down at a platform in the middle of the pub.

“What are you mute? Don’t you want to ask what the collection convention is?”

Cloudhawk absently scratched Oddball’s fluffy head. “I don’t need to since you’re going to tell me anyway.”

Dawn Polaris couldn’t keep her mouth shut if you paid her. Cloudhawk hadn’t been around her long but he was beginning to figure her out. She wasn’t going to waste an opportunity to flap her lips at him.

“The Order of Demonhunters often go out to old battlegrounds of the war between gods and demons. They often come back with old treasures that were left behind, including a fair number of relics. Once they get enough they hold what they call a collection convention. It’s an auction they hold every month or two.

Cloudhawk paused. “A relic auction?”

Of course Cloudhawk knew how much relics could be worth. There were all kinds with various abilities and their strength was determined by the demonhunter who used them. Ordinary people couldn’t create relics. That was a process only known by the gods. As a result relic weapons were tokens of their divine authority.

Cloudhawk remembered the Bloodsoaked Queen – Selene Cloude – telling him once that all the relics in the elysian lands were registered. Every relic, the family it belonged to, and the demonhunter who held it was written down. When one went missing it was a big deal and the city sent out investigators to learn what happened.

Claudia, Raith, and other demonhunters like them from noble families had special heirloom relics. Barb and other common demonhunters didn't have the luxury of having relics handed down to them. Thus, since these relics were held by only a small subset of people, they were usually both rare and expensive.

For the last few days Cloudhawk had been stealing typical riches, he'd never had the gall to pilfer a relic. In his heart he knew that a rich family would eventually forget the loss of jewels and money, but a relic was something else.

For a pub to start selling them, then, was unexpected to say the least.

She unfurled her legs and went on, continuing to fling fruit into her mouth. "Now don't misunderstand, relics aren't so easy to get your hands on. It's all a gamble."

"What do you mean?"

"Ugh, give me a break. Does your brain work at all?" She pointed to her temple and wagged her finger in a circle. "These are dug up from ancient battlefields so most of the relics are either broken or just pieces. They're useless."

Cloudhawk raised his eyebrows at her. "Useless."

"Well, most of the time. From time to time they're put a decent item up for auction but only maybe ten in a year. Compared to the several hundred or a thousand other items they try to pawn off your chances are pretty low as you can imagine. Most of my assets I've poured into this sort of thing and I haven't bought a winner yet."

"And people actually come here to buy this stuff."

"Of course, some of it is worth good money. Pick up enough dog shit to gather all the pieces of something good, and you can bring it to the sanctuary. For a tack of coins they might be able to re-forged it for you. A working relic's value can't be measured in cash."

So troublesome? Cloudhawk was quickly losing interest.

It was definitely easier to try and understand the phasing ability of the stone around his neck. He could just use it to travel to other strange worlds and find relics laying around there. Anyway, he only had a few coins clinking around in his pocket. He looked around and saw a hundred or so demonhunters crowding the tables, most of them

from affluent backgrounds. The few gold he had was more than enough for a normal guy, but here they amounted to little of anything.

“Ladies and gentlemen, sorry you’ve been waiting!” Blaze appeared on the stage in the center of the pub. “Thank you all for coming to participate in the Order of Demonhunters’ collection convention. This time we have more treasures than ever before. In the interest of fairness and honesty we must remind you that none of these items have gone through an appraisal process – their quality cannot be promised. You, ladies and gentlemen, will have to have a sharp eye and a little bit of luck. And luck is what I wish to each of you!”

Dawn planted her feet back on the floor. The plate of fruit was ignored as she leaned in, attentive and serious.

Attendants from the Order carried in a case and opened pulled the first item out from it. It was a simple-looking bronze sword and yet every eye went wide. It hadn’t been authenticated but at least it looked pretty. Its appearance alone would earn it a few bids.

“The base price for this one is fifty gold. Bid increases have to be a minimum of five gold.”

Dawn bleated out her bid almost before he could finish. “Fifty-five!”

When they saw who cried out the boisterous pub grew quiet. Who wasn’t aware of Dawn’s confrontational reputation? Her offer caused anyone else who might have been interested to reconsider. It looked like her crappy attitude did have its benefits.

But while she could cow lower class demonhunters, she couldn’t intimidate everyone. A fat man hobbled to his feet. “Sixty-five!”

Another middle-aged man from an important family was next. “Seventy!”

And then an elderly man. “Seventy-five!”

“*One hundred!*” Dawn refused to be outplayed.

Anyoen could see this bronze sword was no mere trinket. If its surface were made complete perhaps it could be useful. Who knows, it could even be a relic. If that were the case then a thousand gold coins was a good price. That’s why it tripled to one

hundred and fifty gold coins in only a few seconds.

Sweat and begun to pop up on Dawn's forehead. She'd only brought a few hundred gold with her and there were many more items to see. If she saw something else she liked she might no longer be competitive.

"One hundred fifty-five!"

She gritted her teeth and growled the words.

"One hundred sixty!" The old man calmly outbid her. He was her last opponent, everyone else had fallen silent already.

Cloudhawk could almost see steam coming out of her eyes. She recognized the old man, it was the dean of the Order of Demonhunters. He was a highly respected elder of the city, how was she supposed to compete?

Cloudhawk held his tongue and just let his eyes slip closed. He was listening carefully to something.

There was the faintest sound reverberating from the bronze sword, but to Cloudhawk it sounded frayed and incoherent. It meant the damage to it was much more than its appearance would lead one to believe. Being largely destroyed there was very little hope it getting it repaired.

"That thing is useless," Cloudhawk muttered to Dawn. She was drenched in sweat. "You're gonna get robbed."

Dawn paused. "You say it's useless and I'm just supposed to believe you? What are you, a relic expert? Only an appraiser would know for sure and it takes them a couple hours to figure it out. You haven't even touched it, what makes you think you know anything? *I* can tell that this is one of their most complete relics."

"I can do better than an appraiser." He looked back at her full of confidence. "Listen to me, I'm not wrong."

"Yeah, and what if your intuition is bad? What then?"

"I'll take on the cost of any bad item or poor bid you get. You can take the relic cloak off my back as compensation." He tapped it with a finger. "Now *this* is a high-grade

relic.”

“A good relic? And you’d be willing to part with it?” Her eyes veritably twinkled.

“But if I’m right then we split today’s down the middle.”

“Alright, it’s a deal!”

However Dawn didn’t stop bidding. She’d decided to listen to Cloudhawk, but that didn’t stop her from pumping up the price a little higher. To her this was ammunition against her opponents; get them to spend all their money on trash and swoop in when the nice items showed up.

By now the sword was two hundred and eighty gold coins. Aurura saw that old man’s face start to turn.

Indeed, a good relic was worth a thousand gold, but it all a gamble. Not every relic that *looked* in good shape actually was. You just improved your chances by betting on several pieces. It came down to risk, and if the old man paid out too much it wouldn’t be worth any reward he harvested.

She saw it on his face and stopped.

At last the hammer fell. The old man walked away with his shiny trinket for two hundred and eighty five gold coins.

Dawn cast a thorny glance toward Cloudhawk. “Now it’s up to you!”

Chapter 47

Shield, Stone, Sword

The Fiend and Huntsman grew ever more boisterous with each item they put on display. The Order's deluge of strange items kept coming; most were weapons like knives and short swords, or bits of broken armor. From time to time more novel items came up for auction.

To an outsider it had to look like a junk trade show! Noble men shouted until their faces were red over heaps of garbage. As prices climbed each shout increased the bid by enough to make a commoner sick with envy.

Dawn asked her advisor: "What about this one, should I bid?"

"No bid!"

"This one? It looks pretty good!"

"Not bad? Is there something wrong with your eyes? Garbage, through and through. You'd buy it just to throw it away."

"Shit. This one, then. It's in excellent condition, we should bid before someone snatches it from us!"

"No way!" Cloudhawk paid her trinkets no mind, his attention was on an item the attendants just pulled out. At once he knew this one was different, its resonance was more complete. The relic was still in rough shape but there was at least a chance it could be fixed. "This one can be repaired but you didn't bring enough cash. Let someone else have it, we'll keep an eye out for something better. And stop glaring at me, you said you'd listen!"

"This is no good, that's no good. You irritate the hell out of me!" She pulled at her platinum hair with both hands.

There were more quality goods during this convention than she'd ever seen before. If she were by herself Dawn would have already snatched up several, but Cloudhawk's

resolute denial forced her to just sit and stare.

One relic after another was offered. One after another they were sold.

Cloudhawk could see why the order held this collection convention, it had to be hugely profitable. Besides the one item that seemed halfway decent, everything else was useless scrap or mostly ruined.

But even so they were going for a third or a half of the standard market price for relics. Parts of relics were bought for a tenth of the price. It was easy to see how much profit the Order of Demonhunters was walking away with.

The demonhunters here weren't stupid. They knew maybe one piece in ten was worth anything, but still they happily participated. There were relics out there worth more than any amount of money they spent. A one in ten chance wasn't so bad when one considered the potential reward.

The auction had reached its halfway point.

By this point they'd already paraded nearly twenty relics or relic pieces before the audience. Dawn had bid on several of them, but only in order to inflate their price. That's not to say she wasn't eager to grab a few of them, however Cloudhawk's insistence always won out.

But for a girl like her how could she not feel suffocated by it?

Usually *she* was the one pushing other people around, what was going on here? Cloudhawk was driving her absolutely insane!

With each passing minute she was growing more uncomfortable, more likely to explode. Cloudhawk didn't care. He just shut his eyes almost like he was meditating. Already furious, his seemingly flippant attitude was almost enough to convince Dawn he needed a beating.

She was rolling up her sleeves when suddenly Cloudhawk perked up in surprise. A steady, calm vibration filled the air, a resonance totally different from any of the other items. It was intact. "Got one," he said, "it doesn't matter how much this one costs, buy it."

Dawn managed to clamp down on her boiling anger.

Hmph. I'll spare you for the moment. Let's see whether or not you're full of shit.

A pair of handlers brought out an enormous case and placed it on the stage. When they saw what was inside, the auctioneers fell quiet. It was a thick blue shield you could strap to your arm.

The type of thing it was wasn't important. The first thing they noticed was that its surface was riddled with scars and cracks from combat. Some spots were especially bad, like the top left corner that was missing a chunk. The demonhunters all shook their heads, disinterested.

The relic looked mostly complete but in bad shape. The damage was severe and widespread, so how could it still possibly work as a relic? They would rather have a relic that was broken into several clean pieces than this battered eyesore.

On the one hand repairing it was expensive, assuming it could be repaired at all.

Dawn had been anxious to spend her cash, but her face fell when she saw what it was. She was starting to suspect this weasel wastelander was screwing with her. Was this piece of trash really worth anything?

“Starting price is twenty gold coins. Minimum bid increase is two gold.”

You got what you paid for, and this rugged shield didn't look like much. With an unattractive starting bid as well. Most weren't interested and only a few bidders with more money than they knew what to do with made an offer. Twenty gold was more money than a commoner could dream of, but to many of the wealthy here it was nothing. If it was broken then it was broken, it was a collector's piece at worse. Perhaps it'd make for good decoration.

“This relic is more intact than anything else they've shown. I'm not playing with you!”

They'd agreed to listen to Cloudhawk's suggestions. She would buy what he told her to buy, and ignore what he told her to ignore – that was the deal. For Dawn it seemed like she'd already missed the opportunity to get her hands on a few good deals, only for him to order her to buy this lump of scrap. It rankled her to no end!

When was the last time this beautiful and powerful lady of a noble family was ordered around? But she remembered his promise, and took a pointed look at the cloak he'd sworn to give her if he was wrong. She swallowed her doubts, for the time being.

“Thirty!”

She spat the words distastefully.

A few voices answered as the bidding went on. It was a battered shield but there were still a few who were interested. However, in the end the price didn't get too high and soon it became too much for casual interest. Dawn won it for the final sum of forty six gold coins.

The other auctioneers muttered quietly among themselves. Dawn didn't need to hear to know what they were talking about.

She was not a well-liked member of the Skycloud community, so when she paid a premium for a broken shield they were more than happy to gloat over it. Lady Polaris seemed to have more money than sense. Her grandfather would probably be furious when he saw what she was wasting money on.

“Look!” Dawn said, clenching her fists. “They're all laughing at me! It's your fault!”

“Don't jump to conclusions.” Cloudhawk remained calm. “Pretty soon you'll be thanking me.”

The collection convention continued with excited buyers jostling for treasures. There were a couple pieces they went for several hundred gold coins each. Cloudhawk identified some that were good, others that were bad, a few that could be fixed, but none that were worth the price. He told her to save her money.

Eventually another item caught his attention.

The other items on display had all been shields or weapons, things whose use were evident at a glance. In contrast, though, this relic was about the size of a fist and looked like a yellow stone. Its surface was coarse and etched with strange markings, but otherwise no different from any other rock. What was it? What did it do? Was it part of a relic, or a relic itself?

No one was sure.

Cloudhawk did not hesitate and looked at the pretty woman with him. “This one's good. Buy it, no matter what.”

The bidding started, base price thirty gold coins. Before long it'd risen to sixty – more than double what it started at. Clearly there was some interest, but interest had its limits. No one could tell from the look of it if the stone was a relic or a piece of one. No one could tell from the look of it what it did.

When Dawn bid ninety gold coins for it no one opposed her.

Cloudhawk was pleased, for he was convinced just these two items were already a good haul. However, just as he was getting ready to call it quits he sensed another one in the last batch of the auction.

This one was an ancient black and gold sword.

It was roughly three feet long, relatively short and only two fingers in width. The blade was pitch black and didn't reflect any light, but it did radiate with a faint purple glow. Like the bronze sword from the start of the auction it looked in good condition. However, where the bronze sword's powers had collapsed internally the black and gold sword was whole. It was a fully functioning relic.

Dawn gave Cloudhawk a questioning look. He nodded.

Instantly her eyes lit up, finally a proper treasure. But if it was good enough to catch Dawn's eye, she wasn't going to be the only one. However, its look and aura were unsettling. More than a few of the demonhunters in the audience suspected this had to be a demon relic.

Demon relics and god relics were roughly the same, only demonic relics were aimed more towards the power of death, darkness and decay. There weren't many in the city who could use them.

The bidding started. Shouts and counterbids flew back and forth.

In the end Dawn Polaris won her third piece for a final price tag of two hundred and ninety gold coins. She only got it for this much because the old man from before had spent all his money on previous items, otherwise it was obvious he'd have kept bidding.

By the end of the collection convention they'd come away with one shield, one rock, and one sword. Three relics they now called their own.

Chapter 48

Are You Human?

Attendants brought Dawn her three items sealed in glass cases. One of them amicably approached her. "My Lady, will you need our authentication services? The Order's appraisers are very reliable."

"No need." Cloudhawk cut them off. "We'll have them authenticated ourselves."

Dawn Polaris was not happy with his choice. *Hey*, she said to herself, *remember who the boss is here! Who said you could make decision?*

Skycloud city was a martial place, and the demonhunters were a martial sort. The street they called the Home of the Demomhunters had many rooms for rent, stocked with various tools. Cloudhawk thought they would be fin places to test these relics out. He had Dawn purchase them a two-hundred square meter space with some practice dummies for a gold coin.

They weren't looking for an appraiser. Why get a training room?

Unaware of her skepticism Cloudhawk looked pointedly at the box. "Alright let's see."

Her pretty face scrunched up like he was speaking a foreign language.

"What are you doing standing there like an idiot? After spending so much money don't you want to know what they do?"

She gaped at him like he was an alien. "Know what? You don't mean this relics!"

"That's a dumbass question."

Her mind was veritably blown, so much she didn't respond to his insult. Suddenly she was convinced he was crazy. What auctioned relic could just be picked up and used? *He* was the dumbass!

Cloudhawk paid her shock no mind, opened the first case and pulled out the large

shield. The battle-scarred item was fifty centimeters tall ^[1], black all over and made purely out of metal. However when he picked it up it was surprisingly light.

On the inside of the shield he saw runes that were typical for many relics. He used what he'd learned to read out the name: "Concussion shield."

"What a waste of time! You backwoods wastelander yokel, what do you know about relics?" Dawn glowered at the mangled shield then offered a sneer full of malicious promise. "You think you can just pick up a strange relic willy-nilly and use it? I don't know whether you're naïve or just stupid. If you can make that thing work than *you* can be *my* boss!"

"Whatever, I'm not interested in being the boss of someone who'd just cut the legs out from under me." Cloudhawk turned around and looked at her. "I only want you to treat me like an equal!"

Dawn Polaris met his dark eyes straight on. His wasn't a normal stare. Cloudhawk's eyes were full of self-confidence and calm. He was unique, but she wasn't sure what it was about him that made her feel that way.

The inside of the buckler was fitting with a sort of sleeve. Slipping one's left arm inside fixed the shield in place. Cloudhawk first shrugged his arm to get used to its weight. His eyes swept around the training area and eventually landed on a training dummy nearby.

These demons were specially made for demonhunters to help them practice their skills. They were made from wood but only the highest quality, hardy enough to take several blows from an exorcist staff. That fact was enough to prove how tough they were.

Let's get this started.

Cloudhawk started to run under Dawn's incredulous gaze. As his speed picked up he held the buckler in front of him. His eyes were closed, all of his focus on the shield searching for its resonance – and then something unexpected happened.

The buckler began to shimmer with white light.

Cloudhawk slammed right into the dummy, and when his shield met the wood it released a burst of light in visible ripples. All the space around it warped as all of a

sudden the roar of wind filled the training room.

Bang!

Dawn's ears rang as a peel of thunder erupted. Struck full on by the force of impact the training dummy was blasted away. It hit the wall then clattered to the floor covered in cracks. The dent it left in the wall proved what sort of force was behind Cloudhawk's charge.

In a real fight it didn't matter whether he was facing a man or a bull, its guts would be splashed all over the floor after a hit like that. Believe it or not, this shoddy- looking beat up buckler was fully functional.

Dawn Polaris stared at him with her mouth hanging open, wide enough to fit an apple.

"Well that was satisfying!" Cloudhawk trotted over, pulled off the shield then handed it to her. "Want to give it a go?"

She swallowed and looked over at the damaged wall. From the display she could tell this relic was the type that could manipulate both air and wind – precisely the kind of relics Dawn was skilled with. In fact the mirror she used to protect herself used what was called 'wind-type protection.' It thickened the air into an invisible shell to ward off attacks.

Although it was technically armor the concussion shield could also attack. So, surprisingly, it was a fine relic! Without saying another word she pulled the shield onto her arm. Dawn didn't copy Cloudhawk's wild charge, opting instead to walk over and stand in front of one of the dummies.

She reached out with her psychic energy then swung the shield.

The burst of power this time was several times more powerful than the last. Cloudhawk was too close and was almost thrown to the floor, while the dummy exploded into splinters. Bits of wood covered the room.

Dawn was nearly wild with joy. "This is incredible!"

Cloudhawk had a talent for relics. He could pick one up and use it faster than any other demonhunter. But for strength, he only had about one fifth the power of this woman. If Dawn became proficient with this shield what sort of terrible force could she

produce? The differences in their skills were obvious!

The next time Dawn looked at Cloudhawk the disdain was gone from her eyes. Instead there was respect, genuine respect.^[2] She'd never felt that for a peer before, especially someone so much younger than her.

How did he do that?

From the outside this relic looked useless, but Cloudhawk looked past its surface. Dawn paid a sum that she wouldn't have believed even in her wildest dreams. This wasn't just good fortune, this was like a gift from heaven!

What about its scarred surface? That wasn't a problem, a few hundred gold coins would convince the sanctuary's craftsmen to fix it right up. Since its core was still intact repairing it to like-new would not be difficult.

"Let's keep going!"

Cloudhawk picked up the small lump of stone next. Dawn Polaris gathered in close. She didn't mind being so near to him now, her glittering eyes were focused on the relic instead. She peered closely at it for a moment. "This rock is a relic? It doesn't look like it at all!"

"Titan Rock'? Interesting!"

Cloudhawk saw the name scrawled on it but didn't do much more investigating. He sought out its resonance with his psychic power and when they mingled he instantly felt weighed down. Unconsciously chucked it away and when it hit the ground it did so with a deafening bang.

The fist-sized rock had grown to the size of a wash basin by the time it landed.

Shimmering runes slithered across its surface and it quivered back and forth like an angry animal. It continued to grow larger before their eyes, up to the size of an ox.

Both Cloudhawk and Dawn looked at it in shock. Was this relic meant to be thrown at their enemies and smashed beneath it? What a let down...

Crack-crack-crack!

The rock had stopped expanding, but was still transforming. As cracked spread all over its surface what came next surprised them even more. It actually *stood up*, in the shape of a man a hundred and eighty centimeters tall. A soldier made completely out of stone, with a pair of glowing red eyes. Its arms with thick and threatening.

One boulder-sized fist shot out and a dummy went flying. A leg thick as a stone column kicked, and a dummy mad from stone was crushed to dust.

Dawn watched with wide and ecstatic eyes. The relic summoned a weapon – a stone soldier with astonishing strength, capable of following commands. If Cloudhawk could summon a golem this strong what was she capable of? This was another high-grade relic!

What thrilled her the most was this ‘titan rock’ was earth focused.

Dawn’s talents allowed her to use two sorts of relics; wind, and earth. The aegis mirror manipulated the power of the wind and Terrangelica manipulated earth. Cloudhawk had managed to help her find two relics perfectly matched to her talents.

It was almost like they were custom made for her!

Her enthusiasm and joy was easy to imagine and she had to stop herself from kissing Cloudhawk. But in the midst of her exhilaration another thought crossed her mind. When it did her joy turned to shock, then amazement, then an inexplicable cold.

“You... you... you...”

She backed away from him. Her eyes fixed on Cloudhawk with a threatening glare. This she-devil, who feared nothing and no one within Skycloud City, was rendered speechless.

Cloudhawk gave her a weird look. “What?”

Dawn Polaris swallowed hard. “Are you human? How many talents do you actually have?!”

1. The math here struggled to match up with the description of the shield. It’s referred to as ‘a gigantic arm shield.’ I’m assuming arm shield probably refers more to a buckler

- a smallish shield that's slipped onto the arm or held and used to deflect or parry. Bucklers can go up to 45 centimeters, typically. So I guess 'gigantic' means five centimeters larger than normal.

2. Technically the word he uses twice is 'worship', but that's not right - it goes completely counter to her nature.

Chapter 49

Limits

Everything Dawn knew about the world was shattered. The shock it caused her was intense. Not because she had a weak mental constitution, but because what Cloudhawk showed was incomprehensible.

She'd never heard of someone being able to sense a relic's power without even touching it. If everyone had access to such an ability, the Order of Demonhunters wouldn't make any money. It was also unheard of that someone could use so many different kinds of relics – Cloudhawk's talents seemed to be without limitation. He was able to call on the power of any relic he touched.

It didn't matter that he was low born. It didn't matter that he was not strong. These two facts were enough that no one in Skycloud City would be right in overlooking him. These skills made him special. He was as notable as any other talent in the city.

Once Cloudhawk's psychic energy was spent, the golem broke apart of its own accord, like snow on a sunny day. After only a few seconds the stone was back to being fist sized and, like it knew who its master was – returned to Cloudhawk's hand.

“Do you want to give it a try?”

Cloudhawk turned a blind eye to Dawn's shock. He tossed the rock to her.

She caught it in both hands and let the rock settle in her palms. As she looked it over thrill overtook her shock, and Dawn's powerful psychic power poured out. Once again the rock quickly began to transform.

Boom!

This transformation was several times faster than when Cloudhawk had tried. Where it landed a sizeable dent was left in the floor. Beyond changing fast it also immediately swelled to the size of a baby elephant before taking on humanoid characteristics. Once it was finished a two hundred and forty centimeter tall man of stone occupied the center of the room. He towered over them imposingly.

If Cloudhawk's summoned golem was a chimp, than this was a mountain gorilla!

He also found it interesting that this golem was far thicker, like it was covered in a suit of stone armor. It also carried a two-meter long war hammer in its gravely grip.

Incredible! It made its own weapons, too!

Dawn called out in surprise and delight as she controlled with golem through their connection. It lumbered forward, raised its massive arms and brought the hammer down on a wooden dummy. The whole training area shook intensely from the impact. The floor cracked, and the dummy was smashed to splinters.

It was spectacular to behold.

Dawn Polaris ordered the golem to walk around as she practiced her control. Cloudhawk could see that the depth of her abilities was impressive, since she was able to maintain it for so long without any loss in the golem's strength.

"Let's test the third one together!"

Cloudhawk reached into the final box and pulled out the black gold sword. It looked thin and light, very old, and made entirely from one piece of metal. There weren't any visible places where pieces were joined, and in fact it was heavier than it looked.

The name was inscribed on its side: 'Quiet Carnage!'

Shit, what sort of name is that? The name alone proved it was a demonic relic!

There wasn't much different between demonic and godly relics, other than the fact that demonic relics were bleaker and more ferocious. Neither of them knew what to expect from it.

As Dawn had the stone golem wander around Cloudhawk grinned. He searched for the resonance of the blade, joined with it, and the relic began to vibrate.

Of course this vibration was imperceptible to others. As Dawn watched all she saw was Cloudhawk's arm spring up, blade in hand, and cut through the air. A half-moon slash of dark energy was flung out whose sharpness could be felt even from far away.

The golem went stiff. Then, without any foreshadowing, its large head rolled off its

shoulders. Its neck, where the attack passed through, was shaved to a mirror sheen and the only sound was the golem's head striking the ground.

Absolutely no sound had come from the sword or the energy it spat forth. Even when it split rock, nothing.

From beginning to end only deathly stillness prevailed, so it seemed the weapon had a sound dampening ability. Every attack was brutal but absolutely silent, just as its name implied. It wasn't a large sword – three feet or so – making it convenient to carry around. It fit Cloudhawk's fighting style particularly well.

It wasn't anything to fawn over, but the relic was far better than something like an exorcist staff. Cloudhawk wasn't lacking in relics except none were for direct combat. Quiet carnage suited his needs just fine. Not too strong, but stronger than a staff. Faster too. And of course, totally silent.

Cloudhawk put the sword back down. "And there you go, test complete."

Perhaps for the first time in her life Dawn felt a deep admiration. The Home of the Demonhunters typically only had ten halfway decent relics pass through their auction in a year, but this time they'd gotten three. It was an unprecedented haul, made all the more surprising by the fact that Cloudhawk's accuracy was spot on for each one. If this unnaturally gifted guy kept visiting the auction they would have to go out of business.

Their agreement was to split the goods fifty-fifty, but that wasn't going to be easy with three relics. Dawn wanted the concussion shield and the titan rock, but she also knew it was Cloudhawk who'd earned them. She couldn't really justify blindly profited at his expense.

It was almost incredible that this overbearing, bullying lady of the Polaris family was thinking about someone else. Today was certainly a day of firsts.

Cloudhawk saw the look on her face and graciously waved his hand. "Take 'em. Pay me the difference in coin."

Dawn was elated. She blurted out, "I don't like to take advantage of people."

Cloudhawk's annoyance began to show. "Fine, then I'll take two."

"Hmph! Fat chance!" Suddenly she had a change of heart. "I don't like to take advantage

of others. But *you*, I have no problem.”

Cloudhawk didn't have the same covetous feelings towards relics as others. Strictly speaking he'd just stumbled on most of the ones he owned; the phase stone, the invisibility cloak, the Gospel of the Sands, and the sword he might have sort of paid for (but it wasn't much different).

With the stone's phasing powers and his natural ability to hear relics, Cloudhawk didn't think he would ever have to worry about finding more. That was how he could be so generous. Now Dawn owed him even more and that, to him, was worth a few relics. Besides, the two she took weren't very helpful to him.

The concussive shield was strong and its function fair, but its style was better suited to someone who saw more wide-scale combat. The titan stone was an excellent piece, but Cloudhawk already had the Gospel of the Sands. He'd seen the demon use it to summon a similar golem, so the two relics overlapped. The Gospel was clearly much more powerful than the titan stone, so why bother having two of the same thing?

After some thought it was clear what he needed was cash and Dawn's help. Getting feed for Oddball from the Temple, for instance.

Dawn slipped the buckler onto her back and the stone in her pocket. “Your mistress is in a fine mood. I'm going to treat you to a drink. Come!”

With all the bearing of a fantasy heroine Dawn strode into a separate room of the pub. She regally flung herself onto a couch, loudly ordered a dozen jugs of warrior's wine, then selected a few things from the food menu.

“Take what you like, it's on me!”

Dawn really was in a good mood. The young guy was also starting to look less and less like a degenerate to her.

Cloudhawk ate in such a way that it looks slow but in reality was in large volume. He stuffed his mouth and carefully chewed every bite so it didn't look like he was half starved. As she watched Dawn realized that the guy didn't care much about the taste. He was just interested in any sustenance he could get.

A harsh life in the wastelands had taught Cloudhawk to appreciate every bite of food he got. It went double for every mouthful of water.

Dawn Polaris watched him with interest. “You aren’t a big guy, how can you eat so much? One of your plates is enough to feed me for three days. If I ate like you my stomach would explode!”

“One plate means I don’t have to eat for three days. I don’t think you could say the same.”

There were many reasons he ate so much, but that was indeed one of them.

“No one normal wanders out of the wastelands!” She sighed then continued her questioning. “So what’s your story?”

“Nothing to tell.”

“Boring. Turning down a pretty woman is rude, you know. Especially someone as smart and attractive as me!”

“Not a shred of modesty.”

“It’s the *truth!*” Dawn slapped the table and snatched a jug of alcohol. “Do you have any idea how hard it is to share a drink with a beautiful woman? Come on, drink me under the table if you think you can.”

Cloudhawk gave her a glance over his plate of food. “Why would I want to do that?”

“Here I am, a beautiful woman with booze in hand, and you’re asking a stupid question like this.” Dawn stuck out her well-endowed chest. “If you can out-drink me you can do whatever you want with me. Up to you! What do you say, a rare opportunity eh?”

If you put aside Dawn’s... unique personality, and judged her only from the outside, then she was the second prettiest girl Cloudhawk had ever met – besides Selene. She also had a very different presence than the otherworldly, exceptionally refined beauty of the Bloodsoaked Queen. If Dawn didn’t move and didn’t speak she would be like a statue of a goddess, pure and noble. Looks like that always aroused a man’s lust for conquest, even before saying something so provocative.

Cloudhawk gave her deliberately advertised chest a good long look. “You sure?”

“I keep my word!” She said the words with a crafty tone and opened up two jugs. “Let’s go, I’m waiting. See what you got!”

What Cloudhawk didn't know was that Dawn Polaris' capacity for alcohol was famous in Skycloud City.

Even General Polaris couldn't drink his granddaughter under the table, so one could imagine her tolerance. She could drink against ten hardy men without a problem, so this whole deal with Cloudhawk was merely a setup.

"It's not strong, drink the whole thing down. Really quench your thirst."

She snatched one of the jugs, threw her head back and gulped it dry. Almost right away her porcelain white cheeks were tinged a rosy pink. It took away some of the pure and noble air and replaced it with coquettish undertones. This was no normal loquor either, it was a brew only demonhunters could handle called 'warrior.' As the name implied it took a warrior to stomach it, the stuff was too much for normal folks.

One glass was enough to knock out an everyday citizen of Skycloud City. She knocked back a whole jug no problem.

Dawn wiped her mouth with her arm then pushed a jug toward Cloudhawk. "Hahaha! You're up! Drink slow now, don't rush."

What, was he supposed to be afraid of a woman?!

The instant the stuff touched his lips Cloudhawk's face changed. This wasn't alcohol, it was straight fire. It was *lava*! He almost spit it all over Dawn's face.

She slapped the table and cackled. "What do you think? Strong, yeah?"

He winced and forced himself to swallow it. When the jug was empty he felt the fire spread out from his belly to every inch of him. His eyes were winced and watery, face red, and sweat had started to seep from his pores. Already a fuzzy feeling had started to invade his brain and he felt like he could fall over any second.

He'd been duped!

Dawn's face was barely pink, which proved she had a high tolerance. She was inhuman, what normal person could out-drink her?

"We're not done yet. Keep it up, another!"

Dawn wanted to Cloudhawk make a fool of himself, so she was determined to drink until he couldn't stand. Cloudhawk, as a man who didn't like losing, tried to keep up.

"That's two. Again!"

By the third jug Dawn had started to turn red and the booze had started to affect her thinking. Cloudhawk refused to give in and tossed back his third jug as well.

Still up? He was holding on by sheer perseverance alone! Dawn was convinced he was seconds away from passing out.

She didn't give him any chance to breathe, shoving another jug in front of him. Victory was near at hand, who could say how much either of them had drunk by now. Cloudhawk could hardly hold himself straight, and although he'd passed his limit a while ago he kept drinking.

Honestly, Cloudhawk wasn't much of a drinker. As a Tartarus mercenary all of his brothers could handle more than he. Drinking like this wasn't just about the amount but about one's constitution as well. He knew it right when he saw her take that first drink, Dawn could wipe him out even without relics.

Her strength and physique helped protect her against the ill effects of alcohol. Besides, she clearly had a talent for drinking beyond a normal person.

In reality one jug was Cloudhawk's limit, but somehow he managed to put down three in a short period of time and he was only slowly starting to get drunk. He recognized what it had to be – his blood. Once the alcohol content of his blood rose above a certain level, elements in his blood quickly worked to dissolve it.

Was it the trespasser virus?

Evidently the more he drank the more was being removed from his bloodstream. It kept him in a fuzzy haze but he never got to the point of passing out.

"I can't believe this. Again!"

The jugs strewn across the table steadily emptied.

Cloudhawk remained on the cusp, while Dawn just drank more and more. And with every jug the redness of her face intensified. Her eyes began to blur. It was her first

time getting this far, meanwhile the guy just – kept – drinking! How was he still ok?

Impossible. He had to be on death's door. One more drink – one more drink and he'd fall off that damn stool!

Her face was pale and stricken. Someone like her with all her pride and talent couldn't accept a loss, even though she was almost at her limit. "AGAIN!" She hissed.

Another jug was emptied.

Cloudhawk swayed like a slight breeze would do him in, but he stayed up. The scene before Dawn's eyes started to bleed together and she couldn't keep her thoughts together.

She was done!

She put down the seventh jug, wobbled on the couch, then hit the table with a thud. Never would she have imagined she could lose to Cloudhawk. She'd dug this hole her own damn self.

Chapter 50

A Dubious Crisis

Cloudhawk stumbled over and tried to rouse Dawn, but she was out cold. She had all the agility of a sack of mud, like all her bones had been removed. With one arm under her neck and the other under her legs, Cloudhawk lifted her up and laid her on the sofa.

Heat radiated from her face and her warm breath tickled his neck. Cloudhawk had a good vantage of her ample chest as it rose and fell, soaked from sweat and booze. Every inch of her tempted a man to sin, especially the corner of her lips which glistened. Once the booze robbed her of her vicious streak she looked charming, almost adorable.

“I’m nnnnot drunk. Le’ss keep goin’. Boooottums up!”

Dawn Polaris managed to slur out in more sentence and then went quiet.

Cloudhawk fumbled back to his chair and sat, looking over the table that lay in disarray. He fought through the sloshy feeling in his head and grabbed for the cigarettes provided by the pub. After several attempts he finally managed to light one, stuck it in his mouth, and took a drag. He didn’t have much experience with smoking but these tasted different. The aromatic flavor of elysian tobacco penetrated through his lungs. *Even this is different here*, he mused. ^[1]

The trespasser virus in his blood continued to dissolve the excess alcohol, but it wasn’t very aggressive. Cloudhawk was in much better shape than Dawn, so he wasn’t in much of a hurry to get moving. He finished his cigarette and polished off another jug of warrior wine, this time sipping.

Being drunk was pretty awesome. He felt like he was floating and emotions were more intense.

All the feelings he kept bottled up came bubbling out through the power of booze and tobacco. He clenched his fists and an almost overwhelming urge to smash the table came over him, to scream and curse and let it all out. But in the end he held back. All

the obsession he felt to flee the wastelands came back to him, then the joy of his first steps through the elysian lands and the confusion and despair that followed. All the passion that had roared through him for months surged through his brain. They crashed like terrible waves that threatened to drag him under, but eventually subsided.

Everyone had an idea of what paradise meant for them, but the world was always changing. Reality went on, destroying lives and dreams without a care. In the end when everything that could burn was gone, all that remained was clarity. Cloudhawk wasn't there, but he felt like he was beginning to understand.

Drink the wine you had today, enjoy the meat that was on your plate. That was enough.

Especially in times like now somewhere between drunk and sober. Real troubles melted from the mind, lost in the haze. Even persistent pain melted away in the face of contentment. The elysian lands weren't what Cloudhawk had expected, but he could still settle down here.

First thing was living. Living was more important than anything.

He knew the situation he was in. He understood that to Aethos Polaris he was nothing but a chess piece, and a chess piece was only worth as much as its purpose. He could be found lacking or just cast aside, and if that happened he would quickly be gobbled up by this frantic city.

Out here he didn't have any backing. With treasures like the gospel of the sands, and people like Frost de Winter and the Cloude family after him, he was a target. He was left with no way to protect himself or fight back.

As he pondered his fate Dawn Polaris sunk deeper into inebriated slumber.

Cloudhawk looked at her curled up on the couch. Asleep she really was something to behold. Her bright white skin was vibrant and soft like you could draw water right out from her. In truth, though, years of training had honed her body to perfection. She was as taut and resilient as a jaguar.

Cloudhawk reached out and ran a finger along her smooth cheek, ruddy from alcohol. It gave her a strange sort of charm he couldn't quite put his finger on. She seemed to feel it and her eyebrows furrowed slightly only to relax again after a moment.

Cloudhawk wasn't some kid anymore, wet behind the ears. With the booze taking his inhibitions and a beautiful woman defenseless before him it was impossible not to have reactions one would expect of a man. However Cloudhawk wasn't drunk to the point he'd lost all sense, and he was interested in living a little while longer. And so, he pretended like he'd never heard Dawn's earlier, salacious comments.

It was time to bring her home.

Cloudhawk carried her, her shield and her weapon back to the commander's mansion where he deposited her safely in her bed. He then returned to his own room and fell into a deep sleep.

Dawn slept like the dead until late into the night when the heat caused her to stir. She pitched and roll until she couldn't take it and started to tug at her clothes to get them off. She gave up halfway through and passed out again sprawled over her bed. [2]

The next day...

"Aaaahhh!" [3]

A piercing scream erupted from Dawn Polaris' room.

She'd come to and discovered herself mostly naked and the sheets all tangled. Piles of her clothing lay on the floor in tatters. The signs pointed to a scenario that frightened her out of her wits.

What happened? What happened! Why does my head hurt so much?!

Memories of the night before came crashing down on her like a tidal wave. Her desperate attempts to get Cloudhawk drunk stood out in her throbbing head. Did he actually...?

She slowly turned her head, looking at the clothes thrown about, then down at her milky white legs. Suddenly she was filled with shock and anger as a single thought took over. *SHIT! Kill me now!*

She snatched up Terrangelica from nearby and ripped it from its sheath. Light reflected of the blade's smooth surface and into Dawn's eyes, red with unbridled fury.

Cloudhawk was still asleep in his room. He still wasn't accustomed to sleeping in a

bed, but he'd passed out the second his head touched the pillow. When suddenly he felt the murderous intent sweep by him he awakened, startled. What was going on? He rolled out of bed just as the door to his room was kicked in.

Dawn Polaris stormed in, disheveled and furious. Her hair stuck out in all directions and flailed in the breeze caused by the door flying open. Her eyes, red as a rabbit's, glared as she clutched her sword tight. When she saw Cloudhawk she took a swipe at him without saying a word.

"Holy shit! You're insane!"

He wasn't very wrong. Dawn's mind was twisted over what she imagined had happened the night before. However, luckily she was too emotional to use her weapon's powers. The blade whistled as it came down toward his head.

This woman was the definition of volatile! Just last night she was all laughs and happy conversation, now she was trying to kill him!

She was still unbalanced and hungover, enough for Cloudhawk to get out of the way. His poor bed caught the blow, though, and was cleaved near in half.

"I'll hack you apart, you shameless *rapist!*"

As she was preparing for another strike Cloudhawk groped for quiet carnage. The instant his hand found the grip it came alive with energy and a cold light arose. Its keen power glimmered as he pulled it up, protecting himself from Dawn's wild onslaught. When the two weapons collided not a sound was heard.

Cloudhawk had enough presence of mind to use his relic's power, but Dawn did not. Without the power of hers word the two were evenly matched and the collision knocked both of them back several meters.

Cloudhawk understood what was happening. "Are you fuckin' crazy? I didn't do anything!"

She shouted back at him. "*Rapist!* You take advantage of a woman and you don't have the balls to admit it?!"

"Look, relax for a moment!" Cloudhawk was stilled dressed. Luckily he'd been smart enough to fight off last night's temptation otherwise she'd really chop him into minced

meat. "Let me just ask you one question. Have you *really* checked?"

She froze. When she woke up she saw her clothes thrown all over the place and half her body exposed, and that was enough to throw her into a fit. She'd grabbed her weapon and charged after the supposed culprit, but had never stopped to make sure she was right.

Cloudhawk sighed. "Go next door, make sure, then come back and 'hack me apart' alright?"

She glared at him with his indignant expression but squeezed her legs together. She didn't feel anything different. Some of her anger subsided but she still fixed him with a deathly stare. "Don't. You. Move."

A few minutes later...

When Dawn came back from next door her sword was back in its sheath. Her awkward expression said it all, but she gave him an apologetic look and muttered a question with her head hung low. "You really didn't do anything? It hardly makes sense, a beautiful woman like me in that state... you're no man!"

She was going to find a reason to complain no matter what.

It was Cloudhawk's turn to be angry. "After all the help I've given you the past few days this is how you treat me? Wake me up with a sword aimed at my fucking head? If I was any slower I'd have been murdered for nothing! Shit, I need to get as far away from you as quick as possible for my own safety!"

She scratched her nest of platinum hair sheepishly. After a few awkward moments she spoke. "I was just scared. Chastity is very important for templars."

YOU were scared?! Bah!

Cloudhawk just glowered at her.

Dawn saw that he was really angry this time and it made her apprehensive. Maybe for the first time ever she tried to face up to her error. "I was confused because of the alcohol, it's an understandable mistake right? My reputation with the Temple was threatened. I promise it won't happen again."

Cloudhawk still didn't answer.

She started to feel flustered but she didn't know why. This guy was just another servant, and she a dignified lady of the Polaris family. What reason did she have to feel timid? Anyway what happened was just because she'd been scared. She wouldn't have really killed him if he hadn't moved, she wasn't an idiot. Killing him would have been bad for everyone.

Typically Dawn would have been dismissive of the whole matter. If she made a mistake than she made a mistake, and if he'd died than he surely deserved it. This time she was really worried Cloudhawk might decide to cut off all contact with her. She'd actually started to take a fondness to him after these last few days. After years of terrorizing Skycloud's populace, he was the closest thing she'd ever had to a friend.

Cloudhawk stared at this prideful noble woman looking at him anxiously. He thought he could almost see tears at their corners. With her hair in a mess and her clothes ruffled she could almost be confused for endearing. In the end he curtly waved his hand. "This is the last time."

"Ok ok ok! It won't happen again, last time." She hopped in place like a little kid.

One of her servants then entered the room. "Lady."

Dawn was in the middle of trying to think of some way to pay back her misconduct when they were interrupted. "What is it," she said impatiently.

"The general has an urgent matter he needs to speak with you about."

Suddenly her face fell. Any time her grandfather called her it was for something unpleasant. Especially at a time like this. She had no choice but to say goodbye to Cloudhawk, get her hair and clothes in order, pick up Terrangelica and head out.

The serving girl snuck a quick glance at Cloudhawk. A strange look was in her eyes.

More than a few people had witnessed Dawn tearing through the mansion half-dressed and ready to cut Cloudhawk in half. It wouldn't be long before the story spread, especially with how high-profile Dawn Polaris was.

The Lady Polaris was a noble lady, from an illustrious family, and the youngest ever templar. Was she sleeping with a wild vagabond boy in off the streets? Scandalous!

What's more, maybe he'd scorned her after they slept together and that's why she went after him with the sword!

That's mostly the story that got out to the public, and the citizens had plenty of opinions about it. It created such a ruckus that word eventually got to the Temple and she was forced to subject herself to evaluation. People only stopped the gossip when word got out it was proven she was still pure.

1. Cigarette smoking in China is a *massive* industry. The town I lived in had several big cigarette factories, and you always knew them by the strangely sweet smell they emitted. Cigs in China are also phenomenally strong, going up to 15mg tar yield as opposed to Marlboros which are like 6. Not long ago smoking was encouraged to fight hunger and was even considered therapeutic for the throat. In lieu of giving workers raises one factory I heard about gave their workers free cigarette rations instead. Lung cancer and other respiratory diseases are a huge problem in that part of the world.



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