



THE
MASK

不员神记

原力

ORIGINAL FORCE

THE GODSFALL CHRONICLES

– The Fallen God Records –

**- BOOK 2 -
The Elysian
(II)**

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[RWX (Wuxiaworld)]

Chapter 51

A Mission

At the peak of his tower, Skye Polaris drew his hulking frame up and stood regally by a window. His beard and hair shivered like a lion's mane in the light cross breeze and the whole of Skycloud City was reflected in his eyes. The scenery lent this enormous, violent man an air of solemn intensity. Like a lion surveying his territory.

The reputation of the Polaris family was illustrious, but beneath the glow was a pressure no typical person could understand. He was growing older and the years passed quickly. He felt himself getting weaker and tried to cover it with his outrageous ferocity. It was just a ruse, meant only to conceal the fact that he was losing his strength.

Skye's talented son had died some time before, leaving the family without a clear successor. From the outside the holy territories looked like a paradise, but beneath that things were far more complicated. Strife among families was not uncommon. The worry weighed on his mind that one day, when he died, whether his family would be able to remain here in this beautiful city of miracles.

Dawn was a fine representative; inheritor of their family's lauded bloodline as well as from the sanctuary. She was even more talented than her father had been. All she needed was time, but could he remain long enough to give it to her?

There was a dull ache in his chest. It was from an old wound earned on a demon hunting expedition thirty years ago.

Dawn was somewhat of an enigma. After earning her rites with the sanctuary and returning home, no more than a few days would go by before she got herself into trouble. With Selene gone Dawn had no nemesis to pursue. She'd grown bold, arrogant, domineering and unscrupulous. Yet, shockingly, he hadn't seen her for some time. Nor had there been any news of her causing trouble out in the city. For a girl like Dawn, this was abnormal.

"What did you call me for, old man? Don't you know I'm busy?"

Her biting voice reached him even before she stepped into the room. This was her style.

The general turned around and regarded her for a moment in silence. He smelled the booze on her – most likely she'd gone out drinking the night before. He frowned and asked, "You've been awfully quiet for the last few days. What are you scheming?"

"Oh stop with all this nonsense, grandpa!" Inwardly her heart started to beat faster. Had he found out what she and Cloudhawk were up to? She kept her emotions from her face and rolled her eyes at Skye, feigning irritation. "I've been dealing with Cloudhawk lately. Ask him if you don't believe me."

The crags in the old man's face deepened as he scowled. "What have the two of you been *doing*?"

"Training, obviously!" She answered.

He wasn't convinced. "What sort of training?"

Dawn Polaris proudly patted her full chest. "Grandfather, think about who your granddaughter is. I'm as intelligent as I am beautiful. There's no man in the world I cannot tame! Cloudhawk is a wastelander, a scoundrel, and in the end he'll serve under my boot like a docile mongrel."

She was somehow inexplicably nervous as she said the words.

Cloudhawk had suffered her slings and arrows ever since he came into the house, especially this morning. She wasn't sure how to deal with him anymore.

How could her grandfather not know Dawn's character? He knew it was only a matter of time before she overreached and upset their new soldier.

"Grandfather, I'm sure I don't need to tell you how high the fatality rate is at the Hell's Valley training camp. It's been so difficult for our family to find someone we could polish. I thought that perhaps Cloudhawk could do with some training before we send him? If he dies out there it'd just be a waste."

She had a point. Skye couldn't see a reason to deny the request.

"Alright, alright. It's rare you do anything for the family, this is a good impulse for you."

If this girl was finally beginning to understand her duties to the family than good! If she kept fooling around and making trouble with the local nobles eventually the sanctuary would get tired of her antics. “Now that you’ve had some time to learn more about him, what are your feelings?”

Dawn thought about being honest but changed her mind. If she shared the wastelander’s true potential it would raise her grandfather’s estimation of him. That would mean more work for him to do, and less time to spend with her.

“I wanted to talk to you about just that.” She offered her false assessment mercilessly. “Really, grandpa, you’re losing it. This kid is weak and a total blockhead. As far as I can tell, if we sent him to Hell’s Valley now he’d be as good as dead.”

Skye’s anger bubbled to the surface. “Do you have a better idea then?!”

Dawn reached out and grabbed her grandfather’s arm. “I’m short a bodyguard. He can fill the position.”

Her sudden tenderness took him by surprise and almost made Skye break out in a cold sweat. The old general shook his head. “No, absolutely not. Out of the question. Snatching him from Arcturus’ clutches cost us, and we now owe him the equivalent of a whole troop of soldiers. Doing all that just for a simple bodyguard is a total waste. If you need a bodyguard, our home is full of them. All you need to do is tell me your preferred height and weight.”

“I couldn’t stand having morons like them around me!” Dawn rejected the idea outright. “What is the guy dies out there during training? Isn’t that an even bigger waste? Leave him to me, I have my own training methods that I think are just as good as the training facility’s.”

Skye Polaris tugged at his white beard. He wasn’t fooled by this girl, not when he knew what the kid had done. He’d had his demonhunter powers awaken while alone in a desolate place, crossed the wastelands to get here, and saved someone from under Frost de Winter’s nose. All of that proved that Cloudhawk was anything but ordinary. Considering how deadly the wastelands were Skye had no doubt he’d survive Hell’s Valley. If he hadn’t been so confident, he wouldn’t have made the investment.

“That’s enough. You can do what you like in the interim but there is no negotiating this matter.” The old man had made up his mind. “The training facility has opened and I’ve

already submitted his name. It's settled, we're not changing it now. He's going."

Dawn pressed her lips tight together. Irritation was clear on her face. *Stupid old man*, she thought, *this old bastard!*

Skye continued with sincerity in his voice. "Our family is in a unique period right now. I'm doing what I can to cultivate more warriors in part to make your life easier in the future. There's another reason I called you here, though. Since you don't seem to be busy I have a mission for you, a relaxing way to pass the time.

"What mission?"

"Do you remember the several hundred convicts that escaped through the tunnels under Skycloud City? I've sent people out to hunt those piles of garbage down, but they've come back empty handed. They were even attacked a few times and a few of our men were killed. The news is starting to make a lot of noise throughout the city, and they're a serious danger waiting to happen. This needs to be solved as quickly as possible."

"Something this simple and they still don't have it under control? What were those louts you sent even doing?"

"Take some people and head in there yourself. Gather these convicts and bring them back to prison. Those that resist, get rid of them."

"You smelly old fart! I ask you for someone and you deny me, but you sure are quick to ask for my help." Her words were sharp but Dawn wasn't one to pass up a good time. With her sword leaned against her shoulder she casually continued. "Alright, nothing but a school of mud fish that need to be rounded up. Leave it to me."

Skye added more in a commanding voice. "A few of them are dangerous, don't treat this lightly. Also, Frost de Winter from the governor's mansion and the Court's representative, Atlas, are preparing men for the same task. Aren't you always eager to compete against them? Now is your opportunity to show them that our family is the real power in this city!"

Frost de Winter was well known. Atlas was also no ordinary man.

Atlas belonged to what they called the Court – their full name was the Court of Shadows. They were Skycloud City's largest official special forces unit. Very secretive

and mysterious. There weren't many of them but every member was formidable. All of them were demonhunters as well. Atlas had become leader of the unit at a young age and there was a lot more to him than that. He kept a very low profile, to the point where he was more urban legend than reality. Dawn Polaris hadn't seen him for years.

A Skycloud City demonhunter commander, Frost de Winter.

An operative from the Court of Shadows, Atlas.

A Templar from the sanctuary, Dawn Polaris.

What was it about a bunch of escaped convicts that justified a response like this? Dawn was clever, she recognized that this was exactly what her grandfather said it was – a contest between three young stars.

“Excellent! You can wait for new of my success.”

This time her adversaries were worthy, a fact that spurred her fighting will.

However, just as she was getting ready to leave and select men for the job, an important question occurred to her. Whatever happened in the prisons, Cloudhawk definitely had had a hand in it. If she went down there and exterminated them would it make him unhappy?

She wasn't accustomed to taking other people's peoples into consideration. As far as she was concerned there were only two types of people in the city, especially when it came to her contemporaries;

The first type was known as 'garbage'. They comprised the largest group. Dawn had a long-standing reputation as an insufferable she-devil, and she used to beat anyone with an ounce of talent in the name of seeking out a challenge. As a result the sons and daughters of the noble families came to fear her ferociousness. They actively tried to avoid her at all costs, and Dawn looked down on anyone who ran away from a challenge.

The second were competitors, people like Selene and Zephyr from the Cloude family, or Frost de Winter. Various churches, the sanctuary and other families had rising stars as well. Dawn challenged them to feats of might whenever she could, and with the exception of Selene she beat every one. They all competed against each other, and every one of the group was as proud as the other. No one was willing to accept defeat,

and so there was no way for any of them to be friends. As for Selene and Zephyr, neither were in the city to compete with her.

Now there was Cloudhawk, and she found him to be unique.

At first Dawn didn't see him as any better than a common thief, but after spending time with him for a while she found there was more than meets the eye. He wasn't just a thief, he was a master burglar with skills she had to appreciate.

More importantly, he was different from everyone else, like a solitary hawk. Lonely yet proud, neither conceited or servile, and never once cared about Dawn's status. The feeling she had for him was different from anyone else she'd met.

She should ask his opinion.

Dawn planned to seek him out but thought twice about it. Waltzing back into his room would be awkward and embarrassing. Instead she hailed a servant. "Tell Cloudhawk to come see me right away!"

RWX's Thoughts

Atlas is a brilliant choice by Xiao Lai, one which I had never thought of. The name in Chinese was 擎苍, which literally means 'holds up the heavens'. I was having serious problems coming up with a name for him, but Xiao Lai hit on 'Atlas', a reference to the mythological Greek Titan who was condemned to hold up the heavens for all of eternity and bear it on his back. Absolutely brilliant!

Chapter 52

Atlas

Dawn Polaris sat before Cloudhawk. The tattered shield she'd recently won at auction was on her back and her treasured sword was slung over a shoulder. She'd changed into her warrior attire and rested easily with her heels planted on a table between them. Her shapely legs were partially contained in high leather combat boots that revealed a hint of porcelain flesh.

She stretched those long legs and took a sip of tea without a hint of awkwardness, having selectively forgotten the embarrassing events of last night and this morning. She gave Cloudhawk the rundown of Skye's latest mission.

"Wipe 'em out?"

The news surprised him, but he had to admit it wasn't unexpected. It would have been unusual for Skycloud to completely ignore hundreds of convicts hiding below the city.

"Yup, but I heard you had something to do with it so I wanted to come and ask you what you thought." Dawn retracted her long legs and folded them beneath her for a more comfortable posture. "But don't misinterpret this as giving them a back door. These wicked men have to be dealt with or the city's safety can't be guaranteed. What's more, it isn't just me participating, I'm just one part. That's going to make things more complicated."

Actually Cloudhawk was quite pleased. Dawn put her cards on the table but she'd been straightforward with him. As far as he was concerned this showed that she was starting to look at him more as a friend than a servant. She wouldn't have had the same consideration for anyone else.

Cloudhawk frowned, his brows wrinkled as he mulled the problem over. "I don't care about the others, but there's a group of a hundred or so from a merchant family that don't deserve it. They were called Bloomnettle Company. Innocent bystanders, pious, who were caught up in the crossfire. If anyone else got hurt because of me... they have to be spared. The others are on their own, but those people – I have to find a way to get them out of here."

“Showing humanity is the mark of a real man.”

This was something Dawn admired about him. Cloudhawk clearly had the ability to flee before, but had risked his life in order to make sure others got away safely. Even knowing it was a trap Cloudhawk did all he could to free Squall. Besides, all the noise he made was definitely Lady Polaris’ style.

“Miss, everyone’s been gathered!”

After the servant gave the report Dawn drained her tea cup and bound to her feet. She moved gracefully like none of last night’s antics were weighing her down. She jabbed a finger at Cloudhawk and spoke in a tone that left no room for argument.

“You’re coming.”

But it wasn’t a command, she was helping. In essence, this mission was a test.

Dawn would never allow herself to fail, whatever the challenge. However, she also owed Cloudhawk and she hated the idea of owing anyone anything. Two birds with one stone, she thought. As to whether it would make things more difficult, she wasn’t worried. ‘Too much to handle’ was a foreign concept to her.

Two hundred soldiers had been assembled. She was given an intelligence briefing and a map, then Dawn led them toward the tunnels in high spirits.

Skycloud’s tunnel system predated the city itself. At the time the area here was still in flux. Demons still roamed the land so these tunnels had been designed for the citizens to take refuge in. Once the warred had passed the tunnels remained as a way for the people of Skycloud to escape if some tragedy came their way.

Because it had to be big enough for everyone to hide in the tunnel system was absolutely enormous. It twisted and curved underground like a labyrinth. Maps of the system were also secret and tightly controlled, only a few people had been allowed to see one. It was good Dawn had one, otherwise the chances of them getting lost and dying down there were very high.

In times of peace the tunnels were sealed. No one was allowed in.

Dealing with the convicts wasn’t all that hard, in reality. Seal of the exits and without any food or water they were sure to perish in six months or less. Without maps – all

of which were controlled by the highest levels of Skycloud government – they weren't going to escape. Going in to wipe them out was more an exercise than having any sort of real significance.

It'd been years since the tunnels had seen occupants. It was dark and fetid, a foul scene that made Dawn scowl in distaste. But she wasn't so spoiled as to detest getting her hands dirty, nor was she a clean-freak like Frost de Winter. She was used to it after a minute.

"Everyone, stay on your toes. If you find the convicts, make sure you spare anyone who surrenders. Kill those who resist!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

Skycloud's soldiers were equipped in standard gear with the addition of crossbows and poison-tipped bolts. A sort of spotlight was affixed to their weapons and they used them to search through the darkness of the tunnels.

They hadn't gone more than a few steps when suddenly a small group of convicts scuttled past.

Soldiers pounced on them, a few were grabbed before they knew what was happening.

More people escaped from Skycloud's prisons than Cloudhawk had thought because it had two levels. The upper level were typical jails where normal offenders were kept, while the level below were proper dungeons that housed more dangerous felons. When the dungeons emptied naturally the prisoners upstairs were freed as well, so with so many people in the tunnels they had spread out to all corners.

Of course the men Dawn picked for her team were elite soldiers of Skycloud's army.

They followed even the faintest traces to another twenty or thirty convicts. Most were captured alive, a few desperate and reckless men tried to struggle but ultimately were killed. Some were put down by Dawn Polaris herself.

She was no doubt a product of her illustrious family. Dawn cut down the convicts as though culling weeds. She was ruthless, efficient, and her strikes were all decisive. None of her work was sloppy. As Cloudhawk watched her slay these men he knew her attack against him in the morning was half-hearted.

“Ugh, so *boring!* This doesn’t even feel like a fight!”

Dawn rested Terrangelica’s blade against her shoulder and looked down the route ahead. Deviously hidden traps, painstakingly placed along their path, peppered the way. Dawn saw them but paid no mind, deliberately stepping into danger.

Snap!

A rope trap tangled around Dawn’s foot, but all of a sudden it was like she weighed a thousand pounds. It failed to lift her even an inch off the ground and just snapped, but a hail of spikes shot out from the walls as the second part of the trap fired. Dawn – calmly as though she were taking a stroll through a park – slipped through unscathed and unconcerned.

Hardly worth a second thought. That level of ability was demoralizing, no wonder she was bored.

Cloudhawk thought so, too. However, he just so happened to spy something on the wall as he turned his head. It was a symbol, one he recognized. Majjhima left it here and it was more than likely Bloomnettle’s people were with him.

A clue. Cloudhawk stepped forward to take a closer look.

Only, as he approached, Oddball, perched dutifully on his shoulder, must have seen something. Through their connection Cloudhawk felt a clear warning.

He didn’t know what Oddball had seen but he was immediately on alert. In the next instant it felt like he’d slipped into an icy chasm and he was covered in a biting cold from head to foot.

Danger!

Years of near-death experiences in the wasteland honed Cloudhawk’s instincts. He reacted almost without thinking.

Quiet Carnage hummed as Cloudhawk ripped it from its sheath. The black gold sword was only half raised when a dagger reached out for him from the shadows. It came at him faster than anything he’d ever seen, even the Bloodsoaked Queen didn’t have speed like this. If not for Oddball’s keen eyes Cloudhawk would have been done for.

Blade and dagger met. Not a sound was heard.

Cloudhawk felt the force of the impact sweep through him and it almost made him drop the sword. Meanwhile his opponent was unfazed. The black-bladed dagger wasn't still for a fraction of a second, lashing out at him again like a deadly viper. Straight for him, irresistible – Cloudhawk didn't even have time to recover from the first strike before the dagger came right for his throat.

Fast. Too fast!

His instincts took over again and he threw himself backwards with everything he had. He managed to avoid a fatal blow but the knife still caught him in the shoulder. This hidden attacker had appeared too suddenly for him to react – even the likes of Dawn hadn't known he was there. By the time he made himself known it was too late.

Cloudhawk winced in pain but panicked when he felt the wound go numb. He quickly began to lose sensation in his arm.

Poison, and potent!

A roar went up as Dawn charged forward, Terrangelica reaching into the darkness. Before the mysterious assailant could finish Cloudhawk off a swipe from her sword forced the two men apart.

“Atlas! You're really asking for it!”

Dawn squinted her eyes and peered into the dark. There was nothing, and then slowly a figure appeared like a shadow. A man only a few centimeters taller than Cloudhawk was revealed. He was somewhere in his twenties, and black as the tunnels that surrounded them; black hair, black eyes, black mask, black clothes, black dagger, black boots. He was like the night had come alive.

Somehow he seemed familiar to Cloudhawk.

There was a thinly contained wildness in his eyes, like a feral wolf. The way he moved was like a viper waiting in the tall grass, or a scorpion biding time in the crevice of a rock. He oozed the grim, deadly ferocity of the wastelands. The sensation was wholly familiar to Cloudhawk.

But he'd never met this man before. In fact, there were only a few people living who

knew who he was.

He was strong, but exceedingly low-key and absolutely terrifying. Only a handful of the common people knew him for his existence was a close-kept secret of the city's elite. The Court of Shadows' second in command – Atlas.

I don't have any problem with this guy. Why'd he try to kill me?

Cloudhawk had no idea!

Dawn's white face grew even paler. "Give me the antidote!"

"It's no use. My target always dies – there is no antidote for a sting from Deathstalker [1]." Atlas looked at her with a blank and indifferent gaze. The relic weapon in his hand, the dagger he called Deathstalker – glowed with a faint wine hue. It certainly looked like the lethal stinger of its namesake. "His fate is sealed. He will die down here."

"Atlas, I thought you were worth a damn. Shameless!" Dawn was mad with fury. "Come at me if you have the sack, why attack a novice?!"

"He killed my younger brother. He had to die."

Atlas' eyes slithered back over to Cloudhawk and there was nothing in them but an infinite cold. Not a hint of emotion lived in those soulless orbs. He returned his dagger to its sheath and turned away, ready to slip back into the shadows.

1. The name of this creepy emo punk's weapon is 'hell scorpion.' The Deathstalker scorpion is a real thing and abso-fucking-lutely terrifying. A sting can cause convulsions, coma, and death.

Chapter 53

Grudge Held

Dawn rushed at him, Terrangelica bared and carving a trio of slices through the air, one after the other. Atlas felt the impossibly sharp attacks bearing down and spun around, responding with six swipes of his own. His speed and skill were on full display as each reoste and counterattack was perfectly executed. This was no typical short sword either, but stings from the deadly relic blade Deathstalker!

This special and lethal weapon had two special properties; the first was that it siphoned power from its victim, and the second was its toxic bite.

When Deathstalker's blade met flesh it responded by releasing a fog. It looked like smoke, as though from a fire, but in fact it was venom. The potency of it depended on the strength of Deathstalker's bearer but more than that, it could also melt right through armor. There weren't many defenses that could ward it off.

Just the thought made one's hair stand on end. Deathstalker might not have been the strongest relic but it was certainly among the most lethal. Tailor-made for assassins.

Its strength-siphoning abilities were also unique. A normal two-foot short sword wasn't going to stop a hammer or axe in direct combat, but Deathstalker was not normal. After contact it stole power from the attacker and pushed it into the short sword itself.

Ordinarily if the two rivals clashed weapon to weapon their matched strength would knock both away. However, Deathstalker absorbed the force that would typically knock Atlas back and redirect it. While his opponent would be knocked back he could push forward, sealing his victim's fate with the weapon's venom.

Atlas' offensive was fierce and immediate, bold, unconstrained, and insidious. But after a few exchanges Dawn saw a weakness in his posture. She exploited it, hacking her sword at him. Atlas brought Deathstalker around to block and at the same time, the blade seethed with a dark energy.

Clang!

The deep purple hue surrounding Deathstalker scattered with the impact, but Dawn was knocked back while Atlas didn't move. He catalyzed his relic again and the unsettling hue returned, coiling around the blade like a hellish flame. It carved a black wedge through the air.

Fierce, cunning, ruthless, unflinching.

Atlas portrayed all the qualities of a master assassin. Despite Dawn's family and reputation he attacked her without clemency. She was still trying to regain her footing when he bore down on her, yet the Polaris family's pride kept a level head. With a chilly snort she thrust the tip of Terrangelica into the ground.

Boom!

The sound of explosion ripped through the tunnels!

Moments after striking the ground shockwaves erupted from the sword, like the epicenter of an earthquake. Just as the razor-sharp edge of Deathstalker was about to pierce Dawn's porcelain skin the force knocked Atlas back.

"Die!"

She quickly determined where Atlas was going to land and summoned Terrangelica's powers accordingly. In just the spot where he was destined to fall a spike of jagged rock jutted forth.

But who would expect that Atlas would suddenly stop in mid-air, as completely as though he was suddenly dropped in water. Instead of hitting the ground as gravity demanded he planted his two feet on the tunnel's walls. Atlas stood there perfectly parallel to the ground.

Dawn wasn't going to let this bastard outplay her so easily.

Terrangelica's mighty powers manifested once again and surged toward her opponent. This energy was completely invisible, yet Atlas seemed to know it was coming. Continuing to violate the laws of physics he leapt off the wall and somersaulted onto the ceiling. His feet tread along the top of the tunnel as surely as if he were standing with the rest of them.

He swung at Dawn with Deathstalker in his right hand, and with his left scattered a

handful of five or six pitch black darts. Each one fluttered through the air like butterflies. One could be forgiven for thinking they had a mind of their own, for they whipped around to attack Dawn at all sorts of odd angles. She had no choice but to rely on the protection of her aegis mirror. The air congealed into an impenetrable, invisible wall all around her. Atlas' darts struck it and were stopped in their tracks.

Dawn Polaris was gathering herself for a counterattack, but Atlas had lost any interest in continuing the fight. Like a spider he skittered away along the roof and disappeared into the shadows. He'd escaped the range of any attack she could muster, and besides his advantage was speed. Much as she grit her teeth she had to accept that he'd gotten away.

Atlas was what people feared when they thought of assassins and sneak attacks. Few within Skycloud City would survive his deadly attention.

Their brief encounter proved that Dawn wasn't the assassin's target. Atlas was a remarkable combatant who knew his strengths and weaknesses, so he knew a protracted battle against Dawn would not turn out in his favor.

"Piece of shit, piece of shit! I'll kill you, do you hear me?!"

Like a furious lioness Dawn roared into the darkness while soldiers winced from the sudden noise. None were eager to give chase.

"Garbage. You're all useless trash, do you know that?"

With her opponent gone Dawn turned her fury on the soldiers. If they weren't so useless Cloudhawk wouldn't have been assassinated by Atlas. If they weren't completely brainless he wouldn't have gotten away! She was confused and unsure of what to do next. If she knew this was going to happen she wouldn't have brought Cloudhawk here...

This bullshit mission – to hell with it!

Dawn, who had never accepted a defeat in her life, was ready to give up on their task. Although she knew there was almost no hope for Cloudhawk she had to at least try. Maybe if she brought him back in time maybe Mr. Ink could do something.

She could hardly believe she was so upset over the life of some petty thief. She fought against the bitter aftertaste of this revelation as she looked around for Cloudhawk, in

order to save his life. However as she approached his prostrate form one of his eyes popped open, then the other. He took a few sly glances to the left and right.

“Is he gone?”

Oddball nodded its fluffy little head.

“Holy shit, that germy asshole almost did me in. You really saved my ass this time.”

Cloudhawk sat up like he was getting up from a nap. Where were the signs of venom? Dawn’s emotions ran the gamut from shock to relief and then doubt. “Why aren’t you dead?!”

Cloudhawk stared at her. “Are you that eager to see me in a coffin?”

She rubbed her jaw and looked him over. “It’s impossible. I’ve never heard of anyone surviving Atlas’ venom.”

Cloudhawk paid her to mind. Beneath the tear of his shirt a knife wound could be seen that was neither very deep nor very long. Deathstalker’s venom was so potent that all it needed was to draw blood to deliver a lethal dose. So for Atlas it didn’t matter how deep his strike went – that wasn’t important once he nicked his target. Once the venom spread through his victim it would finish the job for him.

Cloudhawk acknowledge that the scorpion-like weirdo had a weapon just as odd as he was. The potency of the toxin was directly correlated to the amount of energy channeled through the relic. If the assassin’s initial attack had landed Cloudhawk could have had half a dozen lives and still would be no more.

Where he was lucky was in blocking that first strike.

Atlas first blow knocked away Cloudhawk’s defenses. It succeeded in sapping his strength but the interval between attacks was too quick for him to summon the same strength as his first blow. As a result the potency of the sword’s toxin was reduced. Ultimately it saved Cloudhawk’s life.

Atlas was no one to sniff at. That was for sure.

Cloudhawk’s danger sense was almost instinctual, but Atlas was practically right on top of him and he’d felt nothing. Deathstalker was practically in his face by the time

he was made aware of the attack. That could only mean he had some sort of relic concealing his presence, something like Cloudhawk's own invisibility cloak. Add to that Atlas' exceptional skills as an assassin, who didn't reveal his lethal intent until the very last moment.

Cloudhawk was happily taken aback by Oddball's reaction in particular.

The strange little bird had spotted Atlas before he did, which could only mean it was able to see the invisible. He was able to spot the assassin as he was getting close and warn his master.

Cloudhawk's new pet wasn't just a great scout. He was also an excellent early warning system! With Oddball by his side he could use the bird to scout out dangerous areas and reveal anything that might be lying in wait.

How many more surprises did this little guy have? Cloudhawk scratched Oddball's head in appreciation.

Dawn wasn't all that pleased with being ignored. "The smallest bit of Deathstalker's venom can kill a master demonhunter. How did you survive?"

She could see the area around the wound had turned black, but it hadn't spread far. In fact, even as she watched the rotten borders were slowly receding. Foul, black blood oozed from the wound.

Was he a control metahuman? Could a control metahuman of sufficient skill expel venom in their blood?

Supposedly high-grade control metahumans were able to exercise perfect control over their muscles and blood vessels to purge out venom. Only, venom from a relic defied that sort of control – after all, no control metahuman, no matter how strong, could control every cell.

Cloudhawk blinked as he thought of how to lie. "It's a secret." [1]

For the first time he was starting to think maybe Roste's parting gift wasn't such a curse.

Dawn's eyebrows went vertical. Was he immune to poison? That would mean the poison Mr. Ink injected him with was also useless.

She was smart enough to guess the gist of it; the poison General Polaris had given him was slow-acting. Since it wasn't as intense as Deathstalker's it didn't awaken his body's defense, but once it 'woke up' his immune system wasn't just going to stand by.

He hadn't cared about that poison business from the very beginning.

Now that the danger had passed Cloudhawk calmed down and grew solemn. "Why did he want to kill me? Who is his younger brother, why don't I remember anything like that?"

"Atlas' family has close ties to the Court of Shadows, the Umbras. I remember he had a younger brother named Raith. He wasn't worth much."

Raith? Raith Umbra? The one with that weird arrow that almost killed him?

Cloudhawk slapped his forehead. When fate was against you, a single fart could start a shit storm. That guy having a brother was bad enough, but his big brother had to be a world-class assassin. He would rather have Frost de Winter, Dawn Polaris or Blaze as his arch nemeses than even cross Atlas' mind.

He was like the specter of death, hiding in every shadow. Who knew the next time he'd leap out of some dark corner and take his life? It made him furious! Raith's death was his own damn fault. Cloudhawk would have had it any other way.

In the end he just wasn't strong enough!

Cloudhawk made himself a promise. He would wait... wait until he was strong enough, then Frost and Atlas would learn the cost of pissing him off!

Chapter 54

Oddball's Abilities

“The Umbra family isn’t very notable in Skycloud, but they possess very uncommon abilities. You killed one of theirs, I don’t think they’ll ever forgive you.” She frowned once she learned what happened. “You saw what Atlas can do. The Umbras are not a family to be trifled with.”

Raith was small potatoes – a demonhunter, but a weak one. Cloudhawk didn’t think dealing with him would cause so much trouble down the line. First he got caught by Claudia, out for revenge. Now he had Atlas to deal with because of what happened to his brother. His whole family, in fact. Definitely not pleasant news.

“I have a solution!” With a mischievous look on her face she saddled up to Cloudhawk, patting her amble chest. “Swear allegiance to me and I’ll make you my personal guard. You’ll be with me every day, that way we can keep you safe!”

“The lady’s got jokes.” Distrust was clear on Cloudhawk’s face. “I almost died and you were two feet away.”

She couldn’t stop someone like Atlas, who could creep out of the shadows at any moment and disappear just as quick. And how could Cloudhawk agree to be anyone’s loyal servant? It was unthinkable!

Most importantly the Polaris family was preparing to send him off to that training camp. He would rather take his chances out there than be this girl’s lapdog.

“What do you mean? I didn’t see him at first but I fought him off right away. If I wasn’t right there nothing would have stopped him from finishing the job. Would you still be standing in front of me complaining then?” She sniffed in irritation. “Atlas has to show me some respect anyway. If you were my man he wouldn’t dare carelessly attack you again. I’m the only person in the city who can protect you. I’m the only one who’s offering to.”

As he listened to her righteous promises, her self-sacrificing oath of protection, and the implications between her words, Cloudhawk felt touched deep within his heart.

The words came rising up through his throat and he carefully enunciated each syllable.

“Not. A. Chance.”

Dawn Polaris was hopping mad. “Do you have any idea how many people adore me in this city?! You have *no* idea what you’re throwing away. You’ll regret it for the rest of your life!”

“If you told me there were a bunch of people who adored Selene I might believe you. You, though...” He shot her a glance. “I dunno if you could ever find so many masochists in one place.”

“You *want* me to beat the shit out of you!” Dawn was literally stomping around in fury when she raised her blade against him.

All of a sudden Cloudhawk vanished into thin air.

Dawn froze, thought for a moment, then deflated like an angry balloon: *No one compares to me, except maybe Selene – that bitch. She did always have fans, ever since she was little. Is it true no one likes me? No... they’re just blind!*

“Hey, come out. I’m not gonna cut your head off.”

“I found a clue and I’m going after my merchant friends. This is too important for me to be screwing around with you. We’ll meet up later.”

Cloudhawk’s voice reached her from down the tunnel. Her temper seethed just below the surface, but she managed to keep it squashed.

He had indeed found a clue, one that told him the Bloomnettle company survivors were likely with Majjhima. Under these circumstances it wasn’t smart to bring Dawn along since Majjhima and Squall were both considered felons – the kind they were supposed to kill on sight.

Things were getting better between Dawn and Cloudhawk, and he didn’t want to put her in a tough spot. It made more sense for him to go searching on his own. At least that’s how she saw it, and the thought satisfied her. This guy had a terrible attitude, but at least he was thinking about her.

Her guess was more or less the right one.

Cloudhawk's aim was to save the merchant family, and to also warn Majjhima of what was coming. That was the best he could do, though. Whether or not they escaped from their hunters would be up to them and the whims of fate. After all Majjhima was no friend, warning him about what dangers lurked in the tunnels was more than what could be expected.

Anyway Dawn's group was too conspicuous. If Atlas decided he wanted to cause more problems or if they ran into Frost de Winter in their search, that would put Cloudhawk in a pretty uncomfortable position. Going it alone was smarter. He made a smaller target, harder to pin down.

Cloudhawk had only gone a short ways into the tunnel before he was engulfed in pitch blackness. He couldn't see his hand in front of his face.

Troublesome. He'd forgotten to bring some sort of light with him.

He slowly came to a stop. It'd been so long since anyone was down here that it felt claustrophobic. The air was stuffy and the ground slick with sludge. Finding Majjhima like this was not going to be easy. But as Cloudhawk mulled over the problem his little bird companion perked up. Oddball fluttered off of his shoulder, and then the unexpected happened.

Oddball's golden feathers began to glow and suddenly he was a huge firefly. It wasn't enough light to fill the tunnel but it was enough for Cloudhawk to see where he was going. He beamed at his little friend. "Interesting. You're your own little torch, huh."

What else did this little creature have to do to prove its pricelessness? It could read his thoughts, scout, warn him of danger and light the way – the best pet he could ask for. What deadly relic weapon could hold a torch to this little guy? Literally.

Cloudhawk was determined to do his best and make sure this weird little fluffball grew well. He didn't have any friends who really knew him, and a companion like this really helped dispel the loneliness he sometimes felt.

However the light wasn't inexhaustible. After about fifteen seconds Oddball's light began to dim.

The growing creature was already low on energy and so it asked Cloudhawk to lend him some power. Without hesitation he reached out with his psychic energy, the same way he did when Oddball was just an egg. The two started to resonate and

Cloudhawk's psychic energy slowly drained while Oddball recovered. The light returned, a little stronger than before.

Divine creatures were basically special relics and Cloudhawk could communicate with Oddball the same way he did with his cloak or book. His psychic energy activated Oddball's powers in the same way, but where it differed from typical relics was that it grew and developed its own abilities.

The two were closely tied. Cloudhawk had to get stronger if Oddball was to grow up, and he was determined to get stronger soon. As Oddball grew up it was sure to do ever more amazing things! While Cloudhawk's psychic energy flowed the little bird tittered happily and flapped around. Thankfully it didn't require much energy, so they could keep this up for several hours before it got tiring.

But time waiting for no man.

He had to find Majjhima. He had to find Squall!

Majjhima had left clues along the tunnels, but a group of a hundred survivors had also left signs of their passage. Cloudhawk picked them out and eventually gathered enough to know their direction. As he picked his way through the tunnels he was also careful to erase any clues he found. He had to do whatever he could to throw Atlas and Frost off the scent.

As he was closing in on his targets a whistling sound rose through the darkness. A soldier's arrow was headed straight for him!

Cloudhawk scowled. Did he run into another group of hunters? He whipped to the side just in time for the arrow to zip past and lodge itself in the wall. Half of it was buried in the stone while the other half quivered.

He didn't even have time to steady himself before a second and then a third arrow followed. They came one right on the heels of the other, out from the darkness of the tunnels. Cloudhawk threw himself around, wildly dodging the attacks and eventually caught sight of where they came from.

Those weren't soldiers.

About six or seven people had come upon him, none of them weaklings. They had to be some of the convicts who'd escaped from prison. They'd probably robbed the bows

from soldiers, or took them from their corpses.

“Wait, wait!” He hissed. “I’m Cloudhawk, I’m the one who got you out of prison. I’m not after you.”

His answer was another volley of arrows.

These guys weren’t deaf, just determined to make sure Cloudhawk was dead. Down here there weren’t any supplies; no food, no water, nothing except what they could take. These men were criminals – counting on them to appreciate what he did in the prisons was like counting on a cow to climb trees.

Splash! Without warning a spray of blood painted the tunnel walls.

One of the convicts gaped as somehow, without a sound, his throat opened up. He fell to the ground and twitched as the life drained out of him. What the fuck?! How was there no sound at all?

The rest of them had only a moment to ponder the question before a dark blade started hunting them through the shadows. A ruthless hack buried it through a convict’s back and into his heart, ending him instantly. Cloudhawk wrenched it free and a fountain of blood followed, but still there was no sound. Nothing as it ripped through cloth and skin, nothing as it slipped back out. The others only noticed when they heard the patter of blood and the thud of their companion hitting the ground.

“Come out! Show yourself!”

The surviving convicts were shaken. They waved their weapons through the air to ward off the darkness but the monster in the shadows gave them no room to breathe. The black blade moved again, more lives were lost. Soon only one remained.

A ghost! There are ghost down here!

Noiselessly his companions had died one after the other, all in a matter of seconds. Whatever terrifying weapon that was passed right by the others and they didn’t hear it, not even as it was buried in their bodies.

The last one only managed a few steps before the shadow came for him. Cold steel pressed against his throat as suddenly and soundlessly the blade was in front of him. He went stiff as a board.

“Where is Majjhima?”

“They’re ahead, under attack. I’ve answered your question, spare-“

The convict crumbled to the ground, eyes wide and gaping into the darkness of the tunnels.

Cloudhawk gently waved Quiet Carnage through the air. It was frighteningly sharp, he thought to himself. He barely felt it as he killed the convicts. Those men were doomed the moment they decided to attack him.

Chapter 55

Deterrence

Profound stillness. Stifling gloom.

This was a small section of the tunnels, about three hundred square meters housing a couple hundred people. Lamps were set in distant corners but they didn't do much to dispel the darkness. Like all the other tools of Skycloud, so long as they were in the city they could be used indefinitely. A few boxes were scattered around with essentials like food and water, but there weren't many and they were quickly emptying.

A man thin as withered weeds, with hair to his shoulders, sat cross-legged on the floor. He was covered in grime from head to foot and I gathered in the craggy lines of his face. A scar ran down his face and over one of his eyes that gave him an even more savage appearance. His back, shoulder and chest were covered in wounds. Lily hovered over him doing what she could. "We don't have any medicine, I can't do much."

Majjhima's voice remained low and steady. "This old man's got tough bones, none of this is worth worrying over."

This group had survived down here the last few days thanks to Majjhima's contacts, who he had deliver much-needed supplies. But their good luck couldn't last forever. Skycloud's hounds were closing in and the ways were sealed. For all of Majjhima's clout and contacts it proved not so easy to slip out of the military's noose.

His organization was four hundred members strong before supplies grew too strained. A group wanted to take it all for themselves and fighting broke out. By the end over a hundred people had died. Their corpses were littered among the tunnels, and were already beginning to smell.

It was ironic. Majjhima brought them all here, hid them from attackers in the tunnels, drew on his network to give them supplies only for greed to trump it all. Was their small pile of food and water really worth it?

Those jackasses were too dense to realize that Skycloud's blockades would lighten up eventually. If they wanted to live their best bet was to rely on the resources Majjhima

could provide. If something happened to him any hope of getting stuff from the outside died with him.

No.

In fact everyone knew it well. And they figured it was better to nab what he had before someone else did it. At least they could live longer than the other guy.

And after that, what then? Fuck it! Every man for himself, live moment by moment.

Of the two hundred or so people who still listened to him, a hundred were from Bloomnettle company. They never breathed a word of revolt, and he honored his promise to look after them.

“Boss, bad news! They’re coming again!”

A dozen shapes starting moving in through the darkness of the tunnels. The one who led them was a whip-thin man clad all in black, his limbs no thicker than a bamboo branch. His hair was a disheveled mop atop his head like wing on a skeleton. Everything about him oozed malice and made one’s skin crawl.

This one was unique. Raputin was put in jail after raping and murdering a dozen young women. His violent and ruthless style could handle ten soldiers at a time. Today he had a pair of swords, patchwork weapons made from disassembled military weaponry.

All at once a palpable fear spread through Majjhima’s followers.

This skeletal man’s weapons had tasted a lot of blood, much of which they witnessed firsthand. A tenth of the bodies that were rotting in the darkness were put there by him. Fear of him was, in no small part, the reason so many went to his side.

Majjhima stood up and walked over toward the man, staring at him eye to eye. “Escaping’s going to be hard enough without us trading bodies.”

“Cut the shit, I gave you a chance. You keep half your stuff...” The skinny man’s snake-like eyes slithered through the crowd until he found what he was looking for. “...and we get them.”

Lilly’s face twitched. Twelve young women shivered while the rest of Bloomnettle

company shuffled with fear.

The men Rasputin took with him eyed them like hungry wolves. All of them were violent offenders – strong, violent and evil.

“We’re locked down here and we don’t know when or if we’ll ever get out. I’d like to enjoy a woman’s unique... flavor before I die.” Dripping with foul intent Rasputin’s eyes raked over the girls. They lingered a little longer on the doctor, Lily. That full chest, tight ass, and pretty cheeks. He felt it like a fire in his stomach awakening a beast inside him. A dark red tongue darted as he licked his lips. “Anyone who wants to join my side, I promise you get a piece.”

Majjhima scowled. It was plain as day Rasputin was deluding them, but times like these brought out the worst in people. Their most small and petty selves emerged, and he knew some were ready to accept it.

“Half of what we have, but no one goes with you.” Majjhima stood firm, all coolness and restraint. “Cloudhawk made me responsible for them. You saw what he could do, what do you think he’ll do to you if you mess with his people?”

“What, come after me? Hahaha!” There was a tinge of madness in his laugh. “Skycloud had people closing in as we speak. Who knows if we’ll even make it to tomorrow? Do you think I care if I upset that little shit? Hell if he could really do what he said, how’d he get caught in the first place? I’m dying down here anyway, let him kill me.”

“You’re right!” Someone in the crowd stepped forward and looked at the young girls. “They don’t contribute but they eat all our food and drink the water. For what? Cloudhawk’s already been captured, probably. He’s not coming down here!”

Someone joined them, then another. Then another.

“When food and water is so scarce you have to trade what you can. You either fight or you pay with your body. Otherwise what are you doing to earn your keep? Keep the women and kill the kids and old people, that’s what I say. It’s only fair!”

“That’s right!”

“Why should we share with them?”

The Bloomnettle company was a big group, and most of them weren’t fighters.

Majjhima didn't stop anyone and just let them go and the pressure broke. He watched twenty or thirty people betray him.

Even the people who were loyal to him tried to convince Majjhima that they were just a burden. That even if Cloudhawk did come down here it was unlikely he'd even find them. He had enough on his plate already without having to handle the garbage, too.

"If you're going to be stuck in your ways then I'm going to have to take them myself." Rasputin had just taken a fourth of his people and dealt a staggering blow to their morale. Now was the right time to take what he wanted. "You see that one there? Big tits, nice ass, pale skin... fine Skycloud goods right there. I heard she was a doctor, too. You fellas want some of that?"

Lily felt a dozen rotten stares crawl over her as she pressed herself back against the wall, covered in sweat. In the city doctors were respected. Lily wasn't gorgeous but she was pretty and full figured. She had a lot of feminine charm and to these men, who'd been locked up in the dark for years, found it difficult to control themselves.

"Kill them!"

Rasputin knew he'd aroused their dark appetite. "Whoever brings me the old man's head gets first dibs on her!"

The men around them became to hoot and whistle. And just as they were ready to pounce a cold light flashed from the tunnels.

A simple-looking black-gold sword lashed out from the shadows. Like slicing tofu, cut through Rasputin's left shoulder and out through his right abdomen. Impossibly sharp and completely soundless.

Then the blade turned and was swiped from his left abdomen and punching through his right shoulder. And once more across his right arm, tearing through rib and lung and heart, and exiting through the left arm. So fast, in a blink the three attacks swept through him.

All without a noise.

The others came to their senses as they watched Rasputin fall down in neat chunks. Someone knocked him over like an angry child through building blocks. Blood seeped out in gallons, spreading out along the floor in a gruesome bloom.

A man stood above the pile of meat, wearing a mask and a grey cloak and a sword as silent as death in his hand. He stood still as the sanguine petals grew beneath his feet. Finally his eyes rose to sweep over the others, and in a voice like the rasp of the grave asked them a question. "Bad things happen to those who are ungrateful. Someone want to prove me wrong?"

When Lily saw who it was tears fell down her cheeks like a waterfall. All the people of Bloomnettle began to cry.

Only one man cut Rasputin apart like he was nothing, It filled them with confidence.

No one had seen Cloudhawk arrive. They didn't even see what he did. Many people still had no idea, to them Rasputin just fell to pieces. In fact several men were fixated on their goal and lunged forward before they noticed. He lazily stretched out his hand and, amidst the sound of rasping gravel, an arrow of sand shot out. It fired through all three of them. They screamed and died.

The crowd start to share uncomfortable looks. People began to try and back away.

Rasputin was no weakling, and in a straight fight it wasn't sure Cloudhawk could take him. But with the help of the chaos and his invisibility cloak he was able to get in close for a surprise attack. With the addition of Quiet Carnage's powers he cut the man to pieces before he knew what happened.

Cloudhawk knew some of the angry men out there were dangerous murderers who could fight as well as Rasputin. Majjhima's people were weak even with Cloudhawk on their side, and if they chose now to charge things would get back in a hurry.

But the opposite happened.

His sudden arrival and ruthless style made him mysterious, and all residents of Skycloud had a sense of fear and worship for demonhunters. Terror kept them locked in place.

One of them scrambled to their feet. "This was all Rasputin's idea, none of us wanted to do it! Spare us!"

He drew his eyes back and forth over the crowd, letting the moment linger. "Do not let me see you. Ever again. Now - fuck off."

Granted forgiveness, they turned and fled into the dark tunnels.

Cloudhawk knew they weren't going anywhere. Dawn Polaris was not far behind and they were headed right for her. They had more of a chance against Cloudhawk and soon that she-devil was going to prove it to them. But by then it'd be too late.

Leading them into her hands was like handing her victory.

There were a lot of people who fled from the prisons, but the crux of them were here. If she snatched them up that was most of the more dangerous criminals right there, leaving little for Atlas and Frost to squabble over and more than enough for her to prove she was the winner.

Chapter 56

Another Encounter

Majjhima was looking after a hundred and eighty people, himself included.

Cloudhawk noted the lamps and crates of supplies, and from them deduced that Majjhima had to be using his outside connections to remain stocked. Smart, otherwise they would have starved down here already.

Majjhima and his people were shocked and happy to see Cloudhawk among them once again, however they didn't know how he managed it. How did he find them down here in the darkness? Was there anything he couldn't do?

As he walked over to the crowd his grey cloak fluttered behind him. Dim light played off the contours of his mask, making Cloudhawk look even more mysterious. The bloody sword was still in hand and the memory of what it'd just done made the survivors uncomfortable.

Majjhima had kept in contact with his people above ground and supplies weren't the other things he gathered. He heard all the news; a theft at the commander's compound, fire at the governor's mansion, and Squall's rescue from under everyone's noses. Every action was a challenge to the authority of Skycloud that made his heart race.

And yet it was strange. Cloudhawk accomplished his mission, didn't he? What was he doing down here? After everything he'd done, the fact that he was still breathing should have been enough. How many lives did he think he had?

However ruthless and headstrong some of these men were none of them dared do anything but bow and scrape before Cloudhawk. Their savior paid them no mind. "Where is Squall? I don't see him."

Everyone was quiet.

"It's been one thing after another down here, I don't know where he went. The tunnel system is complicated and intersects with a number of natural caves, if he got lost then

I'm afraid..."

Cloudhawk was silent for a few moments. He mulled over the sort of person Squall was, and his ultimate wish of becoming a demonhunter. After seeing the cruelty and hypocrisy of the world it had to have dealt him a serious blow. Was he still the same boy who worshipped Arcturus Cloude?

Now some of Skycloud's most adept warriors were hunting through the tunnels. Would Squall stay safe? There wasn't anything Cloudhawk could do about it now, so Squall's fate had to be left in his own hands. He hoped his friend made it.

"What's your plan? Escape the city?"

"It's a lot more confusing down here than we thought. Even with a map it takes time to figure out where you are. Besides, as serious criminals does it make any difference if we leave the city? There isn't a city throughout the domain that'd take us."

"Then you're thinking..."

"...of staying down here." Majjhima shot Cloudhawk a mischievous smile. "The upper tunnels are being tightly monitored by those who hunt us, but deeper in the system there are caves and tunnels from the old days. We can stay down there for a while, maybe even make a life for ourselves."

There were serious forces down here looking for them, and Cloudhawk figured most of the escapees weren't going to make it. Majjhima's group still had a few dangerous criminals, and that would be a problem for the city. But Cloudhawk didn't care – Skycloud's security wasn't his concern.

Majjhima looked at Cloudhawk with a strange expression and was silent for a long time. Eventually he made a decision. "I'd like to talk with you in private, if you have the time."

The two men stepped away from the others so they could talk alone.

"What is it?"

"I won't lie to you. I'm an agent with the Dark Atom."

Cloudhawk had expected Majjhima to ask for something else, not reveal his allegiance.

Everyone in and around Skycloud domain knew about the fiendish organization, but they were more active out in the wastes and borderlands. It was rare for their agents to infiltrate the elysian lands, much less their capital city. There was more to Majjhima than what met the eye.

It was unexpected, but Cloudhawk didn't much care.

He could tell from Majjhima's behavior and mannerisms that he wasn't a typical city dweller, but he was also different from the other criminals. His 'wasteland appreciation club' was bullshit, just a way for him to gather people who might be receptive to his cause. Building a black market network from there was beyond the abilities of a simple criminal.

Majjhima gauged Cloudhawk's reaction. His lack thereof proved that the young man didn't have the same repulsion most Skycloud citizens shared for the insurgency. He felt safe enough to continue.

"I've been living undercover in the city for years and I've managed to build a good foundation. We started from the grassroots and now we have people in the chamber of commerce, some mid-level military personnel as well. Thanks to the jailbreak I'm sure I can recruit several of these outlaws as well."

Cloudhawk gave him a skeptical look. "Why are you telling me this? Aren't you afraid I'll expose you?"

"You can't. I already know you aren't a real demonhunter. You're just like us." Majjhima's voice dropped even lower and he stepped close. "We're gathering all our resources. We've built enough to make a real underground power here!"

In the eyes of the elysians, the Dark Atom was a terrorist organization.

They'd already managed more than a few attacks throughout the domain that have led to many deaths. As expected the more damage done, the more the people came to hate the Dark Atom.

Cloudhawk looked over at the others milling around out of earshot. "These people aren't idealists, and they aren't weaklings either. Are you sure you can control them?"

"Heh, down here there isn't any food or water - no supplies to keep them alive whatsoever. Without me how else are they gonna get what they need? So long as all

the resources come through me I don't have to worry about keeping them in line. Over time they'll assimilate and become part of the organization." The old snake surely looked to have everything under control. "But if we really want to make a difference we need a leader with the right qualifications, to make the right calls."

Cloudhawk guessed where this was going.

Majjhima didn't keep him in suspense. "I was hoping you'd stay down here with us to lead our group. No one doubts your skills. I've got a few hundred people topside, and with the ones we got down here we'll be almost a thousand strong. That'd make you leader of the biggest insurgency group in the city and it'll only get bigger."

This guy wanted Cloudhawk to be the ringleader of their little circus!

It was a solid plan. Majjhima didn't know how strong Cloudhawk really was, but he sure wasn't weak. More important was that he was the one responsible for saving all of them from life in prison, then right afterwards spitting in the governor's face. It was that kind of drive and courage they needed. Relying on him was the right call.

Leader of a thousand tunnel-dwelling terrorists...

If you'd have asked Cloudhawk if one day he'd have the opportunity he would have laughed.

However, he had no interest or experience in leading anyone, much less a faction dedicated to the destruction of Skycloud. He didn't have to think much before giving his answer. "I'm not the right fit. You need to find someone else."

Majjhima wasn't going to give up that easily. "Think on it."

But there wasn't much to consider. Cloudhawk didn't have a stake in the war between the Dark Atom and Skycloud, and he still had Skye Polaris' poison to worry about, even though Trespasser had probably constrained it. Both personally and practically Cloudhawk couldn't do what Majjhima was asking.

He didn't want constraints. A thousand people sounded like power, but it was really the loss of freedom.

"Here's a keepsake from the Atom." Majjhima was disappointed but he didn't keep pushing. He pulled something out of his pocket and handed it to Cloudhawk. "You

might not be interested for now, but I'm confident there's nothing more suitable for you. If you change your mind or run into someone else from the group, show them this and they'll help."

Cloudhawk had lost his rose-tinted view of the city, but it was still where he hoped to live a comfortable life. He wasn't interested in getting embroiled in whatever spat existed between the elysians and the Seekers.

But he took the token. Maybe it would come in handy one day.

"Lily, gather everyone up. We've got to move."

Cloudhawk could only be responsible for the members of Bloomnettle company. Majjhima and the others were considered enemies of the people and if they were caught everyone would be killed. The only thing left he could do for them was point out where Dawn Polaris wasn't going to be. Majjhima waiting until their resources were packed up, told Cloudhawk they would meet again some da, then lead his people deeper into the tunnels.

"Let's go!"

Cloudhawk was playing with the token when suddenly he stopped, frozen like he was struck by a bolt of lightning.

Lily looked his way. "What is it?"

He didn't answer, instead closing his eyes and reaching out with his psychic energy. It linked with Oddball who was some distance away, and through their resonance Cloudhawk could see through the bird's eyes. Its vision was so acute that even in pitch darkness he could see clearly. But Cloudhawk didn't have time to appreciate it, because what he saw spelled trouble. Real big trouble.

A large group was coming their way.

It wasn't Dawn, either. The one who led them was a handsome man in snow-white armor and a silver spear in his hand. He was surrounded in an ice-cold, gallant air that was hard to forget.

Frost de Winter! This asshole again!

Cloudhawk's eyes popped open. "Pick up the pace, we have to go as fast as we can!"

Lily didn't know what was happening, but she could tell from his face that it wasn't good. They were a group of largely women and children, even if they ran as fast as they could how could they escape Frost de Winter's elite soldiers?

Chapter 57

Another Exchange

Frost de Winter was an admitted germophobe. A place as foul and filthy as this tunnel was exactly the thing he hated most and it made him feel soiled from head to toe. However, self-control and perseverance kept him moving through the darkness, hunting his prey.

His party was somewhat smaller than Dawn's, but Frost had brought five demonhunters with him. As a high inquisitor of the demonhunters he had the right to demand a small contingent on any mission he pleased. So, although in numbers his group was inferior, they made up for it in combat power.

One of his subordinates – a demonhunter specialized in tracking – called out. “There are traces that show a large group has been living in the area. Up ahead.”

Frost's voice was cold as ice. “After them!”

His people were some of the best warriors in Skycloud. The fugitives had no hope.

Five minutes later they were flooding through a narrow tunnel. The passages down here were anything but uniform, and this one was among them ore cramped. Only four people could pass through side by side, so a hundred had to file through in several lines. They came across another group trying to do the same, made up mostly of children and the elderly. They seemed to be a sizeable group.

“Kill them all!” Frost gave the order but his men hesitated. Their orders were to capture convicts and to only use lethal force if they resisted. These folk were just normal citizens, wasn't wiping them out going too far? Anyway, if they didn't bring anyone back how could they claim credit and get rewarded?

“These animals are a scourge upon Skycloud City. Bringing them back is inviting evil into our midst. They're nothing but a waste of space, better to kill them. And merit means nothing to me, now obey!”

“As you command!”

The soldiers rushed forward in three columns with their weapons raised. Leveling their crossbows, they pulled the triggers. The sound of twanging strings and the release of compressed air filled the tunnel, followed by a hail of crossbow bolts. A storm of deadly steel came raining down on the defenseless exiles.

Cloudhawk was in the middle of the group, trying to keep them moving and paying close attention to the situation. He hadn't anticipated Frost would immediately choose the most violent path. The screams proved him wrong, and after the first volley half a dozen people were laying on the floor riddled with arrows.

The shots kept coming, but a wall of coarse yellow sand rose up to plug the passage behind them.

Dozens of crossbow bolts could be heard as they thud against the wall of sand. It sounded like rain on a lake surface.

"Lily, get everyone out of here!"

Cloudhawk pushed forward with his left hand, causing the sand wall to explode into a wave of gravel. It surged through the narrow passage and forced the soldiers' eyes shut. The grit coalesced into sandy arrows that charged down the tunnel.

Frost de Winter grunted. He couldn't see, but the pitch of the arrows was enough. With superb precision he swung his silver spear through the air and knocked away every one that got close. His control and strength were flawless, leaving him in no danger from Cloudhawk's attack.

Frost's eyes locked on a figure, half-seen through the sand. His lips turned in a mocking sneer. "You again."

A deep resentment ran between the two men. Frost de Winter never saw Cloudhawk as anything but a filthy wretch, and Cloudhawk's hatred for Arcturus' disciple ran bone deep. Down here in the dark scourge met nemesis.

"These people are innocent, they weren't supposed to get caught up in this. They've been pardoned, so what gives you the right to exterminate them? They're citizens of this city, just like you. What you're doing is contemptable!"

"These rats might have lived a fine life, but you're the one who got them involved. You're the monster here, not me – their fate was sealed when they met you. I agree,

Cloudhawk. They shouldn't have to die for your sins."

Cloudhawk already saw through his opponent, he knew there was no point in arguing. He could have perfect logic but nothing he said would make any difference. There was no changing this man, so Cloudhawk steered clear of the topic and tried a different tactic. "Fine. Well, Frost, meeting you down here was my shit luck. But now that we're here, you've got another chance!"

Frost's face darkened like a blizzard as he listened. He growled out his response. "What are you saying?"

"First the prison, then the tunnels," Cloudhawk said through a laugh. "Twice I've embarrassed you and proved you don't have what it takes to capture me. I feel bad I keep making you look stupid, and I have a big heart. I figure I'll give you one more shot."

Frost de Winter's pride was legendary.

With how sharp Cloudhawk's words were, it was shocking they didn't immediately throw Frost into a rage. His escape from prison, freeing the convicts, and snatching Squall in plain daylight were one stinging blow to his ego after another. When he thought of what people must have been saying, the derisive laughter behind his back, Frost's anger flared. He would rip this hateful rodent limb from limb.

Cloudhawk lifted his sword and pointed it at him. "You and me. You got the balls?"

Everyone else paused in surprise. A challenge, one on one against Lord de Winter? This guy had to be crazy, how was he any sort of match for Frost? Against the unscrupulous high inquisitor, how was this any different than suicide?

However what Cloudhawk expected did not occur. Frost de Winter did not lose his temper, only looked at him with those infinitely cold eyes. "You think you can get in my head with a pitiful strategy like this? I'm not sure if I overestimate you or you underestimate me. Keep firing, kill this fool!"

Cloudhawk was frozen. That was his one ploy, thought up in a moment of desperation. He wanted to make Frost furious and buy the others time to flee. Then, somehow he would stay alive until Dawn showed up. Once she got between them the crisis would pass. However it looked like Cloudhawk hadn't thought it through. Frost de Winter was an arrogant shit, but he wasn't an idiot.

The soldiers raised their crossbows and continued to fire. Several more Bloomnettle members were murdered.

As rage welled up from Cloudhawk's heart another sand storm arose. He decided his best shot was blocking their advance. The tunnels here were narrow, and even with so many soldiers there were no more than ten he had to contend with at once. Cloudhawk had enough power to fill this tiny space with choking sand.

"The sandstorm again!"

The soldiers hunkered down to protect themselves and could see nothing. Meanwhile Frost de Winter wildly swung his spear, trying to catch Cloudhawk somewhere in the storm. But he was gone, the scoundrel had already used his powers to vanish.

"Push on, keep firing!"

The first line pointed their crossbows where they thought was forward. If they couldn't kill Cloudhawk, at least they could take out more of the fugitives. But as their fingers began to squeeze the triggers a black-gold sword emerged from the sand on their left. Its sharp bite cleaved right through the crossbow and pierced the compressed air tank, causing it to explode into splinters.

Strangest of all it never made a sound. Between that and the sandy environment, the second soldier was completely unaware when the sword lashed out again and destroyed his crossbow. It was the same scene for the third and fourth soldier, all the way down the line. They sat in a half-crouch with empty hands while the sword flashed above them, disarming the second row just as quickly.

Cloudhawk's brazen actions were unthinkable. He was attacking the soldiers head to head!

Yet why not? His invisibility cloak was a relic of near mythic powers, and paired perfectly well with the deadly silence of Quiet Carnage.

Quiet Carnage cut through whatever it touched and didn't make a sound, including human flesh. Channeling his psychic power through the sword effectively muted everything he did and made his sneaking that much more effective. He could be standing right in front of them and they wouldn't know.

He was also too fast for them to follow. Yet, the attacks all were aimed at their weapons

and not the soldiers themselves. Two magnificent swipes of his sword and eight crossbows were destroyed. Thanks to the narrow opening, by the time the next row of soldiers took their place the exiles had fled around a corner.

His gambit did not come without cost, though. For now the others were safe, but that made Cloudhawk the lone target.

The two lines of soldiers exchanged crossbows for melee weapons, and the demonhunters among them were even faster. A pair of exorcist staves whistled through the air toward Cloudhawk from two different directions.

It was going to be difficult for him to fight these two demonhunters alone.

He pushed off the balls of his feet and sprang backwards. Half a moment later the staves slammed against the floor, right where he'd been standing. Each one shattered the stone floor and kicked up jagged shards. Suddenly, a shout called out from behind.

"Hmph!"

Frost de Winter leapt out from behind the line. He ran along the wall faster than Cloudhawk could follow. He felt Snowsong's power crashing towards him like an ice dragon with its fangs bared.

Cloudhawk had not forgotten what happened the first time he fought Frost. He'd been holding out before, but this time there was a brutality mixed in with the overwhelming force of his strike. He couldn't even compare it to before. Although Cloudhawk had gotten a little stronger since then, if he thought he could deflect this strike he was deluding himself.

But getting out of the way was not an option. Even before the spear reached its target, the flood of power washed over him.

In half a blink Cloudhawk was covered in frost, making his joints stiff. If the spear hit him he would be frozen just like last time, then all it would take was a stiff kick to break him into pieces.

You wanna kill me? It won't be so easy, asshole!

Embroided in the thick of the fight, Cloudhawk wrapped a hand around the phase stone. Immediately its powerful field engulfed him and the ground below became as

soft as water. He sunk into the earth right before Frost de Winter's eyes.

The high inquisitor scowled but his reaction was quick. With a brutal swipe he struck Snowsong against the ground and released a blast of frigid energy.

Clang! The ground shook and freezing cold swallowed up the whole area. Teeth chattered as the soldiers all started to shiver.

Jagged icicles arose all around where Frost de Winter had struck. The other demonhunters all paled when they saw it, for Frost usually kept his powers in check. Now they witnessed what him and his spear were capable of and it was obvious why there were only three others who could stand in the young man's way.

Yet, even more surprising was how Cloudhawk had slipped away.

How did he do it? They saw it clear, he just sank into the earth just before the killing blow landed. Did he have some sort of special earth-type relic that allowed him to move through the ground?

Frost de Winter pulled his spear out of the ground. The scowl on his face was colder and more bitter than ever. That rat wasn't much of a fighter – ten of him couldn't beat Frost in a straight battle. But he had plenty of ways to run and hide.

Chapter 58

Mission Complete

As Cloudhawk floundered beneath the tunnel tendrils of steam surrounded him. The cold made him shiver terribly.

Frost de Winter's attacks were too overwhelming. He didn't even need to strike his target, for the burst of frigid energy snowsong spewed was enough to give a normal person frostbite. Thankfully Cloudhawk's body was more resilient, but it still felt like every cell in his body was numb. He could hardly move.

The wave of cold was incredible. Well, it wasn't quite accurate to call it a wave of cold.

Snowsong didn't expel physical cold, but an energy field that reduced the temperature in an area. Anything caught in the field naturally froze from the sudden drop, not from anything Frost's relic produced.

Whatever was unfortunate enough to be in the field felt the effect both externally and internally. Clothes made no difference no matter how thick, and in only seconds the victim's muscles lost all strength and their organs stopped working. Snowsong was deadly long before it struck its target.

Even with the mystical stone Cloudhawk was still in dire straits. There were limits to its area of effect. The phase stone made everything permeable, but only to a certain extent. In his experience the denser and thicker the environment, the more difficult it was for Cloudhawk to pass through it. Outside energy followed the same principles.

When Frost's attack landed its energy field spread scattered, at least relieving him of that threat. Still, even using the stone to avoid a direct hit from the spear, he wasn't out of danger yet. Cloudhawk was strong enough to deal with a typical demonhunter maybe, but it was still too early to have any hope of surviving a fight against Frost.

He felt his blood burn through his veins and a cold sweat sprouted from his pores. The cold that had invaded him was starting to get pushed out. Slowly he felt his normal dexterity return after about twenty seconds.

We're not finished. This bastard has repeatedly tried to put me in the dirt. I can't take him on yet, but that won't stop me from fuckin' with him!

Cloudhawk picked a spot then used his stone to climb back up the levels. He used his invisibility cloak to make sure he stayed hidden.

Frost de Winter and the demonhunters were talking.

They were discussing their options. Cloudhawk's phasing abilities made him particularly hard to kill, so it was a waste of time to try and pin him down. It was better to continue the hunt for fugitives in order to complete their mission, and perhaps lure Cloudhawk out of hiding at the same time.

Hiding near the back of Frost's group he quietly seethed at their plan. There was nothing this black hearted bastard wouldn't do.

He stepped forward. Suddenly another figure appeared among the soldiers.

The two soldiers furthest back weren't paying much attention when suddenly their heads were smashed ruthlessly together. They crumbled, unconscious. Other nearby soldiers gasped in surprise but before they could react Cloudhawk whipped his legs around in a series of powerful kicks. Two more soldiers went flying through the air and into their compatriots.

He charged forward like a bull, making quick work of another three or four soldiers. The narrow confines of the tunnels erased their numbers advantage, and with Cloudhawk's sudden and ferocious attack chaos quickly followed.

One the demonhunters cried out. "Grab him! Don't let him escape!"

But Frost de Winter and the demonhunters were at the head of the column. When they realized an attack was coming from the rear there was nothing they could do. Meanwhile Cloudhawk grabbed one of the soldiers and flung him over the crowd like a sack of potatoes. He crashed into the center of the column and knocked another group of fighters to the ground.

But soldiers were also starting to react, pouncing at him from all sides. Soon he was surrounded.

Cloudhawk's appearance was so sudden the soldiers didn't have time to draw their

weapons. They piled on him with punches and kicks, calling for the others to come. More and more people piled together until a dozen bodies were crushed together with more added every second. It was like they were trying to crush him to death.

The turmoil caused Frost to lose his temper. "Morons! You're all worthless, get out of the way!"

The soldiers, a mass of flailing arms and legs, eventually managed to untangle themselves. In the center of the dogpile they discovered that Cloudhawk was gone, leaving only several of their own mostly suffocated. As they gasped for breath Cloudhawk stepped through the right wall of the tunnel, beat the lights out of a few more soldiers, then slipped through the left wall.

Only a few of Frost's men had been seriously injured, but Cloudhawk's rapid sneak attacks had turned his crew into a mess of confusion. He had no option but to spread his demonhunters out; three in the middle, and one on each end of the column. Anywhere Cloudhawk chose to strike he'd have to deal with at least one of them.

By now the convicts were long gone. Frost de Winter had no way of knowing where they'd gone. With his attention on Cloudhawk there was no way forward.

In fact Frost's defensive posture came too late. As useful as the phasing stone was it demanded a lot of energy. Cloudhawk stood in a tunnel a short distance away, one hand on the wall and the other on his hip, taking deep gulps of air. Sweat was dropping off of him.

No good... I'm still not strong enough!

These guerilla tactics couldn't continue, but as Cloudhawk tried to decide on his next move a sensation tickled his mind. It was Oddball, trying to communicate from nearby. His face immediately lit up. *On time after all.*

He found the right spot and wrapped his hand around the phase stone. Using the last of his strength he pushed his psychic energy through the stone, and slipped through the wall. No sooner did he pass to the other side than his legs gave way, and he collapsed onto someone. They both tumbled to the ground.

A sweet smell filled Cloudhawk's nostrils. His left hand rested on something both soft and supple. His heart nearly stopped when he looked down and saw the beautiful pale face of the woman he was lying on.

“Having fun groping my ass?”

Cloudhawk was mortified to discover that his arm was wrapped around Dawn’s waist, and his hand just so happened to grab the most convenient spot to try and steady himself. That would explain the soft and supple feeling. He awkwardly retracted his hand and opened his mouth to speak, when suddenly his world began to spin. He hit the wall with bone-jarring force.

“Alright, you perv!” Dawn stood over him, glaring daggers. “You think you can take advantage of a lady like me? I may be a heavenly beauty but I’m no floozy! You’re getting off easy if I don’t castrate you!”

Bullshit! Where did all your strength disappear to? You fell on purpose, you’re looking for an excuse to beat me up!

Dawn and her team had captured more than a hundred prisoners, most of them Rasputin’s men. The members of Bloomnettle Company had also joined them. Oddball fluttered over from down the tunnel, coming to rest on his master’s shoulder. It was all thanks to this little guy.

Oddball’s pricelessness was more obvious every minute.

While leading Lily and the others to safety Cloudhawk had Oddball keep an eye on their path. The news that Frost was coming gave him enough time to find a narrow hallway, robbing Frost’s advantage. If it weren’t for those precious minutes they would have been sitting ducks. While he was preparing to fend Frost’s men off, he then sent Oddball out to look for Dawn.

Dawn Polaris’ punctual arrival was also thanks to the bird, since he led her this way. Oddball was more than helpful, it was smart enough to do all sorts of complicated tasks. Cloudhawk’s companion was definitely going to be a huge help in the days and fights to come.

The sound of marching footsteps rang through the tunnel.

The sound brought a broad grin to Dawn’s face. She drew Terrangelica and thrust it into the ground. Planting her feet, with both hands on the relic’s pommel, she filled the area with a vigorous regality.

Frost de Winter and his men appeared down the corridor, coming their way. When he

saw who was waiting for them he had to rethink his approach.

“I didn’t think we’d meet again so soon.” She stood still as a statue, but did not use her powers. “Our last contest wasn’t very satisfying. You wanna go again?”

Frost was no fool. If they were above ground he’d be happy to injure her pride, but down here Terrangelica was more dangerous than ever. So much as a vibration could bring the whole tunnel down on his head. Frost and his men were outplayed.

“You can’t protect him forever.”

“Maybe I can.”

The look Frost leveled at Cloudhawk was so full of malice it was almost cutting. He then turned his eyes back to Dawn, who stared back without a care. The slightest bit of power crackled through his hand into snowsong.

Terrangelica began to shiver.

Frost felt a wave of stifling power sweep through him, ready to explode at any moment. The ground shook slightly below his feet and a crack loudly started to grow through the ceiling overhead.

“Withdraw!” Frost swallowed his rage and wounded pride. They retreated back the way they’d come.

Dawn muttered something about cowards before pulling Terrangelica from the ground, slipping it back into its sheath. She strode over to Cloudhawk, grabbed a fist full of clothing, and yanked him to his feet. She brushed the dust off his shoulder then wrapped her arm around him in an affectionate headlock. “Not bad!” She said through her chuckles. “Not bad, I knew I picked the right guy. With this many convicts I’m definitely in the lead. I’ll make sure you’re rewarded.”

Thirty seconds ago this she-devil smashed him into a wall and threatened to cut his balls off. Now she was all friendship and sunshine. Cloudhawk wasn’t the only one who looked at her like she was insane.

Dawn definitely earned her ‘moody’ reputation.

“Alright, let’s call it a day. Time to go home!”

Overall the mission was completed without a hitch. Lily and the others were safe, and Frost de Winter was sufficiently embarrassed. Any way you look at it they did good. Dawn also grabbed a bunch of convicts, enough to win this little contest and satiate her bloodlust.

Whether or not Majjhima and his people would survive down here would be up to luck. Cloudhawk hoped they could keep out of Atlas' or Frost's crosshairs.

Chapter 59

Returning the Favor

Skycloud's tunnel system was as dark, silent, and gloomy as ever.

A mouse scurried along, vigilantly scanning its surroundings for danger. It skittered through the dark, unknowingly growing closer to the figure hunched in the shadows. It was unmoving, silent, giving the rat no indication it was there. Then – at just the precise moment – it struck.

The rat squeaked in terror.

A young man held the rodent tightly but didn't give it much chance to struggle. HE clamped his teeth into the rat's back, into its meat and through its spine. Hot, fresh blood filled his mouth.

"Hooaagghh!"

The young man didn't have a wastelander's ability to eat anything. Before he could even swallow the foul scent and flavor made him vomit. Only after days of starvation the only thing that came up was stomach acid.

In his mind the situation was clear. He had to persist if he wanted to survive. Dying down here wasn't an option, not if he wanted revenge. To do what he had to do. Suppressing his disgust he took another bite, and this time he swallowed.

Suddenly a light. Somewhere behind him. How was there light down here?

The young man's head snapped around and the light revealed his features. Long and tangled hair jutted out in all directions, framing a dirty face that might be handsome underneath the grime. Bloodshot eyes glared through the bright light and his mouth was smeared with a mix of blood, vomit and fur. He looked as feral as he did repulsive. Chains clinked, connected to shackles on his hands and feet. Wounds covered his body.

His deep, hoarse voice croaked through a parched throat. "Who's there!"

The one who held the light was a young man, dressed all in black – black boots, black pants, black gloves, black hood. Even his face was covered in a black mask that hid his features, leaving nothing but black eyes looking out. Even holding the light the stranger was like an eerie living shadow. ^[1]

Atlas didn't reply. He just looked the young man over, then bent over and placed the light to one side. Reaching behind him the assassin pulled a black dagger soundlessly from its sheath. Its dark blade reflected no light but oozed malice.

Squall's whole body went stiff. He guessed this person had to have been sent by Skycloud to kill him. He tried to scamper backward, to run.

Then Atlas lunged at him.

Crack-clang!

His attacker was so fast Squall didn't even see what he'd done. Suddenly his hands and feet felt lighter, and then his shackles clattered to the floor. Finally an almost forgotten sense of freedom returned. Atlas then flicked his left wrist and flung something toward him. Squall wrenched his body to the side just in time for something to whiz by. A clank, then he turned to see an iron pipe lodged in the wall.

Squall knew what Atlas had thrown at him when he saw it. An exorcist staff, the sort used by demonhunters. He didn't understand the man in black's intentions. When he looked questioningly at him he saw Atlas standing silently on the border of the light. The light rippled over him, as though the shadows were fighting to steal him back. His black dagger was clear as ever, though, and promised blood.

"Pull it out."

Atlas didn't seem accustomed to much talking. His words were curt, his voice hoarse, making it hard to tell his age. But Squall got it. He was giving him a chance to fight back.

If he wanted a fight, then he got one!

As he pulled the staff from the wall Squall felt his heart surge with the will to survive and a thirst for vengeance. He attacked first, rushing at Atlas like the wind. Despite several days of starvation in the darkness, he still had impressive speed and strength.

He had some skill, at least more than your average soldier. However even after half a dozen swipes from the staff Atlas was unscathed. He flit through the shadows like a feather, hardly real at all. Squall didn't even catch a scrap of clothing.

Atlas half-heartedly waved Deathstalker.

An unbearable pain jolted through Squall's shoulder. The assassin's black blade was buried in his skin.

He stopped and stared at the wound, but just for an instant. With a roar he knocked the small sword away and took another swing at Atlas' throat. The attack was easily deflected and followed by a swiping cut across Squall's chest. The former merchant and one-time demonhunter hopeful fought through the injuries to keep up his assault. A third cut caught him in the leg.

They went back and forth seven or eight times. Fighting with all his strength Squall never even got close to his assailant. Every exchange ended with Atlas giving him another wound for his trouble. However, none of them were life-threatening. The gulf in abilities was evident, so why didn't Atlas just kill him? Was he going to torture the boy to death?

Squall wasn't an idiot, he knew he didn't stand a chance. But he wasn't going to go die like a coward.

Atlas lazily kicked off the ground, sweeping his leg around in an arc. Squall's exorcist staff clattered as it was knocked down the tunnel.

He fought for breath, gasping a lungful of fetid air. The wounds were painful and he staggered under their weight, hardly able to stand. But he stood his ground, fueled by anger alone. He roared at the man in black like a dying beast.

Atlas stood across from him, unmoving. From the start of their exchange up to now he hadn't moved from that spot. It was painfully obvious how handily he dealt with Squall. Black eyes wandered over the feral young man without a glint of emotion in their depths, but not cold. Absolute indifference, without pity or malice

"Is that all you can handle?"

As he broke the silence Deathstalker fully awakened. A caustic purple haze hung around the blade's edge like an eldritch flame. In the bleak tunnels it looked like

Death's own weapon come to claim him. Although Squall didn't know what was the power of Deathstalker, he immediately recognized it as a relic, and a strong one.

This man was a demonhunter?

All through their fight not only had he been holding back his skill, he hadn't even used a fraction of his abilities. Hopelessness washed over Squall, there was no escaping this killer.

"If you're so weak..." Atlas brandished his sword and slowly stepped closer. "...then you are of no use alive. I'll send you on your way."

Trepidation seized him as Squall watched, helpless. He knew there was nothing he could do. Was this his fate, to die down here at this demonhunter's hands? Denial filled his mouth with bitter flavor. His life couldn't end so uselessly in these tunnels.

He snatched up the exorcist staff. Atlas maintained the same languid speed as he hacked toward him.

But speed was relative. To Atlas he was hardly showing any effort, but to Squall he seemed fast as lightning. He hardly had time to lift the staff before the deadly attack came crashing down. An unspeakable sense of peril filled his mind. He knew nothing on Deathstalker, but he knew every relic was remarkable. One hit was all it would take.

This was it, his moment of life or death.

With another roar Squall clearly felt a mysterious power well up inside him. It roared through his body like a vibration strangely in tune with his weapon. Then the exorcist staff began to spin. It screamed like a cyclone and friction birthed a shower of sparks.

The power of a relic! He'd awakened the staff's power!

Potential as a demonhunter had been found in Squall, but he had never undergone any proper training. Nor had he ever actually used a relic, yet he had summoned the staff's power. There were few in the city who could do so without training.

But none of that crossed Squall's mind. Death loomed close, he didn't have time to stand in wonder.

He heaved his weapon with all his strength toward atlas. Staff and sword met and-

Deathstalker stopped. Squall's exorcist staff was knocked right out of his hands.

The metallic clang of their meeting hung in the claustrophobic chamber.

Huge cracks appeared as once again the exorcist staff hit the wall. The psychic energy Squall had filled it with was released all at once into the stone. He just stood there, stunned, for he thought for sure the attack was strong enough. But to Atlas it was not even worth a second thought.

The dark blade with its slithering purple flame inched toward his throat.

This is it! My life ends here!

All hopes were dashed to pieces as he waited for death, but the pain he expected never came. Atlas' sword had stopped less than a centimeter from his neck.

Why?

The purple fires slowly faded away, along with its lethal aura.

Atlas unceremoniously returned the relic to its sheath. "Pick up your weapon."

Squall didn't understand. "What..."

"I'll say it again. Your weapon. Pick it up." Atlas kept staring at him with those lifeless eyes. "Three days, I'll teach you. How much you learn is up to you."

Squall couldn't believe his ears.

Although he'd never learned the man's name, his skill alone proved he was no typical demonhunter. Without a doubt he had to be a master, but this sort of mission wouldn't give the likes of him or someone like Frost any accolades. Why offer to teach him? What was the logic? He was a criminal!

"Don't ask. Don't think. Don't thank. Just follow orders." Atlas' voice was soft as a shadow's caress. "I owed a favor. This is payback."

Who would dare trust someone like this? But that didn't matter, he'd spared Squall's life. He'd even offered to teach him. By all rights this was beyond anything he could expect!

Squall knew that after all of this he would never be a demonhunter. That path was closed to him. But his strange new master, maybe he could give him the training he needed.

“What are you going to teach me?”

“Time is limited. I’m going to teach you to survive.”

Squall’s heart thundered in his chest and he clenched his hands into fists. Survival was exactly what he wanted to learn.

Chapter 60

The Plan

The first thing Frost de Winter did when he returned to the mansion was shower several times. He then sprayed himself with cologne to mask any hint of the smell he'd recently escaped. However, the discomfort in his heart couldn't be washed away.

How was a wasteland rat like Cloudhawk able to repeatedly show him up? Even that crazy woman Dawn Polaris was on his side, now. What was her grandfather thinking! However when Frost thought about it he was heartened that Cloudhawk would only be in the city for another few days. Soon the training at Hell's Valley would begin and he would be sent away. It gave him some solace.

Two hours later, in a local pub.

Frost de Winter had exchanged his armor for the typical wide-sleeved robes worn by nobility in Skycloud city. The snow-white cloth was almost magic, turning from a dashing young military genius into an erudite scholar. However, the shrewdness in his eyes could not be concealed.

None of the food or drink on his table was touched. As always Frost's self-restraint was of the highest caliber. He never drank, never smoked, never enjoyed a woman's touch, did not covet money, and had never been seen enjoying himself. Frost de Winter was always the picture of high-born discipline, driven by the desire to be the best. To achieve that he made sure to make the most out of every second to become win strength, title and influence.

All this was due to his excellent teacher.

Frost's highest aspirations were to be like him. The only way to do that was to put in much more effort than the common man. He was talented, but he wasn't even among the top ten in the city when it came to natural ability. However he was in the top three for skill, and he firmly believed he was the best all-around warrior of the youngest generation.

Selene? Zephyr? One was an insurmountable talent who was dumb as rocks, and the

other had disappeared into seclusion with their father years ago. Frost considered neither his equal.

Blaze? Atlas? One was slick with no ambition, and the other was too narrow-minded to make anything of himself!

That left Dawn Polaris. She merely relied on her family and talents to push people around. Her precious family would collapse around her sooner or later, and her talents will dry up. When she joins the ranks of the base common folk what right would she have to even challenge him?

Frost de Winter sat there, cold and aloof. He did not come from a mighty family, nor was he of exceptional talent. However, he did have the benefit of a peerless teacher and unyielding drive. Everything in his life was aimed at a single purpose, so he was convinced no one would be able to stand in his way. He was fated to become the greatest man of his generation.

“Why is he taking so long?”

Frost’s eyebrows furrowed, he hated wasting time. It was like throwing away a precious resource. The tardiness of his companion was beginning to irritate him.

Besides, this place was full of degenerates. The stench of corruption and decadence clung to him.

This table, this chair, this carpet... who knew how many filthy plebians had touched them? It didn’t matter how often you washed them the stench remained. Surrounded by drunken revelers and flirtatious harlots, Frost’s skin began to crawl.

How was the world filled with such short-sighted ignorance? There was so much to do, yet these fools wiled away their days in pursuit of transient pleasures.

If Frost had a torch he would hesitate to burn this whole place down. But he didn’t. He was forced to wait and suffer.

“Apologies, nephew. You’ve been waiting.”

At last a mustached man bathed in a lordly presence pushed open the door to the private room. He was none other than the governor’s assistant, Augustus Cloude.

“No need to stand on ceremony, uncle.” Frost de Winter rose and pressed his hands together in greeting. He quickly pushed the conversation along. “How are things going? Well, I suspect?”

Augustus’ expression stated otherwise. “It’s proving difficult. The place they’re sending Cloudhawk is unique. Any assassins you send won’t be able to sneak in.”

A stern displeasure crossed Frost’s face. “Then we deal with him on the road. We do it ourselves!”

Augustus shook his head, rejecting his nephew’s plan. “Too impulsive. Skye Polaris will certainly be sending a retinue with Cloudhawk, meaning we’ll have to kill the commander’s men to achieve our goal. You can imagine, I’m sure, how the old man would react to such news. The wastelander’s life isn’t worth pitting two of Skycloud’s strongest families against one another. I cannot assent to this plan – much less the governor.”

Frost de Winter frowned. “What sort of place is Hell Valley?”

“I don’t know much about it myself. The various families send representatives every year to participate in training. Its high mortality rate is well known, but not their methods.” Augustus fiddled with his mustache as he spoke. “Unerringly, those that emerge are the elite. Best of the best. They don’t bother joining the army or any demonhunter group. They are recruited into special units, or secret family organizations like the Court of Shadows. Elusive, mysterious, and beyond my jurisdiction to pry into.”

Frost de Winter’s scowl carved lines in his handsome face. “Is there nothing we can do?”

“The families don’t just send anyone, only their most talented take the risk. There is no guarantee Cloudhawk survives.” Augustus tried to persuade his hot-blooded counterpart. “This is a sensitive time. There are always methods, but if something should happen to the wastelander Skye will surely blame you. This is why Lord Arcturus has ordered that you keep your distance. The commander is not a man you wish to provoke, our Lord is working in your best interest.”

Frost de Winter had already dismissed his uncle’s warnings. So long as Cloudhawk lived he was a problem. He shut his eyes and thought for a time, then spoke. “You say

Hell Valley boasts a high death toll. Cloudhawk might not live through the training.”

“That’s right.”

“If he dies during the process then no one can say I had a hand in it, yes?”

“That’s... indeed!”

“Then we have our opportunity. We cannot dispatch men to the camp but we can send trainees. We have them enroll and they deal with Cloudhawk from the inside. Nothing can be traced back to us, and Skye will have no reason to suspect our involvement.”

Augustus couldn’t hide his wry grin. “My good nephew, you are not one to be ignorant of the situation. Why do you want to kill this man so badly?”

“The wastelander scoundrel has insulted me, defiled our city, and tarnished our lord’s reputation. This I can stomach. But something tells me if he is allowed to live Cloudhawk will become a serious threat to the master. I’m not prepared to ignore my premonition.” Frost de Winter fixed his uncle with an unflinching stare. “Are you willing to help me, uncle?”

“Alright. This once.”

Augustus Cloude was Lord Arcturus’ man, executing whatever the master demanded. For many years he’d lurked in the background, manipulating things to make sure the governor’s bidding was done. Never once had he violated Arcuturus’ orders. This time, however, he worried that the governor’s methods were too lax.

Killing Cloudhawk was not going too far. Not in order to protect the family’s reputation or his lord’s dignity.

Augustus Cloude brought Frost to a special prison beneath the sanctuary. It was only a tenth the size of a typical prison, and only housed a dozen or so inmates. However, these criminals were not your run-of-the-mill convicts. Each of them were demonhunters who had committed atrocities and the dungeons they occupied was built specifically to house them.

Augustus opened up one of the cages, and inside was a large man dripping with chains. A sick air hung over the thirty-something year old man and he was covered in scars from head to feet. Even just the look of his was rabid.

Frost cast a glance toward his uncle. "This is the man you recommend? He doesn't look like much."

"This is the one they call the Butcher." Augustus smirked. "Don't underestimate him, his bloodlust is well known. He was once sent out to find a blasphemer hiding in a village. When he couldn't discover who it was he slaughtered every man, woman and child. It was so bad that they locked him up down here to make sure word never got out."

Frost still wasn't convinced. "IS he strong?"

"More than sufficient to deal with Cloudhawk," he answered.

The governor's disciple frowned in thought. "Be that as it may, we should have a contingency in place."

Augustus blinked in surprise. His nephew definitely wasn't sparing any effort this time. He reminded him of Lord Arcturus when he was young. If Frost de Winter could learn to control his moods he would grow to become quite a man.

After a moment's hesitation, Augustus led him to the deepest cage. "This one is truly insane. He once hid by the sanctuary until an oracle passed by and kill them. He's slated for execution, but if you think he's useful I can levy the family's influence."

Frost nodded and called out. "Lift your head, let's take a look at you."

The killer slowly raised his head, revealing the face of a man that did not look at all like the monster Augustus claimed him to be. His skin was fair and his features noble. Blonde haired, blue eyed, his had an impressive build. Far from frightful, he seemed almost as bashful as a young boy.

"Interesting." Frost de Winter looked him over, then approached and unlocked his shackles. The blond haired youth fell to the ground, rubbing his raw wrists and ankles appreciatively. Frost looked down his nose at him. "You should die a hundred times for what you did."

The man hung his head and a raspy chuckle followed.

Frost frowned. "What are you laughing about?"

As the last syllable left his throat the blonde man's head snapped up. That bashful look was gone and in its place was a bestial insanity. In a flash he lunged at Frost with his sharp fingernails.

Bang!

Frost de Winter used his spear to knock the rush aside, simultaneously filling the cage with a bone-chilling cold. Right away the blonde man's body was covered in a layer of frost. With an animal-like scream he skittered backward, but Frost pressed the attack. A dozen strikes followed, one after the other, forcing the man to roll to safety. He cowered in a corner gasping in fear.

"There aren't many who can avoid my spear. Not bad." Frost wasn't angry from the man's surprise attack. He walked over to where he huddled in the corner. "I'm prepared to give you a chance to live."

This one was definitely stronger than Cloudhawk. The wastelander hadn't been able to avoid his strike.

What's more this madman didn't even have a relic or weapon. The power he displayed was physical only, but there was clearly more to him than that. Frost's plan was coming together; use the Cloude family's influence to enroll these two in the same training program as Cloudhawk.

From there they could get the job done.

Chapter 61

Dawn's Generous Gifts

Skye Polaris read through the report three times, then boomed with laughter like an enormous copper bell. “Good! You’ve done good. The Court and the governor were handily defeated – you brought honor to our house. Beautiful!”

Dawn Polaris achieved excellent results in the tunnels below the city, killing over a hundred escaped convicts and capturing a hundred more. Most impressively, the ones she did capture were violent offenders from the dungeon – the most dangerous of the lot.

This impetuous, moody niece of his had done very well.

Skye had noticed some maturity in her over the last few days. She hadn’t been going around stirring up trouble, and she did what she was told conscientiously. It was a welcome, if entirely unexpected change.

“What would you like as a reward?” Skye quickly added, “Not Cloudhawk. Don’t even suggest it.”

Dawn glared at him. “Who cares about your reward?”

Skye watched as she turned to leave. “Where are you going?”

“The Temple!”

“What are you headed there for?” He shouted after her, confused. “Make sure Cloudhawk is ready to go! He’s being sent off in only a few days, don’t procrastinate!”

Dawn Polaris frowned but did not reply.

Several dozen people stood at the transit station, laden with goods.

Cloudhawk looked over the Bloomnettle survivors. “Even with the general’s pardon, Skycloud city can no longer accept you. Go and find somewhere else in the domain to settle down. Live out your days in peace. Don’t say anything that’ll get you in trouble. You all are elysians so you know this better than I do. I don’t think you need any more nonsense from me.”

There were eighty or so Bloomnettle survivors left. They were fortunate after such a disaster!

But Lily and the others wore downcast expressions. Were they once more fated to wander without a home? It seemed to be the best choice!

“Hey, getting out of that hellhole alive was lucky. Why the long faces? Better days are on the horizon, right?” He saw their anxious and confused expressions. “Is something wrong?”

Lily was worried about the future. Everything happened so fast at the headquarters and they’d been thrown in prison with only the clothes on their backs. Now their home was shut and all their goods removed.

Making sure such a large group stayed healthy and together was not going to be easy!

Lily was a physician, but her skills weren’t exceptional. Other cities couldn’t offer as much as Skycloud city, either. How was she supposed to take care of everyone? How was she supposed to make sure the children grew up well? With a childhood like this none of them would get good jobs like being soldiers or demonhunters.

“Don’t worry, I’ve thought about all of this.” Cloudhawk handed over a heavy bag. “Take it! It’s the money I’ve saved up, I can’t spend it here anywhere. Use it to make sure you and the others live happily.”

She took it from him, and judging by the weight she figured there were about a hundred coins. When she pulled on the drawstring and looked inside her eyes immediately went wide. She was right about the number, but what she hadn’t guessed was that the pile was all gold. A hundred gold coins!

How many years would Bloomnettle Company have had to save to accumulate this much? Cloudhawk just handed it over, without so much as a blink!

Cloudhawk gave her a questioning look. “What is it? Not enough?”

“Oh it’s enough. More than enough.” Lily hurriedly pulled the bag closed. “I don’t know how to thank you.”

“‘Thanks’ works, and let that be the end of it. Forget everything that’s happened and anything having to do with me. Just live your lives.”

Cloudhawk didn’t care about what he was giving up. To normal folk a hundred gold coins was a fortune, but for him it meant little. Dawn still owed him.

He didn’t want to see these people ever again. In fact it would have been better if he’d never met them at all. It seemed like tragedy followed him wherever he went. These sorts of common, good-hearted people were helpless once they became victims. Cloudhawk didn’t care what would become of them in the future –whether they’d make it or not. He just didn’t want them to suffer because of him.

“That’s all I can do. The ship’s coming, time to say goodbye.”

Cloudhawk waved and, saying all that needed to be said, quickly left them on the platform. He walked away unhurriedly and never looked back.

Lily and the others watched him go with conflicted hearts. If they hadn’t met this wanderer all the core members of the company would have died out in the borderlands. However after meeting him their leaders were gone, and their livelihood destroyed.

But then he risked his life for them, and if he hadn’t they would all have faced a bleak and uncertain future. Exile from the elysian lands, if they were lucky.

Cloudhawk’s relaxed posture was misleading. He’d risked everything for them.

They were banished from Skycloud city, but at least they’d been absolved of their crimes and had a chance for a normal life. A quiet and ordinary life somewhere was more than enough.

What would stay with them forever – what they lost and could not recover – was their faith.

Cloudhawk didn’t need to do all that he’d done, and in fact he wasn’t sure why he did. He wasn’t a very charitable man. Over the last half a year he’d killed many, and never hesitated.

What wastelander's hands weren't stained with blood?

There was no thought given to 'right' or 'wrong' in Cloudhawk's green. There wasn't such a thing as good or evil. Either he wanted to do it, or he didn't – that was how he made his decisions. After sending Lily and the others to the platform his responsibilities were done. The matter, as far as he was concerned, was settled.

Cloudhawk whistled on his way back to the mansion. When he arrived he found that Dawn was not there. Bored, he decided to pass the time practicing.

Of the thirty-six postures Selene Cloude had taught him, Cloudhawk could now do twenty-seven or twenty-eight in a row. It showed that he had been improving. As he went through the motions he didn't feel tired necessarily, but progressively hotter. By the end he was drenched in sweat. [1]

Time passed quickly and before he knew it night had fallen. A voice interrupted his training.

"Idiot, this isn't the sort of practice you should do without guidance!" Cloudhawk didn't need to look to know Dawn had returned. "I guess Selene never told you that straight training like this can damage the body?"

Cloudhawk slowly stopped and turned to face her. "What do you mean?"

"This is a body forging method for demonhunters, but if you overdo it you can strain or damage your muscles and tendons. You're supposed to supplement your practicing with medicinal herbs. Otherwise if you aren't careful you could hurt yourself, even cause permanent damage." Dawn stood in front of him with her arms crossed and a critical expression on her face. "I can see that Selene really didn't have your safety in mind. She was trying to make you a cripple. You really shouldn't have anything more to do with that vicious woman."

How deep does the nastiness go between these two? What a clumsy attempt to drive a wedge between us.

Dawn's warnings were really only half genuine. Improper practice was responsible for a lot of injuries, but saying it would cripple him was a baseless exaggeration.

Cloudhawk didn't believe Selene would try to hurt him this way. There weren't any sorts of medicine he could use out in the wastelands, but he recovered from wounds

quickly. So far his development had been well-balanced and there wasn't any danger.

Dawn beckoned him with a wave of his hand. "Come to my room. I have something I want to give you."

She'd made a trip to the sanctuary and brought back some things for her new friend. Among them were a thousand or so jade-like pellets which she explained was feed for divine beasts. Were it not for her mother's connections they never would have gotten their hands on it.

Cloudhawk picked one up and put it beside Oddball.

The strange little bird immediately perked up and gobbled it down. From the wave of happiness that coursed through their psychic connection Cloudhawk knew it was just what his companion needed.

"This batch of feed cost two thousands gold coins," Dawn revealed. "I also prepared some medicines for you. Some are for healing, some are to make you stronger, and some are to improve your psychic power. All told they were also two thousand gold coins. Since I owe you let's call it three thousand you need to repay, alright?"

Dawn Polaris laid out a bunch of jade bottles containing special elysian elixirs. There were three; Body-Quenching Elixir, Soul-Purifying Elixir, and Sacred-Healing Elixir. [2]. The Body-Quenching formula was used to temper one's physical abilities. Soul-Purifying Elixir bolstered physic energy. As the name implied the last one, Sacred-Healing Elixir, was a high-grade healing potion that restored both physical damage and exhaustion. These were special formulas made by the sanctuary that even wealthy citizens couldn't buy. In addition there were several more liniments and balms, none of which looks typical.

Cloudhawk opened his mouth to protest. "How are they so expensive? You decided all this on your own, I never said I wanted any of it."

"You ungrateful brat, you want to get whooped?!" She smacked him so hard with her fist it almost made Cloudhawk puke blood. She growled at him menacingly. "Let me tell you, this is the insider price. Medicine like this is only used for those with noble blood, it's wasted on a wastelander scoundrel like you. Anyone else could beg to spend the money and still be denied! If it wasn't for my mother you wouldn't have gotten any of this. Do you have any idea what I had to sacrifice?"

She thought about just what she'd had to promise in order to get Cloudhawk all of this. Her mother had made her swear to a year of seclusion in the Temple. She would spend twelve long months training, cultivating, and giving obeisance to the gods. She might as well have asked for Dawn to take her own life. A year without booze, meat or fun of any kind! It was the same as dying.

Then for him to be so ungrateful! Of course she'd be furious.

"I'm just saying, you play too rough. Luckily my bones are tough." Cloudhawk gently rubbed his aching chest where she'd struck him. He didn't like owing anyone anything. "Are we going to the Order of Demonhunters any time soon? Do you want me to go grab any treasures? I've gotta get rid of this debt while I'm still in the city."

"Whatever, they don't have auctions every day. Anyway, with your eye going every once in a while is good enough. If we kept screwing with their system the Order would quickly start to hate you. Stealing wasn't a long-term plan, either."

"What can I do then?"

"Pay with your body?"

Cloudhawk looked her up and down. "You sure?"

Dawn's face immediately turned red. "What the hell are you thinking? Who'd want your body that way? I'm saying you be my servant. A thousand gold a year, what do you say? Pretty good, just to follow me around and have fun don't you think?"

"No way!"

"You little moth-... fine, owe me then. So long as you owe me I know you aren't going anywhere." Dawn shook her head. "Ah right, you'll be leaving in a few days. So don't die before you pay me back!"

Outwardly she was obstinate and coarse, but Cloudhawk knew inside she was a sensitive woman. "I promise," he replied.

"It's still early." To him Dawn looked a little uneasy. She waved her small hand. "Let's go, time for a drink!"

Cloudhawk blinked at her. "You're still in the mood for a drink?"

“Just drink,” she said. “I’m not interested in competing with a freak like you again. You coming or not?”

“Let’s go!”

The two left the mansion together.

1. What he describes is likely meant to be very similar to Taiji or Qigong. While I was doing Taiji in the beginning, although the movements are slow it can be very tiring. It’s about control and stamina. Over time as your muscles get stronger you can do more postures – depending on the style one ‘round’ of Taiji is a hundred and eight postures, but the longest is over two hundred. While it gets physically less intensive that doesn’t stop you from sweating like crazy, which is true for Qigong standing meditation as well. The Chinese believe that these exercises activates and circulates qi throughout the body, which causes you to sweat. From a traditional medicine theory perspective ‘wei’ qi, or defensive qi, controls the action of the pores so manipulating it can cause sweating.

2. At the risk of making traditional Chinese medicine sound like a Hogwarts class, a lot of their medicinal formulae have similarly dramatic names. ‘Decoction of the Blue-Green Dragon’, ‘Three Immortals’, ‘Mysterious Decoction’ etc. Not all or even most, really, but they’re fun when you see them.

Chapter 62

Enemies and Departures

Since Cloudhawk was to be gone for a time, he prepared himself back in the mansion. He'd taken two of the Body-Quenching elixirs already, and he had to say Dawn's gifts were helpful. Elysian medicines didn't have the immediate effect that Seeker drugs had, but they were far gentler on his system.

Seekers used ancient scientific methods to create pharmaceuticals, which saw results moments after injection. The panacea injection was an example, which improved self-healing by a factor of ten almost immediately. However, in the end these drugs often pushed the body beyond its natural limits, squeezing every cell for every ounce of potential for a temporary boost. As such these drugs were very good for the short term, but were possibly harmful over longer periods.

Cloudhawk knew this, so he hadn't wanted to risk his health by taking drugs that forced improvement. On the other hand, the elixirs Dawn had brought her were different. They were refined through special processes here in the elysian lands. The contents of the bottles were small, but they were the potent extracts of rare materials. Their ingredients improved strength, agility and regeneration.

Most importantly, these elixirs were stable and had no side effects. ^[1]

After training for a little while Cloudhawk was surprised to find that he was progressing quickly. In only a matter of days since beginning the herbal regimen he was able to comfortably perform thirty postures of the demonhunter exercises. This proved that he was getting better.

For most elysians his incredible improvement would be hard to believe, so to prevent Dawn's shock and probing curiosity Cloudhawk kept it a secret. At her current rate of progression Cloudhawk was achieving in a couple days what took her a month of training.

Dawn Polaris was no typical person, either! Her talent was maybe only surpassed by Selene Cloude's.

There was a lot about Cloudhawk that was unique. He could hear relics, for instance, and he improved at a faster rate than most. If the patriarch of the Polaris family found out he'd surely cancel Cloudhawk's training in Hell Valley. Skye was looking for people to make his family and soldiers stronger – he wanted to forge people to make them the tip of the spear. However with Cloudhawk's current abilities he would be wasted in the vanguard. Skye would want to make him a pillar of their family's strength.

Of course from Cloudhawk's perspective there was no benefit to being a servant of the Polaris family. He'd always valued his freedom, and as powerful as the Polaris family was it also seemed to attract trouble. Cloudhawk didn't like trouble, so he didn't want to be tied somewhere where it could easily find him. He'd much rather spend his time away training.

At last the day came for him to go. Cloudhawk packed up the feed for Oddball and his elixirs in a travel sack, slung it over his shoulder, and got ready to set out.

"It won't do for you to carry your sword in hand all the time. I had something made for you." Dawn Polaris had tracked Cloudhawk down and threw something at him.

Cloudhawk caught it – a sheath, made from the same materials as his black-gold sword quiet carnage. When he slipped the sword in he was pleasantly surprised at how well it fit. He wasn't sure how Dawn had gotten the dimensions of his sword so precise.

She smirked at him. "It's made from elysian tungsten steel ^[2]. It cost fifty gold to make. Remember to add that to what you owe."

It seemed like his debt was increasing every day, and he knew it was only going to grow. Oddball's food was finite and Cloudhawk would need more medicine for his training. Since Dawn was the only one with the means to get these things for him he had to rely on her favor. It was going to be a long road to get out from under what he owed – but that is exactly what Dawn wanted.

Dawn thought for a moment. "Work hard when you get there. When I have time I'll try to find a way to come and visit."

Skye ordered a contingent to accompany Cloudhawk, ensuring he was safely on his way to Hell's Valley. Mr. Ink led the party.

Cloudhawk didn't get the Polaris family physician, but he knew he was no weakling. He had to be something special for Skye Polaris to reign his temper in around him. Mr.

Ink's presence had to be a way to insure nothing happened to Cloudhawk on his way to Hell's Valley.

Skye had also explained the do's and don'ts of Hel's Valley before Cloudhawk left.

"The environment out there is harsh, but it's the perfect place to make you stronger. If you survive you're sure to improve quickly. You'll learn a lot there that you can't learn in the elysian lands, so make sure you pay attention."

The ship was preparing to depart. With his final orders delivered Skye Polaris got ready to leave.

But as he turned to go the sound of a griffon carriage coming from the city reached their ears. All eyes turned to the extravagant convoy as it approached, toward the flags flapping on each one; a crescent moon on a field of blue. It was the crest of one of Skycloud city's influential families.

Skye's eyes sparkled. "The Lunae family. Is that upstart Garuda Lunae sending people to Hell's Valley as well?"

The contingent of carriages from the Lunae family pulled up near Skye Polaris. From within trundled forth a man who was precisely the shape of a meatball but the size of a man. He waddled toward the Polaris patriarch with an amicable look on his face. Easily over three hundred pounds, the rotund individual was clad in immaculate gold silk robes. A slanted mustache sat over plump lips and though he was a respectable fifty years of age, the portly gentlemen seemed comical and harmless.

"General, of course it'd be you. Such a coincidence." Garuda Lunae only managed a few steps before his face turned red and he started puffing. The happy smile never fled from his face, though. "This humble man pays his respects."

"You're full of it." Skye huffed as he eyed the Lunae assembly. "Aren't you merchants? What's all this, sending men to sacrifice their lives in Hell's Valley?"

"So serious, General. So grave. We are but merchants and cultivating elite fighters is of little use for us." Garuda's face was suddenly comically melancholy. "I'm not sure what affliction has come over my third daughter, but she insists on being allowed to undertake training at Hell's Valley."

Skye looked back at him with surprise on his face. "She must know the dangers.

Children of the aristocracy are especially sheltered, and yet she persists. You've raised a good girl, have her come out. Let me have a look."

Garuda beamed and waved toward the carriages. "Claudia, get out here and introduce yourself to the commander."

A golden haired young woman stepped out, so thin she almost seemed to float. Her pretty face was worn to the point of almost being called haggard, like a stiff breeze could knock her down. Her face retained a wooden expression as she made her way over to where Skye stood. Once before him she offered a stiff bow. "I've met the commander."

Dawn's voice broke into the conversation. "Hm? Cloudhawk, why are you hiding behind me?"

Claudia Lunae's eyes swept Dawn's way, just in time to see Cloudhawk slink out from behind her. All of a sudden her expression and mannerism changed, and her eyes were dual furnaces of rage. "*You!*"

Skye looked over, puzzled. Dawn looked at him, confused. Garuda looked at them both, surprised.

Cloudhawk couldn't help but once again bemoan how small the world seemed. Why was he constantly running in to people who wanted him dead? He couldn't side so he simply stood there in full view. He pulled his shoulders back and answered. "Damn right it's me!"

"Die!"

Claudia lifted her hand and from within her palm arose a flower-like relic. From it shot several dozen darts, all headed right for where Cloudhawk stood.

Shocked, her father screamed like a stuck pig. "Stay your hand!"

"Tempest flower?"

Dawn's slender brows lifted, but her sword was on the move. Standing in front of Cloudhawk she stabbed the sword's blade into the ground, which summoned a wall of soil to rise. The hail of darts were stopped before they got close.

That's a damn good she-devil!

Indeed, even the likes of Frost de Winter were embarrassed when they tried to face her. Who was this girl, who thought she could harm Dawn's servant in front of her? Someone in the city was actually more arrogant than she was. Dawn wasn't about to let that go easily!

"Have you gone insane, girl?!" Garuda hurled his lumpy body between them. "I didn't spend a fortune to buy you that relic so you could use it on the General's people! Stand down!"

All three of them were untouchable! Skye Polaris went without saying, he was commander of Skycloud's armed forces. His position may not have been as illustrious as the governor's, but he wielded no less power. Dawn Polaris had the backing of her family and the Temple, as well as the likes of Mr. Ink who they didn't wish to offend. As for the young man, Garuda didn't know him but he sure wasn't worth attacking the Polaris family for.

Skye chuckled dryly. "The Lunae family is impressive. Your tracker necklace is nothing special but the tempest flower is quite the relic. You're definitely willing to spend money on your girl."

Garuda flopped onto his knees. "This humble man's daughter has acted improperly. We beg the commander for forgiveness!"

When she saw her father on his knees Claudia Lunae began to sway. She suddenly realized how dangerous a predicament her rash actions had put them in.

Skye paid Garuda no mind. "What's all this about?"

Cloudhawk shrugged then went over their contentious history.

The General frowned and ran his fingers through his beard. "This child was a friend to the Umbra boy, and in the end you had to kill him? He was no one important and you had no choice. You can't be blamed, I'll help straighten it out

Dawn sighed. "Anyone else this would be easy, especially some talentless trash. But that one had a brother we don't want to upset."

"Who?"

“Who else? Atlas!”

“Son of a bitch, him?”

The news did not sit well with Skye. Atlas was second in command of the Court of Shadows, Skycloud’s most infamous special operations organization. They got their orders directly from the Temple. Not even the Cloude family could keep them in check, much less the Polaris family. Atlas was not an easy bastard to deal with.

“How do you want to deal with this girl?” Skye Polaris looked Claudia over. Atlas was a problem, but this one was not. Garuda begged for mercy but the commander acted like he could not hear. He spoke directly to Cloudbird. “Your decision.”

Claudia Lunae stood still as stone and just as silent, biting her lip.

“This is a personal matter, so I can’t ask the General to get involved. But if she still decides she wants to come after me, I’m not going to show any mercy.”

“Good. A man of integrity, decided as it should be. Let the kids work out their own problems. Let the adults deal with family matters and stay out of the way.” Skye stared at Cloudbird, who’d proven to be quite the troublemaker. “The threat of Atlas’ knife at your back is a good thing, too. It means you’ll have to get strong quick.”

What other choice did Cloudbird have? He’d just have to accept that fate hated his guts!

Mr. Ink quietly interjected. “Everyone, the ship is preparing to depart.”

1. This is the standard argument for Chinese herbal medicine versus western pharmaceuticals. Proponents of traditional medicine feel that herbal medicine is milder in action, but more complete in their efficacy while having much milder side effects. Here is an interesting article from the WHO that described the state of herbal medicine, and gives an example of how herbs have been distilled into more potent pharmaceuticals.

2. Did you know they use tungsten steel for rocket nozzles? Cool!

Chapter 63

Reconnaissance

Enveloped in a shell of glimmering energy, the airship began to ascend. Cloudhawk sat in his cabin looking out of the window as the ground fell away. Once more the artful layout and ordered streets were revealed from a bird's eye view, only to slowly vanish into the horizon.

From here he could see the miraculous falls reappear from the clouds like a jade column. Hundreds of ships came and went, grandiose as they soared through the sky. Yet as the spectacular scenery was revealed Cloudhawk did not have the same sense of splendor he'd experienced when he first arrived.

He'd thought this would be the place where he might settle down. After defeating the demon and with the demonhunter token he could buy himself a life where he didn't need to worry about food or clothing. When he got here he thought that finally he might live a happy life. Who'd have thought that in less than a month he would leave Skycloud domain's most prosperous and bustling city for the unknown.

He couldn't say there was any regret or unwillingness. But there wasn't comfort or freedom, either.

Cloudhawk was strangely calm. When Skycloud city disappeared he drew his eyes away from the window and lain down in his cabin. With his arms as his pillow he shut his eyes and mulled over what he'd just learned.

By some strange act of circumstance Claudia Lunae was also on her way to Hell Valley, but he was not troubled. For better or worse he was tied to the Polaris family, and the Claudia's dare not provoke the commander. Besides, Cloudhawk was not the same man Claudia met in the wastelands.

Her skills had improved, but within limits. Meanwhile both physically and mentally Cloudhawk had seen tremendous gains. While Claudia had the blessing of a wealthy house to buy her relics, she had neither the strength nor experience to threaten Cloudhawk any longer.

It's best for you if you stop screwing with me. If not I'll make sure you meet Raith again, face to face! Cloudhawk's bitter thoughts were not idle promises. He knew soft hearts did not solve these kinds of problems. He spared her once, he wouldn't do it again.

As for her family, he wasn't sure.

He'd learned all he needed to know about the Lunaes. They were a merchant family with ties to all manner of industries from clothing to dining, luxury goods to public transport, even weapons and armor. They were the largest and most influential merchant family in the entire domain.

The Lunae family organization was massive. After three generations of stable development it was now being led by Garuda Lunae. He didn't seem to be an exceptional man, but his skills were at least sufficient to maintain what his predecessors had built. Over the last several years their organization had kept their status as the most affluent merchant family. Thus Garuda Lunae was crowned with the title of the richest man in Skycloud.

Cosnidering such information one would assume the Lunaes were an influential power in Skycloud. However, the truth was quite the opposite. The tradition of the elysian lands lay in respect for the gods. Those who were pious and brought glory unto the names of their benefactors were awarded the greatest power. Merchants, who worked for their own gain, were not given much respect or status.

Businessmen respected nothing but profit. They cultivated a prospector's instincts. To the zealous citizens of Skycloud working as a merchant was difficult to admit. Despite their vast wealth, the Lunae family did not have the rights to maintain a standing force or participate in powerful circles in any meaningful way.

All this considered, it was very difficult for the Lunaes to find demonhunters willing to swear fealty to their family. They were a proud breed and being the lapdogs of businessmen was not something their pride could suffer.

To combat this the family spared no expense in raising talent from within, hoping that they might generation demonhunters of their own. Unfortunately for them, their bloodline seemed lacking, and at least so far their endeavors had not been rewarded. That was not to say they hadn't succeeded in raising a few demonhunters, but all were roughly comparable in skill to Claudia Lunae – that is to say, not terribly skilled. Not good enough to raise their family's reputation.

So it was that the Lunae family was rich in property but not much else. Garuda was extremely deferential to the Cloude and Polaris clans because they saw his family much like they viewed him; a fat sow exposed to the wolves. So long as they avoided offending their betters they might avoid a grim fate.

Garuda bowed and scraped before Skye for this reason. Even if his family had more money than anyone else in the city all the General had to do was summon his forces. If the Lunae family survived such an encounter it would only be after serving up several pounds of flesh.

Every the pragmatist, the Lunae family patriarch served those in power and changed with the winds of fortune. How could he dare risk upsetting Skye and his brood? He rebuked his child to ingratiate them with the Polaris clan, but then again the friend Claudia had lost was Raith Umbra – a member of the family who had established the Court of Shadows. How would the Umbras react if Garuda forced his daughter to apologize to the one who killed one of their own?

The richest sow was in a bad way. Being so wealthy wasn't as good as it seemed on the surface.

To Cloudhawk things didn't seem so bad. That was why he didn't ask Skye Polaris to deal with Claudia. Nor did he attack Claudia in return or demand an apology. Since any sincere apology was impossible, why bother?

The two families now shared one airship, but had no interaction. They each acted like the other didn't exist.

Oddball merrily flew around the cabin after gobbling down another pellet. This fuzzy bird-beast was Cloudhawk's closest companion. Best friends could split, deepest trust could be shattered – it was the nature of humanity and could never be predicted. But Cloudhawk was certain that no matter what, no matter what happened, Oddball would never betray him.

Oddball hatched from Cloudhawk's psychic energy. From the moment it popped out of that egg they were bound together.

"Ugh, so boring." Cloudhawk scratched Oddball's fluffy, who'd settled on his finger. "Why don't you go and take a look at the scenery for me, eh?"

Oddball flapped its wings and fluttered away without hesitation.

Cloudhawk made himself comfortable, folding his hands behind his head and closing his eyes. His connection with the little bird opened wide. It was a good way for him to practice and allow Oddball some exercise. Two birds with one stone.

The bird's disproportionate wings beat madly, keeping its pudgy body in the air. While it looked like trying to keep itself airborne was strenuous, in fact Oddball darted about as deftly as a dragonfly. It soared down the aisles of the ship, peeking curiously through fist-sized vents set in the walls, peeping into other cabins. It's plump round body was just large enough to slip in and out without trouble.

Cloudhawk peered through Oddball's eyes and saw what it saw.

A man, clad in ash-grey robes with half his face covered in a mask. He was sitting cross-legged in the middle of his cabin. Wasn't that Mr. Ink? Cloudhawk had to admit he was curious about this cryptic man.

Without any visible support Mr. Ink floated three feet above the ground, surrounded by several black spheres that circled him in eclectic orbits. Whatever their speed or trajectory none of the spheres ever collided.

What mystical power was this? It looked so arcane!

In Skycloud city, those with powers such as this were rare. Atlas and his Deathstalker weapon were surely sinister, but this felt... evil. The power that surrounded Mr. Ink stank of death, decay, and bloodlust. Just a hint of it made Cloudhawk deeply uncomfortable, like the man was himself a decomposing corpse.

The gods were represented by that which was good and light, and their artifacts were not like this. Whatever Mr. Ink was using had to have come from someplace darker. It had to a demon artifact.

Mr. Ink frowned suddenly. He'd felt something. The orbs spinning around him stopped. Not wanting any danger to befall Oddball, Cloudhawk quickly ordered his little friend to escape and come back.

Who this guy was or what his powers were didn't matter to Cloudhawk.

He could tell at a glance Mr. Ink was not someone to toy with and nothing good would come of being caught spying. Oddball slipped out from the vent, spiraling askew threw the air in its haste to leave. Eventually it regained equilibrium and fluttered elsewhere.

The deep pockets of the Lunae family were made clear when it was revealed that all cabins – but for those reserved by the Polaris family – were booked by the merchants. Of course they were the next target for Cloudhawk’s snooping. He ordered Oddball to head to their section of the ship.

The Lunaes looked like they were sending in army rather than escort a single girl. There were dozens of defenders tasked with escorting Claudia, none of whom paid Oddball any mind. The bird took their disregard for granted and fluttered over to Garuda Lunae’s room.

The three-hundred pound man sat alone in his room, but if anyone who knew him were to see the patriarch now they would be shocked. His ingratiating, frivolous demeanor was gone. Now he sat with the stately and solemn expression befitting a man of station.

Cloudhawk was shocked. Was this the same man he’d met outside? He seemed completely different.

Garuda Lunae lifted a cup of tea and took a couple sips. Seated below was his daughter. Claudia. He looked at her and sighed. “I know what’s happened to you, Claudia. I know all about the circumstances between you and Cloudhawk. Do you know why I arranged for you to meet?”

“I don’t.”

“Cloudhawk comes from the lowest upbringing, but according to my information he’s very talented – maybe as talented as Selene Cloude used to be. He set fire to the governor’s home, stole from the general, freed a dungeon full of convicts and attacked a congregation preparing to execute a blasphemer. All of that, and he still walks around without a care. Do you still think he’s just a typical wastelander?”

“Your daughter doesn’t understand what her father is trying to say.”

“Arcturus Cloude is the sort of man that only comes along once in several generations. General Polaris is a living legend. Both have forgiven Cloudhawk and extended an olive branch. He may have chosen the Polaris family but that did not stop Arcturus from trying to recruit him to their family. What’s more, he has close ties to Selene Cloude and Dawn Polaris. He isn’t someone we can afford to insult.”

Cloudhawk, listening furtively from his cabin, was surprised by what he heard.

How did Garuda know so much? The banquet Arcturus had thrown to settle their dispute was no secret, but what they spoke about in the garden together was private. Getting this information needed more than just listening for idle gossip. Obviously his helpless and comical persona was a disguise. There was a lot more to this fatty than he let on.

“But –“

“No buts. You are no match for him, and even if you were I forbid any more trouble. Just the opposite, I need you to get close to Cloudhawk. Make contact. If possible, you can even try to forge a deeper connection.”

“I could never!” Claudia Lunae shot to her feet, anger twisting her face.

Her father answered with stern insistence. “You must. You know what our family faces, are you willing to put your personal grudge before your kin? What happened in the wastelands was brought about by Raith’s zeal. Death doesn’t even erase what he’s done!”

Claudia’s face went from pale to pink. She threw open the door and stormed out.

Garuda remained seated and watched her go. He sighed. No one understood what she was going through more than him. Stubborn as Claudia was, however, she knew what was at stake. His warnings would stop her doing anything rash, but it was a lot to ask for her to forget her humiliation. She would just have to suffer.

What else could be done? This was her family!

Chapter 64

Deadwood Forest

Cloudhawk had seen everything.

Claudia Lunae's inspiration for joining Hell Valley's grueling training was Cloudhawk, but was it not her family's idea? Her father looked like the sort to suck up to whoever held the reigns, but it should have been obvious that the patriarch of Skycloud's richest merchant family wasn't what he seemed.

Garuda's feigned stupidity was about self-preservation. He knew that the wealthier his family became the more danger they were in. It was imperative that they raised strong members to keep their empire safe.

Hell Valley was a frightening place, but it was the only way to get strong quickly.

Through Skycloud in general Claudia Lunae's skills were hardly worth mentioning. Among the family, however, she was exceptional. Garuda was willing to bet that if his daughter survived she could earn a spot in the Court of Shadows, or some other lauded organization. The more they spread their influence the stronger the Lunaes would be.

As Oddball flew around gathering intel, Cloudhawk noticed that the little bird's abilities had greatly improved. IF not for the little critter he wouldn't have learned about Mr. Ink's strange powers or the Claudia's secrets.

As he laid there in his room, Cloudhawk used Oddball's abilities to know what was happening all across the ship. He could rest while Oddball got some exercise, the best of both worlds.

Right now Claudia Lunae was sulking in her cabin. Her father sipped tea and did not move from his chair. Without much to see Cloudhawk quickly grew bored and had Oddball go out to the ship's deck. Its tiny bird legs latched onto the railing and it looked out over the beautiful horizon, relaying everything back to its master. It was beautiful, after all the little guy's vision was much sharper than any human's.

Even a thousand meters in the sky Oddball could see rabbits running through the

grass below. It was able to keenly discern colors where a human would only see an expanse of green. To Oddball that green had a dozen shades and it could spot every change. If it focused, the bird could even see changes in heat.

And that was still not the limit of what it could do!

Oddball could see through camouflage, too. Atlas was one of the greatest members of the Court of Shadows, and even with an invisibility relic he couldn't stay hidden from Oddball's sight. Was there anyone in Skycloud who could hide?

When Oddball hatched Cloudhawk got a natural sentry and scout. Getting information would be much easier from now on. He didn't have to worry about someone like Atlas sneaking up on him, either.

"The ship is docking. Will all passengers please come up to the deck and prepare to disembark."

Cloudhawk eagerly grabbed his satchel when the call came from the other side of his door. After two days he figured they'd be at his destination, however he discovered that was not the case. Following the Polaris escort out to the deck it was not Hell Valley that stretched out before him. They had reached the platform of the domain's eastern mountain pass.

This was as far as normal airships could take them.

While within the domain these ships could continue back and forth without limit, needing no energy or fuel. But if they crossed the border by even so much as a few centimeters they lost all power and would crash into the walls.

Cloudhawk's escort gathered their exit permits. He looked around with surprise. "The training camp is out in the wastelands?"

Mr. Ink answered with a gentle chuckle. "Not the wastelands, but not much different. It's in the borderlands."

When he heard borderlands Cloudhawk couldn't help but think of the Sandbar. His thoughts turned to Asha, the fat guard captain Hammont Seacrest, the mysterious bar owner Adder, and the young and inexperienced demonhunter Barb. He wondered how they were.

“Why the borderlands? The training is run by elysians, isn’t it?”

“Normally. Different training camps have their own training programs, some of which are contrary to the morals of the elysian lands. Naturally those training camps can’t be permitted within the domain. I’m not familiar with anything more specific than that, but you’ll learn all about it once you get there.”

Cloudhawk found it laughable. “I really was deceiving myself.”

Mr. Ink heard Cloudhawk’s wry sentiment and smirked, but said nothing.

The Lunae family’s entourage was ready in short order with several dozen milling about the deck. Very much as one would expect new money to act they went everywhere with pomp and circumstance, trailing crowds of people as though they feared not everyone would know they are Skycloud’s richest family.

When Garuda reappeared he’d once more donned that charmingly naïve façade. He fawned and flattered excessively. “Master Ink, young master Cloudhawk. We’ve brought quite a large entourage and it would cause us no trouble, perhaps you’d like to travel together?”

Mr. Ink gave the fat merchant a passing glance. “This is fine.”

This delighted Garuda. His expansive rump rolled from side to side as he waddled away, only to return a few minutes later with a carriage for them to use. Together the families and their escorts departed.

Cloudhawk pulled aside the curtain and looked around. *Ah, are they really sending us to a training camp? All these troops and flags it looks like we’re going to war.* The Lunae family’s troops were all self-trained and recruited. To typical organizations they looked marginally better than a mob. IF they ever were forced to face a standard Skycloud contingent they would collapse at the first blow.

The magnificent gates that barred passage through the mountains opened before them. The carriages and soldiers made their way through.

They left the domain’s picturesque scenery behind for the vast desolation of the borderlands. Cloudhawk felt the transition deep inside him. Out here it was barren, but to him it really wasn’t all that bad.

Cloudhawk was like a lone wolf, and the Skycloud domain was like a beautiful gilded cage. It was orderly but constraining – food was plentiful but everywhere you turned were barriers. Outside the massive walls was a world of freedom and cruelty, where the weak were consumed by the strong. But there was nothing to stop you, no one to tell you no. Anything you wanted to do you could do, so long as you had the strength to pull it off.

So which was better? A beautiful prison with food aplenty? Or a blood soaked land of freedom? The answer wasn't readily available to Cloudhawk. He liked safety and comfort, but he also liked being able to do what he pleased.

He was no philosopher or poet, so Cloudhawk was about to explore the metaphysical dilemmas this posed. He tended to judge things by simple criteria; his heart knew the way. The days when he felt the elysian lands were good there he would stay. When he grew tired of its rigidity he might hang out in the borderlands. Of course, it would be best if there were some place where he could be free *and* satiated. Maybe one day.

Weeds were churned to mulch beneath the wagons' rolling wheels.

About half a day later the elysian caravan arrived. A vast and wilted forest stretched out before them over uneven terrain. Even specially trained mounts wouldn't make it through, so they had no choice but to continue on foot.

Cloudhawk looked out over the forest. A mist hung over the rugged land that made it hard to see much of anything. He shut his eyes, and the napping bird on his shoulder popped its beady eyes open. As their vision combined Oddball's eyes pierced the mists to reveal the rolling forests ahead.

The borderlands forest was mostly dead. For every dozen rotten husks was a half dead tree barely hanging on. Somehow they'd managed to live for who knows how long, resisting rot and insects. The rest had petrified, like pillars of stone jutting from the earth at odd angles.

Looking further one saw a fog-shrouded valley, faintly visible in the distance. That had to be their destination, Hell Valley.

"We're here."

Cloudhawk opened his eyes and brought his vision back to his immediate surroundings. Ahead he saw a single path leading into the forest. A campsite had been

set up with a stone stele marking their location: “Hell Valley Training Camp.” Even the carved letters seemed to stink with carnage like death oozed from the rock itself.

Here at last. This has to be our destination.

The deadwood forest was densely packed with its eponymous petrified trees and cloaked in mist. Without a guide they would easily get lost trying to navigate through it.

A few burly men were waiting for them when they arrived and Garuda hastily greeted them when they were within earshot. He immediately produced a few sacks of coins and offered them to the smirking men, in the hopes of buying protection for their young trainees.

Garuda had never been in contact with the trainers, but he knew what sort of people they were. They looked like simple folk, but pull one out and bring them to the elysian lands and they would soon be begging for favors.

“Keep your money, big fella.” The leader’s voice was cold and contemptuous. “Try to bribe anyone here again and your trainees will be knocked out.”

Garuda’s face froze. He retracted the money with an apologetic smile.

Cloudhawk and Claudia started the check-in process.

“This is the one the Polaris family recommended? He looks like a useless runt!”

“Alright, leave ‘em here. No one else is allowed any further, they belong to us now. Come with me!”

One of the big men pointed a club at Cloudhawk.

“I appreciate you taking the trouble.” Mr. Ink offered the men a curt nod then turned his eyes to Cloudhawk. His voice was soft. “From here on out you do whatever they tell you, do you understand? If you’re lucky you’ll be back in three years.”

“What?! Three years!”

“The fuck are you standing around for? Move!”

One of the men roughly shoved Cloudhawk. He had nowhere to go but forward.

Cloudhawk stole a glance at the big guy. He was a hundred and eighty centimeters tall, give or take, and looked dangerous. His club in particular caught his eye. It looked like wood but he suspected it wasn't. It was some sort of composite – but not from the elysian lands. Were they wasteland weapons?

He didn't spend too long thinking about it. Before long they were at the outpost in the center of Deadwood Forest.

Chapter 65

The Small Black Room

Deadwood Outpost was a hastily constructed camp of wood cabins made from the surrounding foliage. About a hundred soldiers were garrisoned here, picked from the ranks of the elysian armed forces. What was particular to this group was that none of them were younger than forty. Soldiers at their peak – in a few years they'd begin to steadily decline.

But the first thing Cloudhawk noticed wasn't their age. All of them were surrounded in a dangerous, barbaric air. They could subdue wild animals with a hard stare. Cloudhawk figured these men had been carefully chosen for this post and were more than simple soldiers. They were special forces.

These were veterans, with years of battlefield experience that made them far tougher than active duty men back in Skycloud. It would follow then, that this wasn't just a training camp but also a veteran garrison. If a force tried to invade from the wastelands this training camp would become a deadly fighting division.

How strong were these guys?

Judging by their aura all of them were about as strong as Mad Dog and Slyfox had been. In other words the average fighter here was a Mad Dog, and captains were probably even stronger.

Strong as they might be, though, Cloudhawk wasn't concerned. Back in the day he'd been a useless scav, but he could probably take four or five of them now without breaking a sweat. If he wanted to run there wasn't anything they could do to stop him.

The one that did give him a healthy fear, though, was the guy who led them into camp.

Behind his brown eyes was a tyrannical cruelty not unlike the others, but he had a more commanding bearing. His demeanor couldn't be cultivated by an ordinary grunt. He must have been one hell of a soldier!

This ragged camp had a hundred discharged soldiers and more than a couple retired

veterans, and they hadn't even reached Hell Valley yet. It certainly said something for the strength of this training camp!

Cloudhawk didn't like what he saw, there was something unsettling about these guys. The way they looked at him and Claudia he could feel their ill intent. Meanwhile his own eyes looked all around looking for an angle. Cloudhawk thought he might try to get in good with the big guy leading them, but the man's cold face made it clear he was in no mood to talk. They reached a squat wooden building.

"We're here!" The man pulled open the door. "From now on this is your home. You don't speak, you don't kick up a fuss, you don't cause trouble. You eat when he tell you to eat and drink when we tell you to drink. If you don't have a specific task don't go wandering around. Understand?"

Shit. I thought this was supposed to be a training camp, not prison!

Cloudhawk didn't say what he was thinking, but he did ask a question. "What if I need to take a shit?"

"What, you shit that much? You got ground all around."

"Screw that!"

"Fuck, aren't you a mouthy one? Keeping flappin' your fuckin lips and I'll plug your asshole with my club. See how much you shit then!"

Strict was an understatement, Cloudhawk thought. A breath of dissatisfaction and this freak was willing to shove stuff up his butt. ^[1]

Apparantly the threat of sexual assault wasn't enough for the large man, because he swung his club at Cloudhawk for punctuation. It came down on him in an instant, whistling the same way a sharp instrument might although it was thick and smooth. Cloudhawk stood there with nowhere to dodge.

Thunk!

The club caught him upside the skull and knocked Cloudhawk silly. His world spun wildly and he threatened to pass out like the blow had cracked his head open. The big man picked him up by a handful of clothes. Suddenly a cold sweat broke out all over Cloudhawk. Was this bastard gonna follow through with his threat?!

In desperation to escape Cloudhawk scrambled into the small dark room. The door shut tight behind him.

What the fuck, it was a reasonable question wasn't it? Cloudhawk rubbed his thankfully unmolested backside and sighed with relief. *You can go fuck yourself with that damn club. Goddamn, this place is full of freaks!*

Cloudhawk interspersed his grumblings with sharp curses. Since making his Skycloud debut, this was his first time being embarrassed like this, but he still didn't dare fight back. He waved at Oddball who was anxiously flying around and chirping to show he was ok. Well, as ok as he could be after taking a club to the skull.

It took a full ten seconds for his head to clear.

When he regained his bearings Cloudhawk touched his head but was surprised to find no wound. There wasn't even a bump. Somehow the blow had skipped skin and bone and knocked him right in the brain – instant concussion. Even if he hadn't been caught off guard Cloudhawk wasn't sure he'd have been able to escape a hit like that.

Hell Valley was rife with hidden talents. He'd better behave himself, otherwise who knows what sick fetish that freak would subject him to.

There were two others in the dim room with him. He hadn't noticed since he'd nearly had his head knocked off, but he saw them now. Both were in beautiful costumes with bags slung over their backs and exorcist staves on their waists. He didn't need to ask to know they'd also come to train at Hell Valley.

Cloudhawk didn't say anything to them. He just walked over to a corner rubbing his aching head and hunkered down. Then the sound of footsteps approaching returned.

The door was pulled open and a blonde woman entered. She was tall and rather thin, and when she saw the small cabin she couldn't hide a frown. When her sapphire blue eyes landed on Cloudhawk they instantly turned hard.

As the saying goes, it never rains but it pours. Claudia Lunae had joined them.

Of course the two of them had come together and registered at the same time, so it was no surprise they would be put in the same room. Cloudhawk shut his eyes and pretended like he hadn't seen her. Claudia made her way to the furthest corner and sat on the floor, hugging her knees. Her eyes never left Cloudhawk.

Four people, four corners, not a single sound. It stayed that way until night fell.

The outpost's soldiers hadn't given a reason, just forbade them from talking or making any sort of noise. They couldn't even go outside. Any eating, drinking or bodily needs they were left up to their own devices. Thankfully at night the room was pitch black and they couldn't even see their hands in front of their faces. The recruits had all brought backs with some sort of container so they could handle their business.

They were only given one meal a day, but when the soldiers delivered it the trainee's faces went green.

Was this even considered food?

The bowls didn't contain nutritious fare from Skycloud, that was for sure. Instead it was a mass of foul smelling roots, mashed into a sort of paste and peppered with ants and other insects. To drink they were given a thick red fluid that smelled coppery, likely a mix of blood from different animals.

They didn't need to eat it to make their stomachs churn. Just the smell made them nauseas.

While three of them glowered unhappily at their food they heard slurping from another corner. They followed the sound and in the dim morning light they could see Cloudhawk stuffing the black rhizomes into his mouth, chewing heartily. He gulped the whole thing down, bugs and all, stopping just short of licking the bowl clean. By the end the only thing looking back at him from the bottom of his bowl was his reflection.

Cloudhawk didn't hesitate to throw his head back and gulp down the blood-infused brew, either. He finished it off and chucked the empty glass to one side then shut his eyes and went back to sitting quietly.

What a disgusting, barbarous heathen! How could he eat *this*? It would just as likely kill him as fill him up!

As Claudia Lunae silently cursed the wastelander the other two trainees were doing much the same. They were all elysians, how could they suffer this treatment? They glared at Cloudhawk with haughty expressions, and were it not for the no-talking rule they would have told him exactly how much of a disgrace he was.

An hour later one of the soldiers returned to collect the bowls. Claudia and the other two hadn't touched theirs. Cloudhawk, on the other hand, had eat and drunk his fill. When he noticed that the others hadn't he knew why not. Inwardly he had a choice curse of his own to aim their way: *Idiots!*

It wasn't hard to see the purpose of this.

The elysians were spoiled young men and women of talent. This training was meant to make them tough, sharpen them, and the first step was to make sure they understood they didn't have the perks of elysian life anymore. They might have been used to a life of luxury, but they were human and humans needed to eat. They knew they were going to be here a while as well.

So if that was the case Cloudhawk wasn't going to waste his time. He fumbled around in his bag for a moment and pulled out a small bottle. It was some of the medicine he'd brought with him. They'd taken all the food and drink when he signed in, but they'd left him these.

He tipped the bottle and an azure blue pill tumbled out. He chucked it into his mouth. This one was the purifying spirit pill. [2]. This stuff was meant to help improve his psychic abilities. Up to now he'd been focused on strengthening his body, so it was the first time he'd taken this medicine. Since they were going to have him locked in this room doing nothing, now was as good a time as any.

It didn't take long for the pill's effects to emerge, but they weren't physical. Instead he felt it in his mind, like a thousand tiny needles were boring into his skull. The pain was intense.

Cloudhawk empties his mind and tried to meditate and that's when he felt a haze settle over his consciousness. It felt like slowly spinning in a dark sea, or being lost in a newborn nebula. As he did he felt like drips of fluid were falling into a small river below. That river was Cloudhawk's psyche.

Whatever psychic abilities he had now was an inheritance from the phase stone's previous owner. He had been gifted only the smallest amount from that vast and endless ocean but it was enough to give Cloudhawk the power he'd needed. Now he discovered that he didn't need to rely on the stone, he could train to make himself stronger from within.

The greatest discovery was that improvement came quickly – at least as fast as any other talent from Skycloud. With his natural skills and help from the phase stone, who's to say his psychic power couldn't one day surpass the stone's former master?

1. Apparently they use 'chrysanthemum flower' as a euphemism for anus. The more you learn.

2. They were described as elixirs before, which are supposed to be liquid. Guess it's been retconned to pills now

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Chapter 66

The Scarred Instructor

The residents of the small dark room had encountered a serious problem. Here at the outpost they were only given a single meal, and that meal consisted of foul roots and squirming insects. In lieu of water they were given cups of blood.

Refuse to eat? Then you starved. One might be able to hold out for a day but they were only human. How long could they go without food?

Claudia and the other two from Skycloud watched Cloudhawk scarf the food down with relish, like it was some rare delicacy. It made them doubt their assumption that the fare was as disgusting as it appeared.

It was precisely as disgusting as it looked, but under circumstances like these they had to fool themselves into thinking otherwise. Claudia danced around the prospect for half an hour, though she knew time was limited. In another thirty minutes a soldier was going to come and take their food away.

Gritting her teeth, Claudia picked out a root that didn't look too awful from the mess in her bowl. They were all awful of course, but this was at least looked relatively edible – even if it did remind her of petrified feces. If it were the consistent shape would speak to the owner's good digestive health.

Alright, enough. It's only psychological, don't mind how it looks.

Claudia rolled it between her fingers and felt the gritty soil stuck to it. It must have been recently dug out of the ground. But it didn't matter – harden up and deal with it!

But then she had second thoughts. She didn't know where this had come from.

She pulled a knife from her rucksack and shaved off the root bark. ^[1] It helped dispel the illusion that it *looked* like shit, but the more she peeled the more it started to smell like it. Still she held back her disgust and took a bite. Right away her face twisted into a pained expression.

“Yuggghh---huuooogh!!”

The other two couldn't take it and followed her lead.

Could people actually *eat* this stuff?! It was like death to their taste buds, every sniff was lethal! It didn't matter how strong your will was, this stuff was stronger. It was absurd – ridiculous! How was that uncouth swine able to eat it like a delicacy? Impossible!

Cloudhawk had finished his portion long ago. He was seated quietly with his eyes closed.

He didn't care what the others thought. Years in the wastelands had taught him that the more scarce food became the more you had to conserve energy. Dispel the idea of any unnecessary movement. Try to make your body's systems go dormant to spend less precious strength.

The proof was how he reacted. Despite Cloudhawk's famous appetite he never grew too hungry. The outpost's food left much to be desired in flavor, but it certainly had enough nutrition to keep them going.

Claudia Lunae and the other two trainees huddled in their corners, cradling growling stomachs.

They were demonhunters, and demonhunters got hungry faster than normal people. They were stronger, and so their bodies had to expend more energy to keep them going. Typically they offset that by eating a lot of nutrient-rich foods, but after two days they were half-starved.

Claudia was just managing to fight back her nausea. She stretched out a hand to give it another shot when the door to their cabin burst open. A group of soldiers filed in and snatched up the bowls, whether or not the trainees were done with them.

Day three.

Claudia managed to keep down her first bowl of food. She'd thrown up twice but she was *so hungry*.

Day four.

She ate up every bite of the filthy stuff. This time she didn't vomit.

Day five.

They'd gotten used to the food, but they hadn't even really started their training yet. This was just a taste of what hell was like. To Cloudhawk the days of scanty food and scarce water was like being back in the wastelands. It was much worse for the spoiled elysians.

But it was endurable. Claudia and the others weren't handling it as well as Cloudhawk but he was able to tolerate much more than the typical person.

Five days and nights in total darkness, starved and tormented, had put them on edge. The worst was that they weren't allowed to move around, much less speak. It was a cruel sort of punishment.

They were told over and over by trainers and family to respect all the rules, but after five days their will began to break. Impatience got the better of them and they figured a few quiet words would cause no harm.

A little conversation will help make this whole thing easier. It wasn't a big deal, what harm would one sentence do?

"Let's talk." The one to break the silence was one of the other Skycloud trainees. After so long without using it his voice had become hoarse. "I saw a bunch of cabins. They can't be listening at all hours. If we just sit here in silence I'm going to go mad."

"Yeah, hey what's your name? I'm the third son of Southsky City's general, my name's..."

The two young noble children carried on their quiet conversation. Claudia also found the silence almost unbearable, but as she sat there and looked at Cloudhawk sitting silent and cross-legged across the room she also kept her mouth shut. She wasn't going to get shown up by that bastard.

If this idiot can hold out then why can't I? If he doesn't open his mouth then neither will I!

She hated Cloudhawk with a passion and saw him as her nemesis. She couldn't abide looking weaker than him. Meanwhile the other two were looking at Cloudhawk and

Claudia. A pretty girl like her attracted attention anywhere she went, especially considering her family. They figured it would be a good idea to get close to her.

But she wasn't talking. It would be improper to just boldly approach.

"Hey, why don't you speak?"

"It's alright. It's night, if we keep it down they won't be able to hear us."

They tried to get Cloudhawk's attention but after several attempts Cloudhawk acted like he didn't hear. This upset the two trainees. The small cabin was only maybe twenty meters across, so they stood up and walked over to him.

Cloudhawk was already disliked since he was clearly so different from them.

It had to be said that while the others were starving he gulped down that awful food without a problem. He made them look like fools while they vomited their guts out and he just scarfed it all down. How could they not be upset?

"We're talking to you. You dead?"

They tried several times to get his attention but no matter what they did Cloudhawk never moved. They weren't people to him, they were a pair of dancing monkeys chirping away. He didn't want to waste any time with monkeys.

"Shit, you don't care about showing disrespect eh? I'm the son of Southsky's general!"

One of the youths shot to his feet, upset by Cloudhawk's perceived insult. He kicked Cloudhawk over.

Cloudhawk picked himself up, expressionless. He didn't say anything, didn't strike back, because he knew he wouldn't like the consequences of acting out. His indifferent attitude only made the two young men angrier.

It was a performance, put on for Claudia Lunae. After days in here embarrassing themselves they wanted to take back some pride. It all rose up in them like a tide. One of them, seeing red, threw a fist at Cloudhawk's face.

Claudia gloated with a cold sneer. These two were from small-town influential families. They were young, with exaggerated opinions of themselves. They were all put

together for a reason and the actions they took now were going to cost everyone involved. This was the best outcome for her.

Cloudhawk would definitely be wrapped up in it!

Claudiae knew that Cloudhawk was as cunning as he was impulsive. If he was able to keep himself in check it would be a surprise. All he had to do was lift a hand and the punishment he earned would be music to her ears. If he didn't she would get to watch as these two morons beat the hell out of him. What could make her happier? After almost a week of darkness and silence, finally some entertainment!

But just as the guy's fist arrived it didn't hit Cloudhawk as expected. Instead he swung right through his head like he was flailing at air.

"What the hell?"

The other one gave it a try. The result was the same, with his fists passing right through Cloudhawk's head.

Was this guy some sort of apparition? He had to have some sort of special relic that was confusing them!

The two young men stared wide eyed and Cloudhawk just smirked back. Their blood ran cold. "You... You got guts. I'll remember."

Neither dared come at him again. It didn't matter where he came from, if Cloudhawk could use a power like that he was no ordinary guy. He wasn't someone they should screw around with, it would only end up bad for them.

Cloudhawk shut his eyes and sat back down without saying a word.

The two morons thought they were clever, but Oddball had been keeping an eye out. Every day there were at least three soldiers standing watch over their cabin, working in shifts. Their strange auras were tough even for Cloudhawk to recognize, so he wasn't sure when they were nearby. But he knew the nonsense these guys had been up to was being recorded. They knew.

The sixth day.

The seventh day.

As time passed one could imagine it wasn't just a handful who broke the rules.

Bang bang bang!

“Gather up!”

On the eighth day a gong rang, loud enough to wake everyone. Trainees filed out of their cabins to find several large men standing in the center of the camp near an iron pylon. A scarred man with an eyepatch and black clothing stood in front.

He faced a group of seventy or eighty young, fresh-faced recruits all around their early twenties with bags on their backs. After seven days and nights they all looked famished, barely able to stand.

As Cloudhawk walked out into the crowd he felt hostile eyes on him. His brows drew together. He knew Claudia hated him, but after her father's pleas her violent tendencies had all but gone.

This murderous feeling... it was hard to understand.

Cloudhawk was sure there was no one he knew here besides Claudia. Why would anyone want to wish him harm? He started to look around for the owner of those eyes when...

Clank, clank, clank. The sound of heavy footsteps.

Five veteran soldiers surrounding a single man walked by.

He was easily two meters tall and brawny as a lion. His reddish black face was marked with half a dozen scars that reached from one side of his face to the other. They had clearly been stitched. It made his already unpleasant face harder to look at, like they'd used different kinds of skin to past it all back together.

He walked in an imposing manner and every step made the ground shake. He looked like nothing could stop him – he'd walk right through a mountain and cleave it in half if it dared stand in his way.

“Hello, everyone. I am one of your training instructors. The men with me are my assistants. And that's it for my self-introduction.” The scarred instructor spoke very fast – quick as lightning and sharp as a blade. His voice boomed through the camp. “If

I pick you out, step forward.”

He started to point at people, ultimately selecting twenty-some from the crowd. Among them were two from Cloudhawk’s cabin. As they stood before the instructor’s cold glare they didn’t dare move a muscle.

The fear about all twenty of them was almost palpable.

All of them had something in common; they’d all somehow broken the rules while locked in the cabins. Up till now they thought they’d been lucky. But at last they realized their folly – they were being watched twenty-four hours a day.

“Do you know why I singled you lot out? Breaking the rules in and of itself isn’t bad – we like rule-breakers in Hell Valley! But if you’re going to break the rules, you either need to have the power to change the rules, or be smart enough not to get caught! That’s where you failed.” The instructor grinned and his scarred face twisted up like a devil’s. It made their skin crawl. “So now you’ve got to pay the price, that’s all there is to it. If any of you disagree then step up! I’ll give you a shot.”

The twenty offenders looked around at one another. None of them dared raise their voice.

As strong as his assistants were, no one wanted to test the instructor’s strength. They’d been caught and he picked them out without fail. There was nothing to be gained by arguing, that would only make their punishment worse.

“Alright. Well if you aren’t willing to take your shot, then don’t blame me for what’s coming.”

The scarred instructor’s sinister grin made everyone shiver.

1. Often in Chinese traditional medicine the root bark is the most efficacious. Keep that in mind if you’re ever stuck alone in the wilderness and are forced to stuff strange plant matter into your face.

Chapter 67

Dire Disciplinarian

Five stony-faced assistant instructors stepped forward with long whips in their hands. It was easy to guess they would soon be used.

Meanwhile, the scarred instructor stood before the group with his hands behind his back, straight as a javelin. His loud and imposing voice boomed forth. “Twenty lashes! Spare no effort!”

Cloudhawk had personally experienced what sort of effort these assistants were capable of. While they didn’t possess the skills of a demonhunter, they were more than strong enough to handle the young trainees.

If they used their full force, he was convinced they could whip a boulder to pieces!

Crack!

One!

Piercing screams rose up from among the offending students. It wasn’t that they were weak, but the bite of the whips was too intense. In addition to whatever tough substance they were made out of, the whips actually spat sparks as they tore through the air. One pass of the whip could easily split a wild boar’s hide and rend the flesh beneath.

How truer was it for these young trainees?

One lash was almost more than they could bear, but as the blood began to flow and the pain spread through their whole body a second lash came. By the third, one of the female trainees had fainted. Most of the others only lasted to five. The strongest managed to suffer through seven or eight passes but eventually they also collapsed.

The assistants didn’t stop once the trainees lost consciousness. They kept going until all twenty lashes were delivered.

The others watching swallowed back their fear and alarm.

Twenty one lacerated bodies lay on the ground, some wounds deep enough to reveal bone. It would be many few days before they could recover from this punishment, and were it not for the immediate treatment they were given these wounds would have left many crippled. The assistant instructors had done their best to nearly beat these young men and women to death!

The two that had come from Cloudhawk's cabin were out cold and hardly recognizable. They were so badly beaten it looked like they'd been attacked by a pack of wild dogs. It was hard to look at them.

Finally, the scarred instructor nodded. "Take them away! They've all been eliminated!"

The remaining trainees blanched and Cloudhawk fought back the urge to curse. *Shit! We just started and they're already kicking people out. Why even bother beating them to within an inch of their lives? Not everyone can handle punishment like that, it'll ruin them!*

"You pity them, don't you? That's wrong – you should envy them. *You* are the ones who deserve pity!" The scarred man smiled a black smile and his voice came down like a hammer. "Once you enter Hell's Valley there's no going back. Either you meet the criteria and walk out, or you leave on your backs. At least they still live, but only because they weren't formally admitted. Many of you won't be so lucky."

The faces were a mix of stern, enraged, and frightened. Hell's Valley was true to its reputation, for here they weren't seen as people. Didn't the instructor know that some of these trainees came from illustrious Skycloud nobility?

"The welcoming ceremony is finished. Now you really have entered hell. I'm sure you've heard some things about us before you've come, but I'm here to tell you whatever you've been told is just the beginning. Believe me – you'll learn all about what it's really like here very soon."

As he spoke, the scarred instructor walked back and forth before the group of trainees. He stopped, and as he stood looking back at them he sunk a few inches into the earth like he was some enormous colossus.

"I don't care where you've come from, whether you're from the military, a noble house, or a demonhunter. The moment you arrived you all became one thing – garbage. Filth.

Worms! Understand? Repeat it!”

Those from noble families were already offended by his lack of respect, but after this speech most were unhappy. The noblesse were especially enraged.

No one opened their mouth.

The instructor wasn't upset, in fact he smiled. He was afraid he might have scared them into submission too early, but he was pleased to find that he'd been too merciful. That was good, otherwise it would have been boring.

“No one here is willing to recognize their worthlessness? Good! Very good! I appreciate that.” He went back to pacing the line, a vicious grin on his hideous face. “If that's the case I'm going to give you all a chance to prove your backbone.”

Cloudhawk then felt a wave of power emanating from the man, an oppressive force not the slightest bit inferior to someone like Frost de Winter. His rich and barbaric aura made their skin crawl and their heart race. He was like a demon who'd crawled out of the pits of hell.

Everyone watched him, expressionless. No one said a word.

He continued with a ferocious howl. “If any of you can beat me, I'll give everyone one of you a free pass. An exemption from the Hell's Valley entrance exam. I'll give thirty seconds for a challenger to step up, then after that everyone gets ten lashes!”

There was an entrance exam, too? What the hell! They still weren't formally in the training yet?

Ten lashes was unacceptable. They'd all seen what happened to the last group. Ten lashes might not almost kill them but it would definitely make them pass out and leave awful wounds.

“Twenty seconds! What? You're all cowards, eh? No one has the balls to take a shot?”

Everyone glared. They hadn't even started training and they were supposed to accept a beating? No one liked the idea, but they weren't fooled either. The instructor's offer was a trap, any idiot wouldn't willingly fall in.

“Ten seconds!”

Cloudhawk sighed softly. It looked like there was no avoiding it, he was gonna take a beating no matter what. It was better than being torn apart, as anyone who tried to fight the instructor would be. But he underestimated the arrogance and self-confidence of the elysians, and overestimated their common sense.

“Five seconds!”

“Instructor!” A gallant young man shouted at him. “I challenge you!”

When he heard it the scars on the instructor’s face twisted horrendously into a hungry grin. His smile was more unsettling than any curse. A young man in his twenties with broad shoulders and a muscular body made himself known. He wore standard demonhunter clothing with leather armor over the top.

When Claudia saw who made the challenge her eyes filled with astonishment. She knew this guy, he was also from a distinguished Skycloud city family. He wasn’t as strong as the stars of their generation – like Frost or Dawn – but he could hold his own for ten rounds or so against them. That wasn’t easy, and it was probably what gave him the confidence to accept the instructor’s challenge.

The scarred tyrant was just a soldier, but he didn’t show an ounce of fear when facing a demonhunter. He extended his hand and motioned the challenger forward.

The youth raised his left hand, a sword cradled in his palm. A cyan light glimmered around it and winds gusted through the camp. A crisp and clear ringing sound hung in the air for a long time.

Nice sword!

Everyone shared the same thought.

Demonhunter power burst forth and cyan light radiated from the weapon’s tip. He wasn’t going to take any chances with this scarred sadist. While the ringing sound continued suddenly the sword split in two. As the blades crossed a gust of cutting wind fired out toward the instructor.

A bladestorm ranged attack!

The guy had some skill!

His attack's dual whirlwinds looks simple enough, but underlying them was a mysterious force. At this distance at the very least it would cut off any route of escape. Whether the instructor tried to go left, right or overhead he was right in its path. And while the instructor was getting boxed in, the trainee was preparing his thirst strike. He'd been prepared, for if the instructor dodged his first two bladestorms, the third would surely do him in!

With a grim chuckle, the instructor reacted. He raised his right hand and punched. His hand was covered in an elysian tungsten steel gauntlet but he still punched at supersonic speed. The friction of the steel piercing the air released sparks.

Bang! It sounded like a thick pain of glass shattering.

The scarred man's fist plunged into the heart of a bladestorm and blew it to pieces. The cyan power burst out every which way and dissipated.

The young man's face paled. "Impossible – t-that's impossible! How could a normal human body resist my attack?!"

The young man was not a lowly demonhunter novice. He'd spent two years in military service before arriving at Hell's Valley. He was sure his relic's bladestorms could carve apart steel – and yet the scarred instructor had simply punched it apart? It was so absurd he couldn't believe it!

The tungsten gauntlet had clean cuts all the way through and fresh blood leaked from the fissures. The youth had drawn blood but it meant nothing to the scarred man. "Is that all you got?"

Shame brought on a wave of anger and the younger man attacked again. The cyan light from his sword rose suddenly to a blazing glare, and he launched himself forward fast as the wind. Meanwhile his sword was quick as a viper and lashed out in a thickly packed series of blows. A rain of steel came crashing down on the instructor.

As Cloudhawk watched his pupils constricted. This guy was faster and stronger than he was. He had to ask himself, if it were him on the other side of this attack, could he endure?

The scarred instructor moved quick and agile, like a specter. He saw through each strike, avoiding them while retreating a couple meters. With a sharp look in his eye the young man raised his weapon, poised to continue. At last eh whipped his sword

around and an enormous bladestorm erupted from the sword.

This close, this fast, and this strong, the young man was sure *this* time he had him.

The scarred man stood still, unmoving, while dust was kicked up around him. Then he disappeared, leaving only a faint afterimage where he'd been. Cloudhawk gaped in disbelief. He knew the instructor didn't really vanish, he was just so fast that it seemed that way.

Woosh! The bladestorm surged over one of the wooden cabins.

The wooden structure was carved right down the middle as easily as cutting through a sheet of paper, a petal, or a leaf. It slowly started to separate and fall to either side.

The young man was not a weakling. He couldn't match up to someone like Frost de Winter, but he had to be within the top three of the trainees here. And he was of noble birth, to boot.

What happened next no one saw clearly. It happened too fast.

Before he could retract his arm a thick hand reached out and held it fast. It twisted, then as easily as snapping a dead branch his arm folded backward more than ninety degrees. Bone snapped and tore through flesh to reveal the jagged break.

The young man screamed, unable to hold his sword. It flew out of his grip and got lodged in a boulder some distance away. It cut through rock as easy as custard, proving just how sharp it really was.

"Hahaha!" The instructor's spiteful laughter rang through the camp. "That *is* all you got! You aren't even as strong as one of my assistants. You had no hope of besting me!"

Chapter 68

Everyone, Strip!

The instructor didn't use a relic. With only his physical speed and strength, he handily crushed a capable demonhunter. This young trainee was no fresh-cheeked novice.

It was a shocking display for everyone who watched. Demonhunters were proud of their abilities, and yet they'd just watched one get absolutely wrecked by a mere soldier.

Still, the youth was worthy of his demonhunter title. Even though one of his arms was now useless he tried to fight on with the other. With a roar he slammed his fist toward the man's hideously scarred face.

Crack! The trainee screamed again. His fist struck bone sturdy as iron, and the damage he did to his own fist was worse than he did to the instructor's face. Their tyrannical trainer only chuckled darkly, then kicked the younger man's knee so hard it folded backward. *Snap!*

His victim was forced to his one good knee.

He'd won, but that didn't stop the scarred man from continuing. With an open-handed slap he dislocated the demonhunter's jaw and sent him flying. He toppled head over heels among a cloud of spit and broken teeth. After hitting the ground he writhed in place like a pitiful dying insect. What happened to the proud demeanor of the demonhunters?

The scarred instructor slowly walked over to the young man. He placed his boot on his skull and looked over the crowd with savage eyes. "Is this what I can expect from the mighty demonhunters? Rubbish! Garbage!"

Anywhere one went within the elysian lands, demonhunters were treated with the utmost respect. They were warriors in service to the gods, defenders of the holy lands. Strong and noble, a demonhunter's mystical powers were the stuff of legend to the average citizen and commanded their awe.

The ugly instructor was a soldier through and through, yet still he embarrassed the demonhunter before all of them. This wasn't just an insult to their order, it showed disdain for the gods themselves!

Did he really come from the elysian lands? How could the realm of the gods produce someone so ruthless, arrogant, and cruel? All manner of sinful things lived in this beast's heart. Yet despite their rage and hatred, everyone felt powerless before the scarred instructor. With the young demonhunter writhing beneath his boot, he looked at them and asked if anyone else wanted to take their shot.

Cloudhawk stayed quiet, but inside he was sizing up the truth of where he found himself. The guards here were elite veterans, hand-picked from the best. One of them fought like ten men. These training assistants were highly capable soldiers who'd been discharged from service. They were as strong as Dawn without using her weapons – apex warriors.

The instructor himself was even harder to judge. Judging by the scarred man's strength, speed and agility, he had to have gone through countless body modifying methods. The scarred man fought as hard as Dawn did at full strength, and he hardly seemed to be trying.

Most importantly, these men came from decades-long military careers where they must have been elite special operations or unit commanders. Their skills had been honed in a hundred battles, leaving corpses piled high in their wake. In a life-or-death fight Cloudhawk wasn't sure even the likes of Frost de Winter or Dawn Polaris would survive.

Something also told him that the instructors' true strength didn't lie in their mere combat prowess.

These incredible warriors and talents were completely unknown. Mere instructors at a training camp? Inside information was a rich commodity in the elysian lands. Cloudhawk found it hard to believe there could be so many skilled people here and no one would know.

“You demonhunters are nothing more than monkeys to me, showing off your asses like you're worth something. You think because you can play with trinkets that no one is a challenge?” The scarred instructor belittled them while pulling a cigarette from his pocket. He lit it and scanned the crowd with cold eyes. His voice was a sinister growl.

“You all better fuckin’ listen real close. Relics are weapons, and weapons are an extension of power – but they aren’t everything. There are people all over the world that can tear demonhunters apart with nothing but their bare hands. There are too many examples of people who can kill you relic-wielding shits with nothing but smarts and planning! Worms like you rely on tools and neglect your own bodies. You are as frail as paper; you can’t run faster than anyone else, you aren’t as agile as anyone else, you don’t react faster than anyone else – but you sure as fuck will die like everyone else.”

“What is Hell’s Valley? Let me enlighten you. It’s a garbage dump where trash like you is pulverized. I chose to come here because it means I get to crush worthless fucks like you for shit and giggles. Hahaha!”

To illustrate his point the instructors stomped on the one good knee of the young man beneath him. It elicited another series of sickening crunches to which the mangled demonhunter howled. With a piteous whine he rolled half-conscious on the ground, and the instructor kicked him away like a fleshy sack.

“Eliminated! Get his ass out of here!”

A pair of assistants walked over and dragged him away.

None of the guy’s wounds were life-threatening, but they would be very difficult to recover from. He would need the Temple’s healing supplies, otherwise the damage would be permanent.

The instructor threw his half-smoked cigarette into the dirt and trampled it below his boot. All the while his dark glare swept the crowd, looking for another victim to brutalize. “Filth! Scum! Worms! Who else wants to make a stand?”

Everyone was silent as the threat of the instructor’s savagery hung over them. They were all skilled enough to be demonhunters. They did not fear death nor challenge, but senseless humiliation was unacceptable.

“It looks like you’ve all come to accept what you are. I’ll remind you that out here there is no such thing as pride, status, or title. Out here my word is like the word of the gods – you listen or you pay the price.” His words were mocking and downright blasphemous. If the Temple heard him say these words, he would be burned at the stake, but he didn’t care in the slightest. He waved impatiently. “Let’s get the admission

test under way!"

They must have been out here for ages. These soldiers were barbarians from head to toe.

Cloudhawk was anxious about what this admission test would be, but he steeled his resolve. Whatever it was, the exam wasn't going to be a walk in the park.

The instructor looked them over once more. "The goal is simple: weed out the garbage. By the end we've usually eliminated fifty percent."

Fifty percent? That would be around thirty of them! They haven't even started and half were about to be kicked out.

Most frightening was what the instructor had just said; once you join the training, don't expect to walk out in one piece. He could only imagine what would happen to those who got eliminated. Serious injury or death, both seemed just as likely.

Their cruel leader continued. "Clothes off, let's go."

Many hesitated. It wasn't just men here, a full third were young women. They were from noble families, surely his demands were going too far.

"I'll say it again. I don't give a *shit* about your dignity or where you come from. It doesn't matter who your daddy is, how rich you are, how glorious your name. Out here, all that means fuck-all!" His words were icy daggers. Hell's Valley turned people into weapons. It wasn't a goddamn day camp. Nothing disgusted him more than these newbies and their melodrama. "You got three choices. One, take me on in a fight. If you win then you get a pass. Of course if you lose, I snap your arm and throw you out. Two, do what I say and take off your clothes. Three, my assistants will help you take your clothes off!"

The women looked frantically around with red eyes. These weren't trainers, they were torturers!

Claudia was, of course, deeply insulted by the order. Was she really expected to remove her clothes in front of all these trainees, the scarred instructor, and a hundred or so soldiers? To elysian women who held chastity as among the greatest morals, this was unthinkable.

No one wanted to remove their clothes, but if they didn't... what would this scarred animal do? He said the test would weed out fifty percent of them, so Claudia didn't believe he'd be willing to throw everyone out. How would the training camp continue without trainees?

Their faces were masks but they shared the same thought. No one moved.

Good, this is how it should be. Hope rose in Claudia's heart.

The scarred instructor took their refusal as a challenge. Slowly his lips curled into a hideous smirk. Sometimes when a lion's sovereignty was challenged, a little blood was needed to reassert dominance. It was time to show them where the power really lay here. They would learn how to act. "Twenty lashes for each of them. Do it!"

Everyone knew just how cruel these whips were, they'd seen it with their own eyes. If twenty lashes didn't kill them it would leave them crippled.

Then they would all be eliminated.

Was the instructor really willing to get rid of everyone, the assistants thought? He was insane!

Cloudhawk also scowled with anxiety. Even as strong as his body was and even with improved healing, twenty lashes would take some time to come back from. If they beat him that badly, how would he participate in the training?

The scarred man didn't care about his fellows' hesitation. "What are you fucks gaping about? Do I need to whip them all myself?!"

Chapter 69

The Entrance Exam

The instructor's assistant's looked at each other uncomfortably.

It wasn't that they sympathized with the students. Asking them to remove their clothes was a simple thing. If they wrung their hands over such a trivial thing, that was their own problem – all over their so-called dignity? Out in the field, when real battle called, it wasn't just skin that would be revealed. Bone, muscle, organs and all might be revealed. Compared to that, what's a little nudity?

The reason they hesitated was because the scarred instructor wasn't the only instructor in the valley. If this madman eliminated every trainee, what would they say to the instructors waiting within?

"Instructor Cutter ^[1], that's enough for today." One of the assistance stepped forward and offered protest. They were all grizzled veterans, they didn't need to keep their reservations a secret. He cut right to the chase. "If you eliminate everyone, the instructors down in the valley won't be pleased. There's no rush, we can take our time."

Instructor Cutter frowned. "You make a good point. So what's your suggested punishment?"

The assistant was ready with an answer. "If their modesty is so important, let them have it. They keep their skivvies for the price of five lashes. If they refuse to remove anything they get the full twenty, no quarter given."

"Very well!" The scarred man clapped his hands for punctuation. "You hear that? Today's your lucky day! If I had my way you all would be out on your bleeding asses! Now, let's get going!"

"Instructor, I have a question!"

Claudia heard a familiar voice rise from the crowd and it filled her with a sense of foreboding. The instructor, his face full of irritation, searched the crowd until he found

the frail frame the voice had come from.

Cloudhawk felt like a mountain had descended upon him, so intense he had to keep his knees from shaking. But he was different from the others, he'd seen the terrible things the world was capable of and stood firm.

The young guy's steadfast demeanor surprised Cutter. It was a surprise to find someone with some stones among this pile of garbage. "You've got a mouth, shithead. Use it!" [2]

"So if we take everything off we don't get beat, right?"

"Obviously, you dimwit!"

Skiiner watched in surprise as this young man, in full view of his companions, stepped forward without reservation. Steady hands stripped off one piece of clothing after another until he stood there naked as the day he was born.

Cloudhawk! Such a bastard... This shameless pig deserves to be hacked into a thousand pieces!

Confronted with this scene the others squirmed with discomfort and disgust – especially the women, Claudia among them. It was like hot needles in their eyes. How could they be someone so bold and immodest?!

Cutter looked him over. The guy looked like a twig with his clothes on, but once they were removed he saw the corded muscles beneath. He was chiseled and compact like a panther ready to pounce. From the look of him it was clear this greenhorn had some strength and speed.

But Cutter wasn't impressed with his build. Instead, he respected the kid's indifference to everyone's stares. His face wasn't even red. A great man didn't sweat the little things and had thick skin. *Not bad, not bad at all.*

The first among the trainees to strip did so with perfect calm.

As he stood there naked before the elysians, they couldn't understand his behavior. But, he in turn didn't understand their reticence. After all, everyone came into the world without a stitch. Clothes were like the swords they carried, picked up later in life. Did 'dignity' mean being shackled to these things you hung on your body?

Out in the wastelands, wandering around naked didn't even earn a second glance.

It wasn't that Cloudhawk didn't have any pride. On the contrary, he probably had more than most. What he'd learned was that dignity and honor didn't come from anything out there – it came from inside. It was the constraints we set for ourselves, the lines in the sand we refused to cross. That line was different for everyone; the beggar gave no thought to saving face while anything less than a luxurious meal for a millionaire was seen as an affront.

If you thought about it that way, human beings really were rather peculiar creatures who obsessed over the most pointless of things.

Taking his clothes off was about ideology. If he were allowed to run around naked all the time he might be called a philosopher.

“You sure move fast, kid.” Cutter gave Cloudhawk another weighing glance. “I'll remember you, I hope you make it through. Pick up your shit and stand to one side.”

The others looked at each other in speechless despair. But in the end they had no choice. Clothes started coming off.

Sixty of the trainees, Claudia included, chose to leave their undergarments on to preserve their modesty. The men wore underwear whereas the women also had a strip of cloth across their breasts to keep them hidden. The instructor was true to his word and ordered the assistants to deliver five lashes. A few of the weaker ones couldn't handle it and were taken away, unconscious. Needless to say, they would not be joining them in Hell's Valley.

Surprisingly, another trainee took the immodest path as the process continued.

“Wait, wait! I'll take 'em off.”

People were beginning to realize the cost of pride. Obviously the entrance requirements were high and the chances of elimination were great. They would need to be strong, and five lashes would sap them of that essential energy. A strip of clothing might cost them their spot, and that would bring them even greater shame. They would be throwing away their chance to let their talent stand out.

All their clothes came off. Someone else followed the example.

Five or six more chose to remove all their clothing including two young women. Embarrassment was a small sacrifice if they could avoid elimination. The remaining fifty-some stuck to their ideals, refusing to cross their line in the sand. Weakly, dripping blood, they shuffled over to the other after paying for it.

“There are a couple of you that get what we do here, but not enough. Now you gotta hand over everything you own.” Cutter pointed to the clothes and bags the trainees desperately clung to. “I mean everything. Clothes, relics, medicine – hand it all over. None of those are allowed where you’re going. They’ll be returned to you when the test is done. If we find out you’ve hidden anything from us we’ll have you flogged and thrown out!”

No one was happy with this order either. The demands were becoming harsher and more unreasonable as time went on.

A demonhunter’s relics were a large part of their fighting prowess, not to mention signs of status and honor. Under no circumstances would they ever give up their relics, so the instructor’s demands were the equivalent of stripping them of any sense of security.

But there were no exceptions. Everything had to be given up!

“The test is simple.” The scarred madman pointed through the mist-cloaked forest, to the barely visible valley beyond. “You have to get to Hell’s Valley as fast as possible. First half to get there stays, everyone else is eliminated. I suggest you give up your shit quick, an early start makes passing more likely. Offer still stands though – you can beat me in a fight and pass, or follow my orders. My patience is limited so don’t fuck around.”

After seeing what Cutter was capable – and happy – to do, who would be stupid enough to challenge him? Assistants passed among the crowd with boxes, gathering up the trainees’ personal items. Although they were clearly reluctant everyone complied, they had to. Who knew what the punishment for refusing was.

Cloudhawk piled everything he owned into the box and locked it shut. An assistant then looked him over to make sure he wasn’t carrying anything else. Everyone was then given coarse linen robes, the sort prisoners might wear, as protection from the elements.

These affluent and respected demonhunters had never experienced treatment like this before, but they kept their ashen faces even. None of them were interested in catching Cutter's attention. All they could do was exactly what they were told.

“Open the Valley! Welcome to Hell, ladies and gentlemen!”

The gate leading to the valley slowly opened and a vast dead forest greeted them. The assistance pushed the trainees onward like a herd of geese.

Cloudhawk felt dozens of angry eyes following him as they stepped out into the forest. He must have offended these uptight nobles, so sticking around wasn't in his best interest. He picked up the pace and quickly headed off toward the distant valley.

He raced into the forest and leapt high off the ground. The branch he landed on bowed under his weight a full five meters and in the same motion he bent his knees to gather momentum. When the built up pressure snapped back and the branch whipped back into place, it sent him soaring through the air like a bullet.

He started by putting some distance between himself and the others.

Those who had not been punished ran after him in fine condition. The others, nursing wounds and dripping blood, were already struggling and couldn't keep up.

Their pride and honor was going to cost them.

Once Cloudhawk was satisfied with his lead he began to slow down. After a moment a pudgy yellow bird joined him, promptly spitting a stone from its mouth. Cloudhawk slipped it over his neck.

Through their connection Cloudhawk conspired with Oddball while turning over his things. He palmed the phase stone and gave it to the bird, who took it and flew off ahead.

Both the bird and stone were still safe and in hand.

Something like this rock wasn't going to gain any attention. As for the Gospel of the Sands, the Mask of a Thousand Faces, his invisibility cloak and so forth, they were great treasures but they weren't priceless. The phasing stone couldn't be allowed out of his sight.

Now that it was back around his neck he felt far less troubled.

No matter what was in store, with the stone and its phasing abilities Cloudhawk had a serious advantage. He knew one way or another this advantage was gonna be especially important, at least in making sure no one could threaten him.

Cloudhawk was sure no one was catching up, but he didn't want to waste any time.

As he made his way through the forest the mist began to clear. A scene he wasn't prepared for revealed itself, one that filled Cloudhawk with dread. This test wasn't anywhere near as easy as the instructor let them believe.

1. Up to now he has been referred to as 'knife-scarred instructor'. The soldier now calls him 'Blade Instructor' – Cutter seemed apt.

2. In probably my most favorite line ever the instructor says 'you have an ass, so fart!'

Chapter 70

Waylaid

It was a tree.

An absolutely enormous tree practically the size of a small mountain. It would take several dozen people to wrap their arms all around it.

It'd been dead for many years already, but it's dried out husk of a trunk towered overhead. The wind and elements had turned it to stone and all that was left were spindly finger-like branches without a single leaf on them, reaching into the sky. It looked like the withered hair of a demon and it made the surroundings all the more sinister.

But it wasn't the tree's peculiar size or dramatic state that grabbed his attention. What gave Cloudhawk pause was what hung from it, things that did not naturally appear there. A dozen desiccated corpses swayed in the breeze like fruit that rotted on the vine, impaled by the thorn-like barren branches. It was a strange and gruesome scene. ^[1] Some were skeletons already, dead for more than three years. ^[2] Others were weathered mummies with dried and twisted expressions. Those hadn't been dead long.

The dead weren't strange, but seeing them here – like this – that was alarming.

Cloudhawk cautiously picked his way closer. The tattered robes on the corpses were the same sort he wore. Were these trainees like him, whose luck had run out? What killed them? It wouldn't make sense to be some animal, for there weren't any signs they were eaten and no animal he knew hung their dinner up like this. The tree itself just looked weird, but in fact was itself dead. He didn't think there was any way it could do this to the trainees itself.

He was suddenly struck by the impression that this was not someplace he should linger. As he was turning to leave his keen senses perked up, but too late. His left leg broke an imperceptible thin silk thread that traversed the path.

A trap?!

A palpable sense of danger enveloped him as suddenly spines shot out from crevices in the tree's trunk.

They shot out almost faster than he could follow, and were certainly coated in poison. Cloudhawk was fairly sure he could survive most poisons, but whatever this was certainly wouldn't feel comfortable if he got a dose.

Unarmed, Cloudhawk had no way to protect himself, and it was all too fast for him to react. He tried to dodge but the thorns came raining down like hail. Thankfully he was able to avoid most, but a handful still managed to find their mark.

However the Cloudhawk of today was far different from the Cloudhawk of old. When the spines struck he immediately tightened the muscles in the area, stopping them from penetrating any farther than skin level. The toxins in the barbs diffused through the skin almost immediately, but it also awakened the trespasser virus. The two microscopic substances started to do battle.

Skin around the point of contact turned black.

At first it looked like a reaction from the poison, but in fact it was the opposite. The discoloration came from trespasser, which forced the toxins to the surface and away from Cloudhawk's veins. He knew this was a sign that his organs and brain were protected.

He was still getting his bearings when several small human-shaped figures poured out from the trees.

The first thing he heard were strange, bestial hisses coming from their throats. Then he saw that their bodies were caked in some grey substance. It outlined their ribcages and made them look like shambling skeletons. Each one hefted wooden spears with chipped bone heads as they battled for who would be the first to skewer Cloudhawk.

Wastelanders? There were actually wastelanders living here!

He had to give it to that scar-faced fuck. He thought when they said go quick they were just talking about some mutated animals, maybe a dangerous plant or two. But this? An intelligent race of people laying traps through the forest? And the instructor hadn't even hinted at it.

Sending a group of people without knowledge, without experience, into unknown

territory where an enemy lay in wait... well, one could imagine what the results would be.

The pygmies weren't typical wastelanders – they were more like sweepers, mutated humans from the wastelands. However this race seemed to have developed a stable mutation for their bodies, making them all look similar as opposed to the wide array of mutations he was used to seeing. Out in the wastes the mutations were as varied as the people who had them, making his old haunt a constant freak show.

Deadwood pygmies were about a meter and a half tall for adult males. Small, certainly, but they made up for it in agility. They moved through the gnarled forests quick as the wind. They were also smart, that was obvious from their trap. But in this case their trap made them overconfident.

They assumed that their poison-tipped barbs had robbed their prey of the strength to fight back. Like madmen they fell on Cloudhawk one after the other, eager to be the first to injure the elysian. Little did they know that their poisons had no effect on this human. He was hardly affected at all.

“Go!”

Cloudhawk shrugged his shoulder and Oddball took off. It rose overhead to survey the landscape and see how bad the situation was. If he found there were a lot of these mutants, or his competitors were closing in, he would have a chance to prepare.

“Ya-ya-ya-ya-ya!”

One of the deadwood natives brandished his spear and charged at Cloudhawk. Were his opponent human perhaps Cloudhawk would have shown mercy. Unfortunately for the pygmy, however, he had a deep distaste for their kind.

The sweeper stabbed, but his spear hit nothing. He stared, stunned, when suddenly the weapon was yanked out of his hand. He didn't even see how Cloudhawk did it.

“Here, take it back!”

Cloudhawk returned the pygmy's spear, right through his chest. It slid through him, out from his back and into the second pygmy coming up behind. The second unfortunate mutant was pinned to one of the petrified trees.

Cloudhawk juiced away from another attack, this time punching his attacker square in the face. The crisp sound of shattered bone answered as the mutant's cheekbone broke into half a dozen pieces. Cloudhawk didn't even pause, whipping around to plant a kick on another pygmy's chest. He struck with such force that it turned shattered bone to shrapnel, churning organs into minced meat. The sweeper was flung away in a shower of vomit and blood like a gruesome firecracker.

How could this guy keep fighting after being poisoned?!

They weren't alone. Cloudhawk shared their surprise. Ever since coming to the elysian lands he'd been getting stronger by the day. He'd practiced the demonhunter body forging exercises up to thirty postures but had yet to really fight and see his progress.

Of course his time in Skycloud was spent with anomalies like Dawn and Frost de Winter. He could get through all thirty six postures and still not stand a chance against them. But now that Cloudhawk was letting loose with his full strength he was shocked to find that he had to be at least as strong as Mad Dog used to be – maybe even stronger!

Cloudhawk was different from Mad Dog, though. The Tartarus Mercenary's captain was all about force, while Cloudhawk had that in addition to speed, quick reaction time, regeneration, and control. All balanced. Half a year had passed since he was that worthless scav, and if he went back as he was now he would have been a match for any Tartarus elite.

But the disadvantage of speed was that he didn't have the experience to be proficient in his new body. He might be as strong as Mad Dog, but the warrior had twenty-some years of life in the harsh wilderness that tempered his abilities. He'd known exactly how to use his strength to produce more than a hundred percent. Meanwhile Cloudhawk was lucky to effectively use eighty percent of his potential.

Be that as it may, everyday sweepers were no match for Cloudhawk anymore.

If these mutants were here it had to mean they had a camp nearby. He couldn't afford to let any of them escape and alert the others. He'd soon find this place crawling with enemies, and that would cause all sorts of trouble.

He snapped up a discarded spear and went on the attack. In a flash several pygmy sweepers were knocked flying. They screamed and hollered in fear but it was too late

to flee. They all perished under the bite of their own weapon.

Cloudhawk whipped around, looking for his next target like a wild animal. One of the indigenous warriors unlike the others stepped out from the trees. He wore thin leather armor, and held a gun in each hand. As he leapt out, still in midair, he started to fire.

Cloudhawk's eyes contracted to black pinpricks, the bullets' trajectory reflected within.

He could see a trail where the bullets split the air, from the instant they left the gun to where they passed now. Incredible... Cloudhawk never dreamed he'd be able to see so precisely!

He'd never experienced anything like this before. Beyond being able to see where the bullets had come from, if he were a little faster and a little more precise he would block them with just his weapon.

He didn't dare try it now. Instead he dodged them by moving erratically, but the pygmy proved to be a crack shot. He was able to calculate where Cloudhawk would be even when he dodged, closing off any route he could take. He couldn't get away.

Yet Cloudhawk's mind worked faster. He guessed where his opponent would fire to counter him and knew that he would be peppered if he did what was expected. So he did the opposite.

Cloudhawk leaned all the way back as far as he could go. He could feel the friction of the bullets as they passed just over his chest and upper body. His hands planted on the ground and gave him the thrust he needed to flip over. In a blink he was five or six meters away by another tree.

His feet hit the trunk and he immediately hunched. Using the leverage from the tree he pushed off with his knees then fired off like an arrow toward the marksman.

His dodge-turned-counterattack was seamless and displayed a level of skill the pygmy hadn't thought the elysian possessed. But the pygmy was no pushover either, and immediately responded with another volley of gunfire. Cloudhawk wrenched himself to the side, avoiding all but one. Yet just as with the spines Cloudhawk toughened up the point of impact, stopping the bullet skin deep.

Finally, the pygmy felt fear.

He realized that this one wasn't just strong, but rather possessed the full gamut of abilities. But it was too late.

The bladed spear swiped at the native vertically, cleaving him clean in two.

Cloudhawk stood over the littered corpses with no expression, still as a statue. He then gritted his teeth against the pain and dug the bloodstained bullet from his chest, throwing it aside. The surface wound wasn't anything he had to worry about, it wasn't going to slow him down.

He looked over the dead pygmies and noted that their mutation was unique. There were poison glands in their mouths and along their arms. That meant that their bite and scratch was toxic. Natural toxins... no wonder it was part of their traps.

Cloudhawk looked around to make sure nothing else lived. He saw none, but his eyes did fix on a location. He became even more tightly wound, like the fight had only just started.

"Stop hiding!" Cloudhawk's voice was harsh and cold. "I know you're there. Come out!"

Chapter 71

The Butcher

Oddball had been keeping an eye overhead while Cloudhawk dealt with the sweepers. It turns out it was a good decision.

With Oddball's help he was able to pick out the people hiding among the trees, waiting for their chance. He never would have spotted them otherwise, and after the fight he would have been left open to a sneak attack he might not have walked away from.

Clap... clap... clap. That was the first thing he heard.

"You're better than I thought."

Two figures stepped out from hiding, one burly and the other thin. As they appeared from the mists Cloudhawk saw them clearly; the stronger one was a hideously ugly man covered in scars, while the thinner one was his complete opposite with blonde hair and handsome features. It was the handsome one who spoke.

They wore the same coarse robes he wore, marking them as trainees. They didn't have any injuries either, meaning they had also chosen to remove all their clothes back at camp. These were the sort Cloudhawk had to respect.

The pair looked at the corpses scattered beneath their feet and realized their assumptions were quite mistaken. Even without relics this guy fought harder than your average punk. He had to be about middle of the pack, compared to the other trainees.

Cloudhawk looked at them through narrowed eyes though he was careful to keep his features even. "Let me guess. You two stink like someone's mongrels. I'm gonna guess Frost de Winter hired you to take care of me."

The ugly one snarled like a beast as anger welled up in his eyes. Cloudhawk's words were like gas on a bonfire. He could feel the bloodlust pouring off of him. "You're mouthy, even when facing death. I'll make sure to snap every bone in your scrawny body before I put you in the dirt."

His blonde companion took a different tack. He bore an apologetic smile, like he'd been caught doing something improper. Although his voice was a little hoarse, it wasn't unpleasant to listen to. In fact it was almost magnetic. "How did you know? We've never met before, is it written on our foreheads or something?"

His words were easy and earnest, without a hint of malice. But Cloudhawk sensed that he was far more dangerous than the scarred thug.

"You think it was hard to guess? Nah. I felt it back at the camp, that someone was out to get me. But we've never met, you had no reason to want me dead, you had to be working for someone I've pissed off. If it were Atlas he'd do it himself, probably. Master Arcturus wouldn't have gone through all this trouble. That leaves Frost de Winter, the only one left with the means and motive." The bullet wound on Cloudhawk's chest had stopped bleeding and there was already new skin stitching the hole closed. He gently stretched through the healing process to get himself back in top shape as fast as possible. The sound of popping joints followed. "Only Frost underestimates me. Mongrels like you can't finish the job."

"Self-confidence is a good thing." The blonde haired man sagely nodded his head, completely unconcerned. He seemed more like a curious bystander. "You're right – he does look down on you. But you shouldn't make the same mistake with us. This fellow here is called the Butcher. He has an eight year service record as a demonhunter. Fifty-nine missions under his belt, none failed. As for me –"

"Why are we wasting our fucking breath?!" The scarred man had grown impatient. Butcher didn't care about any of this shit. Yeah maybe the kid was stronger than they expected, but he still wasn't worth his salt. His voice came in a barely contained growl. "I kill every one of these lowlife wasteland fucks I come across. I would wring the life from your body even if I never met Frost de Winter! You keep your hands to yourself. I'm gonna kill this piece of shit all by myself."

Perhaps afraid the blonde man would steal his fun, the Butcher raced into action. Cloudhawk felt the big man's imposing vigor lock onto him.

'The Butcher' wasn't a pleasant nickname. Out in the wastelands it might have given him pause, but for the highbrow elysians the name meant only very bad things. A name like that was a stain he earned for misdeeds. He was a capable demonhunter, sure – but it looks like that's what got him into trouble.

The Butcher's zeal manifested in him becoming a wanton slayer of the wild and blasphemous. He brutalized anyone he got his hands on, to the point where even elysians were terrified of him. He took pains to murder those who considered unworthy in the most cruel means possible, whether they were old, young, women or children. There wasn't a single example of someone who got away from his bloodlust.

But what really pinned this moniker to him was the Butcher's last mission. He was tasked with chasing down a blasphemer hiding in an elysian village, and ended up slaughtering everyone there. The blood of the villagers flowed in rivers – a hundred souls snuffed out. His... fervor earned the wrath of Skycloud's elite.

That's why Augustus Cloude recommended him.

The Butcher's loathing for wastelanders and blasphemers had transcended all reason. He wasn't lying, even without Frost's orders he would have happily killed Cloudhawk simply for daring to draw breath. And he would have relished in making it as painful as possible.

Murder! Such a strong thirst for death!

Cloudhawk had faced many strong opponents, but none that made him tremble like the Butcher. When the demonhunter came at him Cloudhawk felt like he was facing a tidal wave of carnage, a torrential flood of rage that threatened to sweep everything away. It seemed overpowering.

An aura like this was an aberration from birth, tempered by killing thousands with one's own hands.

Just as when two armies met, morale played an important role. When morale was broken the army was crushed as though under a landslide. If morale was high it was not uncommon for a handful of soldiers to send a force of hundred fleeing for their lives. It was just as important for two soldiers facing off in combat. Someone like the Butcher could defeat his opponent before ever throwing a punch, easily besting someone stronger than him.

As the Butcher charged at Cloudhawk like a mad rhino not only did the wastelander fail to flinch, but the tyrannical cruelty that lay long dormant within him stirred. Veins in his eyes engorged tracing angry red lines through his vision, bringing with it a surge of power. Although the savagery he oozed could not compare to the Butchers, he was

no less inspired to cause pain.

Boom!

Two fists met, one large and one small.

Two blasts of momentum met, and two pairs of feet dug deep into the ground. The resulting impact blasted back the mist in a ten meter diameter.

Wind whipped past the blonde haired man, fierce as a tempest. It surprised him, shook him even. Was this what the guy was capable of? The Butcher's strength did not come as a shock, he'd heard the name and knew the demonhunter's combat style relied on pure force. But Cloudhawk was a waif, how was he able to summon that sort of might? He thought they might have underestimated the wastelander, but after that display it was clear the kid was a worthy opponent.

Cloudhawk could feel all the blood within him shiver through his organs. ^[1] His whole arm was paralyzed from pain. Although the berserker strength had nearly doubled his power he couldn't take advantage of it.

The men Frost had sent obviously had their own fortes.

The big guy was difficult enough for Cloudhawk to deal with, but the one Cloudhawk worried most about was the blonde haired man who was yet to join the fight. He caught the man out of the corner of his eye and saw that he hadn't moved yet. Like he wasn't intending to fight at all.

The Butcher was an eight year veteran demonhunter who was hardened through his time on the field. His combat experience ran much deeper than any of the kids back at the training camp. Half a second of distraction was all the time he needed to capitalize on Cloudhawk's flaw.

The Butcher whipped a leg through the air so fast it made the wind whistle.

Cloudhawk brought his arms up to protect himself and the impact sent him flying. He crashed through a tree thick as a mixing bowl. Cloudhawk didn't hesitate once he regained his footing. He kicked the shattered top half of the tree he'd flown through, sending its thousand-pound bulk at the Butcher pointy-end first.

A hideous grin spread across the large man's face. His dark calloused fist reached out

and met the trunk in midair. Inch by inch the petrified tree trunk exploded into splinters as the wave of energy surged through it. Stabbing bits of wood were thrown in all directions.

Inwardly the blonde haired man had no choice but to admit his admiration.

Both these men were demonhunters, but even without relics they were putting on one hell of a show. It was a rare site to see such impressive physical displays. The Butcher began to laugh hysterically. He was as strong as Mad Dog had been, and when he released all inhibitions he fought like an insane beast. Reason was pushed to the rear and replaced with pure power and instinct. As bloodlust consumed him he was less man and more weapon.

As the Butcher prepared for another attack he found that Cloudhawk was nowhere to be seen among the shower of splinters. He squinted into the mist just in time to see a faint figure disappearing past the horizon.

“You can’t run!”

The Butcher gave chase. Cloudhawk’s plan was simple; one-on-one he didn’t fear anybody, but two on one weren’t odds he liked. The blonde one was definitely waiting for his chance while Cloudhawk was busy with the Butcher, but he wasn’t stupid enough to let that happen. So he ran.

The blonde man hesitated, and before he could follow the forest was suddenly filled with the screams of pygmy sweepers. A host of guns, spears and bone blades were leveled his way.

The sound of their fight had been loud – too loud for the natives to miss.

The blonde man rubbed his head like the irritating circumstances were giving him a headache. Although the sweepers surrounding him were closing in, he wasn’t nervous. He just seemed annoyed.

1. ‘Qi and blood racing through him’ is the exact line, but I chose to remove the mention of qi since it isn’t a western concept. Suffice it to say that qi here is meant as a surge of energy, like an electric shock.

Chapter 72

Days Past

Blasts rang out through the deadwood forest as the desperate chase continued for half an hour. The Butcher found that Cloudhawk was quick, maybe even quicker than him. Luckily the forest's dangers forced Cloudhawk to watch his speed, otherwise the Butcher might have lost him.

It'd been a long time since he faced a wastelander like this. At last, a challenging opponent – something interesting.

His eyes burned with ferocity and a thirst for murder, but in his mind dim memories of days past fought their way to the surface. They were things he much rather would forget, but as was so often the case the things we seek to forget are the hardest to let go of.

Twenty years ago.

Twenty long years ago...

It didn't matter where he went or what he did, the memory followed him. It crawled through the dark recesses of his mind like a cockroach that refused to die, appearing when he least expected. A needle in the shadows, stabbing him when his guard was down. It always set upon him in the same way as a nightmare, bringing with it an unbearable pain that made his blood race.

Twenty years ago the Butcher was a child of nine. He lived in a small city out in the Borderlands, born to a simple family of peddlers. They weren't affluent by any means, but they made enough to enjoy a comfortable living and provide him with an education.

When the night fell that changed his life, it came with a few dozen wasteland raiders who'd managed to sneak their way into the town. They attacked the merchant company his family was a part of. The Butcher could never forget the sound his father made while they hacked him to pieces. He could never forget the miserable death that came to his mother and sister, but only after they were repeatedly raped. He could

never forget his brother, stuffing him in a box and hiding it with his body as the wastelanders stabbed him over and over. His own brother's hot, thick blood poured into the box and stained his clothes red.

His family was gone. His life was over.

Day after day the nightmares came, stripping away everything that made him human. He lived, but everything that he was became twisted. The Butcher became the most ardent believer of the faith, but faith alone wasn't enough. If he was going to keep on living he needed something else to dull the ache in his soul. He found the only thing that brought him relief was the cries of heathens, and the screams of wastelanders. The only medicine was their blood.

Once he joined the demonhunters he doggedly applied for any mission that came up. An excuse to torture any wastelander he could get his hands on. It was the last mission that earned him his new name. That was when his former comrades-in-arms started looking at him like a monster. But he didn't care, it was worth it. His only purpose in this life was to exterminate scum. What did it matter what they called him?

The Butcher hated the ones that passed judgment on him! He did nothing wrong, and the great gods above would stand by him if they knew.

It was their fault – the unambitious, the weak, the scared – it was their fault there were still these filthy wretches scrambling through the dirt. There was nothing more important than cleansing the world of these obscene beasts. A few sacrifices for ultimate peace was a small price to pay!

He had almost resigned himself to dying bitter and unsatisfied down in that dungeon when Frost de Winter let him free. He'd heard of the governor's disciple before, of course, but he was surprised by what he found. Despite the demonhunter's noble exterior the Butcher sensed the same deep-seated hatred for the unclean that he harbored.

The Butcher wasn't interested in Frost's motives. He was just willing to do the work.

Besides his target was a wastelander, someone who instead of sneaking into Skycloud and facing punishment, was living happily in the commander's own home!

How could this happen? It was an affront to the gods!

Had the city fallen so far from grace? For his dedication he lost his name and reputation, but someone like Cloudhawk – who had evil pumping through his very veins – was taken in with open arms! How?

The thought filled him with another surge of anger. He pushed himself to run faster, an ability which allowed himself to greatly increase his speed at the expense of precious energy. It was something he taught himself from his time out in the field, and one he usually only used in life or death situations. He didn't care about that now.

Cloudhawk led the Butcher through the forest for half an hour, constantly ducking down one path and weaving through another. His circuitous route was intentional, he was relying on his quick recovery rate to wear the big man down. But it didn't look like the guy was going to be that easy to shake. He had enough spare energy for a burst of speed at least.

Fuck, he really is a psycho. Like a rabid dog that'll never let go.

He fought like someone with an ax to grind. This sort of motivation came from bone-deep hatred, like Cloudhawk had personally raped and killed his whole family!

This was no good, he didn't have time to deal with this psycho. This was a test, after all, and this fuckwit wasn't making things any easier. He wasn't going to be part of the fifty percent that got kicked out.

Cloudhawk figured his best bet was to use the advantage of surprise. The Butcher was strong, but where he didn't have any relics Cloudhawk still had the phase stone. With its power he completely negated his enemy's overwhelming strength. Temporary intangibility followed by a decisive counterattack could solve his problem.

While Cloudhawk planned his next move, Oddball shot his master a warning. There was a mass of natives ahead mobilizing for an ambush. They were waiting for Cloudhawk and the others to run right into their trap.

“Excellent! That'll help me save some effort.”

Cloudhawk went right for them. He channeled his psychic energy through the stone and it released a field of power that detached him from reality. He didn't have his invisibility cloak, but that didn't stop him from hiding. His body slipped from view, into a particularly thick tree.

Less than three seconds later...

The Butcher charged through the mist and any branches that blocked his path. Cloudhawk had slipped away, and he had no idea he was hiding in a tree not far from where he stood. He pushed on, only to lose all trace of Cloudhawk ten seconds later.

He was beginning to suspect something was amiss when he tread on a silk-thin thread. A net made from tough vines fell from overhead and suddenly he was caught. Pygmy sweepers in their bone-like war paint surrounded him.

“Wasteland mutants!”

The Butcher roared at them like a wild animal. The vine net was strong enough to confound a dire bear, but not enough to hold him. He heaved his great muscles and the vines parted, but before he could free himself the sweepers started throwing spears and firing weapons. Sprays of blood spat out from new wounds on his body.

Poison seeped quickly into his bloodstream. He could feel his muscles stiffening, like he was turning to stone.

The sweeper poison was powerful, a normal person would likely die on the spot. Even the Butcher was losing control of his body. All of his focus had been on Cloudhawk, so he hadn't been paying attention to his surrounds. At any other time he wouldn't have fallen for such a primitive trap.

“Aggghhh!!”

His screams shook the earth and his eyes were bloody seas of red. Any semblance of reason scattered as madness overtook him. Although he was covered in blood he still surged rushed like a tempest, obliterating a sweeper's head with a single punch. He grabbed a second one and ripped him in two with his bare hands.

Bang! Bang!

The natives' guns fired another volley, tearing open more wounds, but their prey was abnormally tenacious. He wasn't going down unless they got him in a key spot. The Butcher was a raging bull, charging this way and that. Everywhere he passed he was followed by a shower of blood and gore. None of the sweepers' corpses were left intact.

The price he paid for his dogged determination was more than twenty wounds. Poison

barbs jutted from his neck to his legs, turning his skin a hideous purplish-black.

“You dirty, rotten wastelander!!”

He took deep, rasping breaths and frothed at the mouth. As he came back to his senses he realized he’d played right into Cloudhawk’s hands. He couldn’t fight the wastelander now, not like this. That bastard had to be waiting somewhere nearby, biding his time until he couldn’t fight back.

That worthless coward!

He burned with rage, but inside he was filled with sorrow. There were still so many of these evil beasts that needed to be cleansed! Was this as far as he would go? But fine, dying in battle was a worthy death. It was better than being executed by those corrupt fucks back in Skycloud!

“I know you’re here! Come out!”

Cloudhawk was nearby, hiding behind a tree. He’d watch the scene play out, and by now his wounds were healed. The Butcher didn’t stand a chance. But as Cloudhawk was getting ready to finish it...

A tall, thin figure emerged. He had blonde hair and a handsome face, with an almost bashful expression. He had all the gracious bearing of a noble prince. Only, he was surrounded with the stench of death. Gore caked his body from head to toe, and the murderous intent that gushed from him put the Butcher to shame. Clearly he’d just come from some gruesome exchange.

But it was strange.

As terrible as that fight had to have been the blonde man was completely unscathed. Why, then, was he covered in so much blood? It was like he’d swam through a sea of corpses to get here. Almost like he’d covered himself in blood on purpose.

When the Butcher saw him step from the trees his eyes filled with hope. “Help me...”

Chapter 73

A Dark Personality

The gallant young man turned his glimmering eyes onto the Butcher. An easy-going smile touched his bright face. Everything about his face – from his eyebrows to his eyes to his mouth – was friendly and inviting. He was the very picture of a friendly boy next door.

But it didn't blend at all with the dried blood and stringy meat that clung to the rest of him.

“What are you doing?! Hurry up!”

The Butcher didn't know how strong his companion really was, but he had to have some skill if Frost de Winter chose him for this mission. Cloudhawk had to be close, the situation was dangerous, but the guy was simply taking his time like there wasn't a care in the world.

“I do want to help you, honestly.” The young man offered a sheepish smile and bashfully scratched his head. With a helpless sigh he said, “But he wouldn't agree. You're exactly the kind of person he hates, and I've worked so very hard to keep him from killing you up to now. I really hope you understand.”

His partner's confounding words sent the Butcher in a rage. “What 'he'?! What the fuck are you on about!”

“He...” The first thing to change were the young man's eyes. Their sentimental warmth vanished and a scarlet light rose behind his pupils like a ghostly fire had been lit deep within. Next was his expression, the contours of his face, his mouth – everything changed almost immediately. The man was the same man, the face was the same face, but the soft lines all grew hard. Friendly eyes became ferocious. All at once he went it was as though a bloodthirsty demon had woken up inside the angelic boy and changed him completely. His pleasant voice had changed, too, and now was grating to the ear – coarse and savage. “He is me.”

So fast!

The Butcher's two-hundred pound body was flung into the air by a kick he hardly saw. He still wasn't sure what was happening when a bone spear pierced right through his chest, pinning him to a tree.

He gaped, absolutely at a loss at the changing circumstance. This was unthinkable, how could this person change so suddenly, so dramatically? Why would he attack his companion without any rhyme or reason? Had he forgotten Frost de Winter's orders?

"Ah! Free at last!" He looked down at his blood-soaked hands and a sinister chuckle rolled from his throat. He stretched and took several deep breaths, as though he'd been locked in a box for days and only just let out. He stopped over to pick up a dagger and began to play with it, tossing it from hand to hand. He slowly walked toward the Butcher. "You know, every time I see someone like you, so eager to lick the gods' boot heels, I can't help but feel... inspired. Artistic expression just fills me up, threatening to burst free. It's a compulsion to create."

The Butcher had no idea what he was talking about. He grabbed the spear jutting from his chest and winced and he tried to pull it free. "I don't give a fuck what sort of freak you are! You just signed your fuckin' death warrant! Frost de Winter will see you hanged!"

The blonde man didn't answer. He stepped in close and with his dagger deftly cut a path along the Butcher's face. He carved a circle – not deep, not large, but just right. The dagger split the bigger man's flesh and traced a path until a patch of it fell away. An ear-piercing scream of pain served as musical backdrop. "Let me introduce myself. My name is Naberius ^[1] and I am an artist. Carving is my specialty."

The Butcher continued to scream and struggle.

Naberius' dagger continued its gruesome tour of the Butcher's body. Like a skilled artisan he continued his work, absorbed in the process, inch by bloody inch. As flesh and muscle fell away his twisted expression was almost intoxicated. Before long the ground was covered in blood and meat.

The process was surprisingly quick, though the pieces were small. Still there was no crueler punishment.

In a testament to the madman's skill he kept his victim conscious all along so he could feel every bite of the dagger. Agonizing torment ensued and he would not permit for

the release of death. Not yet. He would keep his plaything alive so long as he was 'inspired', for as long as three days and three nights. Even when they were nothing but bone and organ his toys still lived.

An artist needed an audience, after all. Who better to appreciate his work than the source material?

Naberius liked to show his victims his masterful work with a mirror when he finished. The more they wailed, the shriller their cries, the more satisfied he became.

The Butcher earned his name, certainly. But this one... he was a true demon.

As he neared the two-hundredth pass of his knife Naberius shuddered, as though a shock had run through him. His dagger deviated ever so slightly, nicking an artery. Furious, he shouted at the wind. "Gabriel! ^[2] What are you doing? I haven't completed my masterpiece – 'The Angel of Bone'. Don't even think of interrupting my work!"

Gabriel's will was inside him, battling for control.

Naberius could play for days, so what recourse did Gabriel have? They didn't have time for this, they were only still breathing because they were supposed to go to Hell's Valley. If they were eliminated and returned home with their mission incomplete, the result would be their execution.

Two minds struggled over control of their shared body.

Cloudhawk watched the exchange from behind a tree. He witnessed everything, from the Butcher's nightmarish mutilation to the struggles of the blonde haired man. Inwardly he cursed Frost de Winter for being a freak, but the ones he sent after him were just as insane.

The ugly one was mad for slaughter, rather straightforward.

The handsome one was a multi-personality psychopath. Typically he seemed gentle, even shy, but deep inside lurked a pitiless and foul spirit. It was more than just twisted thoughts, too, for when one or the other came out their abilities were different.

The dark one was much, much stronger than the normal man.

By himself the golden haired youth was no weakling, and paired with the power of the

darkness he was a fearsome foe. His perception and psychic power was also formidable, without a doubt. If he had any relics Cloudhawk wouldn't stand a chance.

He was a true monster.

After Naberius' petulant outburst he chose in the end to compromise. After all his dagger had slipped, the piece was ruined. Even if he finished 'The angel of Bone' it would be flawed. To a master sculptor this was an insurmountable error.

"Well, if we don't have time to play then we'll deal with that irritating gnat first!"

Naberius turned suddenly, right toward where Cloudhawk was hiding. The dagger deftly spun in his palm before he threw it. It passed through whatever foliage was in its way on a straight path to the spot between Cloudhawk's eyes.

Cloudhawk flung himself out of the way as fast as he could.

But as he fought to escape the dagger he tried to keep an eye on Naberius in the distance. Only, the psychopath vanished suddenly. He was fast – but Cloudhawk could still catch glimpses of him as he approached.

A fierce wind blew at him, followed by a murderous intent.

Golden hair whipped through the air, framing a savage face, and unexpectedly close. His eyes were wide and round, his mouth twisted into a sadistic grin. Every muscle in his face was contorted in uncomfortable ways, making his handsome features hideous and dismaying like a nightmare.

The dagger was four or five meters away still.

Naberius had started to move the moment after throwing the weapon, and arrived before it. As the dagger closed in he lashed out at the wastelander. Cloudhawk, reeling as he tried to avoid the dagger, couldn't get out of the madman's way.

He swiped with his right hand, fingers splayed. Fingernails jutted out like a cat's sharp enough to rend flesh while all the muscles and veins in his hands and arm abruptly swelled, knotted with power.

Unfortunately Cloudhawk's intuition was once more proven right. The blonde man was much more dangerous than he appeared from the outside, much more dangerous

than the Butcher. He wasn't as strong as the large man had been, but he was much, much faster.

This fight wasn't an arm-wrestling match. The strongest one didn't always win. Moreover the freak was fast *and* powerful. His explosiveness was shocking.

Cloudhawk tried desperately to get out of the way but the man's talons caught him in the chest. His robes were ripped open and five trenches were carved in his flesh. Naberius' claws weren't just sharp but also surprisingly fierce. His left hand reached out for a second pass while his right whipped around to catch the dagger in midair.

Meanwhile, faced with a different enemy, Cloudhawk switched up his tactics.

Against the Butcher he'd stretched out the fight, doing what he could to waste the big man's energy and frustrate him. Then it was just a matter of finding the right time to strike. Naberius was too fast for him to run and if he tried he'd just be exposing his back to the enemy. Before he knew it his back would be shredded.

There was a serious difference in their speed, but that didn't mean Cloudhawk was without options.

Naberius was fast, but he wasn't faster than a bullet, and Cloudhawk had just learned he was able to see bullets mid-flight. Naberius' attacks were clear as day. He wasn't as fast as his opponent, so all he could do was try to reduce any wasted movement and keep his movements as compact as possible. He had to choose his strikes, attacking only when he had the upper hand. A decisive blow to turn the tables, that's how he would offset his enemy's speed.

Naberius' left hand swept by with a gust of wind. Bloody gashes appeared on Cloudhawk's throat, but not as bad as the deep fissure that appeared on the tree trunk just beside him.

Two quick attacks, and by now the dagger he'd thrown had arrived. He snatched it from the air. With a flick of the wrist he spun it around toward his victim's throat like a propeller. Cloudhawk ducked, causing the dagger to dig into a tree and carve out another five-centimeter deep incision. The freak reacted by bringing his right knee up to try and catch Cloudhawk as he dipped down.

The knee came at Cloudhawk like a sledge hammer. A direct hit would shatter bone.

He netted the fingers of both hands together and fended it off. He used the momentum of the blow to kick off the ground and it sent him three meters straight up. Agile as a monkey he clambered up the tree into its spindly canopy. But no sooner had he landed then a gust of wind arose at his back. Naberius' mad laughter cackled in his ear.

"Hehehehe! You're too slow!"

The glint of a dagger came tearing down.

Cloudhawk swung his hand around and slapped Naberius' wrist away. Fast as he was his attacks were sloppy. The dagger was in his right hand but was knocked to the left marking out a half-circle away from Cloudhawk. The wastelander continued to protect his vital areas with only his hands so that even separated by only ten centimeters, his opponent's blows couldn't find their mark.

With the dagger deflected, the claws came back.

The two men battled in the branches of the petrified tree. Cloudhawk juked and dodged but Naberius still moved with far more grace and surety. Like a ghost he came at him from every angle while bits of tree clattered to the ground below.

The tree's withered crown was clipped and snapped like a man tired of his hairstyle. The two fighting on its head were like the scissors of an untrained barber. Before long the tree had a very nontraditional hair style, and the ground below was littered with broken branches.

Naberius cackled all the while. *"Hehehehe! You have a strong will to survive this long!"*

Cloudhawk focused only on defense. He was so far successful in protecting his vital areas but Naberius' attacks were too fierce, too precise. He couldn't avoid them all, eight or nine spots had been wounded and were seeping blood. Thankfully his regenerative abilities meant the damage wasn't serious, but he didn't dare discount their cumulative effect. Naberius was all about torment, and something told him that the freak was still just playing with him.

1. I went with the name of a marquess of hell, a demon who teaches art and cunning and speaks in a hoarse voice.

2. An angelic name this time, in the story he is called 'Gold White'. His very Aryan features are typical of archangels and Gabriel is said to have a white-gold aura.

Chapter 74

Unpredictable Happenstances

The abnormal fiend that was Naberius had a host of glaring flaws; vanity, conceit, madness. By now he was convinced that he had the upper hand, that the rhythm was under his control. He was a cat playing with a mouse.

So why was Cloudhawk so calm? His tricks were exhausted, his death was near!

This unsettled Naberius. It was like sleeping with a beautiful woman, only for her to lie motionlessly beneath you – responsive as a corpse. It killed the mood.

“The look in your eyes is getting under my skin.” Naberius was sure Cloudhawk had no way to fight back. When they dropped once more to the ground Cloudhawk pressed himself against a tree to avoid another attack. He thrust his dagger right toward the wastelander’s left eye. The madman’s precision was uncanny, and his quick movements were sure to pop the young man’s eye right out of his skull. “I think I’ll take one!”

As the dagger’s tip came his way Cloudhawk’s heart was filled with a cold mirth. *You fuckin’ dope, you want my eye?* He caught the blonde man’s wrist in his hands, stopping the dagger mere centimeters from his face.

Cloudhawk’s back was against the tree, pinned as they struggled for the weapon.

Naberius chortled at the young man’s foolishness. The claws of his left hand reached out, this time to dig into his abdomen. This close and with his hands occupied, Cloudhawk couldn’t stop him. He could almost feel it – the soft skin parting, tough muscle giving way to warm wriggling guts. He would grab them and pull them out for his plaything to see.

The time had come.

Naberius threw all his focus and strength into the attack, convinced Cloudhawk could not resist. He completely missed the stone around his neck come to life, or the pale light and power that surrounded him.

Naberius felt all resistance vanish. The dagger in his right hand jerked forward into his victim's face at the same time his left hand plummeted into his abdomen. With a thud his dagger stuck in the tree's tough bark. His five sharp claws struck something hard.

No... no this isn't right!

He saw them go through but there was no tearing.

Naberius was an expert in body control, and a self-proclaimed master sculptor of the human body. He knew what it felt like it muscle tore and skin gave way. He knew what it felt like this a dagger and with his bare hands. This felt like nothing but air.

Cloudhawk took a short step to the left, and smiled.

"My turn."

With a grunt his right leg came across like a hammer, sending Naberius off his feet. He broke through two trees before coming to a stop. That wasn't going to kill him, but it sure as hell hurt. He was confident Naberius wasn't going to be nearly as fleet-footed after a kick like that.

Sure enough, although the blonde man's body was tough the blow was not easy to recover from. Naberius felt that several of his ribs had been broken and his lungs had taken some damage. He couldn't move as deftly as before.

Cloudhawk leapt into the air, as flexible as a chimp, spinning like an expert diver. As he came plummeting down he stuck out his right foot for a crushing ax kick. This wasn't a normal kick – it was as lethal as a large man swinging a war hammer. If it landed it could very well split him in half.

Naberius pushed off the ground and shot back up to his feet, light as a feather. He dodged Cloudhawk's kick by the skin of his teeth, causing the wastelander's heel to strike the dirt. He then swept his leg around, kicking up a cloud of dirt and rock into his enemy's face.

"You bastard!"

The two men punched at one another at the same time. The force of each blasted away the particles of dirt.

Naberius staggered backwards. His gifts lay in speed while Cloudhawk was more well-rounded. He was fast and strong, leaving no weaknesses to take advantage of. Without his speed to help him Naberius had to rely on strength alone, and he couldn't go toe-to-toe with Cloudhawk.

The bones of his left arm ached. The punch damaged something in his shoulder.

Naberius refused to admit defeat. Regardless of his injury he lashed out fast as he could, but his dagger once again passed harmlessly through Cloudhawk. Again? How was this happening! Cloudhawk sidestepped and delivered a punch. Ordinarily Naberius could easily have dodged but his injuries stopped him cold. He just stared as the young man's fist caught him in the stomach. As he doubled over another dropkick buried him in the dirt.

"You have a relic... how?!" The man's twisted face was a mask of rage and disbelief. He struggled and spat mouthfuls of blood into the soil. His left arm, chest, kidney and spleen were injured. Sturdy as he was this guy had nearly put him out of commission after only a few blows.

"The instructor never said foul play was forbidden in Hell's Valley. All he said was make sure you don't get caught."

Cloudhawk was calm and frank with the man who'd just tried to kill him. He'd had no advantage against the freak and it was only thanks to the phase stone that he hadn't been gutted. Without it he would have been forced to only stay on defense and hope for the right moment.

But with the phase stone he wasn't afraid.

Although the stone's power wasn't invincible it required more power than Naberius possessed. Through its unique abilities Cloudhawk was able to land a surprise blow and negate his enemy's superior speed.

Naberius hadn't considered this his foe would have a hidden hand yet to play. Unprepared, he was taken completely by surprise and it cost him. What's more he'd never heard of a relic with power like this, that turned people into ghosts. Now his only option was to try and flee, for the condition of his injuries would only get worse and running away would become impossible.

Cloudhawk knew what the blonde man was thinking. "Weren't you being pretty cocky?"

Why are you running now?"

Naberius didn't answer. He jumped up and made a run for it through the forest.

Cloudhawk gave chase. As they dodged trees Naberius' face softened. The sharp angles and twisted muscles gave way to the more familiar gentleness from before. The almost bashful Gabriel returned.

"Hey, *hey!* You're going to leave me to deal with your mess?!"

Gabriel was not pleased, but the body belonged to him now.

Cloudhawk was gaining so Gabriel put all his energy into trying to stay ahead. Although they shared the same body, Gabriel didn't have the same control as his darker counterpart. He could only managed about eighty percent of his potential speed, and with the state of his body as it was he was even slower. He didn't have any advantage of speed over Cloudhawk anymore.

Gabriel shouted at him over his shoulder as he ran. "Hold on, I don't want to kill you. I just let Naberius out to deal with the Butcher. I'm sorry about what happened after! That was all Naberius, it has nothing to do with me!"

This is his apology? If it weren't for my tricks, I'd already be dead.

Cloudhawk would cut him into pieces, then apologize when he was dead. He'd be interested to know if Gabriel would accept his apology then.

Gabriel bemoaned his fate. He was told it was a 'nothing mission', but obviously Frost de Winter had misjudged. It wasn't that he'd underestimated Cloudhawk, but rather that no one knew what to expect in Hell's Valley. Without relics both he and the Butcher were fighting with one hand tied behind their backs!

Cloudhawk was not the softhearted sort. These two were sent to kill him and he had no reason to show them any mercy. He was determined to kill Gabriel, if for no other reason than to spare himself more trouble later!

Cloudhawk kept up pace but after several minute he still wasn't getting close enough. He grit his teeth and thought for a moment, then snatched up a sharp rock as he ran past.

Whoosh! It struck his prey's calf.

Gabriel was surprised and alarmed by Cloudhawk's tricks. He hit the ground with a grunt and his pursuer took the opportunity to close in. He came down on him with a first like a falling star, a punch that if it landed would split his skull open. If Gabriel's head was made of steel it still wouldn't save him.

But with Cloudhawk's fist just two meters away-

Oddball squawked from nearby. Cloudhawk hesitated for just a moment, for just then a slender figure leapt out. The stranger bound off a tree trunk to his left, then whipped a kick at him.

Cloudhawk spun around and brought his arms up to block. The force of it knocked him four or five meters away, toward another tree. He grabbed a branch and used it to flip himself up onto his feet. Eyes narrowed, he glared at the new attacker.

Claudia glared back ^[1]. She then cast a glance toward the man on the ground. "Are you alright?"

Gabriel was relieved and overjoyed at his savior. He scrambled to his feet. "Thank you!"

She returned her gaze, filled with righteous anger, onto Cloudhawk. "Dogs can't help but eat shit, huh. Here you are trying to kill more innocent people!"

Cloudhawk felt like a child who'd had his candy taken away and then framed for stealing it in the first place. It was a nauseating feeling.

Motherfucker! It was absolutely baffling that this defeated assassin would get to live on. How did she *always* show up at the least convenient time? Wasn't she afraid he would kill her?

Wait... something wasn't right.

Suddenly it all felt off. He couldn't defeat Claudia, not here.

She was a close-ranged fighter with capable speed and strength. As a demonhunter she had sub-par psychic energy, however. Cloudhawk had managed to easily beat her back at Skycloud because he had his relics to help him.

Without their tools, purely hand-to-hand, Cloudhawk wasn't sure he would take her.

Claudia was marked from the lashes she decided to take as punishment for her dignity. Fresh blood traced paths down her arm and dripped from her fingertips. The back of her robes were dark from the bloodstains. Those whips were serious business so she had to be suffering, which also meant her fighting capabilities had to be affected too. It was a gratifying thought for Cloudhawk.

As Gabriel rose from the ground he fixed his eyes on Cloudhawk.

Things just kept getting better, didn't they.

Chapter 75

Dust-Up

The enemy of one's enemy was one's friend.

Cloudhawk was fighting alone, but thankfully he had the phase stone to lend him some confidence.

These two joining forces at the critical moment was going to be a difficult situation for him to deal with. Still with the stone's energy field surrounding him he was effectively separate from the physical world. The only attack he would have to fear were those that could overcome the limits of the stone's power, anything less would be ineffective and he could completely avoid.

The problem was that just as others couldn't harm him, he couldn't harm anyone either while he was incorporeal. He would have to drop the stone's power before trying to fight back, and against a single target he could choose the right moment. Just as with Naberius, it was a matter of dodging then counter-attacking.

But when his foes started to multiply things got more complicated.

Activating the stone took time. Constantly galvanizing and dropping it created more opportunity for mistakes. If they could keep up a continuous assault, or had some special attack, or some special way to overcome his defense, winning this encounter was going to be very difficult for Cloudhawk.

"Remember who I am." Cloudhawk's mind was racing, looking for any way to turn the situation his way. But on the surface he remained calm. When he turned his eyes on Claudia a scornful sneer was writ on his face. "Twice you tried to kill me with your sneak attacks and have failed both times. Now here you are again. Are you some sort of sadist? Hey, you don't love me or something do you?"

The accusation made her furious. She wouldn't consider it even if he were the last living person on earth!

Cloudhawk smacked his forehead like he was assailed by some irritating fact. "It's just

such a shame you grew up ugly. I mean you know it. Your face looks like a pancake, you've got no chest and your ass is a funny shape. A woman like you holds no interest for me – just not my type. Not even out of pity, really, so you should just put the thought out of your mind.”

In fact, while Claudia wasn't as beautiful as someone like Selene or Dawn, she was still one of the prettier girls in Skycloud. Her figure didn't have the same enticing fire of Hellflower, but the bits that should be big were big, and the bits that should be small were small. All in all, very standard.

Gabriel understood what Cloudhawk was trying to do.

He was a cunning little shit. What he was saying was a load of nonsense, but it was driving the girl crazy. The angrier she got the harder it would be for her to keep her head in a fight, and that lost them their advantage.

Claudia didn't rush to action. Gabriel also didn't act rashly.

They were in a stalemate. Cloudhawk's verbal attacks became more boldfaced and more brazen, drawing on the many uncouth things he learned from his time in the wastelands with mercenaries. Naturally, they grew increasingly filthy. How could a self-proclaimed noble soul from the elysian lands accept such black-hearted obscenity? Cloudhawk was nothing more than a scoundrel – and that's exactly what gave him the edge over any elysian. He didn't care about face, so the stream of expletives and foulness just kept coming. That's how he was able to strip before two hundred people without a second thought. What elysian could do the same?

Claudia's face turned several shades of red, and her knuckles cracked as she held her fists by her side. It was like a sea of lava roiled just beneath her skin, threatening to burst out at any moment.

Cloudhawk's plan seemed to be working.

But Claudia shut her eyes, took a deep breath, and when she opened them again Cloudhawk was surprised to see her eyes were perfect blue pools of tranquility. In fact there was no emotion in them at all, or in her voice when she spoke. “You're falling back on old tricks. Don't you get tired of yourself?”

What is this? All this wasted breath, and no reaction? Cloudhawk had her pegged as a hothead, but her reaction today was exactly the opposite.

Out in the wastelands, Claudia didn't lose to Cloudhawk - she lost to herself. Back then she had a clear combat advantage over him, but had let emotion take control. She gave up her power and let him lead her by the nose.

She took her mission's failure as a lesson. She was an emotional person, but she could learn how to separate her mood from behavior. She effectively had two faces. There was benefit in success, but lessons in failure. What happened to her out in the wastelands wasn't all bad.

This was why enemies and foes were so important!

Enemies were the whip pushing you to forward. Adversaries were the mirror with which one constantly looked at the truth of themselves. ^[1] The person who was able to avoid purely hating their opponents, who could see past their enmity to the worth of their foes, that person was destined for greatness.

"Good... very good. You've grown up." Cloudhawk let his loathsome persona fall away. The fierceness in his eyes gave way to calm and he spoke softly. "But you're still determined to fight me?"

Claudia's voice sounded like it was born on a frozen mountain wind, cold and imperious. "I just don't want to see villains win. I can't stand by while another demonhunter loses their life to contemptible tricks. Any elysian would make the same choice I made, because every elysian carries a righteous heart. A wastelander like you would never understand, so you use any method to get what you want. Any method to gain power. Without faith how far can you really go?"

Gabriel's face twitched. His heart started beating quicker. It was happening again.

Once his heartrate reached a certain threshold, Naberius would come out again. Claudia's sanctimonious sermon was provoking him.

"You're willing to make a decision without all the details? You smug assholes are willing to go out and slaughter freely, and saddest of all you still think your hands are clean. Put yourselves up on that glowing pedestal. If that's the sort of things the gods teach your people then if they topple today it wouldn't be soon enough." Cloudhawk bent down. He wasn't going to waste time arguing religion. If they were going to fight they might as well get it over with. "Alright. If this is the way it's gotta be then I'll take on both of you."

Claudia was furious. This bastard *dared* malign the gods?! The only reason humans still existed was because of the gods' protection. This heathen deserved to be burned at the stake!

Cloudhawk resigned himself to murder. He paid Claudia no mind in the past because he didn't see much of value. Now it appeared there was more potential than he thought.

She was trouble, precisely the sort of trouble Cloudhawk was tired of dealing with. If he killed her here, the Lunae family couldn't trace it back to him. But Gabriel was a dangerous aberration he also had to deal with. Cloudhawk had fought hard to win an advantage over him and that was only dealing with his physical abilities. The psychopath definitely had strong psychic abilities, too. Killing him any other time when relics were involved might be impossible.

It was like a bone stuck in the back of his throat. There was no more holding back, he had to clean this mess up.

As murderous intent flooded from Cloudhawk, Claudia's pale face blanched even further. She even stepped back unconsciously. The wastelander was cunning and wicked, even crazy. From his resolute aura she knew he wasn't going to stop until one of them was dead.

Claudia spoke to the man beside her in a low voice. "This one's not an easy fight. If we work together –"

Before she could finish the thought a bone-deep chill ran up her spine.

Her face fell, and when Claudia turned the affable blonde man was gone and she was face to face with madness. He'd changed completely in the blink of an eye, and with the glare of a bloodthirsty hunter he swiped at her with deadly sharp claws.

Naberius' dagger-like claws could rip through a mutant animal's fur, much less the milky flesh of Claudia's throat. But just as it seemed her head would be lopped off she proved her worth as a melee-focused demonhunter. Her body immediately tensed and she leapt out of the way. When she landed several meters back she felt her neck burning. She brought her hand up, and when she looked down at it, it was covered in blood.

Her quick feet saved her from having an artery cut, but the wounds were deep.

“You...”

She only got a single word out before Naberius was on her again. His wounds were serious, but his speed was still not to be underestimated.

Claudia was faced with the seething murderous rage of this psychopath, who suddenly wanted to tear into several pieces. She had no idea what was going on, was this some sort of trick Cloudhawk had arranged? Only, when she showed up she clearly saw that she'd caught him by surprise.

Naberius charged at her, laughing maniacally. “Killing ten thousand of zealots like you can't slate my thirst! Gods, the Temple, faith – it's all *bullshit!* You think any of that highbrow nonsense gives a shit about the common man?! I'm going to kill you, unless the gods see fit to save you!”

Claudia didn't know how to put what she was feeling into words. Anger? That didn't come close to describe it. Beyond that there was humiliation and despair. *How could this happen! He is a demonhunter!*

Cloudhawk was delighted.

Gabriel... or Naberius or whatever this freak called himself... seemed to have a story of his own.

“All day evoking the names of the gods. Who do you think you are?!” Naberius' ferocity grew. “This world is mad! *Everyone is mad!*”

Claudia fought off his offensive but not without cost. Several bloody wounds peppered her body.

All the while Naberius continued his insane shrieking. “I'll cut off every piece of meat on your body, just like I did to that goddamn oracle!”

He killed an oracle?

It was like a bomb went off in her brain. Her thoughts went blank.

Oracles were ecclesiastical members of the sanctuary, different from a church. There were many churches, mostly religious institutions for the common folk. Only the bishops of those organizations could claim to commune with the gods. Oracles, on the

other hand, were legitimate conduits with direct access to speaking with the gods.

Although oracles had no other abilities besides this, they were infallible members of elysian society. All of the art, equipment, food and drink they enjoyed were gifted to them from the gods. Every year they were blessed with more relics or technology from on high in order to maintain the prosperity of the realm. The oracles served as a bridge between the people and their deities.

He killed an oracle? That is beyond insane!

Could it be that this demonhunter has completely renounced his dedication to the light? Has he given himself over completely to the darkness? Damn... what have I done?

Chapter 76

Twists and Turn

The cooperation Cloudhawk was afraid of didn't happen. Instead what he witnessed was something he hadn't expected.

Naberius completely ignored his mission's target upon reawakening and focused entirely on Claudia.

Although the Claudia family's demonhunter was adept at close-quarters combat, she had neither the experience nor speed advantage in this fight. In the blink of an eye, the two exchanged a flurry of blows that left her with several bloody wounds. One of them was especially deep, and she had to keep her abdomen tight for fear her guts might start to leak through.

Naberius wasn't any better off.

His fight with Cloudhawk left him with several broken ribs, an injured kidney and a punctured lung. A normal man would have succumbed to the damage already, and his flurry of attacks was making his condition worse by the second.

How interesting. It didn't seem like Cloudhawk would even need to lift a hand. If they kept it up the two would helpfully take each other out.

Claudia pushed herself forward with an angry roar, her hands lashing out like a dragon leaping from the sea. Her blows brought gusts of wind as they surged toward Naberius but only struck his afterimage. The psychopath appeared behind her and raked his claws down her back, leaving deep fissures that spurt blood. She spun around to counterattack and managed to catch him in the shoulder with her fist. The two were knocked away from each other.

Blood leaked from the corner of Naberius' mouth. His internal injuries were dire. Claudia was covered in blood that stained her robe copper. Her outer injuries were severe.

Clutching his chest, Naberius growled. "Cloudhawk, I don't see the need for us to break

each other. You hate the gods just like we do, hate the hypocrisy they stand for. We're the same."

Cloudhawk stood with his arms crossed in front of his chest, watching the drama unfold. "You flatter me, but I have great respect for the gods. Don't drag me into this mess."

"You know the oracle I killed was just a low-ranking one, but still an oracle." Naberius was an insane mess. His golden hair was caked with dirt and blood, and his handsome face was covered in filth. Anger twisted the cherubic features into a hideous mask making him look like a wild animal. "I never took Frost de Winter's mission to heart, my situation is different from the Butcher's. He was hoping the Cloude family could clear his name, but I know I'm never going back to Skycloud!"

Naberius' best chance was to have Cloudhawk as an ally! Joining forces to kill the demonhunter was a much better option than trying to defeat the wastelander in their condition.

Claudia was stunned by what she was hearing from Naberius. This monstrous man, who had killed an oracle with his own hands, had been dispatched by Frost de Winter? The Butcher he'd mentioned was also someone Claudia had heard of, the one who eradicated an entire village for one heretic.

But Frost was a prodigy with an impeccable reputation. Why would he do something like this?

How could he not realize that his actions violate Skycloud law? That it was a betrayal of the gods themselves? Why would he do such a thing? If this was Frost's true nature then what did that say about the Cloude, the Polaris family, and everyone else in the city?

Claudia was lost in confusion. In fact, it was more like panic.

"Alright." Cloudhawk's eyes were pits of sinister darkness. With a smirk on his face he leaned against a tree trunk. "I believe you. You *did* try to kill me, but if you help rid me of this obnoxious woman then all is forgiven. When it's done you don't bother me, and I don't bother you."

That was it? He wasn't going to fight? What was he thinking? He was content to sit there and watch the other two beat each other to death like they were gladiators.

Naberius was definitely crazy, but he wasn't stupid. Claudia wasn't a pushover. He was sure he could handle her but it would take a serious toll. If Cloudhawk decided to go back on his promise Naberius wouldn't be able to defend himself, or even flee.

Cloudhawk just leaned against his tree and stared, his dark eyes like pits fixed on the two of them. Naberius couldn't read the wastelander's intentions and so didn't rush to meet his end of the bargain. The three young trainees kept their distance and stared warily at one another.

All three of them saw this situation differently.

Cloudhawk was still weighing his options, Naberius was trying to guess Cloudhawk's motives, and Claudia was struggling with the new information she'd learned. Demonhunters were supposed to be the most righteous of holy warriors, she thought, willing to sacrifice everything for honor. She had been convinced that all demonhunters were pure and faultless. Aberrations like the Butcher were rare exceptions.

When she learned that Frost de Winter had ordered these evil men here she was beset by fear and confusion. So the Skycloud code could be broken? So someone like Frost de Winter was simply allowed to disrespect, if not openly defy the gods?

No! It was impossible! This had to be only one side of the story, she refused to believe it!

Claudia was born into a wealthy noble family, she'd grown up never knowing scarcity. When she was found to have the abilities of a demonhunter she began training, surrounded by people like her who were bathed in faith and taught to praise the glory of the gods.

Everyone she knew in her life was firm in their piety, so she believed it had to be so throughout the entire domain. Everyone loved one another, brothers and sisters before the eyes of their gods. They were all noble, good-hearted people and that is why she could never understand the dog-eat-dog nature of the wastelands.

Demonhunters were the bedrock of that faith. She was convinced of their inviolable honor, for they represented the bravery, loyalty, faith, and strength of the elysian lands.

For the first time in her life this was brought into question. She was faced with the dirt just beneath the sterling face of the demonhunters. Her faith was shaken, and her

honor under attack. It filled her with uncontrollable fury. She would rather believe all of this was a trick orchestrated by Cloudhawk. *He* was the one who brought this psychopath here.

“Die!”

She put Naberius out of mind and launched herself at Cloudhawk instead. Her fists came at him like missiles catching him by surprise. He hadn't anticipated she'd come after him with no warning, so much that he had to shake himself from his astonishment to quickly dodge.

Boom!

The tree he was leaning on exploded into splinters.

Holy fuck! What the fuck is going on?!

Claudia whipped a kick at Cloudhawk, forcing him to scurry back half a dozen meters.

A hurricane of punches came his way, forcing Cloudhawk to fight back.

Now it was Naberius' turn to watch the scene unfold. What a fortuitous change in fortunes! Now the fanatic turned her fervor on the wastelander, but Cloudhawk had managed to beat Naberius. He knew the girl was no match for the man.

Her leg swept by with a powerful gust. But instead of striking her target she watched as her foot slipped right through his temple like Cloudhawk wasn't even there. He stood there unscathed, then reached out with grabbed her leg in both hands and flung her aside.

This was his chance!

Naberius made up his mind. In his condition he wasn't going to get away from Cloudhawk. His only bet was to deal with the girl. His ferocious expression promised death as he launched forward.

Claudia was helpless as she tumbled through the air. But as Naberius was getting ready to strike the final blow...

Rustling came from the trees and several figures emerged. Upon seeing this both

Cloudhawk and Naberius would hardly believe it. *More* people?! It was a goddamn fairground! This did not bode well for either of them – demonhunters like Naberius were not the norm. Most would side with Claudia.

Not good. Got to kill her quickly!

He didn't slow down one iota. The psycho's intent was to shatter every bone in her chest and ruin all the organs inside. He would revel in crushing her heart and watching the rain of meat of blood, in feeling it flow over his body.

"Two men against one woman? There's no honor in that."

With the words a bone arrow shot from the mist, with both incomparable speed and flawless precision. Naberius could not dodge it and finish Claudia off, so he stopped just short of the fatal blow. He spun and kicked Claudia away while snatching the arrow from the air with both hands. However the incredible force of the arrow shoved him several meters back. When Naberius hit the ground he saw a new bloody hole in his clothing.

Several figures stepped out from the forest. They all wore trainee's robes.

One of them was a sturdy man of around twenty-five, with buzz-cut hair and sharp gallant features. He carried a bone bow obviously taken from the natives. No one of ordinary strength would have the brawn to wield a weapon like this, so he had to be strong. He was also clearly the leader of this small group.

Naberius' face darkened. Claudia stared at them blankly.

Cloudhawk chuckled. "You showed up just in time, but for what? Heroes saving the fair maiden?"

"My name is Drake Thane. You'd do well to remember." The valiant young man stepped forward. "Because I'm going to personally break every bone in your body. I'm very good at it, so I advise you not to resist, it'll hurt less."

Drake Thane? Of the Thane family!

The Thanes were a lauded military family from Skycloud, though not as celebrated as the Polaris. They'd produced many generals over the years but few demonhunters, and those that did arise tended to die quickly. Their lack of a long-lasting demonhunter

in the family kept them in the middle tier of Skycloud elite.

Drake Thane wasn't a demonhunter, either. But he was a young commander.

This meant all his skills came from his physical abilities alone, and the one who benefited most from this test was him. Unlike demonhunters who lost their relics, his strengths weren't curtailed by the test's rules. He was also smart, much smarter than the average meat-head. He typically only acted when it played to his advantages.

His goal out here was to find his opponents and break their legs, so they would not make it to Hell's Valley. With their relics demonhunters had all the power of heaven at their command. But out here? Out here, he was king.

Chapter 77

Bold Provocations

Drake Thane was not a demonhunter, but a normal soldier. Like the scarred instructor he relied on pure strength and speed to best his enemies.

Demonhunters spent a lot of their effort on strengthen their mind and spirit so that they could make the most of their relics. They were not lousy fighters by any means, but they typically were not up to the same level as a specialized warrior like this man.

In this world the different between a wise man and a fool was simple; a wise man played to his strengths and avoided shortfalls. He held on to his advantage until the best possible moment, because while an advantage could give you the upper hand it could also just as easily slip away. Opportunity was about timing and motivation, and if you hesitated that opportunity fell into the opponent's hands.

Drake was wise. He recognized this moment as an unparalleled opportunity. He recognized his advantage.

Once the demonhunters had their relics returned and recovered from the beating, Drake would go back to being in the middle of the pack – if not near the bottom. He didn't know what was waiting for them in Hell's Valley, but he did know it would involve vicious competition. If he dealt with the strong out here while he had the upper hand it reduced the danger he would face in the future. It made sense, now was the time to strike.

This test was meant to weed out fifty percent of them, wasn't it?

But while the implication was to outpace the others, that wasn't Drake's goal. No, he was going to remove half of his competition himself. All of them were obstacles in his path.

The fewer there were of them, the more resources the valley had for him. That was Drake's thinking, and so that's what he set out to do. Desperate times called for desperate measures.

He'd already put down more than ten other trainees by this point. The sounds of fighting had brought him over here, but he was surprised to find three demonhunters going at it. Each of them looked the worse for wear, and Drake had three handy little helpers to make sure things went his way.

He and his fellows stepped out from the mist. Cloudhawk, Naberius and Claudia stopped their fighting. Three enemies suddenly found themselves on the same team against the newcomers.

Claudia was especially confused. She hadn't expected to run into him, and then he saved her life. Only, now it seemed like he was going to kill her anyway. When had the world become so unraveled? "You dare face a demonhunter as a loyal soldier of Skycloud? Do you not fear punishment?"

To a typical soldier her words might have held some weight, but Cloudhawk wasn't sure whether she was being naïve or just plain stupid trying it on Drake. This guy obviously wasn't a typical soldier, he was a noble just like her and successful at a young age. Whatever respect she expected wasn't going to come from him.

"We believe in the gods and are loyal to Skycloud. A soldier is duty-bound to complete their mission, and our mission is to complete this training. What we need to do is make sure we walk out of this training." Drake spoke quickly and with determination, sharp as a knife through butter. He seemed altogether unshakable. "Saving your life was my duty as a soldier. But to complete my mission I'm going to have to stop all of you right here."

Quite the contradiction.

"Don't worry!" The words tumbled out of his mouth as gently as iron pellets. "I'm just going to break your legs. I don't want to kill you. If you're lucky maybe you can still claw yourselves there."

"Oh, I'm going to claw something alright!"

No sooner had Drake made his threats than Naberius flung himself at the soldier. His mad laughter echoed through the forest, but no one could see where he'd vanished to. Drake stood with his feet planted and his arms folded across his chest, squinting into the mist like a tower stuck in the marsh. Wind or rain, he wasn't budging.

Hehehehe!

Drake's robes were ripped open at the chest.

Naberius swept by like a specter, groping at Drake with his claws. But it didn't feel like he was tearing at a body at all. Naberius might as well have been trying to dig his nails through stone. Claws that could rip through a mutant beast's hide only left shallow gashes on Drake's chest.

The instant Drake felt the strike he lashed out with a fist, fast as lightning. He wasn't one iota slower than Naberius at peak condition, and he was orders of magnitude stronger. There was a stuffy *hmpf*, and Naberius was flung away with all the grace of a discarded sandbag. He hit the ground, bounced up, hit the ground again, and stopped only when he smashed through a tree.

The golden haired youth's body elicited a series of nauseating pops and snaps. In one punch Drake had done as much damage as Cloudhawk had in a flurry of attacks.

Drake dropped his head and looked at the wounds on his chest. A few droplets oozed from them but quickly stopped, and a few moments later they healed completely. A few faint scars were all that remained. "That tickled," he muttered.

Inwardly Cloudhawk felt his heart skip a beat.

The guy's skin was hard as steel. He could stand there and let someone hack at him with a sword and they would barely leave a mark. Beyond that, his recovery speed was even faster than Cloudhawk's, and judging by that one punch he was strong as hell too.

Against someone like him they might have stood a chance if they had relics. But even three on one, with nothing in hand, how were they supposed to fight back? It was like a rabbit trying to fight a pangolin. The fuzzy moron wasn't getting through that carapace.

A few more seconds passed and even the scars were gone from Drake's chest.

"Demonhunters like you command the powers of ice, fire, wind and earth. I could be twice as strong and still couldn't stand against you. But out here, without your godly powers and relics, what can you do against true soldiers like us? The instructor was right, you've become too reliant on the gifts of the gods. You've lost sight of your own strength." Drake had always felt like he was under the thumb of demonhunters, but today he was finally able to breathe. "Every inch of our bodies has been tempered by pain and struggle you couldn't even imagine. Any soldier can defeat a demonhunter in

a straight fight, they just need to realize their potential. We could be the backbone of Skycloud's defense, just as well as any of you!"

"Cut the nonsense! If you think you have the skill, then wait until we get our relics back!" Claudia was at a loss, she didn't know how to fight back against Drake as things were now. But she wasn't about to agree to his bullshit. "Any one person, no matter how strong, has their limits, but the power of the gods is endless. You all have made your bodies strong, but what about someone like Master Arcturus?!"

Drake's face screwed up in anger and darkened. His voice came in a dangerous growl. "There's only one Arcturus in Skycloud. Become him, and I'll have nothing to say. But today, right here and right now, I can teach you all a lesson. Too much talk already – all three of you come at me. We're wasting time, and there are others out there who need learning."

Naberius had gotten back onto his feet, albeit shakily.

Claudia glared at him from across the misty clearing.

Moments ago the three of them had been willing to kill each other, but now that a common enemy appeared they were forced to work together.

But how?

Each one wanted the other dead, how were they supposed to fight shoulder to shoulder in good faith? How were they supposed to join forces even though they would have to?

Drake promised to only break their legs in order to stop them from participating in the training, but what other dangers lurked out here in deadwood forest? What was waiting for them, ready to strike when they were at their weakest? If their legs were broken, how could they run, or defend themselves?

Things had definitely turned dire!

Drake Thane seemed easily capable of beating Cloudhawk and the other two by himself, not to mention he had three friends waiting in the wings. Like him, they were also soldiers who'd been hardened by service. Even if they weren't as strong as Drake, they were still definitely stronger than a group of demonhunters without their relics. It was like fighting a tiger with its claws cut off and its teeth pulled.

“If you aren’t going to get it started, then I guess it falls to me.”

Drake punched his fists together causing his knuckles to pop. He twisted at the waist left and then right and the stretching made his muscles seem to swell. In all his body was like a copper statue, quenched and hardened. The onlookers were convinced that if it was between his skin and a steel blade, the blade was what would break.

No time. They have to be dealt with quickly.

A voice called out to him from the crowd. “Hold on!”

Drake narrowed his eyes at the speaker. He’d taken special note of him before, the least wounded of the bunch. He was the first one to remove his clothes back at camp, too. Someone like him was hard to ignore.

Cloudhawk looked over Drake’s perfectly formed body. “If you’re so confident why not make a bet?”

Drake chuckled at the suggestion. The guy was just trying to waste time, but he humored him. “What sort of bet were you thinking?”

Cloudhawk leaned over and snatched up a bit of broken wood from the ground. He picked off twigs from its surface and swung it around. The branch was no thicker than his finger. “I bet I can whoop your ass with this here stick.”

Naberius gaped. Claudia stared dumbly.

Drake and his three companions stood there staring at him. In their wildest dreams they wouldn’t have thought that would be Cloudhawk’s offer. Had he hit his head somewhere? They couldn’t decide on the best way to mock him.

“Haa-hahahaha!”

“Drake, did I hear that right? This kid thinks he’s gonna break you with a stick?”

“His brain’s rattled. A sword can’t even pierce Drake’s skin. And he’s hiding behind a bit of wood!”

But Drake’s face turned dark and angry. “Are you trying to insult me?”

Chapter 78

Twigs For Swords

Drake's body wasn't only the result of hard training and high potential. The Thanes were second only to the Polaris family in military circles, with any number of lauded soldiers and officers as numerous as the clouds. In contrast to Skye's brood, however, the Thanes did not have demonhunting in their blood. They relied on their own strength to get ahead.

What they did have was a secret method for body strengthening, past down from generation to generation. It was a system far more rigorous than the one used by demonhunters – more effective but also tremendously difficult. It involved more than a dozen secret family medicines, and back-breaking training that subjected the student to extreme torment. In this way they made themselves strong, from bone to organs, from skin to tendons.

It was this body refinement that made the Thanes such a powerhouse. They were a second-tier family in Skycloud, yet thanks to sheer might they far surpassed the Lunaes in influence. Their younger generation, to a man, dominated the battlefields with their incredible skills.

No rain of arrows nor hail of bullets gave them pause. So who gave a shit about a *stick*?

Forget the fact that this kid was a nobody, if a Cloude or Polaris threatened to beat him with a stick it was downright laughable!

Cloudhawk gingerly swung his feeble weapon through the air. *Whoosh! Whoosh!* The thin branch whistled as it cut the air. He pointed it at Drake Thane tauntingly. "What? Scared? Truth is all that muscular nonsense might as well be paper to my eyes. I don't need a fancy sword, a branch will work just fine."

Anger tinged Drake's laughter. "A branch, eh? You've got a big mouth! And if you can't back it up?"

"I'm here, aint I? If I lose you do what you want. A sitting duck."

“Alright!” Drake gripped the jagged hole in his clothes and ripped the cloth apart, revealing the upper half of his body. If one looked closely they might see that he didn’t have a single visible pore. Every corded muscle was perfectly smooth, glossy as bronze or marble. His physique was etched as perfectly as though he’d been sculpted, all hard lines, like a statue come to life. “Show me what you got.”

Drake wasn’t interested in wasting time, but everyone had their pride. And when his pride was so thoroughly insulted, he couldn’t help but let his anger show. This guy was an irritating little shit, but letting him take a swipe with his little stick would only waste a few seconds.

When he failed he could go about grinding all his bones to dust!

“What is he thinking?!”

A magnetic and attractive voice rose from beside Claudia that drew her eye. She saw the blonde haired young man standing near her, back to the way he had been before. The frightening madness that had consumed him was gone. The bashful charm was back. Presumably Naberius could only come out for a short time when emotions ran high. Once things calmed down, Gabriel replaced him.

Claudia was alert and wary.

How could she not be? Not a minute ago his face had been filled with murderous rage. He’d tried his damndest to rip her throat open with his bare hands! Now, all of a sudden it was like nothing happened. He was standing beside her naturally, like they were old friends. A guy like him, who changed his mood as fast as turning a page, was someone she definitely had to keep an eye on.

This bastard turncoat hadn’t only betrayed her when she was trying to help, he’d turned his back on the gods themselves. In more ways than one he was far worse than Cloudhawk. She was determined to keep her eyes open, if a chance presented itself she would break this psychopath in half.

But now wasn’t the time. Claudia pretended she hadn’t heard him.

She wasn’t sure what in the world Cloudhawk was thinking, either. Somehow his psychic energy had advanced by leaps and bounds, but physically the two were about equal. Even with a powerful attack relic it wasn’t guaranteed he could break Drake’s defense.

And a stick? That was flat-out nonsense.

Claudia was familiar with Cloudhawk's cunning nature. It made him different from the standard mold. He liked to get under his opponent's skin, even in the middle of a fight, and manipulate them to his purposes. Was this part of the strategy he was using now? Accepting this farce of a challenge proved that Drake had taken the bait.

Was the plan to distract him and try to run?

No, that couldn't be it. Drake was no fool. He would notice right away if Cloudhawk tried. What's more, at a glance from their leader the other soldiers had begun to circle them. They had Cloudhawk surrounded, so even if he got past one the others were there to stop him. There was no running.

Drake Thane roared at him with a voice that could crack boulders. "What are you waiting for?!"

Cloudhawk took a deep breath. In truth, he didn't know. But he had to try something.

The vibrations of power from the phase stone grew stronger. A field of power rose up, filling him up and enveloping him on all sides. It separated him from the fabric of reality.

Although everyone could still see him, Cloudhawk had stepped halfway between this dimension and the next. Although he didn't phase somewhere else entirely, he had become dislodged from the material plane. Like this he was safe, so long as an attack didn't overpower the stone's abilities. Anything less would pass harmlessly through him.

It was time to start. Cloudhawk held the stick high like a sword and flew forward.

And fly was right. He floated up off of the ground like nothing was holding him, while his coarse clothes fluttered. Gravity no longer existed for him. As gentle as a leaf on the wind, with his stick pointed straight ahead, Cloudhawk floated toward Drake. Without anything to stop him, Cloudhawk passed effortlessly through space toward his target.

Drake and his cronies looked on, shocked.

What was this? An attack this light would hardly tickle! But these men were

experienced warriors, and they recognized when something wasn't right. It was an exceptionally strange scene to witness this guy rise like he did, with his clothes and his hair floating like gravity meant nothing.

Such a slow and easy strike was something even a child could avoid. He came at them like he was arriving from far away, from another world. Strange, certainly, but hardly dangerous. With a grunt, Drake stood stoic and steadfast as Cloudhawk approached.

The branch reached his chest.

Then, the unexpected happened.

Cloudhawk's branch slipped into Drake's body like he was made of air. They stared in shock, like looking at a ghost! It was more than abnormal, for beyond feeling anything it also left no wound. No blood was spilled.

Claudia's face froze. An illusion? A phantom?

Gabriel knew better. It had to be a relic that let him pass through things like this. That was the only way for Cloudhawk to pass through something so easily, while leaving no trace. But what was he thinking?

When Drake saw the branch slip through his body, he broke out in a cold sweat. It was short-lived, however, and disappeared when he saw there was no pain. He recovered fast and realized that it was all a trick. The bastard dared try to deceive him!

Cloudhawk's eyes were calm as a lake surface. It was the first time he was doing something like this. Whether or not he would succeed hinged on this moment!

The phase stone's power was suddenly interrupted. Cloudhawk was all at once returned to the material world, as was the branch he held. The branch that was still mostly inside Drake's chest... that's right!

This was Cloudhawk's innovative strategy!

A mere branch couldn't penetrate Drake's defenses, not even if it was Master Arcturus who wielded it. The branch was just too brittle. He'd have to stab it at Drake ten times the speed of sound to have a chance. Only, was there anyone in the world who could move that fast? Just the friction of it all would burn him to cinders.

But what did set Cloudhawk apart was the phase stone!

Under the stone's power he placed the branch where he wanted. Though Drake and the branch occupied the same location, they did not yet share the same place. The two were in separate dimensions and did not interact. But when he let the stone's field dissipate, suddenly the two were forced together. The branch reconnected to the material plane planted firmly in Drake's chest. This interdimensional attack was the only way to undermine the warrior's defenses.

Of course, Cloudhawk wasn't some planewalking master. He'd come up with it on the fly, and it was the only choice he had. If it didn't work, he and the others would be unlikely to escape.

Cloudhawk felt the branch fighting against the field. He sensed a fierce resistance that made him pause. It wasn't unlike the resistance he felt when he tried to pass through solid objects. The denser and more energy-rich the object he tried to penetrate, the higher it resisted. The force on the branch was increasing dramatically.

Not good!

Crackling came from the dead branch fixed in his grip. It shattered into more than ten pieces with splinters firing off like bullets. The bits that were inside Drake were violently forced out, much to Cloudhawk's shock and surprise. Was this right? Had he gambled and lost?

Drake screamed in agonized pain and hit the ground, clutching his chest.

The branch had indeed shattered but more than half a dozen pieces were still lodged in the soldier's body. The skin, muscle, bone and organs of his body all had different strengths. The stick hadn't damaged his skin or caused any issue to his muscle or bone, because the resistance force of his body spat the big chunks out.

But the body's internal tissues were complicated.

The splinters of petrified wood inside of him spread everywhere. Some were in his lungs, and some were in his blood vessels pumping through his heart. The results were unmistakably awful.

Blood poured from Drake's mouth and nose. This level of internal damage was unprecedented for him, more than he could bear.

A single hit had laid him out. Cloudhawk actually did it.

If he'd been using Quiet Carnage, or if his psychic energy were strong enough to combat the resistance, the stick would have been kept intact and ran Drake through. It would have killed him on the spot!

His first attempt was quite significant. Not only had he defeated Drake, Cloudhawk had discovered a whole new way to fight.

From now on the strongest defenses were meaningless before Cloudhawk and his phase stone!

Chapter 79

Emergent Misfortune

“Drake! Drake! What’s the matter?!”

His three followers hurried over, and when they stooped over they saw something wriggling under his flesh. It was like there were countless worms wriggling inside him. He vomited out a mouthful of blood mingled with wood splinters, which seemed to make him feel better. Drake no longer seemed in danger of dying from the bizarre attack.

“That bastard! We can’t let him get away with this!”

Anger flared among Drake’s underlings. Tragically, Cloudhawk found himself the focus of their rage. He cursed his luck. It was a bet, wasn’t it? Was he going to lose even though he won the wager?

Although Drake was the strongest of the group, Cloudhawk was still afraid. If he got up and tried to fight there was no guarantee they might escape. As for the other three, Cloudhawk had some tricks up his sleeves but it likely wasn’t enough to give him a serious edge. Claudia, Gabriel and him could take one each. At least one-on-one they might be able to hold out for a while.

But would the other two play along?

Cloudhawk wracked his brain, looking for some silver-tongued strategy to convince them to help. He turned to give it a shot - but they weren’t there. He spied two figures racing off into the trees like a pair of frightened rabbits.

All of the wrath of these men was centered on Cloudhawk. What more perfect opportunity would there be to run? Gabriel he might have figured, but Claudia, too? She wised up quick!

Of course the situation was hardly something he could balk at. Neither Gabriel nor Claudia would look back at this moment and feel guilty. There was nothing to feel bad about – it wasn’t like any of them were friends. As far as they were concerned the

others couldn't die quick enough.

If the roles were reversed, Cloudhawk would have torn off into the forest faster than either of them.

It was too late to say anything.

Once the three men surrounded him the first punch came quickly. Cloudhawk threw his arms up crosswise before him, flexing as hard as he could to protect himself. The blow knocked him back several meters and his legs carved a pair of deep trenches in the ground. Before Cloudhawk could even pull his legs out the second soldier whipped a kick at his face.

The ground exploded into a cloud of grit and soil.

Cloudhawk was hurled into the air. As he floated helplessly, the third soldier appeared overhead with the heel of his foot aimed at his skull. At the same time the other two were catching up and launching follow-up attacks. It was a perfectly executed pincer attack, orchestrated from the start.

"You fucks aren't going to get me that easy!"

Power flowed through the phase stone, instantly ripping Cloudhawk from the material plane. All three men converged on him at the same instant, but slipped right through his incorporeal body. Instantly they were a tangle of limbs as the first guy crashed into the third one's shoulder, the second one punched the third guy in the chest, and the third one rammed into his companion with a shoulder smash.

They hit each other so hard they were all flung away, like a human grenade.

Meanwhile Cloudhawk calmly floated back down to earth, hovering a few centimeters above the ground like some sort of specter. He didn't look any different from before, but his hair and clothes floating around him like he was under water.

"What now, huh?" Cloudhawk was becoming more proficient with the stone each passing day. It was good for more than just burglary, as he was discovering. It gave him an incredible edge in a fight. "You assholes can't even touch me, you think you stand a chance? I suggest you get the fuck outta here before you make me mad."

"He has a relic!"

Three angry faces glared at him. No wonder Cloudhawk was able to harm their leader.

Drake was conflicted. He'd underestimated this no-name prick, underestimated demonhunter tactics in general. With his mysterious relic Cloudhawk had punched through his iron-like body as though it was nothing. Drake was struck by the grating realization that he could be ten times stronger than he was today, and the guy would still have won that bet.

That was no normal attack. It was like no style he'd ever seen before, but it was definitely more than Drake could handle.

How could he be this strong? Does no amount of hard work and training overcome a demonhunter's natural abilities? Gods, we are all your devout soldiers. Why do they deserve all your blessings? What makes them so special?!

He felt wronged, angry, envious. He was both defeated and unwilling to admit defeat. It surged through him like a torrent of fire, stoking his fury ever higher.

Once Cloudhawk saw that his three attackers were not rushing back in, he knew his display had worked. He allowed himself to take a breath.

"Wolfe, Jaga, Tigris – stand down. Leave him to me."

Cloudhawk's face froze. No!

Drake stood up and jumped in one fluid movement. A crater was left behind. When he came crashing back down the earth rattled and a shockwave burst out. His glare was so sharp Cloudhawk could almost feel its bite. "You didn't really succeed. That means I win this bet."

Fuck you, that's some bullshit right there. It's at least a tie...

Cloudhawk didn't even have a chance to open his mouth. Drake's meaty fists came at him like a stampede, one after the other in a series of blows he could hardly see. At least punches a second, and each one caused the air to hiss in protest.

Fast! Strong!

In a blink there were several dozen fists pummeling him, and each one had the force of twenty tons behind it. To Cloudhawk it would feel like being smacked with an

elephant, if it weren't for the stone. It was not a problem to him, except that Drake wasn't slowing down. Quite the opposite, in fact, as he quickly ramped up to twenty punches a second. They came so fast they actually started to compress the air, and as it thickened friction began to heat it all up. Temperature rose sharply, like a bomb moments from detonation.

Ten punches. Fifty punches. A hundred – two hundred! Eventually licks of fire were actually dancing through the air, whipping among the turbulence like red-hot knives!

Drake was no demonhunter. What he was doing was purely a result of his speed, strength and ferocity. He had to be using martial skills Cloudhawk had no concept of to allow himself to move so fast and punch so hard. By the time the flurry of punches had reached a hundred, each one had more pure force behind it than Cloudhawk could fathom. This spectacular scene was a result.

A master demonhunter not specialized in close-quarters combat would fear for his life before this onslaught!

Cloudhawk's face fell as Drake's attack reached its climax. At last it accumulated enough energy to affect him, and it felt like a bubble burst. The kickback knocked him a few meters away.

More bad news. His body was rematerializing.

Drake kept it up. Every second he was pummeling Cloudhawk's intangible body with a dozen strikes at different places. The force of each fist reached up to three hundred meters away. Cloudhawk could see their trajectory but couldn't get out of the way. He curled his fist and put all the strength he had behind it, sending right into Drake's face.

Just in that moment...

Cloudhawk's chest and abdomen were pulverized by half a dozen punches. Both men rocketed away from one another.

Drake's skills were beyond comprehension. His three soldier companions – Wolfe, Jaga and Tigris – stared with mouths agape.

Cloudhawk hit the ground hard, but controlled his roll and regained his footing. He paused, teetering in one knee, face pale. Drake was much stronger than he thought. He'd managed to power through Cloudhawk's defense, something he'd never seen

happen before.

His punch wasn't something to sniff at, though.

Drake's lower jaw was crooked from the hit. Unlike Cloudhawk he didn't hit the ground after being knocked back. He deftly spun through the air and landed with his feet firmly beneath him like he was nailed in place.

Calloused hands gripped his face, and with an audible *pop* Drake reset his dislocated jaw.

Cloudhawk's punch would have knocked a black bear's head clean off, but all he managed to do to Drake was swell up his cheek. Even that quickly vanished as capillaries drained the flood away. He looked totally unfazed, never taking those dark eyes off Cloudhawk. No relic was perfect, and no defense insurmountable. The success of his attacks had proved that.

"I don't know how you got your hands on that relic, but it isn't anywhere good enough to save you!" Drake had recovered his confidence. But when he spoke blood still leaked from his mouth. His internal injuries hadn't fully healed yet. "Now that you know I am better than your toy, what else you got to protect you?"

"Heh, don't think you're such top shit. That was an impressive display, but I know what it cost you. As far as I can tell you still got a bunch of splinters stuck in you. Sure as shit can't be feeling good. Someone like you that relies on explosive force, how much longer do you think you can keep it up?"

"Oh, don't you worry about that. I have enough in me to break you apart a hundred times before I go down."

"Then fuckin' put up and prove it!"

Drake's determination was exceptional. He was willing to keep throwing punches at a shadow, whereas any normal person would give up after four or five. He just kept at it like a rabid dog.

Fine. We'll see who's crazier.

Cloudhawk had never been afraid of going all out!

He picked up a dagger from the ground. There was enough psychic energy left in him to use the stone a few more times, enough for one more fight with this stubborn asshole. Cloudhawk knew the dagger wasn't going to do much, but he also knew that everyone had a weakness. His eyes glanced pointedly at the spot between Drake's legs. He was sure the guy noticed.

Drake was just as determined. He dropped into a combat posture.

He didn't know this demonhunter, but if he had a relic like that he had to be special. If he could beat a demonhunter like this, it would be a monument to his efforts along the warrior's path. It would prove that even a demonhunter with fortune on his side could be beaten.

"Bring it!"

Cloudhawk brought his dagger up, crouched and ready. From across the clearing Drake screamed at the top of his lungs. It'd been so long since he'd had a battle like this! Thanks to his family connection he was already a lieutenant in the army, but they still considered him too young to command troops. On the few occasions they did take him out on missions, it was to fight heathens and mutated beasts. Under these conditions, when would he have an opportunity for an epic fight?

Drake braced himself to charge, when suddenly the sounds of running footsteps rustled through the deadwood forest. Both of them looked toward the sound, and neither could believe what they saw.

Claudia and Gabriel had returned.

For Cloudhawk it was a stunning turn of events. Why would they run back this way for no reason? Did they suddenly have a change of heart? Did their sense of morality suddenly berate them for dumping him unceremoniously to the wolves? Unlikely. Both of them were only too anxious to see Cloudhawk dead.

"This kid is mine," Drake growled. "The rest of you, go after them. Quickly!"

Tigris, Jaga and Wolfe charged off into the trees without a second thought. In the same instant, Drake rushed at Cloudhawk like a raging bull. And just as it seemed like all-out war was about to break out-

"Stop fighting!" Claudia shouted desperately at them. "We're surrounded by mutants!"

Stay here if you want to die, otherwise *run!*”

Cloudhawk froze.

Surrounded? By the mutants? How?!

But she was proved right. The sound of shrieks and hollers rang through the forest, and as the mist dissipated countless black figures appeared before them. The black sentinels stood just outside of view, unmoving.

Then, arrows. Everything was arrows. Poison-tipped arrows!

Drake was aghast at the scene. There was no more room for disbelief. “The arrows are poisonous! Find cover!”

Chapter 80

Breaking Out

The rain of arrows fell all around them.

These arrows were thrown, and so they posed no threat of puncturing anything important. They hardly had enough force to break skin, and against a constitution like Drake Thane it was laughable. He could stand in the middle of the field and at worst he might get a pinprick.

But these weren't normal arrows!

One of the soldiers was overconfident and didn't run when he was told. One or two arrows wouldn't kill him. An arrow caught him in the back, digging the cone-shaped black arrowhead into his flesh. The head was actually a mutant fang, filled with poison. So the instant it struck the soldier, toxins were injected into his bloodstream. In an instant poison pumped throughout his whole body.

Poison tooth arrows! Weapons unique to the Blight-tooth sweeper clan.

The poison was strong and quick, but short acting. Because of this they didn't use it in traps like others, but for direct attacks. The arrows were only made just now before the assault when the poisons were strongest. Still the soldier was sturdy – perhaps not to the point where he could deflect steel with his muscles, but certainly tough enough that a few arrows weren't a concern. His false self-confidence cost him, for as the poison touched his skin it immediately took effect. The potent substance could rot through iron plate, so one could imagine what it did to flesh.

The soldier screamed and hit the ground. Instantly the skin around the wound had ulcerated and giant pustules bubbled onto the surface. ^[1] They burst, spewing fetid black blood in all directions.

The first arrow was followed by a second, then a third, and a fourth. More and more of these evil toothed shafts were buried in his body until the screaming soldier was a half-rotten corpse.

Drake was horrified by what the natives' weapons were capable of. A wound like that wasn't something you survived. There was no way of telling how many of them were out there, but judging by the sheer number of arrows there had be at least a few hundred. Seven people wasn't enough, they had to get out of here.

"Tigris, Wolfe. Run!"

Drake shouted for his companions, compelling them to give up their counter-attack against Cloudhawk.

All six remaining trainees looked for a way to break out of the encirclement. While they were thirsty for each other's blood only moments before, the current circumstances turned them into unwitting allies. After all, to elysians all wastelanders and mutants were mortal enemies. At least for the moment, they had to put aside their shared enmity.

The hail of poison arrows ceased. The ground was covered in traces of corrosion and wisps of grey smoke rose like a mist.

The arrows didn't just kill whatever they touched. They desecrated an area, turning it into a toxic deathtrap!

Enemies began to appear in abundance. They were fast, firing arrows as they raced through the forest. Between the mist and the poison fog, the trainees couldn't tell where their attackers were coming from nor how many there were.

All they could see were more arrows coming at them.

One was headed right for Claudia's chest.

With a scowl Cloudhawk reacted, throwing his arm in front of her. The arrow struck him and instantly delivered its poison. Right away the flesh turned black and putrid. Smoke rose from the wound like it was burning.

Claudia could hardly believe what she saw. Why... why did he save her? He poisoned himself!

Cloudhawk didn't seem to care much about the damage. His reasons for saving Claudia were simple – she was a hateful woman but she knew how to fight. With enemies all around, they were facing extermination. [2] Cloudhawk understood that.

“Cover your nose and mouth. We have to get out of here as fast as possible.”

No one was idle, but while they could hear where the attacks were coming from, dodging them was something else entirely. The arrows came in numbers they couldn't fathom, and these were from bows so they were a threat beyond just the poison. They were fast as bullets, and far more lethal.

It was the sheer number that was the greatest threat! Completely avoiding them was almost impossible.

The arrows that missed their targets were still a threat. Toxic fog poured out of the teeth, so potent that a normal person would be killed by a single lung full. Claudia and the others were stronger, but even so two or three breaths was all it would take for it to claim them, too. Only Cloudhawk was different.

Claudia covered her face with the coarse training robe. It gave temporary relief, but it couldn't protect her from everything. Her eyes were especially vulnerable, and the fog was like pouring hot water into her sockets. The pain was so intense she could hardly keep her eyes open. How could she fight when she couldn't see?

Drake's mind raced as he assessed their situation. He could tell where the enemies were thickest by the density of arrows coming from that direction, so he used that information to plan their escape. “They're coming in from that side! Quick!”

Another one of his followers started to follow, but let out a piercing scream and fell as an arrow caught him in the thigh. ^[3] It took no time at all for the poison to rot all the flesh around it, causing bits of skin to putrefy and melt off. Suddenly unable to keep up, he fell behind the rest of the group.

“Tigris!”

Drake reached out for him.

Another barrage of arrows whistled from the forest and his face fell. He had no way to fend them off, and the instant the velocity of the arrows changed all the poison inside was released. Once that happened they would be in the middle of a toxic cloud, and besides several of those arrows would find his legs as well. Drake had no choice but to abandon his man.

In this moment a figure emerged from the mist. When Drake saw him, his face

slackened in surprise. It looked like one of those lizards they used in the wasteland, but different. Wasteland lizards ran on all fours and were relatively slow, whereas whatever this was ran on two. Its forelegs were stubby, but tipped with razor-sharp claws two or three meters long. Their haunches rose about one meter and they had to weigh thirty or forty pounds. Light, but very fast.

These were called stalkers. They had long heads with a nose and mouth that pointed slightly upwards. Their lengthy jaws had twenty six to twenty eight serrated teeth, leaving no doubt that they were predatory.

“Drake, run!”

Tigris struggled back onto his feet – a herculean effort since the poison had already eaten his leg down to the bone. It had spread and splashed over more of him and large parts of his body had already started to turn black. The stink of decay hung over him, there was no saving this man. He knew it, and so with the last moments of his life Tigris decided to try and give the others more time.

He proved himself a soldier in that moment. Wounded and hopeless, his bravery was unparalleled. He punched off one of the riders that got close, and then stuffed his hands in the stalker mount’s mouth and ripped the top of its head off.

Other riders closed in, firing their bows. Tigris’ screams rang through the forest as he was peppered with several more arrows.

Drake watched the whole thing. Raged filled him with such intensity it seemed his red eyes might burst. But Cloudhawk pulled him along, delivering a sharp slap to his face. “Your friend died so you could get away. What the fuck are you still gaping at? Run!”

Cloudhawk’s slap snapped him out of it. Acting recklessly now would get him killed.

As they fled one of the natives stepped out from the group. This one was bigger than the rest, about the size of an average human man. He looked young, and in the elysian-forged armor that covered him from head to toe he looked almost regal.

“You twisted wastelander freak! I hope you fuckin’ suffer before you die!”

Half a dozen arrows jutted from Tigris skin. Their poison had already begun dissolving his organs, but he kept his eyes fixed on the enemy. This one had to be their leader, he figured, and so without a second thought he flung his failing body at him.

The chief wore a helmet that hid his features, but anyone could feel the taunting sneer on his face. With incredible speed he knocked and pulled back a bow twice the size of his companions, firing an arrow too fast to track. This one was a normal arrow that shot through Tigris and became lodged in a distant tree.

He went rigid.

The stalker mount lurched forward and snapped its jaws around the soldier. As Tigris struggle to take his final breaths, the leader pranced his mount around with the soldier caught in its mouth. He slung the bow over his back and drew forth a wide-bladed hatchet. Then, before the elysians and all his men, he cut Tigris' head from its body.

The men who'd followed Drake weren't family, but they were soldiers like him. Young, talented men – comrades in arms. The connection that bound them went deeper than blood. They were also Drake's closest friends, normal men like him. Competing against demonhunters was difficult, but they relished the opportunity. For this reason they'd joined forces, only for him to witness two of them die in this cursed forest. He felt their deaths sharply.

There was nothing he could do. Eyes red, voice angry, he growled at the others. "Let's go!"

Cloudhawk cast a glance toward the sweeper in elysian armor. It was strange, he thought... He'd encountered a few of the sweepers already, and besides their traps they weren't much of a threat. They were an irritation more than anything, easily put down. A mob without tactics.

This group was different. They planned their attack. Their tactics weren't to the same level as an army, but it was far superior to any of the groups he'd seen so far. Cloudhawk had to wonder where this guy came from.

Chapter 81

Blight-tooth Clan

The stalker beasts and their riders could reach a top speed of a hundred and fifty kilometers an hour through the forest. The stalkers were compact beasts full of taught muscle and explosive power. Their lithe and agile bodies easily whipped around any obstacle in their path to easily chase down prey.

“Kill them! For the Clan!”

The lead rider hefted his blood soaked hatchet and screamed a battle cry. The dozen riders who accompanied him answered. They were all attired in custom cavalry gear that bound their legs to the stalker mounts. Effectively this turned two into one; the rider fought and fired arrows while the beast served as their legs.

The small native knocked their bows and aimed for the fleeing trainees. Poison-tipped arrows were let loose.

Wherever they struck – trees or ground – the arrows instantly gushed with toxic smoke, threatening the trainees even without finding their target. Ahead there was another group laying in wait, and soon the elysians would find themselves caught. With death closing in on either side these humans would have nowhere to run.

The leader of the riders felt anticipation seep from every pore. Excitement for slaughter filled him and he almost couldn't stand to wait to cut these bastards into pieces.

It'd been ten years since the Blight-tooth Clan's ancestral lands were invaded. They were forced from the valley where they'd lived for generations, an affront that festered in the hearts of every clan warrior.

But it went beyond clearing them from their homes. The sweepers of the Blight-tooth Clan reproduced quickly, and by age six or seven they were already prepared to fight. The speed worked against them, though, for the despicable human used them for their own ends. Natives of the forest were culled routinely to keep their numbers low. A death squad from the valley was dispatched whenever they were deemed too

numerous.

They were caught in a giant cage.

Blight-tooth Clan used to be a mighty force, but had since been reduced to a shadow of their former selves. They were prisoners of Deadwood Forest. Yet, the most heinous insult was that these proud warriors were now reduced to tools. They were used to hone young elysian warriors, while any mighty warriors they raised were abducted and turned into slaves for the benefit of hardening future human killers. Day in and day out, it was an unending battle for survival.

Among members of the clan, hatred for elysians was imprinted on their very bones.

Gorefang was the title they gave to their leader, and the young one leading the charge was the current generation's chief. He was twenty this year. Among the clan, fifty was considered ancient, so at twenty their Gorefang had already reached middle-age.

His father had been Gorefang as well. Back when they lived in the valley, Blight-tooth Clan was different from the other sweepers. They lived very differently from humans, but were no less intelligent. They planted crops and bred animals to subsist on and sought no dispute with the world outside of their territory. Since they had enough, they rarely raided others. However, even though they avoided conflict, war came to them.

Old Gorefang was captured when the humans came, and tortured to death at the hands of one of their commanders. His successor still remembered the day his father bravely gave his life for his clan.

What had they become?

No future, no hope – nothing. Their sole purpose now was to make their enemies stronger. Their effort, blood and lives were given just to strengthen elysian murderers. Sacrificial lambs on the altar of human superiority.

Gorefang hopelessly resigned himself to the knowledge that this would be their fate, forever. Then, six months ago he saw a chance to change things. A power from the wastelands reached out to him, and with its help he brought his fractured people back together. They were given these mounts and weapons as gifts to rebuild the glory they'd lost.

In six months' time they were on their way.

Because it had happened all so fast, the soldiers of Hell's Valley didn't know how strong the Blight-tooth had become. They were blessed by the help from the wastelands, but Gorefang knew it was not without cost.

He also knew how powerful they were, the influence that they held. Ambitious, aggressive, eventually they would come when the time was right to conspire against the humans of Hell's Valley and crush them.

Easier said than done.

Hell's Valley wasn't just a training camp. That was just part of it. Hell's Valley served as a valuable forward operations base for Skycloud domain, and the veterans stationed there constituted stronger combatants than Skycloud's own army.

Having such a force stationed somewhere easy to hold and hard to attack made for more than just a good training area. It was established mostly for mutual defense, establishing a force of shock units that could be deployed at a moment's notice. They could either be turned against an enemy's rear to cut them off, or used as a spear to strike right at an invader's heart.

As an advance guard their responsibility wasn't to participate in battle, but rather to recognize threats before they happened. Any group that seemed poised to create a problem was swiftly dealt with. The soldiers of Hell's Valley were a special task force with their eyes on the wastelands, and very little happened out there without them knowing about it.

If a group from the wastelands wanted to attack the elysian lands, their first act would have to be amputating the garrison at Hell's Valley. Towards that end, the Blight-tooth Clan made a valuable ally.

Gorefang was smart, he knew what his clan was worth. Attacking the elysians was no easy thing, and his people would serve as little more than cannon fodder. Gorefang wasn't about to let his people die for another's cause, or allow the humans to wipe them out. His hope was to lead his people out, to regain their freedom. So it was that he continued to accept the gifts of the outsiders, while at the same time planning their escape.

He'd planned to wait before making his move, but it seemed too late now. The valley's

student selection process had begun, and now that they were back in the forest the valley's attention would come their way once more. The Blight-tooth Clan's power would soon be exposed, and Chief Gorefang could no longer tolerate his people being victimized.

He made a decision. It was time to fight for their freedom!

From ahead came the sounds of battle.

When Gorefang rode toward the din he was stunned to come upon a very different scene. The warriors he'd deployed to the front had failed. The elysians weren't dead. Instead, he found the ground littered with his men's corpses, and a handful of others in elysian armor. Older men – veterans from Hell's Valley.

"Bastards! We've been discovered!"

When he saw the dead veterans Gorefang's ugly features twisted in rage. They didn't typically send soldiers out to monitor the students, as most of these new trainees were stronger than the average soldier. Even if they did come and watch, they wouldn't intervene. Normally the veterans would dispatch their assistants for that job.

Veterans in Deadwood Forest could only mean one thing; they'd been exposed. Hell's Valley had dispatched a response, a fact that did not bode well for his people.

"Blackfang, gather all the clan warriors. We're killing our way out of here!"

"Yes, chief!"

Blackfang was the chief's right hand and second in command. He put a bone horn to his lips and delivered a blast that howled through the forest. Scares of warriors spread all around gathered at the horn's call. In a matter of minutes, eight hundred men were ready to heed Gorefang's orders.

Blight-tooth Clan's leader looked over the sea of people, his people. He saw the fiery light of determination in their eyes. "The elysian dogs have kept us in this forest for decades. They've killed our fathers, our mothers, our lovers, our children! They use our blood to strengthen their warriors, and spent our lives to buy their future. We've suffered this for so long. It's time to make this suffering end!"

"Whoo! Whoo! Whoo! Whoo!"

The writhing crowd screamed in response, thrusting bone weapons into the air. From the resounding cries for blood, it was clear how much these people had had to endure. Any that had survived the routine purges up to now bore an unwavering hatred for their tormentors.

Gorefang went on. "Our home is destroyed, but we still find shelter under the protection of our ancestors. We may be forced to give our lives, but we will no longer give it for *them*. We will give our lives for *freedom!*"

Another round of cries erupted.

"Raise your weapons, use them to cut a path out of this prison. Many of us will die, but we will live on in the hearts of those who make it. Our clan will grow and prosper, until one day we return to our home and take back everything that was stolen from us!"

"Fight! Fight! Fight! Fight!"

Blight-tooth warriors did not fear death. Years of brutal oppression under the elysians had done nothing to quench their savage spirit. Today they would teach them that letting the Blight-tooth survive was a mistake – one that they would pay dearly for!

Chapter 82

Wolfblade's Scheme

The bone horn's call reverberated through the forest. It was the sound of these warriors determined to give their lives.

A bald, hook-nosed man's eyes popped open when he heard it. With a grin he turned toward the person behind him. "Well boss, it looks like everything's going according to your plan. Gorefang is doing just what we wanted him to do. A stroke of genius, manipulating them into choosing now to try and break free, while also letting the valley know about it. In one stroke we've built the opportunity we need to bring this whole place down. It's time to move on with the scheme."

"As I've told you many times, Buzzard, all great achievements start with careful planning. More importantly, you must guard against your own arrogance. It's just the beginning, they haven't even launched the attack yet." The man's hoarse voice was shrewd and stately. In his heavy tone he added, "I haven't yet spoken. What's your hurry?"

The bald, beak-nosed man nodded respectfully. "Of course, boss."

Had Cloudhawk been there, he would have been surprised to recognize the bald man. It was Buzzard, the high-ranking agent of the Dark Atom he had encountered twice already; once at Blackwater Base and once at the Sandbar. Their meetings had been brief encounters only, but the man left Cloudhawk with a deep impression.

He and the group he was with were hiding in the northern reaches of Hell's Valley. Five wasteland airships were hovering overhead, awaiting orders. Each one was over a hundred meters long, equipped with over a dozen gatling guns and cannons. 'Destructive' did not begin to describe them.

They were outfitted with a long metal rod, from which was emitting a mirror-like screen. This ancient, high-tech technology was an effective camouflage which, when looking toward the ships from Hell's Valley, made them completely invisible. Meanwhile, Buzzard and the others could see everything going on before them.

Besides the five ships, there were also several hundred Dark Atom agents ready for action.

The crowd was gathered around a small man, thin, only about a hundred and sixty-five centimeters tall. He was clad in a silver outfit of unknown material that looked alive, or like some kind of fluid. It moved constantly all over him. Layers of cloth hid everything, even his eyes, like mummies of old. On his back were three different styles of swords and each one resonated with unique energy.

Just mentioning this bandaged stranger's name would cause a stir in the borderlands. He was the leader of the Dark Atom – Wolfblade!

The very same!

This man was well known in the elysian lands as the leader of a massive heretical organization. The Dark Atom held incredible sway over the area around Skycloud domain, and their power was only surpassed by their obscurity. Countless men were willing to die for their cause, and talented warriors were in no short supply. Much to the despair of their enemies, the Dark Atom had spies everywhere – a fact that made it nearly impossible to eradicate them.

Now Wolfblade had shown himself personally. His goal was the destruction of Hell's Valley.

Buzzard was one of a dozen or so other high ranking members joining their leader on the mission. His presence, along with the others, demonstrated just how crucial this attack was.

However, he wasn't the most eye-catching figure. Besides Wolfblade himself, the most striking person was the one who stood beside Dark Atom's leader. He was a man two meters tall, hidden beneath a black robe. Everything about him whispered death, especially the seething red light burning in his dark hood.

Those sanguine points had to be the man's eyes. Unsettling was the fact that there was no emotion in them – no joy, or hatred, or sadness. In a word, soulless.

He stood behind Wolfblade, still as a statue, silent as a shadow.

Though covered, Dark Atom's leader lifted his eyes and looked around. His gaze seemed capable of penetrating everything, seeing all that happened within the valley

below. Right now, he was waiting for the perfect opportunity.

The show was about to begin. For years the elysians had oppressed free citizens of the wastelands. But all that was about to change.

At the same time, elsewhere.

Cloudhawk and the others had escaped, and were taking cover in a cave.

The four others looked sickly, with their faces taking on a pale mauve hue. They'd been poisoned, not but by the poison-tipped arrows directly, but by the potent toxic fumes they'd released. The mist had been so prevalent that it was impossible to avoid inhaling them entirely. As a result, it had begun to eat away at the mucus lining of their nose and throats, even damaging their lungs. ^[1] What's more, the fumes were like a mist and clung to their bodies and clothing. Sores and blisters had sprung up over their bodies, some of which were nearly deep enough to penetrate inside the body.

By the time Claudia found shelter in the cave, she was already finding it difficult to breathe. Her beautiful blonde tresses were stripped of color and left grey and withered. Her skin burned like a blazing oil slick. Of the whole group, only Cloudhawk and Drake seemed to be in decent shape.

Drake's constitution is what kept his healthy, but even he was struggling a little for breath.

Cloudhawk, meanwhile, walked into the cave with no adverse signs. It was like neither the poison arrows nor the toxic fumes had any effect on him at all. While he got his bearing, a pudgy little bird fluttered into the cave and took up post on his shoulder. Cloudhawk gave the critter an affectionate scratch on its head, then turned toward the others. "Well, I've got good news and bad news. What do you want to hear first?"

The four others looked uncertainly at one another. All of this going on, and this asshole was cracking wise?

Gabriel ran his hands through his hair, pulling out thick tufts in the process. He responded with a bitter scowl. If he had his relics Gabriel was sure he'd be the strongest person here, but here he was. The injuries he'd sustained made him weak and the poison's effects more potent.

“I fail to see how there can be any good news for us.”

“We’re pretty lucky, actually. Those sweepers had set up an ambush to cut us off, but they ran into a group of soldiers from the valley. Their fight opened up a route for us to escape, but several of the veterans were killed because of it.”

“This is your so-called good news? I don’t see how any of that is good.” Claudia was still fighting with her prejudice for Cloudhawk. They’d been forced to suffer this together, but she still loathed the man. After all, all that pent-up rancor wasn’t going to go away overnight. So she couldn’t help but share a few sharp words with him. “Oh, you’re saying that the death of a few elysian veterans is good news. Is that it?”

Cloudhawk wasn’t about to get in an argument with this idiot. Her reaction always seemed to be a little behind other people, so he paid her no mind and spoke to the others. “This means this mission they sent us on has gone outside of their control. It’s the only reason they would have sent soldiers from the valley.”

The others paused to take in the information.

He seemed to have it right, the entrance exam was supposed to be hard, not fatal. Against a few hundred natives, with poison and beasts to ride, it was a suicide mission. If you threw someone like Frost de Winter in here with no protection or relics he probably wouldn’t make it out. For the sixty-some trainees it was certain death.

The proper training hadn’t even started yet, how could they just throw everyone into a death trap? The only logical answer was things had changed, and the trainers had no idea. Evidence of that was the group of soldiers, and their deaths meant things were out of control.

The deadwood forest was supposed to be under the valley’s control, so they couldn’t just turn a blind eye to what was going on. The scarred instructor and his assistants had to be out there helping to get things in order, too. If that was the case, it shouldn’t take long for things to cool down. *That* was the good news.

Of course this was predicated on them being able to hold out long enough to get rescued.

Drake scowled. “So what’s the bad news?”

Before Cloudhawk could answer the question, a sound caught their attention from

outside the cave. A pair of stalker beasts skittered into view, squat and agile, their eyes glinting red light. Fang-filled jaws snapped, ready to tear apart anything they clamped onto.

“Shit, they’re in!”

Claudia tried to stand but her strength was gone. She couldn’t fight back.

The stalker riders spotted the five human huddled in the darkness and raised their bone spears. They heaved their weapons, and it was in that moment two figures were on the move. Drake was faster, he appeared in front of one of the beasts and put his fist through its skull. He wrapped his right hand around the rider’s head and squeezed. The sweeper’s ugly face was crushed into pulp.

Cloudhawk leapt over Drake’s head and caught the second rider with a whirlwind kick. Mount and rider went flying while Cloudhawk snatched up his discarded bone spear. He stabbed it at the writhing creature.

A wave of poison arrows came pouring in from the mouth of the cave!

Drake’s face fell and he felt an icy grip wrap around his heart. He grabbed the corpse of the rider he’d killed and held all two hundred pounds of it in front of him as though it were light as a feather. “Out of the way!”

Drake put the corpse between him and the onslaught. Most of the arrows lodged in his meat shield, which caused it to start quickly melting away like a wax sculpture left in the sun. His hands had also been splashed by the poison and had started to burn, but he’d managed to defend them from the enemies outside.

Thud!

Drake threw the melted carcass at the sweepers blocking the entrance. At the same time he launched upward and kicked at the spot of wall above his head. The impact resulted in a web of cracks appearing through the stone.

Bang! Crack!

Two more thunderous sounds as Drake punched the walls on either side of him. Slabs of stone were falling all around, and two particularly large blocks sealed the entrance. Drake stumbled backward, clutching his chest and fighting for air. He’d reached his

limit, after all the damage Cloudhawk had caused was still there, in addition to the poison.

They could hear the sweepers outside already beginning to clear away the rubble. They weren't going to be able to survive in this tight corner for long.

Cloudhawk smirked sheepishly in the face of their dire predicament. "The bad news is there are a few hundred sweepers outside."

Gabriel, Claudia and Wolfe gaped. A few hundred? Were they destined to die in this hole?

Chapter 83

Trapped in the Cave

The cave was filled with the stench of rot. Outside, Deadwood Forest's sweepers were clawing their way inside. At the rate they were moving, it would only be a matter of minutes before they were through.

Drake sat cross-legged on the floor with a pained expression on his resolute face. Beads of oily sweat ran down his bronze skin like he'd just been plucked from a steam room. Each drop hissed when it touched the floor and filled the air with a raw odor. The sweat pouring off of him was a greyish-black, no normal sweat at all.

He was exhausted, but the soldier regulated his breathing and tried to obstruct some of his bloodflow. The intention was to direct the poison out to capillaries close to his skin, then excrete it through the pores. It was a complicated process that demanded a tremendous level of bodily control, as well as knowledge of proper technique.

Yet despite his impressive skill, the situation was not getting any better.

Drake's internal and external injuries were serious. Both of his hands had suffered from the poison and were badly dissolved. The skin had turned from a rich bronze into something between black and purple and it was spreading. His muscles had gone stiff, making it hard to move. A lesser man would have been dead by now. If Drake didn't find treatment soon, that was the fate that waited for him.

He was angry and impatient, and punch at the ground with his rotten fist. Drake growled through gritted teeth. "I haven't even made general yet and left my mark. Now I'm going to die here at the hands of these ugly assholes!"

Seeing the anger from Drake made Claudia feel a little better, as though the freaks outside weren't going to kill her just as quickly as they were going to kill him. She barked back at him in a sarcastic tone. "Well look at that – using the rules to attack demonhunters at their weakest, only to have the tables turned. Thank goodness you broke the others' legs, it's not like we'd be able to band together in a situation like this. Right? No, you *deserve* this."

Drake's face fell.

It was Wolfe who came to his friend's aid. "What gives *you* the right to push him around?! This is Hell's Valley, no one had any idea this was going to happen. What's wrong with using our advantage, this is a competition isn't it? We aren't even in Skycloud, we don't have to follow Skycloud's rules out here!"

"The rules are stamped on every elysian, there are no borders where they suddenly stop applying! If you just do what you please when you leave the domain, what makes you any different from a wastelander?!"

Although he was an outstanding member of military family, Drake's lack of talent made him jealous of demonhunters. He had indeed taken advantage of the demonhunters with one hand tied behind their backs. Was this a moral thing to do? Was this what a proper man would do? What a soldier would do? This sort of victory was no victory at all. Claudia felt nothing but contempt.

Drake was not one for debate, he wasn't going to shout her down. Claudia was a temperamental one, and treated them all like they owed her a fortune.

But Cloudhawk wouldn't hold his piece. "Can we cut this shit out? We might all die here, and if we're reborn as siblings I don't need this sort of baggage."

"Hmph, scum like you is certainly going straight to hell. My soul has a place reserved in heaven. We aren't traveling the same road." Claudia's pale face was red from anger. The fury in her eyes made them sparkle in the darkness. "You killed my friend, that's an offence you'll never be forgiven for. My only regret not killing you with my own hands."

Claudia Lunae was caught between sinners and twisted wasteland abominations. She had to choose one, and no one could blame her for choosing the former. For now she would work with them, at least until they got free. Wasn't that the only reason this scoundrel was playing nice? Drake and his cronies were worthy of her disdain, and Gabriel was a despicable fugitive and sinner. But Cloudhawk... Cloudhawk was her nemesis. She was never going to forgive the vile heathen!

Wasn't it his fault that she was here, from the wounds he caused her? Would she be in this situation otherwise? Cloudhawk was the undeniable source of all her misfortune.

Disaster had been following her ever since she went to the wastelands. She was

generous and forgiving by nature, but she would not relent in her hatred for Cloudhawk. It wasn't even worth considering.

Gabriel was in the worst shape, and yet had the coolest head. He'd expected to die ever since his actions in Skycloud. Dying out here instead was an improvement, as far as he was concerned.

Gabriel looked around at the dark cave and inwardly sighed. It was just a pity, a death that could be avoided if he'd had his relics. He was stronger than Claudia, stronger than Cloudhawk. None of this would have happened if they'd just have let him keep his relics.

A loud blast came from the cave entrance. The violent blow caused the obstruction to be knocked away.

Had they finally breached?

Two members of the Blight-tooth Clan strode in and found the five humans waiting. They immediately began to bark in a language Cloudhawk could not recognize, but the hatred in their eyes was universal.

He'd seen that same look many times. To these natives, Cloudhawk and the others were nothing short of evil.

They used to have a paradise, where all of their needs had been met. All of it had been taken away in a single night. The fighting robbed them of their parents, their loved ones and their children. Those that remained were driven into the forest, where they were hunted for over a decade. Like livestock they were penned in, with nothing to do but wait for death. Any struggle was stripped of value.

How could the people of the Blight-tooth clan not hate these interlopers?

Cloudhawk understood their animosity, but that was the world they lived in. Hate was like a forest fire – it did nothing but destroy everything it came in contact with. Just like his hatred for Raithe Umbra. Like Claudia's hatred for Cloudhawk. Everyone had different values, different standpoints. Eventually rancor would consume the world. But understanding it was one thing, accepting it was another.

The two clansmen did not immediately attack. That left an opening.

Whoosh! Whoosh!

Cloudhawk snatched up a pair of sharp stones and whipped them at the sweepers' heads. Their shrill whines rang out as the rocks viciously collided with their skulls.

Drake picked up one of the larger slabs of stone and charged toward the entrance. "Attack!"

They'd managed to get the first two, but their wails alerted the rest of their clansmen. Furious, the skeletal natives charged forward in a mad bloodlust.

Bows were drawn. Arrows, fired!

Poison arrows filled the cave. They hit the ground and walls, filling it with toxic smoke.

The cave's cramped interior only required a few arrows before it was completely enveloped in poison. With no escape, their only option was to try and keep the entrance closed.

Drake rushed forward, ignoring his injuries. Muscles bulged through torn skin as he heaved the one-ton boulder at the enemies outside. It made a sound like a roaring beast as it soared through the air.

Claudia jumped behind it, running along the wall to pick up speed. By the time she reached the rock it had begun to slow, but with a swift kick she sent it rocketing forward at twice its original speed.

Crack! Smash!

The boulder exploded into several enormous pieces. Each one catapulted toward the Blight-tooth warriors with startling speed.

The diminutive sweepers were dexterous. They dodged and rolled out of the way of the stones so that only two of their number were crushed by the debris. The survivors rolled deftly back onto their feet, pulled arrows from their backs and flung it at them.

Claudia's feet had just touched the ground and already the arrow was right in front of her. She tried to dodge, but just as she was trying to whip around she felt all the strength melt from her body. Whatever strength and flexibility she typically had was spent.

Oh no!

Her eyes went wide with fear.

Cloudhawk appeared from one side and shoved her out of the way, knocking the arrows away with a bone spear. Each one left a puff of black poison behind. That's why he didn't see the one that punched through the haze and buried itself in his chest. The poison fang was completely buried in muscle and immediately delivered its toxic payload. Right away the skin around the arrow turned black as coal.

Cloudhawk was shoved back and lost his footing.

A pair of stalker beasts leapt over the pile of stones and were on them before they knew it. The riders leveled their spears, ready to pin Cloudhawk to the ground, But Claudia saw and jumped forward with a yell. She smashed her shoulder into one of the riders and sent him crashing to the ground. But the first one kept coming. He was almost on Cloudhawk when a shadow flashed by, taking half the sweeper's throat with it.

Naberius.

Cloudhawk wiped the blood that had leaked from the corner of his mouth, then pulled the arrow from his chest. He looked at Claudia and Naberius, and managed a wry smile. "See? Don't we work well together? Let's try not to murder one another if we get out of this. What do you say?"

Naberius tittered that unsettling, unhinged laugh. "Sounds good to me!"

But Claudia just gritted her teeth. She didn't know why she did what she did. All of a sudden she was treating Cloudhawk like a comrade-in-arms, but she knew when they got back to the elysian lands she'd regret her actions. She looked at the festering wound in his chest and wasn't sure how to feel about it.

"Are you three enjoying your chat? Help me block the entrance!"

Drake motioned Wolfe over and they took the lead. The five of them charged at the Blight-tooth Clan warriors. While they were all adept at close-quarters combat, the sweeper archers who'd managed to get inside were not. They were swiftly dealt with.

All eyes turned toward the entrance, and what they saw ripped their hearts in half. In

the same instant they all lost hope because the forest outside was filled with foes. Countless warriors were closing in, more than they could fathom.

At peak physical condition, these five trainees would be hard pressed to fight their way free. And now?

“All of this effort for five people?” Cloudhawk looked out over the army of sweepers. The first line held bone shield, leaving them no avenue to escape. The second line was arranged in a line, bows drawn and poison arrows knocked. All that was left to Cloudhawk was a single, desperate gamble.

“Go!”

Oddball furiously beat its tiny wings and took off into the forest.

Chapter 84

Defying Extermination

Oddball disappeared into the mist. Blight-tooth warriors paid no attention to the tiny thing, the bird was not important.

But they did not know how keen the bird's eyes were. Oddball's vision pierced the fog, sharing what it learned with Cloudhawk about their situation.

The Blight-tooth's bone horn kept blasting its note. Before long, a thousand warriors had gathered – their youngest and fiercest fighters. However, what was shocking was the fact that these natives were better equipped than outpost soldiers. There were over a hundred riders, tied to their vicious mounts.

Every warrior was protected by leather armor, with long bows in their hands and a quiver of poison arrows on their backs. Countless close-combat fighters hefted their bone spear, swords and shields. Some even had firearms. While the pygmy sweepers were not strong of body, with this gear they could wipe out the veteran outpost if they caught the humans off guard.

It was simply unheard of. This wasn't some native tribe – they were an army!

To Cloudhawk, these mutants were strange and twisted things. He did not know anything about their lives, what they inherited or how they grew. Did they have 'parents' the way humans knew them? Did they gather into 'tribes'? They were so physically different that they surely had a much different pattern of community and maturity.

That isn't to say there weren't more stable groups, but they were few and far between. Most didn't join forces and were easily destroyed in the harsh environment of the wastelands. A force like the Blight-tooth Clan was completely foreign to Cloudhawk. Looking through Oddball's eyes, seeing his enemies stretch out through the forests, he felt an icy cold in his heart.

"There are too many of them out there. We're completely surrounded. We won't last five minutes, even holed up in this cave for protection." Cloudhawk's face was stricken

as he spoke to the others. "I have an idea, but I'm going to need everyone's help."

Claudia turned her eyes toward Cloudhawk and saw the nasty wound in his chest. It was already improving. He was the only one of their group who didn't seem to fear their enemy's poison. She'd watched him survive what killed soldiers twice as strong as him.

Strange... this bastard seemed resistant to poison.

Inwardly Claudia sneered at him. Surely it was because wastelanders spent so much time supping on spiders and cockroaches that they developed an immunity. His blood was probably even more toxic than the poison they were trying to use on him.

"We're going to die anyway," Drake said. He was ready to take any risk. "Whatever it is, let's do it."

"Only way to kill a snake is to cut off its head. If we deal with their leader it'll be chaos, that's when we make a break for it. And even if that doesn't work, at least we killed that son of a bitch."

"Well, even before we consider how strong the leader might be, the question is how we get to him..." But no sooner had Drake voiced the thought then understanding dawned on him. Cloudhawk was able to use his powers to slip through things. He needed the rest of them to provide cover, because he was the only one who could pull it off. He gave his support before Cloudhawk could respond. "I understand! Let's do it!"

Outside, the Blight-tooth Clan kept sending soldiers at the cave. Their last assault cost them eight or nine of their clansmen, a fact that only made them more furious.

One of the soldiers who seemed to hold some authority shouted at the others. "Form up! Attack!"

The roar of a landslide came from the cave as Drake's stalwart body burst forth from the rubble. He had a bone sword in each hand, which he used to remove the heads of several clansmen before they even knew what was happening.

"They're trying to escape!" The sweeper commander screeched his warning and a few natives with bone shields shuffled over to block their path. Several dozen others leveled their poison arrows. "Kill them!"

A volley of arrows followed.

Drake spun, whipping his bone swords around like a windmill. He moved so fast it seemed even a droplet of water couldn't pass through, much less the arrows shot his way. The poison fog they released still injured him, but Drake paid it no mind. He was a beast, berserk and out of control. The first shield-bearer he encountered was hacked into half a dozen pieces in an instant.

Several more figures emerged from the cave, joining the fray.

Drake shouted over his shoulder, covered from head to toe in blood. "Three minutes! That's all you got!"

"Understood!" Oddball had already helped Cloudhawk narrow down his target's location. He charged from the group, right toward the center of the sweepers. The ground darkened as arrows plot out the sky, intermingled with deadly gunfire.

It was a terrifying display. Just what he was looking for. The leader had to be around there.

Cloudhawk's feet dug into the ground and he exploded forward. Every step left a pit in its wake. When he reached peak speed Cloudhawk leapt once again into the air, galvanizing the power of the phase stone. Those below watched as he soared toward the wall of poison arrows and hot lead.

Was he insane? It was suicide. The sweepers stared in shock.

The humans were sure to die, but this one seemed in a particular rush. Such a courageous acceptance of death was not often seen. Yet, just as the sweepers were sure Cloudhawk was about to be riddled with arrows, what happened next shocked them even further.

Every arrow and bullet slipped through the crazy human like he wasn't there. None left a mark nor drew blood, as though trying to pierce a spirit. A few of them that failed to kill Cloudhawk peppered their own front line and killed a number of tribesmen.

What sorcery was this?!

Momentum sent Cloudhawk soaring tens of meters over the bloodthirsty horde, toward their heart. Several sweepers charged at him when he came close, but their

spears went right through him and into their companions rushing in from behind. A group of stalker beasts crashed into a mess of limbs as they tried to run him down, but Cloudhawk simply floated through them all.

“What sort of creature is he?!”

This was like nothing the natives had ever seen before. Surprise caused them to temporarily break off their attacks, which Cloudhawk took advantage of to drop the stone’s power. A disadvantage to the phase stone was how it cut his speed to almost nothing, so he had to drop its protective shell long enough to take a few more steps. When he got moving again the stone’s power was reawakened.

He was without the stone’s protection for less than two seconds, but long enough for two arrows to find their mark. Both had struck him in the back. Cloudhawk’s danger sense was keen, but it was better suited for smaller skirmishes. He was surrounded by enemies who wanted him dead, so it felt as though danger was coming from everywhere. His special perception didn’t help him here.

But it didn’t matter. The effects of the poison didn’t concern him much.

Disregarding his wounds, Cloudhawk charged through the lines of enemies. Every inch brought him closer to his target, yet his psychic energy was waning. Unsure of whether he could keep the stone’s power active he continued anyway. Hesitation meant certain death.

The press of sweepers grew thicker the closer Cloudhawk came. Behind them all, the man he intended to kill.

Gorefang was confident in his men. Hell Valley couldn’t have gathered their forces yet and the thousand-strong clan was poised to break right through the borderlands’ defenses. Once they were out of this cursed forest, he and his people would at last be free.

He’d waited so long for this moment.

Blight-tooth Clan’s vigor and reproductive abilities were never in doubt. Freed from their shackles, Gorefang knew they would multiply and spread all across the wastelands. He had been preparing for this the day he inherited the Gorefang title from his father, and here it was.

Blackfang scurried to his side. “We have a thousand warriors gathered already, the soldiers of Hell Valley must already have the news. We can’t stay here, now’s our chance.”

Gorefang’s lieutenant was interrupted by the sound of combat from behind. He scowled. “What’s going on there? What’s all this noise?”

Blackfang answered. “We have those elysians surrounded in a cave. They are fighting back.”

Anger flashed across Gorefang’s face. His soldiers couldn’t even handle a few trainees? Was there really such a glaring difference between wasteland warriors and elysian soldiers? But besides the anger there was a deeply unsettling sensation creeping into his chest. He looked around and spotted a round yellow bird circling overhead. Nothing else seemed out of the ordinary.

“Blackfang.”

“Your orders, chief?”

“The fight to break through the borderland’s defenses will be a fierce one. If something happens to me, you are the next Gorefang. Do you understand?”

“Gorefang, this-“

“Enough. You *must* make sure our clan wins their freedom!”

Blackfang clenched his fists, took a step back, and bowed respectfully. He struck his chest twice with his right hand in a sign of respect. Yet as he raised his head to speak, his voice caught in his throat. The tribe's second in command gaped like he was staring at a ghost. “Careful!”

Gorefang was confused for he sensed no danger, but when he turned his head he saw a figure descend on him, covered in wounds. The human passed straight through one of his bodyguards on a singular mission – right for Gorefang. A bone spear was slowly coming his way.

“You come seeking death!”

Gorefang couldn’t fathom how the human had gotten so close, but now wasn’t the time

to ask. This idiot had signed his death warrant and Gorefang – as leader and mightiest warrior of the Blight-tooth – was here to serve it.

His foe's comically slow attack was beneath contempt.

Gorefang withdrew his longsword and hacked it at the elysian, so fast the wind whistled in protest. It ripped through his neck at subsonic speed. The human could be made of solid iron and the strike would cut him down.

Eh?

As the blade slipped through Cloudhawk's neck, Gorefang knew something was off. It was the way it felt. As he stood there in shock the bone spear entered his chest. He immediately tensed the muscles of his chest for protection, although he was sure the ponderous attack was no threat. But he was wrong again. The spear met no resistance and slipped right in, through and through.

A cold sweat broke out over his body, but Gorefang quickly found there was no pain. No blood. Was this some sort of illusion? Gorefang knew that there were humans called demonhunters who possessed special powers. They were often found in Hell Valley, and they were known for their mysterious tricks.

An illusion! Yes, just a mirage!

Gorefang sighed in relief, but an instant later his whole body seized. All of the skin, muscle, and bone around the spear split apart. Including his heart. Gorefang's pupils constricted into tiny black dots, set in an expression of disbelief.

The spear was real...! It was there, stuck in his chest.

It wasn't a piercing attack, not in the typical sense. Piercing attacks could be defended. It was an assault from a different slice of reality – a dimensional fissure where two things tried to occupy the same space. In the end reality's dominance was absolute, and no defense could stand before it. Gorefang's death was assured.

Chapter 85

The Three Giants of Hell Valley

Gorefang held the shaft of the spear with both hands, eyes wide as saucers. He still could not believe what had occurred. A single human managed to slip past a thousand soldiers and attack him single-handedly. How had this happened?

Even disregarding the stupendous sneak attack, what sort of devil power was this?

Gorefang saw himself as the strongest Blight-tooth warrior in a hundred years. A normal man couldn't even get close enough to make an attempt on his life. Then suddenly, this bizarre attack claims his life. His eyes became swollen and red as blood congealed within them. His mouth opened and shut, yet no sound came forth. He wanted to scream, but all that he could managed was a pathetic gurgle and a few drops of blood.

The human's attack went straight through his heart, and scattered all the strength within him.

Cloudhawk could see the mutant's desperation and pain written on his face. It was a distress that went beyond imminent death. Living this long, Gorefang must have experienced things a normal person couldn't fathom, suffered things no living person should have to suffer. Death wasn't something to fear for people like him. To them the greatest terror was dying before your mission was done.

Cloudhawk knew what was going through Gorefang's mind in his last moments, but there was no guilt. He ended the sweeper's life without hesitation, and without mercy.

This method was the right one, it was the world they lived in. Who could take responsibility for everyone? Who was able to deliver all sufferers from torment? Cloudhawk wasn't out to save the world, he was just an insect. An insect's only interest was self-preservation!

Blackfang roared and threw himself at his chieftain's assassin.

Cloudhawk heaved his arms. He lifted Gorefang off the floor, pinned to his spear, then

threw the sweeper at his subordinate.

Their reactions were too slow. Cloudhawk leapt onto the stalker beast Gorefang vacated and grabbed the reins. His eyes were red, and with an infinitely cold command he tried to dominate the beast beneath him with force of will alone. "Go!"

This human's voice boomed like thunder in the beast's ear, with a note of command it could not deny.

The pressure to obey was overwhelming, for the creature had met a life form clearly its superior. The urge to do what it was told felt like it was coming from deep within its soul.

Cloudhawk ripped a longsword from a sheath strapped to the beast and gave it a sharp smack on its haunches. With a reptilian hiss, the stalker beast took off. Two sweepers tried to block his path but Cloudhawk cut them down without much effort.

His eyes were a deep sanguine red, like pools of blood. Cloudhawk did not look imposing, but the sheer enormity of his aura forced the natives out of his way.

He vanished into the mist while Blackfang was still struggling with his chieftain. He placed Gorefang's limp body on the ground and looked him over, questioning how to get the spear free. He wasn't sure how without causing more damage than was already done. Inside he knew it was too late."

"Now... you are... Gorefang." Their dying leader had a few breath left, which he forced from a mouth filled with blood. He grabbed his lieutenant's clothes and stared him deep in his eyes. "Bring our people... To freedom... Freedom!"

It was the final words of their leader before darkness claimed him. The last thought to cross his mind – *I'm dead... What will the clan do?*

Blight-tooth warriors huddled around, amazed and frightened, furious and hopeless.

Gorefang's reputation among his tribesmen was beyond repute. He had lead them through the darkest parts of their history, keeping the fire of hope alive in their hearts. He was a giant among the Blight-tooth, a hero!

Their fallen Gorefang was a man like no other, never to be replaced.

Blackfang removed a pair of sharpened teeth from the honoured leader's mouth.

The tribe was called Blight-tooth because of the poison sacks in their hands and mouths. Both claw and bite was highly toxic. They believed this ability was a gift from their ancestors to keep them safe, so their teeth were the most important part of a tribesmen's remains.

"Find that piece of shit!" Blackfang swore to himself that he would bury his leader's fangs in that bastard's chest. "Kill him!"

Cloudhawk was already several hundred meters away.

Blackfang's furious cries roused the others from their shocked stupor. Their most respected, most adored leader had fallen, the one they turned to for leadership and guidance. With him their world had collapsed.

Could they let his murderer simply get away? The Blight-tooth warriors gathered up to exact vengeance!

Anger and despair tore through the horde. Their hatred for humans had never burned so hot. The Gorefang was dead. Chaos was already starting to reveal itself.

As structure collapsed among the enemy, the pressure on Drake and the others relaxed. He and the remaining humans fell back into the mouth of the cave to mount a defense. While the turmoil was obvious, none of them knew what had happened to the instigator. Claudia was out of breath and lightheaded. *He did it*, she thought. *That guy actually did it.*

Cloudhawk succeeded, just as they'd planned.

He'd slipped past a thousand angry sweepers and struck a fatal blow at their heart. If word of this ever got back to the elysian lands, Cloudhawk would be famous.

But there was a nagging regret in the back of Cloudhawk's mind. He'd stirred up the hornet's nest, but what would be the consequences?

He darted wildly through the forest atop the stalker beast while a swarm of enraged sweepers gave chase. Every second there were dozens of arrows flung his way, and he used the longsword to knock away any that got too close. But he couldn't continue this way for long. With a terrible screech the stalker beast collapsed beneath him, and

Cloudhawk went flying.

He was more than capable of protecting himself. His mount, however, was not so lucky.

It took seven or eight of the arrows to eventually take the beast down, which proved how sturdy they were. As it began to fall Cloudhawk added insult to injury by kicking off its back. This sent him several meters into the air.

A group of pygmy warriors gathered up ahead.

Cloudhawk hit the ground in a controlled roll, slipping by two of the warriors and cutting their legs out from under them. He jumped back into the air as a pair of riders caught up. He landed on top of one and caved his face in with a savage punch.

There were too many. Cloudhawk couldn't kill them all.

The second rider threw its weapon to the side and pulled out a gun. At this distance Cloudhawk didn't dare risk the damage it could do, so he called on the power of stone to avoid it.

A wave of dizziness washed over him, nearly knocking him off his feet. *Uh oh, what now?*

The rider was leveling a second shot. Cloudhawk lunged forward and whipped a kick at his face. It connected, knocking the eyes from their sockets and causing blood to pour from its ears. Its crushed face was left with a grotesque, twisted smirk.

Cloudhawk gasped for breath. He was spent, not just mentally but physically as well.

Come on, he was the hero! He wasn't supposed to die like this!

With the phase stone's power, Cloudhawk could easily have gotten himself to safety. He chose the far more difficult and thankless task of killing the sweeper leader. Why decide to do something so reckless? He chastised himself for it, and decided that he sure didn't seem much like the hero type. If he survived, he decided to try for less heroics in the future.

There was no escape. He could see the faint silhouettes of riders tearing through the twisting fog. He'd only survived this long thanks to the phase stone, but even it had its limits. He was too weak to call on it anymore.

But maybe there was one more thing he could do!

Escape to another world!

He was certainly no master of that ability. Since getting the stone it'd only happened a couple times, but it had always been in desperate situations just like this. It was his last shot, so he made the decision to try. As the warriors closed in on him, he wrapped his hands around the stone hanging from his neck.

The phase stone felt the call.

An intense energy poured out from it, coalescing into a field of light that spread out in all directions. It started to swirl around him like churned cream. The bullets and arrows that were flung its way were wither knocked aside or incinerated. They left nothing but rippled.

There was still hope.

Life or death hung on this single moment!

Cloudhawk cleared his mind, focusing all of his attention on this process. Then, just at the key moment Blackfang emerged from the mists. He threw a spear at the orb of light, backed by all the despair and rage he held inside. It punched a hole, collapsing the field of energy and any phasing power with it.

The spear was stuck in the ground. A slight breeze past that caused it to crumble into dust.

Blackfang snarled at the others. "Turn this asshole into a pile of rotten meat."

A swarm of sweepers descended on Cloudhawk. He helplessly watched them come.

As it seemed he would be trampled, something the wasteland never expected came to his aid. From within the forest a hail of arrows descended that immediately pinned the encroaching warriors to the ground. The sweepers were so thoroughly shot through that blood leaked from them like a sieve.

A group of figures gradually appeared from the mist.

Five or six hundred soldiers, dressed in elysian armor, appeared before him. The front

lines held their crossbows at the ready. In the lead were three individuals in the uniform of Hell's Valley instructors, along with a dozen or so assistants. The bulk of the valley's might had arrived.

This was... Hell's Army!

Blackfang grit his teeth. He wasn't ready to give up. "Never mind them! Fire your arrows!"

The twang of bowstrings followed. The sweepers were hysterical with fear and anger, and despite the elysian soldiers they refused to let Cloudhawk go. However, their determination was not rewarded. It was unacceptable for a cadet to die under the nose of these instructors.

As Cloudhawk looked on, stupefied, one of the three instructors stepped forth. She was a woman, with a cyan-colored whip clenched in one hand. In stark contrast to normal whips, this one was not 'made' of anything, but forged from captured wind. Agile as a python it slithered around Cloudhawk's waist and dragged him to safety.

They'd fired first, but the woman's whip still saved Cloudhawk from certain death. Fast as the arrows were, they only served to prove how much faster she was!

A demonhunter?

Cloudhawk stared in open shock at her. Her age was hard to place, for while she looked to be in her twenties or thirties, her temperament was almost sage-like. She had an appeal different from the likes of Hellflower – like a cool breeze, preternatural and refreshing. Altogether inscrutable.

She was dressed in scholarly clothing that enveloped her in an elegance and mysteriousness. There were men on either side; one was the hideously scarred Instructor Cutter, and the other was hidden in a shell of metal like he was locked in a tin can.

The Giants of Hell Valley had arrived.

Finally a look of despair came upon Blackfang's face. How did the valley's forces assemble so quickly? It was only possible if they'd known it was coming.

Chapter 86

The Dark Atom Invasion

The Blight-tooth warriors knocked their bows and drew back strings, ready to fire another wave of arrows. However, even before they could pull the strings ready, the ethereal woman across the clearing was responding. With ease and grace she waved the whip clutched in her hand, which released a burst of cyan energy through the forest. It swept horizontal to the ground and out toward her enemies, like a blade of wind.

A fifty-meter cone splayed out like a fan before her. Everything from natives and beasts, to trees and even stone were split in two as the light swept by. All of it seemed as substantial as bean curd before a sharp knife. All of it was neatly cleaved in half.

Cloudhawk watched as a terrifying cold crept up his spine. Subconsciously he touched his waist, thankfully discovering that it all still seemed in one piece. Even his clothes were unscathed. He stared at the unfathomable demonhunter with deep respect. Her relic was not only fierce and quick, it could be gentle as well in a moment's notice. What uncanny power!

Instructor Cutter took a drag on the cigarette lazily smoldering between his lips. He pulled out his sword, a massive thing that was crimson red from hilt to tip and had to weigh at least several hundred pounds. Its blade edge looked incomparably sharp while the back was a line of jagged spikes. The hilt was in the shape of a coiling python. Waves of threatening power poured from the instructor as he brandished his weapon and squinted at Cloudhawk. "You. You're not dead."

This earned a deep sigh from the wastelander. "No, more or less though."

Cutter snorted. "If you can't even survive this test, what right do you have to enter Hell's Valley? Get behind us and see how it's done."

The valley's head instructors varied wildly in demeanor. Cutter was a typical warrior. Although his sword was something to behold, it wasn't a relic. The other two were undoubtedly demonhunters. The layers of metal armor the other one wore was his relic.

How was Cloudhawk so sure? He could feel the resonance coming from it. Even before the female instructor made her move, the armored man had called on his power. It all gathered around his fortress-like figure, causing glowing lines to appear throughout the metal. They joined to create elaborate glimmering patterns, ultimately revealing an archaic design.

The entire suit of armor blazed with light and heat, like iron in a casting oven.

Boom!

In sharp contrast to the lumbering suit of metal, the armored instructor exploded forward with incomparable speed. Like a ball of light he charged through the forest, leveling everything in his path. One of the natives had the wherewithal to try and block, but erupted into a dozen mangled pieces when the instructor hit him.

Anything in the streaking light's path – whether it was wood or stone or flesh - was smashed to pieces as easily as rotted furniture. In its wake was a trough four or five meters deep. The instructor was a man-shaped meat grinder.

Cloudhawk had met several skilled fighters in his life; Selene, Dawn, Atlas, Frost... Each of them had their own unique strengths and fighting styles.

With the exception of the Caliph of the Sands or Lord Arcturus, Cloudhawk had never seen an attack that shook him so deeply. The armored instructor's methods were wild and brutal, bulldozing through his enemies under the protection of his impenetrable armor. His indomitable passage turned all enemies into meat paste.

An attack like that obliterated the enemy's body and morale.

Cutter heaved his domineering weapon. "Leave some for me!"

His words hung in the air as Instructor Cutter leapt forward. Charging into the fray, deep indentations were left where his feet fell. His sword crashed into the enemy forces like a tsunami, whirled like a tornado, kicking up a tempest of blood and flesh. As far as speed and strength, he was the most tyrannical fighter Cloudhawk had ever witnessed.

The soldiers of Hell's Valley discharged their crossbows, then switched them out for close-range weapons. In that space of time Cutter had already cut eight or nine of their enemies to pieces.

A dozen of the assistants rushed in to join the fight. A hundred more elite veterans followed behind.

Blight-tooth Clan had erupted into chaos, forsaking their freedom to exact revenge on Cloudhawk. While they had an advantage in numbers, their fighting strength could not match up to the valley's warriors. How could they stand against an assault like this? Every one of those soldiers was a veteran of a hundred battles, and the assistants were the cream of that crop.

Meanwhile, Blight-tooth's soldiers hardly outnumbered them two to one. It didn't even give the humans pause. Their opening charge forced the sweepers five hundred meters back and killed a fourth of them. The second push gained another three hundred meters, leaving more than half the natives' forces dead. By the third assault there was almost nothing left.

Cloudhawk had been impressed by Skycloud's normal army forces. Seeing the veterans at work, he finally understood just how inferior the wastelands were at waging war. These veterans were nothing short of terrifying, and could easily sweep through any outpost in the wastelands without concern.

As Blackfang watched the enemy route his forces, the last light of hope died in his chest. With deep regret he wondered why he'd ignored Gorefang's orders. Why chase after this lone assassin with all his men? If they'd let him go, maybe they might have stood a chance. The forces of Hell's Valley couldn't stray too far from their home.

Now, though... it was all too late. Blackfang shrieked at his warriors in their strange tongue.

Cloudhawk didn't understand their language, but he didn't need to in order to understand it was a call for retreat. The difference was too great. How could the natives survive against most of the valley's power?

Only a handful of stalker riders managed to survive.

Blackfang led a few dozen warriors into the forest, toward the borderlands. If the valley's soldiers were all here, it meant their defenses at the forest's edge were weak. There was a chance what remained of his clan could slip through, out into the safety of the wastelands.

But the bloodcurdling scream that followed dashed their hopes, as the scarred

instructor came charging at them with sword raised high. He was even faster than the mounts they rode, and so quickly caught up to the fleeing natives. With a single sweep of his sword he cleaved a rider and his mount in half.

“We were going to leave a few of you alive so you could recover your clan, survive out here in the forest. Now that you’ve chosen annihilation, I’ll make sure you get what you deserve.”

From the first word to the last – no more than a few seconds – eight more sweepers were slain. Each one was cut down without a struggle.

Blackfang understood the language of his oppressors. Survive? Recover? What a joke! Could that sort of life be called surviving? What purpose would recovering serve?

In the eyes of the elysians, his people were treated worse than livestock! From the beginning Blight-tooth Clan kept to itself and lives in harmony with their surroundings. They had no interest in ever leaving the forest, but the elysians gave them no chance at a quiet life of freedom. They came and destroyed the paradise they’d built for themselves.

It was them who invaded their land. Them who imprisoned and enslaved his people. Over a decade of living in squalor, a fate worse than death. Was this the benevolence of the elysians?

Even as he bemoaned their fate, Blackfang watched the valley’s soldiers closing in. Only a handful of his people were still breathing.

But ahead... ahead there was light. The world beyond Deadwood Forest – a place even the devils who chased him wouldn’t dare follow.

Blackfang knew he wasn’t strong enough to stand against the sword-wielding instructor. Much less break free from the elysians once he was surrounded. There it was, the road of freedom stretching out before his eyes... but it may as well have been as untouchable as the sky.

“Blackfang!”

He turned his head toward the sound, a group of his clansmen. If they were still alive it meant they had to be what remained of his most elite warriors. He could see in their eyes that they knew what fate had in store. There was no fear in them, just faith and

determination.

Blackfang said nothing. He read the meaning in their eyes.

The remaining riders stopped suddenly by pulling hard on their mounts' reigns. They turned, facing the soldiers coming hot on their heels. With weapons raised high, they shouted at their foes at the top of their lungs.

"Blight-tooth forever! Freedom forever!"

Wild shouts rang out at the riders charged into the overwhelming enemy forces. They were quickly buried beneath the tide of steel and iron.

Hot tears burned paths down Blackfang's face. It was the last opportunity, gifted to him by the last of his people. The chance at freedom.

The hazy light of the wastelands inched closer.

A shadow swept up beside him, too fast for Blackfang to react. A ruthless slice caught him at the waist and cut him all the way through. Like a butterfly without its wings he tumbled through the air until the ground came up to meet him. Still he didn't stop. Without a mount he would run, without legs he could crawl. Inch by inch he clawed his way out of the forest.

He felt the scorching hot sun on his back, and with fumbling hands drew out the fangs he'd taken from his chief. Blackfang thrust them into the dirt, then rolled himself over. He took deep, greedy breaths – his first breaths of free air – and stared at the endless expanse of blue sky above. Fifteen years he'd lived, each one in darkness, never leaving the gloomy canopy of Deadwood Forest. He never imagined the sky would look so beautiful.

And then he died.

As Cloudhawk walked through the corpse-strewn paths of the forest he came across the upper half of Blight-tooth clan's last leader. The last vestiges of this intelligent sweeper colony had been wiped out.

They'd been the victims from the beginning, fighting against cruel captivity. All they

wanted was freedom, but time and fate conspired to keep them from it. Fighting against destiny in today's day and age was an act of self-absorbed defiance that could only end one way.

These pitiful natives were no threat to the elysians, so why did they have to be obliterated? Was it merely the will of their gods? Just because they said that elysians and wastelanders could not coexist? What sort of god would demand such a thing?

Cloudhawk felt pity for these resentful souls. He felt not even a shadow of respect for the gods who did this to them.

This was how it was, this is how it is, and this is how it will be. Whatever miracles they provided, whatever nourishment they produced, however many faithful they delude, however strong they may be... Cloudhawk's hatred for these beings and his doubt for their motives ran deep. Down in his soul he knew the gods were not here to save the world. They gathered up the ones they thought were worthy and created this pocket of plenty, this so-called 'domain'. Wasn't it just another sort of captivity? Cloudhawk didn't know the whole story, but he was convinced that only humanity had the capacity to save itself. And the only way to do that was through strength.

Instructor Cutter shouted out his orders. "Send out teams to sweep the forest. Don't let a single little minnow slip the net."

No sooner did he make the call than a loud explosion erupted from the distant valley. Faces immediately darkened. What was happening? More explosions followed on the heels of the first, several in a row like bombs being dropped. The distinct pop of firearms followed.

Dark Atom's assault on Hell's Valley had begun.

Chapter 87

The War for Hell's Valley

Five wasteland airships tore through the clouds, revealing their grim outlines to the forest valley below. With the valley's mysterious veil pierced it stretched out below the airships, laid bare before their payload.

'Hell' was a poor name for this valley, for it was rife with underground rivers that nourished its foliage. Great trees bursting with life lives there, a sight rarely seen in the blasted landscape outside the elysian borders.

Several buildings in the elysian style rose from the valley's canopy, rising majestically toward the skies. Grasping towers stood vigil over the main compound, a grand construction peppered with elaborate sculptures. A semi-transparent shell hung over it, protecting the building from outside damage.

A small docking port hovered a hundred meters above, whereupon ten or so warships were stationed. A dangling spire at the center was the source of the compound's protective aura.

Most airships constructed in the elysian lands didn't function outside of the domain's borders. There were those warships that were specially blessed to allow them to work in the wastelands, however their energy was not limitless like the others. The tower at the center of the docks was a source of such energy, and through it the ships were able to maintain flight.

This was, of course, a treasure bestowed upon them from the gods. No human was capable of creating such a wondrous thing.

Wolfblade, wrapped in his large cloak and hidden beneath the layers of bandages, was a mysterious and unsettling character. Strange as he appeared, no one here dared question his orders or act in opposition. This operation was the Dark Atom's first direct assault on the elysian lands, and Wolfblade was here to see to it personally. He was the one who'd put the plan in motion, and he would see it through. It was the only way to ensure success.

“The valley’s forces should return in about ten minutes. We have five minutes to get through their defenses. Commence the attack.”

“Yes, sir!”

The Dark Atom’s five ships quickly reached the valley. Once over the compound it immediately began unloading scores of disc-shaped objects from their holds. They fell like rain to the buildings below and stuck to the shield of light protecting them. Each metallic disc had a flashing light attached which pulsed with increasing frequency until at last-

Boom!

All at once, the Dark Atom’s enormous shaped charges detonated.

Fractures instantly raced across the translucent shell as thousands of pounds of explosive force assailed it. An unending series of bombings followed, with the crackling roar of machine guns spitting a tempest of bullets. The fractures increased.

Then, one of the ships released a concussive burst of blue light from a pulse cannon. The valley’s defenses could take no more and were destroyed.

It’d taken less than ten seconds from start to finish – a fine display of Wolfblade’s tactical abilities. Skycloud domain’s advanced outpost was overcome without any wasted effort, as though Wolfblade knew their defensive capabilities like the back of his hand.

Hell’s Valley and its garrison was blindsided by the sudden, dreadful assault.

When the alarms began to sound, the docks – and in fact the whole valley – descended into turmoil. One of the docked ships on standby reacted first and managed to disembark.

The jade-like ships of the elysians were gorgeous, standing in sharp contrast to the motley assortment of scrap that constituted wasteland airships. A spindle rose from the top of the warship around which coiled tens of thousands of sapphire bolts. Like a host of electric eels they slithered to the spindle’s tip, then exploded out in a burst of electrical energy.

Boom!

A hole appeared in the center of one of the enemy airships, molten edges dripping slag metal.

Elysian warships were powerful weapons of war, but the sneak attack had taken them by surprise. They were without command and caught unprepared. While it managed to get a shot off, this lone vessel quickly became the focus of the Dark Atom's remaining airships, which pummeled it with cannon fire. Its once beautiful exterior crumbled and burned.

“Now!”

At Wolfblade's command, the stranger in black leapt out of the airship. He tumbled from over three hundred meters in the air without rope or harness. Even the valley's instructors, strong as they were, would have faced fatal injury falling from such a height. Yet the black-robed stranger did not hesitate. He fell faster and faster, nearly breaking the sound barrier, closing in on the beleaguered elysian warship.

“Stop him!”

There weren't many left in the outpost, but those had stayed behind were seasoned warriors. The black-robed man's descent took only moment, but still the soldiers moved to react and intercept. They fired crossbows at the encroaching invader, bolts that were not only thicker than normal but also complex in their construction. A crystal set in the center of each shaft shone with brilliant light, and they exploded fantastically when they hit their target.

The shadowy visitor ignored these terrifying explosive bolts. A series of blasts engulfed him, but he kept on perfect indifference. His large frame pierced the clouds of acrid smoke and crashed into the ship's highest point fist first.

Its mask cracked loudly, shattering into a storm of splinters from top to bottom. In less time than it took to gasp, the cracks spread to the deck and then the hull. Finally, with an earth-shuddering blast, the elysian warship snapped in half and erupted in flame.

It wasn't Skycloud's biggest warship, but it was still a mighty vessel several dozen meters long! Elysian equipment was known for its quality and durability, yet Wolfblade's henchmen cracked it apart with a single punch.

Hundreds of Dark Atom invaders began the full assault.

They jumped ship a couple hundred meters off the ground, but in contrast to the black-robed man from before, they each had gliders strapped to their backs. From below, it looked like a plague of bats descending on the valley.

Wolfblade pulled the first of his three swords free from its sheath. This one was unique constructed, with three blades arranged around a hollow center. It was an exquisite piece, but different from the weapons of the elysians. Theirs were typically created from jade-like material that was beautiful to behold, etched with artistically crafted designs.

Wolfblade's weapon was not a work of art, but highly functional. It was certainly no product of the elysian lands, but nor was it a weapon you could find in the wastelands.

That last one possibility. It had to be a weapon of the ancients, found in the ruins of their long-dead civilization.

Wolfblade pressed some level or switch, and the blades began to rotate. They spun so quickly it became impossible to differentiate one blade from the other, appearing only as a shimmering cylinder. A dazzling light radiated from the hollow center, bright as the wasteland sun. It stretched out fifteen meters toward the sky.

With both hands on the hilt of the sword, Wolfblade heaved it down onto the floating tower. Like a knife through paper, the light cut it right down the center.

With the tower destroyed, the docks were done for.

They'd only remained suspended over the valley thanks to the tower's mysterious energy. Robbed of this power, the docks – and indeed all the airships attached it – began to fail. Gravity regained its dominance and started to drag them toward the ground.

Dark Atom's leader did not pause to enjoy the view. A glider with a pair of portable jets launched Wolfblade forward. He swung his magnificent blade again, this time carving out a one hundred meter fissure in the fortress below.

With two swings of his sword Wolfblade had performed staggering feats!

Most important to understand was the fact that Wolfblade was no demonhunter. All of the power at his command did not come from any relic. In other words, all of incredible accomplishments were due to the might of his weapons, the technology he

carried. With them he could outperform any number of demonhunters.

His assault was more than the elysians could fathom. How could a mere heathen command such incredible power?

The column of destructive light in Wolfblade's hand dissipated and the blades stopped rotating. As is true with many powerful tools, it required tremendous energy to use and a long time to recharge. It was best used to destroy fortified positions, not protracted engagements.

The Dark Atom had already achieved their goal. In destroying their ivory tower, the elysian dogs no longer had their warships to protect them. A second blow penetrated the valley's mighty defenses, giving them a way in.

Wolfblade returned the sword to its sheath. He then drew the second.

This one, like the first, was a product of ancient technology. It wasn't nearly as dramatic as the first, merely a high-frequency blade, but not to be underestimated. It vibrated at such a frequency that most average relics would be damaged or destroyed with a single blow.

"Advance. Seven minutes twenty seconds remaining."

"Heheh, plenty of time."

Buzzard let a contingent of soldiers through the fissure Wolfblade created. They were fast, too fast for the defenders to repel. By the time veterans gathered at the breach there were several dozen infiltrators already inside. Wolfblade, the black-robed man and the others began to battle the valley's few guardians.

Hell's Army was formidable, far superior to any rag-tag wasteland outfit. Yet despite the name, they were not a standard combat outfit, with only a thousand or soldiers ready to take up arms. Its three instructors had left with six hundred of those men, with the remainder being all that stood between the Dark Atom and control of the valley.

"Elysian dogs! *Die!*"

One of the invaders was a large man, protected beneath a heavy iron vest. A cigar smoked behind his scruffy beard, and the minigun in his grip screamed as it mowed

through the defenders. He laughed maniacally as he swept the gun back and forth. The fires that belched from its barrels shone off his bronze, sweat-drenched skin and made his burly frame shudder with each shot. Though he seemed out of his mind, this half-mad soldier was an expert in the field of control. Round after round was spat from the massive gun, and each one found its mark in a soldier's head.

An elite marksman like him could single-handedly fight off a whole battalion if he had suitable cover. Not far away from him an old man faced another group of soldiers. They were closing in while he lazily pulled a vial of some chemical compound from his pockets. He flung it toward his foes with a slingshot.

As the small flask hit the ground, it belched a ball of fire several meters into the air. An area ten meters in diameter was engulfed in flames, melting anyone unfortunate enough to be caught inside.

In addition, the invaders were populated with several strong mutant soldiers. Halfway transformed between man and beast, they tore the elysians apart with tooth and claw.

So it went, with countless corpses marking each little victory.

The Dark Atom boasted many capable warriors, before even counting the likes of Wolfblade or his strange black-robed companion. There were all manner of fighters, all with different styles. However, the elysians did not sit idly and welcome death. After all, they were veteran warriors themselves. Each darted around the battlefield, quick as lightning, piercing through the mutants' armor with their crossbows. Their weapons fired dozens of bolts in seconds and could punch through armor that would stop a blade, accurate as any rifle.

Intense combat followed.

Suddenly, Wolfblade's voice rang out through the compound. "The situation has changed! They'll be back earlier than expected, prepare to defend!"

Chapter 88

Fierce Confrontation

By the time Cloudhawk and the rest of Hell's Army arrived at the valley, it was a scene of devastation. The docks above had lost their support and were strewn about in piles of burning wreckage. Pieces tumbled from overhead like a meteor shower, even entire ships. It was like Armageddon all over again.

A thunderous explosion caused the ground to shake.

The punishing assault from Dark Atom's five airships didn't stop. They continued to pummel the compound with cannon and gunfire of all sorts. Fires belched all around, vomiting smoke into bullet-filled air while the defenders tried desperately to hold their positions. From time to time the stark blue light of a pulse cannon appeared to erase the soldiers holed up in their bunkers.

How did this happen?

In mere minutes, Hell's Valley became a corpse-strewn warzone. Cloudhawk was shocked by what he saw. This new foe was incomparably strong, with highly skilled warriors, excellent equipment, and deadly weapons in spades. Even the formidable enemies gathered by the Caliph of the Sands could not compare.

There was only one organization in the wasteland with the capability and gall to assault the elysian lands – the Dark Atom.

Cloudhawk was somewhat familiar with the infamous group. To the people of the elysian lands they were terrorists and heathens. However, despite those labels the Dark Atom did have its own system of belief. They followed their own rules. Since Skycloud domain had thus far failed to wipe them out, it proved that the Dark Atom was a tenacious and well-informed opposition group.

Yet, up to now the most they'd managed were a few terrorist attacks. How were they so brazen, to think they could openly assault an established elysian base?

Cloudhawk stared at the scene, lost in thought, while the others burst into action. The

woman instructor raced ahead at a full gallop but made no sound. Then, she leapt off the tips of her toes. Dust dervishes whirled in her wake as she soared into the air, yet strangely she did not fly so much as continue to walk. Her feet stepped on nothing as though it were solid ground, with cyan colored power rippling from where she tread. In a blink of an eye she crossed a thousand meters.

He watched her flout the rules of physics like they were nothing!

As he looked closer, though, he saw that the instructor's high-top boots were the secret. They resonated with the song of a relic, meaning they must be what was allowing her to run through empty air.

When she reached the battle lines, a delicate bracelet on her wrist began to glow. The unassuming jewelry changed suddenly, stretching into a ten meter long cyan-hued whip. High above the din, the instructor reeled back her arm and sent the whip toward her foes, fast as an arrow.

Her target was the madman with the minigun.

The man was a terror, subduing a large section of the battlefield with sweeping gunfire that was frighteningly accurate. He could lock down a while area by himself, so the man had to be dealt with quickly. If not, a frontal attack would end in disaster.

The large man was a prodigious Dark Atom fighter, no mere grunt. He heaved his gun around and directed the rain of bullets toward the woman. While normally one wouldn't be able to dodge while in mid-air, it was different for the demonhunter. Walking through air was as reliable as solid ground, thanks to her boots, so she juked and dodged the bullets that came her way. Of course she couldn't avoid them all, but those that struck her lodged in the sturdy armor beneath her robes. None managed to do anything beyond cause a bruise.

The whip screamed through the air.

At the last second, Wolfblade leapt between them. He hacked at her ethereal whip to keep it from striking his soldier. It worked, but as the instructor saw her blow deflected she flicked her wrist, and caused her relic weapon to wrap around Wolfblade's sword.

This terrorist leader's particle blade was a frightening piece of technology. It would have sliced clean through a normal whip.

The woman displayed her worth as one of the valley's instructors, battling for supremacy against the Dark Atom's leader. Where her whip and Wolfblade's sword touched, they crackled and screeched in protest. But the high-frequency sword could not cut through the mystical whip. Both of them pulled, muscles bulging, trying to force the weapon from the other's hand or draw them close. But they were equally matched, neither could make the other budge.

Instructor Cutter jumped into the mix. His savage blade whistled through the air.

Wolfblade slide to the side, putting his entangled blade between himself and Cutter. The swords met amidst a shower of sparks. In that instant the female instructor saw her opportunity, and pulled just enough to throw Wolfblade off balance.

Cutter disengaged then moved in for a second strike in one fluid movement. With his enemy's guard broken, he lashed out with the ferocity of a tiger. His second attack was even stronger than the first.

The first strike was a feint. This blow was his coup de grace!

Yet just as it appeared Wolfblade's reign of terror might end, the mysterious black-robed stranger swept in and knocked the huge sword aside with his raised arm. How could Cutter's enormous weapon be so easily deflected? He'd only managed to tear the man's robes, which revealed a glint of silver underneath. Not a scratch was left behind.

Cutter pulled his sword back, cutting off his attack and dashing to the side.

His tactical retreat was well-planned, for right behind him was a steel-encased figure charging forward like a moving castle. Energy coursing through the relic armor encasing him in a searing orb and made the armor glow red-hot.

His hefty armor didn't impeded the instructor's speed in the least. He moved so quickly his steel-encased frame became a burning ball of light. Everything he passed was instantly burnt to cinders. His target was also obviously Wolfblade and his mysterious protector.

Faster and fast he moved, coming down on them like a screaming freight train!

While the female instructor kept Wolfblade's weapon tied up with her own, she raised the first finger of her left hand. A turquoise ring glimmered against her skin, which

summoned four identical blades made of wind. They were attached at the center like a bladed boomerang.

She flicked her wrist, sending the ethereal weapon flying.

In an instant it break the sound barrier, eliciting a sonic boom!

When it started its trajectory, the boomerang was only about the size of her palm. However, the further it traveled the bigger it grew, until soon it was a full meter across. Soldiers in its path were slices in half at the waist, leaving a wake of spurting blood and jumbled innards. A swath of the battlefield was cut down. A streak of crimson red marked its passage. Meanwhile the armored instructor was bearing down on Wolfblade with indomitable momentum.

Attack from both angles. A two-pronged assault!

Cloudhawk was dazzled by the skill, it made his blood boil. Were it him on the receiving it he would be immediately overtaken. This was the capability of true demonhunters – these were real warriors!

The black-robed man threw open his arms and lunged forth to meet the armored instructor. It seemed insane, considering how frightening an impact with this armored bull would be. There had to be no more than a handful of people who would dare attempt it.

What was the difference in standing between the armored instructor and embracing death? The demonhunter's powers were gathered up, focused to perfection as he rammed directly into the robed man's body. Let this bold defender first be smashed to pieces, he thought, then he would bury the Dark Atom's leader in the dirt!

Like a meteor striking the earth, the two collided. The force of their impact blew a fan-shaped crater into the ground behind them and knocked anyone too close off their feet.

The man in black did not, as expected, break into mangled pieces. Right at the moment of impact, he wrapped his arms around the armored instructor. A smoking trench was left behind as both men were thrown a dozen meters forward.

The woman's bladed boomerang kept coming, arriving at almost the same moment. While it was more than capable of cutting Wolfblade clean in two, the bandaged leader

made no attempt to move. From the sheath on his back, his third and final blade shot out of its own accord. It glimmered with a strange light, as though it possessed its own intelligence, and met the boomerang head on.

The two weapons clashed. Both were knocked aside.

Guided by the will of the demonhunter, her boomerang recalibrated its arc and swung back around for another pass. However, Wolfblade's living sword recognized the danger was still present and came to his defense once again.

So far, no one had a clear advantage.

After the collision with the armored instructor, the black-robed man's clothing had been reduced to cinders. He was revealed to the world, and in his natural state shocked not just the elysians, but Cloudhawk as well.

There were creatures like this wandering the world? Unthinkable!

The man's body was formed metal from head to toe. No natural process had created this thing, there wasn't a single stitch of flesh on him. His 'eyes' – though no real eyes could be seen – were merely dual points of red light.

This was no living man. It was a metal golem! Was this freak created from ancient technology?

What happened that turned this world into a smoldering wreck? Why did the demons come to tear apart the world of man? Was it not because the ancient were too greedy in their thirst for power? In their desire to shed the yoke of greater beings they pursued strength. Strength enough to determine their own destinies. In the end, the destructive they brought upon themselves was worse than servitude.

The metal man placed his hand against the armored instructor's chest.

Bang!

A pulse of electric power burst from his palm. The impact cast his enemy away like a popped balloon. Metal screeched and clattered when he hit the ground several meters away. Thankfully his relic armor was very strong. It had to be for him to ram into people, shoulder first. The concussive pulse didn't hurt him any.

Cutter leapt over him and came charging at the man. His huge sword glinted in the firelight as he hacked it; head, neck, shoulder, chest, leg. The instructor's attack screeched and left behind a number of scrapes. But not one real sign of damage.

The metal man lazily lifted his hand, where blue light gathered in his palm. Cutter hastily pulled his sword before him to deflect what was coming. When the pulse struck it flung him away like a ragdoll.

The woman's windblade boomerang returned to her, mission left undone. She and her target stepped back from one another.

Wolfblade's bandaged arm was raised. In his right hand hummed the deadly particle blade, while the sword of electric light slithered protectively around him like a viper poised to strike at any moment. The metal man returned to his side like a loyal guardian. He was well protected by an exquisite entourage.

Across from him, the woman stood in midair with the cyan whip in her left hand and the windblade boomerang hovering above the other. Instructor Cutter and the armored man flanked her on either side, clearly ready for another round.

Both sides were too fast. There was no time for spectators, much less participants, to take a pause.

Cloudhawk noticed that the bandages covering Wolfblade were a strange sort of old technology. Facing off against the demonhunter, it became a conflict that represented old-world technology against new-age faith. He knew well the power of relics, but he'd also witnessed firsthand what high-tech was capable of.

Other members of Dark Atom gathered round. Pretty soon several hundred soldiers were awaiting orders.

Meanwhile, Cloudhawk cowered away. He was badly wounded, mentally drained, and physically weak. A fight like this was gonna be messy. It wasn't some outpost scuffle, both sides were powerful and well matched. If Cloudhawk had his way, both sides would wipe each other out. If either one or the other won, he'd be stuck in the same shitty situation.

Chapter 89

Conscripted Cannon Fodder

What does the ebb and flow of the world have to do with me? The honor or disgrace of Skycloud domain is none of my business. To Cloudhawk there wasn't much difference between the Dark Atom and Skycloud. Neither of them were worth shit in his opinion, they'd do the world a favor by destroying one another.

Cloudhawk was looking for a rock to hide in when a gruff and familiar voice shouted at him. "What the fuck are you doing over there hiding?!"

Cloudhawk cursed under his breath as he looked up. It was none other than the surly assistant who threatened to make him intimately familiar with his club. Right now he was suited up like a soldier, encased from head to toe with elysian armor. He'd traded his cudgel for a large ax and stood towering like an immovable wall.

Cloudhawk's reaction was to clutch his chest and flop dramatically to one side. With eyes half-lidded he moaned to his abuser. "I'm all messed up. They shot me with a bunch of arrows and cut me with swords, I'm sure there's some organ damage. I think I'm dying. I'd just hold you all back. But even though I can't kill these dogs together with you, you have my emotional support."

"You dipshit coward!" The training assistant yanked Cloudhawk back up onto his feet, like a bear effortlessly plucking up a chimp. "It's all hands, scrub. If you're gonna die, you'll do it on the front lines. You're with my team."

"I don't think that's gonna work for me."

"You take one more step away and I'll cut you down as a deserter!"

He flung a vial of medicine and a crossbow at the scrawny wastelander. Cloudhawk bemoaned his rotten luck. How was any of this his goddamn problem? He wasn't a soldier *or* a demonhunter. Wasn't his relationship with the Dark Atom shitty enough as it was? If he killed more of them now, they'd hunt him to the ends of the earth.

But this guy wasn't screwin' around.

Making a run for it didn't seem like a viable option. Even if the assistant didn't just cut his head off for being a deserter, he'd probably be captured and brought back to Skycloud to face trial as a deserter and blasphemer. A trial would mean only one of two things for him. If he refused to admit guilt, they'd burn him as a blasphemer. If he admitted wrongdoing, they'd burn him as punishment.

He was screwed either way.

When fate choses to screw with you, even a fart would curse you with anal fissures. Cloudhawk was sure that no matter how bad the valley was, it couldn't be worse than living in the wastelands. Then came Butcher, and Gabriel, and Drake, and Claudia. Then the Blight-tooth clan. How much more shit could he step in?

Above all else, staying alive was his priority. But it is what it is, he thought – there was no time for self-pity.

He bitterly pulled the cork from the vial of medicine and downed its contents. It was one of those refined brews from the elysian lands, quick and effective. It also served as a stimulant to keep warriors on their feet, so Cloudhawk suddenly felt the exhaustion drain from him and vitality return. Even his mental energies recovered a little.

All at once Cloudhawk found himself in the uncomfortable position of being conscripted into a defense force. The battle lines had engaged, and both sides were locked in fierce combat.

All the while the three giants of Hell's Valley were at war with Wolfblade. Spectacular and terrifying were the only words that could define their clash. In a flash it became a fierce test of skill and strength, where their stalemate could break at any moment.

Cloudhawk hefted the weighty crossbow and trudged after his team to join the fight.

This fight was going to be a nasty one – an all-out confrontation.

Instructor Cutter dragged his eyes over the devastated battlefield. Little by little his scarred face darkened into a scowl, making it all the more terrible to behold. "These fuckin' rats, scurrying around in the shadows! Well now they skulk out into the open, they've gotta be bored of livin'!"

Wolfblade had carefully planned this operation. It was simple, but simple had its

benefits. Where he failed was in considering all angles. Of course, he couldn't know Cloudhawk would kill the Blight-tooth leader and send them into disarray. Without leadership, the huge disparity in strength between the natives and Hell's Army only grew worse. The elysians were able to quickly mop up and head back, far faster than Wolfblade anticipated.

But that didn't matter. Nothing ever went exactly to plan.

Wolfblade and his people had already managed to punch through the valley's defenses. They'd also robbed them of their warships. Even with the three instructors on the battlefield, victory wasn't out of reach.

"Natessa Windham, Dumont Cenhelm, and Eckard Cutter." ^[1] Wolfblade's scratchy, uncomfortable voice hissed from behind the bandages. Speaking with him was not like facing a man, but a mummy. "The three 'giants' of this tiny outpost surpass my expectations. You know, I hear that your Master Arcturus is nearly invincible. I'm curious to learn the truth of that for myself."

Natessa remained as cool and aloof as the clouds above. "You aren't even worthy of speaking his name."

Where there is light, there was always shadow. There was no more insidious and powerful secret organization hiding in Skycloud domain than the Dark Atom.

There were limits to that power, of course. From inception to present day the Dark Atom had existed for seventy years. In that time they went through many leaders. Their history and the past that brought them to this point was extraordinary, but they never had the might required to face the elysians directly. This was especially true once Arcturus Cloude took the reigns.

Over the years, the worst the Dark Atom could manage were small-scale terrorist attacks. Attacks on infrastructure, hit squads and so forth. Attacking the root cause of their hatred was never an option.

Be that as it may, the hearts of its members ever beat for the day they could overthrow Skycloud.

Much to the consternation of the elysians, they were never able to completely eradicate these terrorists. Like weeds, you could cut them down and they would just sprout up somewhere else. Their structure was secretive and far reaching, and

whatever methods the elysians used – including undercover agents – was foiled. They'd never been able to strike a decisive blow at the heart of the organization.

Wolfblade was Dark Atom's third leader. He'd maintained control over its forces for over a decade already. No one had ever seen his true face, which led many to suspect that 'Wolfblade' was just a title. 'He' might, in fact, be 'they'. A group sharing the same name. Still others thought that Wolfblade wasn't a real person at all, just a figurehead the organization propped up to keep their enemies guessing.

For the first time, Wolfblade appeared in person on the battlefield.

Although the leaders of Hell's Army had never seen Wolfblade, there was a fair amount of intelligence on his lieutenants. Most of them were here, along with the vast majority of the Dark Atom's forces. Who but Wolfblade could lead such a large force?

For the first time, the Dark Atom's leader had shown what passed for his face. It was an important moment!

If he was slain here, not only would the valley's failed defense be forgiven, they may even get commendations from the Temple. Who's to say the gods themselves wouldn't shower them with blessings? Who wouldn't want to pursue such glory?

The female instructor, Natessa Windham, looked out across the battle. "Remember, their target is the compound."

The armored instructor, Dumont Cenhelm, and the scarred masochist Eckard Cutter, felt their hearts beating wildly in their chest. They, too, looked out over the besieged outpost and saw the enormous cleft their enemies had caused. Their commander was right, the Dark Atom had taken an incredible risk in order to take this place.

That meant they were ultimately after... this was bad!

All three of the instructors scowled menacingly.

It was one of the most well-kept secrets of Hell's Valley, sealed here for safe keeping and stricken from any record. How did the Dark Atom know? But that didn't matter now, they were here and they couldn't be allowed to get their hands on it!

Natessa called upon her psychic energies and let them spread. Her windblade boomerang sprang back into action, infused with even more power than before. The

cyan-hued blades sprouting from it were thicker and sturdier. Spinning rapidly through the air, their keen edges were almost palpable from a distance – in fact it was lethal up to five meters in diameter from the center. If it tore through an army battalion, the resulting carnage was unsettling to imagine. Nothing would be left but mangled bodies.

“Go!”

Natessa urged her relic weapon toward Wolfblade. It spun wildly, changing direction and trajectory from one instant to the next. What’s more, the blades split: one became two, two became four. Attacks came from all sides, never in a straight line, like four bloodthirsty swallows. They swirled around Wolfblade, penning him in with deadly cyclones.

As they closed in, Wolfblade could already feel their cutting energy rip at his clothes. Without a hint of concern, he reached up to unbandage the strip of cloth covering his eyes. The left eye was revealed, no different from a normal person’s but for the dangerous glint that shone within.

All at once, the erratic movement of the spinning blades became perfectly clear to him.

Wolfblade’s eye couldn’t see in the traditional sense. Instead, it gathered all manner of information like speed and trajectory, and conveyed it to his brain. It allowed him to instantly see through feints, and determine all the facts of an attack coming his way. Using split-second planning and all the data collected, he was able to formulate the perfect counter.

The floating sword of electric light began to move. It cut an opening through the spinning boomerangs.

Meanwhile the metal guardian also went on the offensive. He spread his arms and a shockwave erupted from each palm. When it clashed with the cyclones of wind energy, Natessa’s whirling prison was weakened. Wolfblade jumped up, swinging his particle blade and catching out of the windblades in its center. The gathered psychic energy shattered like it was made from glass.

The muscled man with the minigun Natessa had tried to kill stepped forward. “Demonhunter bitch! Come see what grandpas’ gun can do!”

The man’s multi-barreled weapon was handcrafted by the Dark Atom. It took over a

year to complete, and each bullet was specially made with unique gunpowder and casings. They were about the size of a finger, and anywhere they hit was turned into a mutilated cavity.

Natessa couldn't avoid them all, nor could she survive a direct hit. The large man's intention was to distract her from the attack on Wolfblade, but she would not play his game. She continued to manipulate her relic, aimed at the Dark Atom's leader. She stamped her foot, and the air below her erupted like a geyser, shooting her into the air and above the man's gunfire.

"Charge! Kill them all!" Cutter howled over the din. "Cut your way into the compound, don't let them in!"

Two of the instructors, their assistants, and a few hundred soldiers answered with a raucous cry and thunderous footsteps.

Chapter 90

The Cryptic Call

Natessa kept the pressure on Wolfblade. Her cyan whip whistled through the air, so fast all one could see were after-images – a hundred vicious vipers vying for the first bite. As the blows continued to rain down on him, Wolfblade deflected each one with his sword. Their stalemate continued.

The special properties of wind were speed and translucency.

She was a battle-hardened demonhunter, specialized in the wind element, stronger even than Dawn Polaris. Her mystical whip switched seamlessly from long to short, hard to soft, making every attack different. Her approach was different every time, indeterminable.

Wolfblade, on the other hand, was a meticulous tactician more precise than a computer. He could ascertain the most perfect result from even the crudest data. His electric photon sword crackled around him like a protective snake, while the particle blade cut apart the very atoms in the air.

The other two instructors charged toward the compound's breach, assistants in tow.

Of course, the Dark Atom invaders weren't going to stand idly by. The large man with the minigun, who had moments before tried to shoot several dozen holes in Natessa, changed targets. Suddenly a stream of hundreds of thousands of bullets came tearing through the air, toward the encroaching elysian soldiers. The sight almost made Cloudhawk's head bulge out of his skull. Looking at the press of soldiers on either side, he cursed under his breath. There was nowhere to go.

What a fuckin' joke! All the rest of these assholes had shields, or at the very least thick armor.

Cloudhawk? He had a paper thin beggar's uniform. He looked like a fool charging in with nothing but a crossbow between him and a wall of bullets. He stuck out from the crowd like a sore thumb, without any sort of protection, the very definition of cannon fodder. They were sending him to his death!

The flood of gunfire came pouring down, and in that moment Oddball stuck its fluffy head out of Cloudhawk's clothes.

He knew that high-level control metahumans were capable of using all sorts of weapons, which was especially evident with long-range tools. Hellflower had been the best example of that he'd seen, a real weapon master. The guy Cloudhawk was blindly charging at now was at least her equal, maybe even a little better. Even though his gun was spitting out bullets faster than he could spit out foul words, each was exactly placed. Not a single one was wasted.

The veterans dropped their heads and raised their shields, but elysian steel couldn't protect every inch of them. Tenacious as their armor was, it couldn't survive more than three bullets. They started to drop like flies.

Cloudhawk slowed down until he was at the back of the group. Sadly, the gunner was eager to share his deadly gifts evenly. Any target that stuck its head out had a bullet or six aimed their way. They were faster than shots from a handgun, so Cloudhawk's keen eyes couldn't tell exactly where they were going. He had to rely on his danger sense to guide him.

His one blessing was the crowd of soldiers standing between him and the bullets.

With such a large target, the gunner's fire wasn't especially concentrated. Cloudhawk was thankful for the fact, because otherwise he wouldn't have survived more than a few seconds. It sure was no picnic, though, because the Dark Atom was more than just the one crazy shooter. There were maybe twenty more marksmen of all sorts, each one a far sight more dangerous than any wasteland sniper.

One of them was a grimy-looking old man with a slingshot-type weapon. He used it to fling several vials of green chemicals toward them. However, these veterans were not your typical grunts. They fired back with their crossbows and shot the vials out of the air.

Then, the unexpected happened.

As the vials burst their contents were released, bursting into flame as they came into contact with the air. Instead of the red and orange one might expect, whatever foul concoction this was burned with a ghastly green. The ethereal flames tumbled down from on high.

A ball of fire caught one of the veterans in the face. Nerves that survived any number of grievous wounds shut down as his skin melted off the bone. He clutched at his ruined face and fell, screaming as the fires spread. Even when he was burned black they kept burning.

Whatever was in this hellish stuff was a mystery, but all it had to do was touch skin and that was enough. No conventional methods put these fires out, and that terrified them. But the others soldiers kept their head and kept themselves hidden behind shield and armor. So long as the flames didn't touch skin they were fine, they extinguished quickly against inorganic material. Most of the soldiers only had their faces to worry about, but not Cloudhawk. He danced through the rain of fire like a half-wit.

Dumont was the top of the suicidal spear and attracted most of the gunfire. The gunner pummeled him, but bullets that could punch through steel and iron didn't even leave a mark on the walking fortress.

Nearby, one of the Dark Atom soldiers fired a cannon in their direction.

Dumont took the blast head-on, and to everyone's amazement neither the cannon shot nor the explosion it caused even slowed him down. His armor was unyielding, none of their attacks even made him bat an eye.

Instructor Cutter was right behind him like a shadow, mimicking his every move. Dumont soaked up the gunfire until they close enough for him to leap out from behind. He planted his legs on his fellow instructor and jumped, sword flashing. He came crashing down on the enemy like a tidal wave.

A flash of silver. Two metal arms raised to ward off Cutter's blow.

He stopped dead in his tracks with his sword caught between the golem's arms. The freak's hands stretched out, one toward Cutter and the other facing Dumont. Crackling blue light gathered in his palms while the two men took defensive postures.

Boom-boom! Two bursts, one after the other. Both men staggered backward half a step.

The metal golem was a mystery, no one knew how it was controlled. There didn't seem to be any angles in its construction, leaving no room for flame or water to slip through much less a sword. Fast, strong... maybe even more than both the instructors together could handle.

Cutter shouted another order to his troops. “Leave this fucknut to us! Press the attack!”

The Dark Atom invaders and Hell’s Army clashed in all-out war. Cloudhawk pointed his heavy crossbow toward the enemy and pulled the trigger. A spray of bolts and the hiss of compressed air followed. *Shoo-shoo-shoo-shoo-shoo!* One of them caught an unsuspecting Dark Atom agent.

It was the first time Cloudhawk was using a weapon like this, but he was managing to control it well. It wasn’t hard for him to figure out how it worked.

Military-issue crossbows like these had just as much stopping power as firearms he was used to. They used compressed air to fire bolts at high speed and a precision quiver that fed bolts into the firing mechanism automatically. A standard quiver held fifty arrows, enough for a minute of continuous fire. Its wasteland equivalents were either hand loaded or semi-automatic, so they couldn’t compare with even this sort of standard elysian equipment. What’s more, they were quiet when fired unlike a gun and could accommodate different sorts of bolts. These bolts could be switched out for others more suitable to a particular enemy, making the crossbow a versatile choice.

No wonder elysians looked down on wastelander firearms. Weapons like the big man’s minigun were few and far between.

The three commanders kept the enemy’s strongest busy, meanwhile their assistants were each as capable as any Dark Atom elite. Man for man both sides were about matched, although the soldiers of Hell’s Army were superior to the terrorist grunts. They had a clear advantage now that they were fighting face to face.

Cloudhawk didn’t hurry to sing their praises.

Suddenly, a shadow crept over him. He lifted his head and a bitter grin spread across his face. How could he forget? The lumbering black bodies of the Dark Atom’s airships hung above them. Each one was laden with machine gun turrets and missile launchers. One of them even had a pulse cannon, technology modern man couldn’t even begin to grasp.

BOOM!

A piercing column of blue light split the sky. A dozen or more elysian soldiers were splattered against the walls like gruesome paint. What wasn’t instantly disintegrated smoldered on the ground in piles of slag.

Cloudhawk had never witnessed such a weapon of mass destruction before. He recognized that it was similar to the shots from the golem's hands, but on a much larger scale. Maybe they were dug up from the same pit. Cloudhawk noted that since the start of the fight, it'd only been used a couple times. This proved that it couldn't be fired continuously or often. Hopefully there was enough of a cooldown for him to get the fuck outta dodge.

"Alright, team one. We'll keep you covered while you get into the compound!"

Several of the higher ranking soldiers had already gotten the doors open. Most of the several hundred soldiers in Hell's Army were busy with the Dark Atom, leaving only a few dozen left to deal with the compound's interior. Cloudhawk was one them. He wasn't eager to foil their nefarious plot, of course, he just figured most of the fighting was going on outside. Not to mention, those damn airships were just waiting to pick him off. It sure seemed like being inside the compound was the safer option.

Then he stepped inside, and froze.

He felt it like a cold knife running along his spine, something wasn't right. A faint sound from somewhere to the side, wriggling through space and time, from someplace unknown. It was calling him. The phase stone burned against his chest.

What... what was it? There were secrets hidden here, secrets that somehow involved Cloudhawk – or more specifically, the stone that hung around his neck.

If that was true, he had to find out what it was. No matter the risk.

Chapter 91

An Explosive Trap

Cloudhawk could feel that the battle was raging around him, white hot. The pulse of it beat faster. Even hidden in this building, he could feel the ground quiver beneath his feet as soldiers took each other's lives just a few feet away. Dust which had been dislodged from the quaking filtered through the light, and in this moment Cloudhawk rejoiced. The mightiest soldiers of both sides were busily killing each other outside, meaning it was ultimately safer in here.

He lifted his head, and viewed the devastation of the compound from the light seeping from the fissure in its roof.

The building wasn't large in scale yet was marked by the luxury of all things elysian. However, as a military installation it had a severe sort of grandeur. Dignified and unassailable. The doors and windows were framed in rhomboid engravings in white stone. Crystal, agate pebbles and morganite flecks were inlaid in the jadeite walls to create beautiful floral murals. Alcoves set between vaulted arches within the walls were home to a number of godly icons.

This was an advance military outpost. Did they usually spend so much effort to make even their military bases this beautiful?

Elysians were an impossibly stuffy breed.

The towering ceiling had been cleaved open by Wolfblade's earlier assault. The hundred-meter long gash went beyond opening the roof and even managed to slice clean through several floors of the compound. Everything in the beam's path had been cut clean, whether it was thick columns or the smooth stone floor.

The edges of the fissure radiated an intense heat that had yet to dissipate. Cloudhawk could imagine the sort of power such an attack would have, to be capable of cutting a building open like this. With such capabilities in hand, no wonder the Dark Atom thought they were worthy of attacking Hell's Valley.

Cloudhawk followed the other soldiers as they ran down the hall. Magic lamps sparked

to life in their passage until the wide passage was bathed in their gentle, beautiful glow... but of course, that was now marred by the giant gash in the walls.

The leader of their small team was the same fiend who forced Cloudhawk to join the campaign in the first place. He spoke to the others in a low voice. "The item we need to protect is up ahead. Remember, this thing is extremely important. We cannot, under any circumstances, let the heathens get their hands on it."

One of the soldiers couldn't hold back their curiosity. "What is it? Is it worth all this trouble the Dark Atom put themselves in?"

The assistant shook his head. "Only the three instructors know what it is, but I hear it's an ancient artifact from the time of the great war. Something cursed, put here for the time being for protection before it's destroyed. They didn't think it would bring the blasphemers knocking down our door."

Cloudhawk kept to the back of the group, but heard their exchange. So that was the reason the Dark Atom crept out from under their rock, it looked like Hell's Valley had something serious hidden here. He was sure it was the same thing he sensed when he first walked in. He wanted to know more, but even in top condition with all his relics he wouldn't be able to contend with all these soldiers.

Enticing as this mysterious item was, it wasn't more important than trying to think up a way to survive this encounter. After all, whatever this thing might be worth, it wasn't worth more than his life.

"We're almost there!"

The hall began to slant downward until it ultimately ended at an ancient bronze door. Whatever it was the Dark Atom was after was on the other side. It was strange, though. They'd gotten here much earlier than Hell's Army, yet there were no signs the Dark Atom had reached this door. They hadn't encountered a single soul.

It was a fact Cloudhawk found unsettling. Their team leader also seemed nervous. Everyone started looking around, on alert for a sneak attack.

Perched on his shoulder, Oddball chirped softly drawing Cloudhawk's attention. His eyes caught something strange behind the legs of one of the statues set against the wall. It looked like a stone had been removed and something placed inside, then hastily covered again.

Cloudhawk pointed. "What is that?"

One of the soldiers hustled over and pulled the stone away. What he revealed was a strange contraption, with a dozen or so multicolored test tubes strapped together. A complicated mess of circuits was wrapped around it in crude wasteland style. A tiny light blinked on its surface with a steady rhythm.

A creeping dread came over Cloudhawk as he looked further down the hall. There were at least another dozen or so such devices hidden in the walls, surrounding them. The frightening prospect came clawing through his mind, these were –

"Shit!"

The instant Cloudhawk voiced the curse, those blinking lights sped up. Whatever was in those test tubes started to mix together and begun their chain reaction. Heat and light poured from them.

For a moment, time seemed to stand still.

Cloudhawk's pupils contracted as ten simultaneous sparks flared to life. It wasn't an explosion, more like flood gates bursting. Waves of gum-like fire swallowed them up from every angle. The world descending into burning madness, like hell had come to claim them.

There was nowhere to hide. It was a trap!

Everyone hit the ground, pressing themselves to the cold stone while the fires roared above them. The masterful statues of the gods crumbled into rubble and came crashing down like the world was coming apart. A number of soldiers were crushed beneath the debris.

Cloudhawk was blown back half a dozen meters and slammed into the door. He hit the ground, dazed. A deluge of fractured stone followed to bury him beneath their crushing weight, and then what happened afterward was lost. Everything went dark.

A few minutes later...

Cloudhawk regained consciousness. His ashen face sputtered up from the rubble, blood leaking from his burst ear drums. He couldn't hear much of anything. His clothes were cinders and scorch marks were all over him, the flames had even burnt away

most of his hair.

That trap was like a nightmare!

Cloudhawk blinked through his double vision at the ruin that was left. Everything was on fire and an acrid smoke turned the air to poison. The blow to his head made Cloudhawk dizzy, and he felt like throwing up. He hurt all over like he'd been flayed, dipped in oil then deep fried.

Yet, to everyone's great surprise, most of the soldiers were clambering their way out from beneath the rubble.

Although they each sported a number of wounds, the soldiers stumbled to their feet with weapons in hand. They were still ready to fight and die, even after surviving a cataclysm of fire. Cloudhawk decided it was time to get up, and so tried to push off a chunk of rubble off of him. He discovered it was much heavier than expected and his legs were pinned. He was too weak to get out from under it.

The team leader prowled the rubble wide-eyed with his ax in hand. His helmet had been blown away somewhere and blood dropped from several wounds in his skull. Figures could be faintly seen through the smog when suddenly there came a series of blasts. *Bang, bang!* The assistant jerked as eight or nine bullets slammed into him. One caught him in the head.

The tough elysian armor deflected the other bullets. As for the bullet to his skull, it glanced off and left him with a nasty gash but nothing more. A tempered veteran like him had bones like iron. Ordinary weapons weren't going to put him down. The series of gunshots knocked him back several paces, and in the space between their attackers jumped in to finish them off.

They whipped around the team leader, throwing iron hooks which caught on his armor. Round and round they went until thick chains held him fast.

He flexed his muscles against the bindings and they snapped, sending shrapnel in all directions. The instructor assistant then held high his ax and charged at his foes. The first swipe split one's skull. A second cut most of the way through a second man's waist.

Cloudhawk watched in shock and alarm. This guy had more than a few tricks up his sleeve.

Cloudhawk suspected it when he'd almost knocked him silly with the cudgel, but seeing him stand valiantly against the Dark Atom proved he was much stronger than Cloudhawk figured. He hoped it would be enough to keep the attackers off him.

But another target presented itself in the midst of their struggle.

The veteran was in a berserker rage, and he gave no thought before lashing out at his enemies. He heaved his battleaxe as easily as a dagger toward the next foe, but it was stopped by a mechanical arm. It was some sort of prosthetic, four times thicker than any normal limb and attached to the man at his shoulder. He engaged some mechanism and a shield popped out from the false limb.

The screech of metal on metal rang through the hall. This was the first enemy they'd faced who could stand against the team leader's ax.

The arm was more complicated even than that, however, for as he deflected the veteran's ax a gun barrel jutted from his palm. The veteran hastily put his ax between himself and the stream of gunfire that followed. Still, four or five struck him in the chest, fracturing his armor and knocking him backwards.

A particularly quick shadow raced through the smoke and fire. Keen eyes glinted in the harsh light, and through brief glimpses Cloudhawk could see a hook-shaped nose. He reached for the team leader with claw-like fingers, fast as a tempest, fierce as a thunderbolt. While the veteran was busy he swept past and opened his throat from ear to ear. A deluge of hot, dark blood poured forth.

"You..."

He swayed on unsteady feet and tried to talk, but could only manage strained gurgles. Still he brandished his battleaxe as to keep up the fight, but the one with the mechanical arm followed up with another burst of gunfire. Every one of them hit him in the end, until one exploded through his eyeball and into his brain.

This doughty warrior's war against the Dark Atom ended here. The others kept up the struggle, but the bomb had done considerable damage. Strong as they were, they couldn't stand against the tide of enemies.

The battle had taken a turn toward disaster.

Cloudhawk watched in helpless fear, when a stalwart figure emerged from the smoke.

He had to be two meters tall and big enough to fit four Cloudhawks. One fist was bigger than his whole head. His dark skin was tough as leather, and bony protrusions jutted out along his arms and shoulders. Obviously this one was a mutant.

The Dark Atom had quite a lot of formidable mutants like this one.

Cloudhawk watched the man walk toward him with wide eyes. He raised the crossbow he'd somehow managed to hold on to, ready to fire a volley on bolts into the freak's guts. He pulled the trigger and a stream of arrows belched at his foe. But the mutant didn't even give them a passing thought. He raised his enormous fist, ready to smash Cloudhawk into paste.

Chapter 92

The Skull

Cloudhawk had only started to recover, but already another life-threatening danger was coming his way. That couldn't be permitted. His eyes turned red and bloodshot, nearly bulging from his head. A power from deep inside him burst out and he shot to his feet. The several ton slab of rock that pinned him was flung at his attacker.

At the same moment, Cloudhawk threw his crossbow aside and lunged at the large man with his bare fist.

The hulking man roared like a beast, delivering a thunderous punch at the stone tumbling his way. It shattered it into pieces then met Cloudhawk's fist on the other side. When the two men collided, the shards of rock suspended in air were blasted away.

The mutant's strength was nothing short of amazing. Punching through the stone slab hadn't slowed him down or weakened his punch in the least. Cloudhawk felt engulfed in a tide of concussive force that shook every bone in his body and made him numb. His body slammed against the door once again as he was thrown back.

An ugly, twisted sneer tugged at the mutant's lips. It was a mocking sneer for the little man who thought he could stand toe to toe with him. His skinny arms and twig-like legs weren't worthy of his overconfidence.

Cloudhawk clutched his shoulder, face pale.

This guy was just a Dark Atom soldier, albeit one of their crack troops. Still, the difference in strength between them was too big. If he had his relics maybe Cloudhawk would have stood a chance. But wishing wouldn't make it so. His enemy's attacks were crushing – clumsy and slow, but strong enough to punch a hole right through him.

Typically Cloudhawk would use superior speed to take pot shots, but his legs were hurt when the hall collapsed. Anyway, a protracted battle wasn't going to work in his favor in this circumstance. Who knew how many more Dark Atom fighters were on their way? He and the elysians were on the back foot. They weren't going to hold out

long.

He had to think of a way to escape. If he didn't, he'd been left to rot here.

All escapes routes were blocked off by Wolfblade and his people, he had to think of something else. He wracked his mind for an answer but that disquieting call was whispering at him, making it hard to think. I was coming from behind him, on the other side of the thick bronze doors. It was in there somewhere, it had to be, and it could help him. Escape would mean getting his hands on... whatever it was.

There was no other choice. He had to just go for it.

The burly mutant wasn't interested in giving Cloudhawk time to ponder the end of his days. He stooped over and wrapped his arms around a section of fallen column. He heaved, swinging it around in a semicircle and then releasing it right at him. He charged after the rubble with a roar, the ground cracking beneath the force of his stamping feet.

Cloudhawk threw his hands in front of him for protection. Not that it would do anything – the impact would liquefy the bones in his arms.

The mutant's sheer force was beyond what any typical man could fathom. He wanted to smash Cloudhawk against the door with that column, an act which would certainly smash the scrawny man flat. Cloudhawk knew he couldn't protect himself, so he used the last of his mental energies and called on the phase stone. Its mystical field immediately covered him, and he was safe from the outside world.

Time was crucial. The instant the stone's power awakened, Cloudhawk struggled against the door to try and push his way through. He was met with stiff resistance. It was a thick and intractable barrier, but Cloudhawk knew deep within that this was his last chance. Either he got through, or it was the end.

So he grit his teeth, focused his psychic power and funneled it through the stone. Its field instantly strengthened and he managed to squeeze through. He popped out on the other side.

BOOM!

The door and its whole frame shook as something enormous slammed into it. Cloudhawk could hear the column exploding into pieces just where he'd been lying.

The freak's sheer power was never in doubt.

He's squeaked through, surviving by the skin of his teeth.

I'll remember you, ugly. One day you'll get what you deserve.

Cloudhawk struggled back onto his feet. A little blob of yellow popped out of his clothes.

"Hey, lil guy. You doin' alright?"

Oddball offered a chirp of reassurance and perched on his shoulder. It looked fine, just a little shaken. Cloudhawk couldn't blame it, they were both almost killed after all. He didn't know how it was the pudgy little thing was so tough, though he was thankful for it. Those feathers looked frail, but they weren't even scorched from the explosions. His friend was a real survivor.

No time to waste. I've gotta keep going.

Cloudhawk hobbled around to begin searching for the source of the call. Then, suddenly, everything disappeared. No more door, no building, nothing. He was in a pitch-dark place without substance, except that the ground was oddly uneven. There were enormous craters all around, some as wide as a hundred meters, like the whole place had been leveled by meteors.

Great mountains had been blown apart and were strewn across the horizon. Among the ruin were the mangled remains of countless warships.

The corpses carpeted everything, a sea of bodies. The ground was red, the mountains were red, the rivers were red. The sky was red. Everything was painted the color of blood, and the stench of death stuck in Cloudhawk's nostrils. It was almost more than he could stand.

What... what happened?

It had to be some kind of illusion! What was all this on the other side of that bronze door?

Cloudhawk stumbled through the vast, dead world. An angry sun burned in the sky, alongside a second and a third. All told there had to be thirteen burning orbs in total.

No... not suns, but figures that burned just as bright. Suddenly they were right before him, radiating with intense light that made it hard to look directly at them.

“You’ve lost.”

It sounded like it was coming from right next to his ear, like a gentle thunder. The sound of it was full of majesty and coercion, impossible to deny, that shook him to the depths of his soul. Its tremendous will washed over him, so powerful that even the mightiest warrior would be overcome with despair.

“Kneel!”

The command fell with the force of a mountain.

Cloudhawk couldn’t breathe. The will of this being completely overcame his defenses and spoke directly to the depths of his mind. He could feel it working to steal the strength of his legs and force him to the ground.

“*Kneel!*”

Another booming command ripped through his skull.

He was exhausted, drained, and covered in sweat. Cloudhawk’s mind was empty and absent any resistance. But there was something deeper, a tenacity in the depths of his heart that arose in defiance and anger. He didn’t know why, only that he would not kneel before this being. If he obeyed then he would truly be lost. He didn’t want to lose!

Fuck! Who the fuck are you? You think I’m going to kneel because you tell me to?

The beings of light stretched forth their hands at Cloudhawk, who refused to show obeisance. Within their palms the light gathered, an amalgamation of intense power. They held the orbs in their hands and repeated the command in a unified, world-shuddering voice. “*Kneel!*”

“*You can all fuck right off!*”

Thirteen beams of light fired toward him. An entire ocean would evaporate if set against such stupefying power.

Cloudhawk covered his face reflexively.

Seconds passed.

Nothing.

He slowly let his hands drop to find the illusion had disappeared. Oddball was anxiously flying circles overhead, probably thinking its master had lost his mind. Cloudhawk wasn't entirely convinced he hadn't. What was that? Some sort of test? He put it aside for the time being and began to explore his surroundings.

It was a secret chamber set deep inside the compound. Small, by comparison.

Set in the center of the room was a pedestal made from some kind of glittering crystal. The thing set on it was black as coal, and only seemed blacker against the shimmering material. It looked like a skull, a human skull. Boney sockets were pointed his way, and inside danced a pair of scarlet flames. The illusion had to have come from this thing.

Was some dead asshole's bones that powerful? A treasure indeed!

Cloudhawk looked it over for a moment, reaching out with all his senses. Something still didn't feel quite right.

There wasn't a resonance. No resonance meant this wasn't a relic.

Cloudhawk was afraid it was some kind of trap. Whatever this was, people were dying outside to protect it, and the Dark Atom was killing to get their hands on it. After what he just experienced, Cloudhawk wasn't in a rush to assume anything either. He was weighing his options. After all, he still wasn't even sure he *wanted* to grab this thing. Once he did things would get... awkward.

Snatching a treasure from the Dark Atom was like ripping food from a tiger's mouth. Wolfblade would hunt him to all corners of the earth. To add to that, stealing from crack elysian veterans had to be a sin punishable by death. Even Skye Polaris wouldn't be able to protect him. He'd probably cut him down himself.

Even if this thing was some unrivaled treasure, was Cloudhawk prepared to take it for himself?

Throughout his musings the phase stone had been growing hotter. Something in the

back of his mind was urging him over and over again to pick the skull up. He grit his teeth and made a decision: he didn't come down here for nothing. He wasn't scared... just touch it, see what happens.

All the while the skull stared at him from its pedestal.

Cloudhawk picked his way around the crystal plinth, looking it over. When he got a better look at the skull he saw it was not quite what he thought. It was about twice the size of a typical human skull, although it was about the right shape. A mutant's skull, maybe? That didn't seem likely.

It was ink black from top to bottom. Smooth, reflective, and he could even feel a little warmth coming from it. It almost looked like a piece of art.

Could nature make something like this? The aura coming off of it so was strong, it made Cloudhawk's hair stand on end. He felt like he was circling an ancient enemy, a discomfort that was written into his genetic code. The fires in its empty sockets had a sort of power, too. Somehow he knew that they'd been burning for hundreds of thousands of years. Inextinguishable.

If this was someone's bones he didn't want to know what they were like when they were alive.

On the other side of the door, Cloudhawk could hear that the fight was ending. No more hesitating. He picked up the skull.

The moment he touched it the inert remains started to quiver. Scarlet flames belched from its seven orifices like the clawing fingers of an evil spirit. They slithered up his arms, bloodthirsty and desperate to devour him whole.

Chapter 93

A Second Encounter

Cloudhawk immediately wanted to throw the skull away. The fires were like viscous oil, climbing up his arms, filling him with trepidation. There were many times over the last few months that he'd seen otherworldly things, but this was like really being face to face with a ghost!

The fires continued to envelop him. But there was no heat.

In fact it was the opposite. It wasn't like fire at all, but like shackles of ice slithering over his body. They were ghastly vipers, born from the depths of the earth and slowly sapping the life from him. He couldn't move, and the hair all over his body stood on end.

When the scarlet flames had encased half his body, they might as well have been hard as cement. Just as Cloudhawk was beginning to fear he'd been locked in forever, the slithering flames seemed to sense something. They all coalesced around his chest and upon touching the phase stone, were sucked inside.

The plain-looking stone drew them in like a sponge, or more precisely, like an insatiable black hole. Not a single bit of the fire from the black skull remained, devoured by the phase stone until even the eternal fires of its eyes went dark.

Cloudhawk's own eyes turned to the skull, where he watched a change overcome it. The glossy shine was gone from its jade-like surface. All of a sudden it was as though a thousand years passed in an instant. The skull became coarse, parts of it cracked. Fissures continued along the ancient bone until, with a clatter, it broke into several pieces and fell to the ground.

Slowly, Cloudhawk regained his ability to move. He staggered back a few steps the instant his feet would let him. The sound of his heart pounding was deafening.

Something felt different to him now, a sensation centered on his chest. He looked down to see what had been a plain stone, now gradually turning into a brilliant scarlet red. It was as smooth as luminescent as a gemstone now, and an enigmatic power radiated

from inside it.

Did something happen? Had the skull somehow broken his precious relic?

He touched it and was rewarded with an intense shock. A sharp pain raced through his brain that caught him off guard, and then his vision went dark. Memories, shards of thoughts, all jumbled and chaotic flooded him in a wild procession. Scenes of war marched across his mind's eye; flashes of blood and death, all manner of conflicting sounds, thousands of colors all mashed together and impossible to differentiate.

What human brain could cope with so much information? It threatening to rip him apart! If it didn't kill him, it would certainly drive him mad.

Get out! Get the fuck out of my head!

His response to the overwhelming sights and sounds was angry resistance. In his mind's eye a shower of meteors came crashing down into his sea of consciousness, stirring up tidal waves. When they sunk into the depths of that dark sea Cloudhawk thought there might be peace, but it was not the end. The falling stones glowed with an intense light. A field of energy hung over everything.

The images conjured by his mind churned like an angry river.

This... it feels like the stone's powers are activating.

The phasing power came from the stone and not from Cloudhawk, so he had no ability to stop it. His body twisted erratically like it was made of clay, then blinked out of existence.

A familiar feeling washed over him. It was the feeling of passing into another dimension.

Cloudhawk had begun to master the stone's abilities that allowed him to pass through matter. In essence, the principle was he was half in one dimension and half in another. He was still present, but dislodged. The stone's field of energy was the culprit.

If an elastic cloth was used to represent the concept of time, then Cloudhawk's phasing ability was like placing a rock on that cloth. He was still obviously on one side of that cloth as it stretched, but at the same time was not in his own space.

Or like two bridges, one above the other. No matter the flow of traffic above, those drivers were never going to appear on the road below. Although they could see each other, they were only ever projections of each other. Through the stone's ability to make full use of space, Cloudhawk was able to elude danger.

But that was far from the stone's only power. In the hands of a real master, the phase stone could penetrate dimensions completely. Returning to the cloth metaphor, at Cloudhawk's current capabilities he could stretch the cloth but not pass it. If one with enough strength tried, though, they'd slip right through.

Right now, the ability to tread dimensions was beyond him. The few times it'd succeeded was because he'd resonated properly with the power stored in the stone. It was very difficult for him to do that at a whim.

Now, after absorbing whatever was in that skull, the stone was coming alive again.

How could it not take Cloudhawk by surprise?

The power that overcame him sliced Cloudhawk into infinitesimally minute pieces, more than a man could fathom. He was then put together somewhere else, in another reality.

This was not a pleasant experience.

However, after a few experiences Cloudhawk had learned to deal with it. Now he was somewhere draped in darkness and silence. It was a world of ruin.

It had been cleaved into loosely assembled blocks of earth floating around each other, some as large as Skycloud domain. They all floated in an unsettling and empty space but for the twin stars that it orbited. Beyond that, the vast expanse of nothingness and the stars that hid beyond.

It was a dead world of dust and not much else. This couldn't be where he'd come from.

He'd been to a few places now, and they'd all seemed like typical worlds. But this place? He'd never seen anything like it! But anyone with the barest minimum of an education knew this had to be space. He was on a chunk of rock, draped in stardust. The fractured remains of a planet floated all around him that had been torn apart by some nightmarish power. Now they slowly drifted apart through the eternal vacuum, as far into the horizon.

His stone was active, luckily for Cloudhawk. Its field of power was the only thing keeping him from dying on the spot in this inhospitable environment. There was no air and it was freezing cold. His lungs would have been instantly sucked empty, his eardrums ruptured. A normal human wouldn't last five seconds. Cloudhawk might be able to last a few more, at best.

So what was going on? Why would the stone bring him here?

The slab Cloudhawk floated on now was about the size of Skycloud domain. As he looked out, he saw a several tattered excuses for shelters. They had to have been cobbled together after the calamity. None of this would have survived whatever happened to this world.

As he turned his head up, Cloudhawk found fields of wreckage. One section of it looked suspiciously like the floating docks used by the elysians. The ruin of what looked a lot like a warship was nearby, and another easily a thousand meters long. According to Cloudhawk's experiences with them, they seemed exactly similar.

This had to be a battleground.

Cloudhawk's attention snapped back the stone, for in just that instant it released a column of fire. It roiled angrily for a moment before gathering together. Like a mold, it was forced into a human shape. However, no matter how much one squeezed fire was not solid. A true body could not be formed.

As he suspected, his phase stone had some connection to the skull.

The amalgamation of fire was human in shape, but even up close there were no discernable features. All he could make out where a pair of fiery orbs where its eyes should be, and the spectral representation of a gem embedded in its chest. To Cloudhawk he was somehow familiar. It was like looking at himself in some twisted mirror, but the reflection was anything but human.

"You? Didn't you say you were dead?"

Who else could this be but the previous owner of the stone? Having him appear like this all of a sudden was very suspicious.

"Did that skull I found belong to you?" Cloudhawk gaped comically and exaggeratedly. But there was something weird about how he spoke..."I'm so sorry, I think I might have

carelessly broke it into pieces.”

It wasn't the words that was weird. It was the environment.

There was no air here, and with no air there was no way to talk. The being couldn't hear him. And yet he seemed to. They floated across from one another, staring. Out here among the stars they hovered, one large and one small. Yet although they were close, the image was still hazy. They were talking at each other through across the veil of life and death.

“No need to find it strange. This is merely another fraction of my will I left behind.”

“Well, how many of those pieces are out there?”

“When I fell, I split my mind into three pieces. They were the dimension stone, my skull, and my most important relic. The stone bore the inheritance of my power, and my skull contained all of my knowledge. As for my relic, it has been sealed away with all the rest of my riches - my gift of wealth.”

Power, knowledge, and wealth. Weren't those the very things every man sought?

Their conversation was very strange, not least for the way the spirit's voice whispered directly into his mind. It was a little bit like how he communicated with Oddball, only... more detailed. Oddball couldn't communicate like this.

“The stone is the key, without it the skull would turn to dust. Luckily, it was you who found my memories.”

Dark Atom risked a lot in their war against Hell's Army. For all this trouble, they would rob something they couldn't even use. The power that the skull contained could only be accepted by a specific person. That person was Cloudhawk.

It was an incredible coincidence. But, was it really?

Cloudhawk looked incredulous. “How did this happen?”

“There is much in this universe you cannot even begin to grasp, but this is enough: Everything that is possible exists, and all that exists is possible. Everything has an explanation. Knowledge dispels all mysteries.”

The words whispered into the recesses of Cloudhawk's mind.

“If you merge with my wisdom and my memories, you will inherit a deep comprehension of the world you live in. You will see that you are one small, insignificant speck of dust, on an enormous planet that is one of countless others.”

Chapter 94

Sea of Memories

Cloudhawk didn't really understand what the fiery ghost was telling him, and truth be told he wasn't interested in knowing the details. He heard 'inheritance,' that was all he needed to understand.

So there was more? How could he turn down the prospect?

When the phase stone absorbed the power of the skull, all sorts of sights and sounds were foisted into Cloudhawk's mind. Vague memories twisted in his subconscious, too much for him to absorb all at once. What he could grasp was that they were scenes of a war the stone's previous owner had participated in.

One cut, severing a river. One step, trampling a city. One punch, leveling mountains. One roar, shaking the heavens. Now, in times of peace, none of that was apparent.

Perhaps when he lived the ghost was some terrible overlord – a creature no man could overcome. He must have turned the world upside down.

This stranger might have even been stronger than Arcturus Cloude. No... not 'might have'. He definitely was. Cloudhawk – a staunch opportunist ^[1] – was not going to ignore the opportunity the ghost was presenting to him. He could train bitterly for his whole life and never come close to that level of power. If he could take in everything this ghost had left behind, even the governor wouldn't be able to stand against him.

Dawn Polaris would have to look at him with new eyes. Atlas, Frost, and all the others would have their day of reckoning!

The fiery spirit trembled, and a host of embers floated out from him. In seconds the humanoid image was a dull outline of what it had been. But although the spirit was weakening, it could still see into Cloudhawk's heart. His words shattered the young man's daydreams. "You will never be capable of acquiring all my wisdom. Just as you will never be able to wield all of my former power."

Power was the first inheritance Cloudhawk gained from this mysterious spirit, locked

within the phase stone and released when he took it up. Time erodes all things, so the stone did not contain all of what the spirit once commanded. But if Cloudhawk got even half of it, that was more than enough.

That was not to say he wasn't greatly disappointed when he realized the truth. The vast sea within the stone was what remained of the will of its former master, and taking in even some of it was very difficult. For now, it was a vain hope to think he could. He would have to one day be as strong as this man had been. He might as well have asked for the moon.

"Do not fret, my successor. This is not to your detriment. Never underestimate your potential." The man of scarlet fire spoke directly into his mind. It sounded like the crackle of embers. "My mission is to open a portal and guide you through it to your destiny, not make you in my image. You will be greater than I was – you *need* to be greater than I was. If not, then everything that was sacrificed will be for nothing."

"Is that even possible? What do you expect me to do..."

"It is possible. Everything is possible. If that day should come, then you will be capable of donning my armor and wielding my relics. Then the answers shall become clear to you."

What, you don't trust me yet? Fuck, a halfway decent answer would have been a comfort.

Saying that was not advised, of course. He wouldn't want to make this deliberately mysterious spirit angry. Best not to say anything at all!

Cloudhawk saw that as the spirit continued, its body kept fading away. What was left? He had to take whatever inheritance he could before the time passed. They couldn't continue flapping their lips for very much longer. Cloudhawk found himself growing nervous on the spirit's behalf.

The stone's dead master sensed his thoughts. "Do you still not understand? All of my memories have been gifted to you. They exist within your mind. The inheritance is already yours."

The words whispered through his brain, and then the sea of his mind turned over. Terrifying waves of memories crashed over him like tidal waves. He felt like a small boat, watching the wall of water rise.

Strange and unfamiliar visions assailed him. The sheer volume of information was incalculable – Cloudhawk could have lived for decades and it wouldn't come close to this being's lifetime. It was too much, he couldn't parse it all. To try would break his mind.

Cloudhawk couldn't hold back his curses. Had he made a mistake? The knowledge clung to him like a paste, things he couldn't begin to understand. Much of it was beyond his ability to translate. Overwhelming didn't begin to describe it, yet it was still only the first few thousand years of the spirit's life. All the rest of what was contained in the skull was lost. What remained was a motley array of fragments, carelessly jumbled together like a junk heap. Cloudhawk didn't dare even begin to organize it.

“Within you now are two oceans; one of power, one of knowledge. When – and to what extent – you call upon them will be determined by chance and fortune.”

The spirit extended a fiery hand toward him. The hornets buzzing in Cloudhawk's skull finally quieted, allowing a few fully formed thoughts to float to the surface. This knowledge was about combat, and relics. What Cloudhawk needed most in this moment.

Cloudhawk released a long, calming breath. *That* was how it was done? Everything else had been wasted time and effort...

This was a real treasure; the knowledge of proper training, and the means to manipulate and create relics.

“You can never surpass me with just this, eventually you will reach a limit.” It paused, then continued in a warning tone. “Accumulating data is not enough. You must adapt, and initiate – just as you have been in your pursuits for power. But reliance on combat and relics are for the common man. The common man is limited in what he can accomplish. Your destiny must be to go beyond.”

“Heaven and earth are the furnace, where you will be tempered into a relic. You have been richly endowed by fate with the ability to understand relics at a deeper level than anyone. Do not look lightly upon your gifts. Eventually, when you have awakened, you will understand the origins of everything.”

“And thus has my mission been accomplished.”

The spirit had been reduced to a flicker, like a candle flame threatening to go out. It

shrunk until it was only a ball then melted back into Cloudhawk's chest. It sunk into his will, his soul, where the fire's mark remained. A new flood of memories ensued.

The large bronze doors blew open!

Twenty or thirty elite Dark Atom fighters poured in, but Cloudhawk was not there. All they found were shards of bone strewn about a pedestal, the remains of a skull. Its weathered fragments looked like nothing special.

"Is this it?" One of the soldiers frowned in disappointment. "It sure doesn't look like it."

Buzzard was just as puzzled, but now wasn't the time for second guesses. "Is there anything else in here?"

No, there wasn't. The pieces of skull had to be what they were looking for. Buzzard gathered all he could and stuffed them in a bag. With a wordless gesture, he and the others filed out.

As they made their exit, the Dark Atom invaders scattered high explosives through the room then left one by one. They hated to leave Hell's Valley before the job was done, but both sides had already suffered greatly in the exchange.

"Boss, I got it!"

The fighters around Wolfblade all beamed with delight. Their mission was complete, the object they'd come for was in hand. Not only had they managed to invade and destroy the elysian base, but took their treasure for themselves as well. It was a vicious slap to the face to these zealots.

It was time to call everyone back!

The Dark Atom had more people, but a lengthy fight wasn't going to break in their favor. But even if they did win, it wasn't worth the cost. Their powerful weapons were the result of tremendous effort, digging them up and repairing them to working order. Their elite fighters were built from years of training. His lieutenants were hand-picked and carefully cultivated. These several hundred men and women were the heart of Wolfblade's organization, and every loss was costly.

Veterans soldiers were a limited resource for Skycloud as well, but even if they were all wiped out they would fill this place with reinforcements before long. Besides, they'd already brought too much attention to themselves with this mission. If they kept dragging this out, support was bound to come from the domain sooner or later. By then it'd be too late.

Instructor Cutter saw the signs. "They're trying to retreat! Stop them!"

Wolfblade held his hand high, all five fingers splayed out, then wrapped them quickly into a fist. It was the sign to fall back. The airships released the remainder of their ammunition in a violent and spectacular display. Suddenly Hell's Army was submerged in a sea of fire and shrapnel.

"Go!"

Dark Atom's remaining soldiers used the bombardment as cover for their retreat. They got to an area of higher elevation, then put back the jet gliders they'd used to infiltrate the base. As the airships continued to cover them, they descended low enough so that the soldiers could slip back onboard.

Because Wolfblade started the assault by destroying the base's docks, elysian forces had no way to give chase.

Buzzard grabbed a rope dangling from one of the airships, then fished out a controller and pressed a button. A string of bone-jarring eruptions followed. Below, huge parts of the compound collapsed, others were blown over a kilometer away. A nightmarish mushroom cloud roared over the building and toward the heavens.

The compound's soldiers made as though to follow, but the world opened up before them before they could. A shockwave tore through the entire valley, leaving them stupefied. Anything left in that building after an explosion like that had to have been utterly destroyed.

By the time the smoke cleared and the soldiers clawed their way from the rubble, the Dark Atom invaders were long gone. Eckard was itching to get after them, but Natessa held him back. On the one hand, their base was in no condition to continue the fight. On the other, their enemy had the advantage. Chasing after the enemy would only put them in an even weaker position.

It was fine. They still had the foundations, they could rebuilt.

The most pressing matter was how to explain this to Skycloud.

1. This one was interesting, and surprisingly hard to track down. The original term was 'borrowlist', and as far as I've been able to tell, this references something specific to Chinese history and thought. Borrowlism, or copinism, was a criticism expressed by a respected Chinese writer and thinker named Lu Xun. In the article of the same name he criticized China for copying or borrowing ideas wholesale from the West without thinking about how they applied to the Chinese reality. His suggestion was to combine things discovered from the outside world with the traditions and realities of Chinese life. Here the author, in a very erudite way, is describing Cloudhawk as an opportunist. He doesn't care where benefits come from, their origins, or their consequences.

Chapter 95

Captain

The valley was dotted with scars from its recent bombardment. Wisps of smoke rose from jagged craters, marks of those ancient weapons. The compound itself had been completely destroyed, and its docks had crashed onto the ground below. Ten elysian warships lay reduced to smoldering wrecks. Two to three hundred veterans of Hell's Army had been slain. Hell's Army had been devastated, but much to everyone's surprise the trainees had fared rather well. Ten had lost their lives, twenty were eliminated through testing, and the rest were officially trainees of Hell's Valley. Thankfully, the training camp itself was still operational.

As the students looked out over the ravaged terrain, they could hardly believe all of this had been done in one attack. The Dark Atom came in, obliterated everything in their path, then left with fewer casualties than their enemies. Meanwhile, the soldiers of Hell's Valley were forced to watch helplessly as they swaggered off. They were left with nothing but their responsibility to this new crop of young folk.

Weren't the elysian lands supposed to be undefeatable? Weren't they known for sweeping ruthlessly through the wastelands? Hadn't Hell's Valley been a base where the most accomplished veterans had been stationed?

"This has been a mark of shame for our domain. For all of us fighting men!" Drake clenched his fists tightly at his side. A furnace burned behind his hard eyes. "The day will come when I will personally lead our armies to raze whatever slum the Dark Atom calls home! Only blood will pay for blood. An eye for an eye!"

He was a young commander, green. While Drake might have had the fervor and the skill, he was still untested. All the missions he'd been on before were against small groups of blasphemers and mutant beasts. For the first time, he looked out over a disastrous loss. He couldn't accept the dignity of his people to be so thoroughly trampled by wasteland scum.

Claudia understood the rage this large man felt. Six months ago she felt much the same. This time? There was anger, surely, but there was no shame. Her mind was on the loss she suffered while on mission in the wastelands.

Her loss had also been disastrous.

So much blood staining the soul. The bones of so many loyal soldiers baking in the wasteland sun. So many souls of those poor, confused martyrs lost to the endless wastes.

And what was Skycloud's response? Nothing. It was all swept under the rug, no vengeance was sought on behalf of the dead. What did Skycloud fear? They were supposed to be practically invincible. The people were supposed to be unrivaled in their faith.

Cloudhawk!

The name wormed its way through her injured heart. The only wastelander name she knew.

The effect he'd had on Claudia was all-encompassing. He was the one who took the life of her companion, Raithe, and the brave soldiers that had come with them. That wastelander had delivered a shattering blow to her faith, and then waltzed through Skycloud committing treason and acts of terrorism.

And how did it end?

With Cloudhawk safely stowed away in the Grand General's mansion. Somehow he became a charge of the Polaris family. The filthy wastelander had even become close friends with Dawn, a young woman of noble blood... No, the greatest shame was to their pride. Their superiority complex was cut at the knees and dragged through the mud. Their anger was the anger you felt when you couldn't admit defeat.

Claudia had once looked upon the boundless wastes with contempt, filled with the lofty pride of the demonhunters. Now she had seen the truth of what lurked out there. She saw the viciousness, the cunning, the power. Her former self had been like a frog at the bottom of a well, looking up at the brilliant light of Skycloud domain. ^[1]

She was still a faithful servant of the gods, but she had learned not to underestimate the wastelands. So as she surveyed the tragedy its dark agents had wrought, she was not overwhelmed with anger or indignation. She'd learned to face failure without letting it consume her. Anger alone would serve nothing. Only when you accept defeat could you reflect and study on what you learned could you grow beyond it.

In this aspect, Claudia had far surpassed most of her peers. Why would a woman like her from such a wealthy family be here otherwise?

The twenty or thirty-some remaining students gathered in a line and recovered their belongings. Gabriel, scratching his head through a mop of weed-like golden hair, looked around with a bashful expression. He couldn't help but mutter his thinking. "I haven't seen him this whole time. Did he die out there?"

Drake frowned and looked around as well. It's true, where had Cloudhawk gone?

He couldn't say he was terribly disappointed, but through their conflict he'd developed a begrudging respect for Cloudhawk. He'd nearly killed Drake in Deadwood Forest, but despite the grievous wound it had taught him a valuable lesson. Besides, penetrating a wall of over a thousand soldiers to kill a tribal leader was a feat even Drake had to admire.

The natives had been wiped out. Did Cloudhawk succeed in his assassination? If he lived, had he chosen to try and run?

Drake didn't know anything about Cloudhawk, but as a soldier he was a worthy opponent.

"If the invaders killed him, I'm fine with that." Claudia punctuated her words with a sniff and made no effort to conceal her hatred. "Better I don't have to soil my hands with his unclean blood."

"How could you say something so vile?" Drake's temper flared. "You continue to show our soldiers disrespect!"

"A scoundrel like him is only ever thinking about himself, no matter what he does. He isn't worthy of being called a soldier." Claudia's azure blue eyes were sharp as daggers. She used them to pin Drake in place. "And a man like you, willing to turn your hand on people when they're weak – don't talk to me about respect!"

Women were unreasonable creatures, as obstinate as rocks ^[2]. In war, the best tactics were those that won the battle. If the army's leaders acted like she claimed to, all honest and forthright, then the light of the gods would have long been snuffed out. The two of them glared at each other on the verge of trading blows. Meanwhile, Gabriel kept out of it.

A wounded provisions officer came by, nursing his arm and hobbling on a wounded leg. He was covered in blood from head to toe but paid no mind to his injuries. "Hey, that one you're talking about. Black hair and eyes, right? Skinny but looks like he can take care of himself?"

"Hm?" Gabriel looked his way, puzzled. "You've seen him?"

"He's pretty good, held his own. Killing the sweeper leader made the whole clan go crazy. If not for him, clearing out the natives would have cost us a lot more time and soldiers. We would have missed everything that happened here. Things would have been much worse, they might have even destroyed the whole valley. Hundreds of our bothers would be dead. He's responsible for the fact they're still breathing."

The veteran put a bloodstained cigarette between his lips and took a long drag. He was obviously quite appreciative of what Cloudhawk did. Claudia, Drake and Gabriel were all silent. It seemed like the native leader really had killed him. But if that were true they just couldn't understand why Cloudhawk would ignore his own safety for the three of them. Escaping on his own would have been the wiser choice.

"I was with the three instructors, we saw the whole thing. Man, quite the guy. He held out until we came, several hundred soldiers all on his own. Frankly speaking, it's been a real long time since I've seen a fighter like that. It's a shame he's probably dead."

Dead? The news struck them different. Drake seemed sorry. Claudia, conflicted.

Although Claudia was quick to spew vitriol toward Cloudhawk, she didn't believe he was dead. Someone capable of doing the things he did wasn't going down so easily. Cloudhawk was her nemesis, yes – but he was also the benchmark she measured herself against. If he died before she had a chance to become his superior, that would rankle her terribly.

Gabriel asked, "How did he die?"

"It isn't completely clear. He was badly injured but joined us here at base. He and a group of others fought through the blasphemers and into the main compound. They fought, and then... well, you saw what's left." With a heavy sigh, the soldier pointed toward the remains of their base. Fires were still burning, great columns of flame that just wouldn't go out. Anyone caught inside had to be dead. "We didn't see him or anyone else come back out."

The three trainees stared at the ruin, entranced by the fires. It was unthinkable. Wounded, exhausted, Cloudhawk still ignored clear and present danger to go running into the fight.

The veteran cast Claudia a meaningful glance. “Whether it’s Hell’s Army or Skycloud’s own forces, people like us see noble pride as a cancer. If the Skycloud domain is a tree, then we are the roots. We never see the sun, and our lives are spent in the damp and dark. Down here you can’t avoid the filth, but without us what do you think would happen to those like you – that luxurious foliage, out in the sun? You can look down on our bloodstained hands and call us dirty, but you damn sure don’t have the right to question our qualifications. As far as I’m concerned, whoever that guy was, he was more of a soldier than all the rest of you put together.”

He plucked the butt from his mouth and flicked it into the bloodstained dirt, then hobbled away.

His words were about as wrong as anyone has ever been, in all the history of humanity. How could Claudia not know exactly what kind of person Cloudhawk was?

Her face burned and a blush marked her pale cheeks. Even the deaf would have heard that soldier’s hard words. He didn’t leave anything unsaid, it was like smacking her on the nose and calling her a bad girl. But she knew Cloudhawk wasn’t anything like these men. He was a wasteland scoundrel who’d managed to sneak his way into the elysian lands. The blood of soldiers and demonhunters alike stained his hands. She had to fight the urge to scream this at the soldier and beat him to a pulp.

She swallowed it back.

No matter. He was dead, and if that was how their enmity would end then so be it. As much as Claudia would like to deny it, he’d saved her life. Would she still be able to run a sword through his filthy heart? But... if she didn’t kill him, what about the companion he’d killed? Dead was good... dead was good.

They all recovered their equipment.

Drake’s things were a set of tungsten steel armor and a large sword. Tungsten steel was the sturdiest material in the elysian lands. With Drake’s natural defenses as strong as it was, the armor was a mighty addition. A demonhunter would have to fight hard just to get through them.

Claudia took back her exorcist staff, the seeker's torque, and Tempest. Gabriel's relic, on the other hand, were rather unique. It was a black cord he kept wrapped around his hand. A relic of this sort was not common in the elysian lands – it had to be something without much of a history or a story behind it. It was hard to guess what it might be used for.

The trainees were brought to the base's clinic and made to soak in a medicinal bath. The near mystical concoctions of the elysians were very effective. In one day and one night their bodies would be entirely healed, and no trace of injury would remain.

An ear-splitting ring of a bell arose from outside. Twenty eight young people clambered to their feet and arranged themselves into four rows.

All three instructors were present. Cutter stepped forward, while Natessa and Dumont stood silently in place. The hideously scarred man swept his terrifying gaze over the trainees. And when he spoke his voice was contemptuous. “Well. I've gotta say, your performance during this test was a real fuckin' disappointment. Only one was barely satisfactory. Get out here!”

Everyone's eyes turned toward the one he commanded.

He was neither tall nor short, nor was he particularly strong. He wore a new robe, but his short raven black hair was still a knotted mess. Simple demonhunter armor protected him, and a tattered grey cloak was draped over his shoulders. A black-steel sword was sheathed at his back. His face was hidden behind a grimacing demon mask.

The students shared puzzled glances.

Wasn't this the same guy who was the first to take off all his clothes? The shameless one. Instructor Cutter's next sentence that really put their teeth on edge.

“Starting today, the lot of you are a team. Meet your new team captain – Cloudhawk!”

The young man lifted the mask up onto the top of his head to reveal his coarse, wheat-colored features. He wasn't the most handsome guy, but his face was well put together and his features were delicate. His black eyes in particular were sharp and intelligent. He grinned cheekily at the others, his gaze stopping at the three familiar faces near the back. He gave them a wink, as though to say; *Oh, so you all are still alive.*

Chapter 96

More Progress

Everyone looked at Cloudhawk like they were staring at a ghost.

Meanwhile, the wastelander stood before everyone with a shit-eating grin, like he'd just succeeded in some grand mischief. He'd only survived the massive explosion because he wasn't in this world. Once the danger had passed, he clawed his way back to this reality. When he came back, the commanders quickly took him away to recover, hence why no one knew what had become of him.

What a joke! You think it's that easy to kill me? Truth was, Cloudhawk was well pleased with the situation.

Claudia, Drake and Gabriel stared in absolute amazement. The other students were just as surprised. They'd watched the compound get blown to smithereens. Cloudhawk looked at them and had to acknowledge the satisfaction that tickled his bones. These arrogant jack-asses, from the instructors to the assistants and the students themselves – they all looked at him like a scrub, cannon fodder at best. And then came the reckoning, their nest was completely destroyed!

However, these fellows seemed to be absolutely shameless. Even Cloudhawk was embarrassed by what had happened, but they all had blank faces, like nothing had happened.

Claudia clenched her fists at her side. *Of course. Of course he didn't die!*

She finally had come to accept that she had rid herself of this stain, but here he was. Far from dead, he seemed completely unscathed. Now he was their team captain. Did that mean they would be forced to listen to his orders? This bastard really was like a ghost who refused to leave her alone!

Eckard Cutter had a good view of everyone's faces. "This is a military training facility," he said in his characteristically cold voice. "And a military training facility follows military rules. Your captain is your superior officer, anyone who dares disobey his orders violates our rules. I'm sure I don't need to explain what happens then.

It never occurred to Cloudhawk that he might be foisted into the role of captain.

There were some benefits that came with being part of a special elysian military unit. They had access to the best medicines, weapons, missions, and funds. Out here the opportunity to distinguish yourself was high, and that translated into better positions and material rewards back in Skycloud. Of course, captains received some of the best benefits.

For instance, killing the native clan leader and ‘fearlessly’ attacking Dark Atom invaders added to the prestige of the Polaris family. Individually it didn’t mean much, but it was certainly useful for the family he represented. Reputedly, all of these achievements were recorded and traded back in the city. Families could approach the Temple with their list of deeds and request things they might need. These could be relics, special medicines and so forth. As such, achievements were valued currency for elysian families.

That old greybeard Skye probably already heard the news.

Instructor Cutter looked back toward Cloudhawk. “Say a word or two.”

The three instructors knew Cloudhawk was unpopular. They could see some naysayers, and a few who *really* didn’t like the idea of having him follow this guy around. This had to make Cloudhawk anxious. After all, the screening process had shown that he wasn’t the strongest of this lot, even if he did have a special role.

The instructors didn’t seem to have any interest in helping solve Cloudhawk’s image problem. If he couldn’t solve a small issue like this, then he didn’t deserve the position.

Cloudhawk pulled the mask back over his face. He stepped out in front of the others, and spoke. “Truth is, I don’t want to be captain. Any of you who want the job, you’re free to take it.”

The instructors paused. What was he up to?

Cloudhawk slowly pulled the black sword from the holster on his back. “You get one chance. Beat me, and you’re captain! Who’s first?”

Cloudhawk was using this opportunity to cement his authority. The quickest and most effective way to do that was prove one’s strength, but it was risky. Not everyone could pull it off. If he wasn’t careful, he could be shooting himself in the foot. Cloudhawk

happened to be one of the youngest of the group, nor did he look particularly strong. His decision did not seem very well thought out.

“Me!”

Three voices answered his challenge, the second it was issued. They were - of course - Drake, Claudia, and Gabriel.

Claudia wasn't the least interested in being captain, she knew she couldn't hold on to it. Her motivation was strictly to stomp Cloudhawk's face in. She was desperate for any chance to do just that.

Drake stuck the tip of his enormous sword in the dirt and stared at his new captain threateningly. His loss in Deadwood Forest hadn't convinced him of Cloudhawk's superiority. Now that he had his weapons and Cloudhawk had his relics, the truth would be known. He wanted to find out just how strong this no-name from Skycloud city really was. Whether he was worthy of calling himself a captain.

As for Gabriel, it was neither personal nor did he want the captain's badge. He just wanted the challenge, a test of how deep Cloudhawk's talents ran.

“Alright!” Cloudhawk answered without hesitation. “You three then. Step up!”

Claudia, Drake and Gabriel stepped forward. The rest of the trainees moved back to give them space.

Cloudhawk knew more or less the basics of Claudia's fighting style. Drake was a soldier, he didn't pose much of a threat. The only one he didn't have a bead on was Gabriel, so Cloudhawk decided on a course of action that brought a gasp from the others. “I don't want to waste any time. Three on one.”

The three of them, together? The trainees weren't the only ones surprised.

Dumont's expression was hidden beneath his layers of armor, but he did raise his head from staring idly at the ground. Natessa looked over the young captain more carefully. Eckard smiled at the prospect. The kid had some goddamn balls. He respected that.

Drake took the challenge as a slap to the face. What gave him the right to be so arrogant? It was an insult!

Cloudhawk wasn't going to give them any more of an advantage. "Ten seconds. Make your move or accept me as captain."

Drake and Gabriel were still weighing the situation. After all, winning three against one was hardly something to brag about. All the trainees were young men and women of potential. Who among them didn't have some measure of pride, whatever their background? Claudia had no qualms, however. As energy rushed through the exorcist staff, she raised a crystalline flower-shaped relic in her left hand.

Natessa watched her, narrowing her eyes. "Tempest flower."

The flower-shaped relic rose from her palm to hover over Claudia's head, then began to bloom. Its complicated construction broke apart into a rain of petals, only each petal was a metallic dart that was thin as a cicada's wing. The scene was beautiful, but the magnificent display turned their contest into a dance of death.

The metal petals thrummed with energy. Each one whipped toward Cloudhawk, fast as a bullet. A hundred shots, fired all at once!

Even the likes of Drake was surprised by what he saw. Claudia's display went beyond his expectations. They were so close, and her attack was so sudden. Cloudhawk wouldn't have a chance to use his phasing powers before they reached him. Even if he did, how long could his powers be sustained against the constant rain of attacks like that?

The tempest flower was not your typical concealed weapon.

Its danger lay in executing an immediately and powerful onslaught. A ferocious tide of blows, delivered in an instant. One of the demonhunters who possessed this relic before was capable of summoning so many petals that it blocked out the sun over an entire battlefield. With this relic alone he killed hundreds, maybe even a thousand enemies.

Claudia was not that strong, but she could summon several hundred petals from the relic. And so long as she had the mental fortitude, the flower would continue its assault endlessly, until its target was nothing but chunks of meat.

The Lunae family had famously deep pockets, but it must have cost a princely sum – and many favors – for Garuda to win this relic for his daughter. After all, relics like these weren't merely bought with coin.

As Claudia released her psychic energy into the relic, she also rushed in with a burst of speed. The head of her exorcist staff was spinning madly. It roared like the heart of a tornado.

She soared to the air while glimmering petals swirled around her. For an instant she looked like a goddess, descending from heaven to smite her foes. She towered over the ground in a cloud of menace, putting all her force behind the opening thrust of her staff.

Fast enough. Fierce enough! Claudia drew on her every advantage. Few relics could match the sheer explosive power of the tempest flower, and few fighters could fend off Claudia's close-quarters blitz.

Claudia's shredding tempest was far-reaching. The nearby spectators scrambled backwards, for her wild attack would likely injure three out of every four trainees standing nearby.

Cloudhawk faced Claudia and her vicious first strike. He quickly pulled out a metal-bound tome and threw it at her. As his psychic energy reached out, the book exploded into countless grains of yellow sand. They gathered together, forming into dozens and dozens of slithering dragons. In the same moment, he was encased in a shell of grit.

Petals like rain – a deadly hurricane!

And there it was! Claudia's heart skipped a beat.

This was Cloudhawk's exceptional relic, potent and dangerous. It was this relic that had subdued her so easily back in Skycloud city. Faced with Claudia's own relic, Cloudhawk had to find a way to protect himself. Phasing wasn't going to help, so he had to fall back on the Gospel of Sand.

But Claudia knew the strength of his relic, and knew that using it required tremendous mental strength. Cloudhawk shouldn't be strong enough to call on its powers in an instant like that. So how did he?

Too late for second guesses! She would have to break through.

Claudia's eyes burned with unyielding determination!

Then the spectators were treated to an incredible scene.

Claudia came down toward Cloudhawk, trailed by hundreds upon hundreds of glittering metal petals. Cloudhawk stood his ground, immovable as a mountain and surrounded in a gritty battle suit of sand. Flying petals met whipping sand, crashing into one another like warring storms and knocking each other in all directions. Over two hundred tiny battles took place all around him, but Cloudhawk didn't move an inch. Claudia kept coming.

Just as the two were about to collide, she stabbed her staff at Cloudhawk with a scream. He responded with a sweeping cut from Quiet Carnage.

In the instant spear and sword met, all that which floated in the air around them was blasted away. Cloudhawk skid backwards a few paces, but Claudia was flung into the distance. She spat out a mouthful of blood, her staff clattered as it rolled away. The bones of her right hand were broken.

As the hard ground met her, Claudia's heart sank like the last light of dying embers. *More progress! He's much stronger than he was back in Skycloud city.*

Chapter 97

The True Power of a Warrior

“I win again.”

Claudia got back onto her feet. She gripped her wrist, then snapped it back into place with a sharp hiss. Picking up her staff from nearby and stepped back into the crowd. The others eyed the no-nonsense noble for a few moments.

The golden haired woman had been beaten back with a single blow. Still, everyone could tell that Claudia was absolutely not a weakling. Her psychic ability especially was impressive. Between the other two and her flower relic, Cloudhawk would be in real trouble.

She chose not to. Instead, she decided to admit being beaten.

Accepting defeat was a rare quality for others like her. Most would continue to throw themselves at the matter to save their pride. She gritted her teeth and choked it down, for she knew better than anyone would must have happened. She'd used her tempest flower to add pressure on Cloudhawk, overpower his defenses. All the strength and momentum behind her exorcist staff was at a critical point.

What happened next took her completely by surprise.

Cloudhawk's riposte hit her staff at the precise spot her grip was weakest. He forsook attacking her directly for a much more skillful – if unnecessary – display. His sword cut twice in quick succession. The first one whipped right past the staff and into her, while the other knocked her weapon away.

It all happened in a blink. The other spectators wouldn't have seen.

Claudia knew she'd lost before he said it. Not just lost, she'd been thoroughly beaten.

Cloudhawk's sudden improvement wasn't just physical or psychic. In a matter of one night he'd somehow gained uncanny combat experience. His command of his relics, and his keen judgment was nothing short of excellent.

In a duel, relative strength was a key factor in deciding victory and defeat – but it wasn't everything. Who could say that the weakest of demonhunters could never beat a master? With the right combination of equipment, intelligence, skill and power one could cross any chasm.

Her physical strength didn't come close to Cloudhawk's, nor did her relic manipulation. Although she hated to admit it, he was a far cleverer tactician as well. Technically, he displayed a mastery that would rival instructors of the demonhunter's college.

Claudia quickly quit her claim for his title because she knew it would only end in more embarrassment. As for joining the other two? The mere concept was disgusting. She was a complex and prideful noble. What sort of a victory was won with numbers? Nothing she wanted to own.

He's too strong... so I'm going to need to think of a way to get even stronger!

Claudia refused to accept inferiority to *anyone!*

Cloudhawk had easily put aside a worthy challenger. He hardly had time to gloat before a booming voice ripped through the crowd.

"Let me try!"

Drake Thane tore forward, clad in a full set of titanium armor. He was different from a demonhunter. He was more practiced in speed, strength and other combat abilities. By the first word of his challenge he was already moving. By the second he'd already reached Cloudhawk, sword raised. His weapon hacked down with the final syllable.

A savage cut! The force of it kicked out a fan of dust.

A semi-mystical ability like this came from pure force, no god-given blessing like a demonhunter. Two normal men standing in this blast's path would be more than defeated – they would be smashed to pieces. That was Drake's strength.

He didn't feel his strike land.

An impact like being shot point blank with a handgun struck him in the chest. He looked down and saw a slice in his armor. Cloudhawk couldn't match Drake for sheer speed, but he had an uncanny ability to predict where he'd be. The wastelander easily

sidestepped his attack, and delivered one of his own in one easy motion.

He very much appreciated the heavy armor encasing him. Without it, Drake would likely already be injured.

But how? Unbelievable! Drake stood there stunned, but only for a second. Heaving his man-sized sword, he whipped it toward Cloudhawk again with enough force to split a river. It picked up speed, and split into three searing blades of light. A rainbow of pain, certainly a force to be reckoned with.

The other students gaped at what they were seeing. Under all that armor, how could he move fast as a specter? With a sword that large, how was he able to wield it like it weighed nothing?

Eddies of sand beside him hardened into a shield. The first two blades of light broke through the shield while also knocking him back. The last one slipped through, going right for Cloud hawk's throat. Claudia's rain of blows hadn't overcome Cloudhawk's defense, but Drake did it in two. It was clear how much faster and stronger he was. There probably weren't many in the crowd who thought they could take him, even the melee-focused demonhunters.

Drake wasn't concerned that Cloudhawk might use his phase powers.

He understood it now. His was an irritating trick, but one that required time to summon. He didn't give Cloudhawk any time. Using it also cut the wastelander's speed. Drake wasn't about to fall for the same trick twice.

I'm ready this time, I'm not giving you any chances. Do what you will. I'll cut right through you, no mess. What makes you think you have any chance against me?

This attack was overwhelming, faster and stronger than Cloudhawk could manage. Between Drake's titanium armor and nigh-impervious constitution, he didn't fear reprisal from his new 'captain.' Trading a few dozen wounds for a few hundred seemed worth the risk to him.

The wind rose, kicking up the sand.

Focusing his psychic powers, Cloudhawk turned the shield Drake broke through into half a dozen snakes made from sand. They were large as boa constrictors and entangled Drake as he rushed in. They held tightest to his shoulder and right arm and

eventually dragged him to a stop.

“Bastard! Let me go!” The soldier roared in protest and heaved his muscles. A few of the snakes crumbled, allowing him to wave his sword through the choking sands.

Drake squared up and raised his sword in a posture that suggested he was ready to cut Cloudhawk in half. Only, as impressive as all that movement and shouting was, it gave Cloudhawk more than ample time to get out of the way. At the same time there was a dark flash from his right hand. Another fissure from a black strike appeared soundlessly on Drake’s armor.

Drake was furious. He’d already been caught twice by this bastard’s sword. As Cloudhawk made a retreat, Drake jumped into the air. Both hands wrapped tight around his sword’s hilt and as he brought it down, the edge of it glowed red from friction heat.

His sword was no relic, and Drake was no demonhunter. His weapon was a specially crafted sword from the elysian lands.

Thanks to its unique construction, the sword was able to turn red hot in a fight. Nothing compared to what a demonhunter might do, but it was a terrible addition to Drake’s already formidable person. The tungsten steel was a rare material in the elysian lands with a melting point twice as high as normal steel. The heat coming off his weapon was searing, but would not warp it.

Cloudhawk dodged again, and the sword cut a charred trench in the ground next to him. The stone were melted and the gritty earth turned to glass. The blast of heat that swept by singed some of Cloudhawk’s hair.

Drake’s sword certainly became more troubling, but it didn’t add much to his attack. Strong as he was, a single hit would end pretty much whatever it touched. Whether the sword was burning hot or not didn’t much matter aside from a scary appearance. It was the psychological pressure that was more effective.

A cloud of sand whipped around them. Currents of it carried Cloudhawk away from danger. Inwardly Drake grunted disapproval. *Blind my senses to try and retreat? Hmph! I won’t give you the chance. See if you can get away from this!*

He whipped around like a top, remaining in place. Sand arrows coming at him from all directions were shattered in midair. The ground was quickly covered with sizzling red

sand. It looked like a defensive maneuver, but in fact Drake was gathering energy. The muscle from his arms and legs were taught as bowstrings until he reached his limit. Then his power unleashed, surging through him inch by inch

Boom--!

Those watching were treated to a stunning scene.

His spinning motion was creating a crater in the ground like it'd be hit with a bomb. But where the ground went down, he rose up only to launch forward with imperceptible speed.

Watching from the sidelines, Natessa's expression betrayed interest. "This is..."

Eckard nodded and finished her thought. "Inner Fire, a martial skill that draws on all one's latent potential. There aren't many with the skill required to pull it off. The soldier gathers all his power then directs it from the inside out. He no longer needs to plant his feet and gain momentum from pushing off, because the power all comes from within. He looks calm from the outside, but inside his body is a storm of energy. He wields it well and freely. The Thane family representative knows his stuff."

Drake's attack was so fast he threatened to break the sound barrier. It was unthinkable to most, because someone moving that fast was subject to tremendous outside pressure. But Drake's body was hard as iron, so when he moved through the air fast as a bullet he wasn't worried. He spun toward Cloudhawk like an arrow, his body the shaft and his sword its tip.

This was a high-level martial skill. Spearhead!

Soldiers like him couldn't use psychic powers, so their abilities came from great physical feats. Their bodies were their main tool. 'Spearhead' was an ability used when two armies met on the field to break through their front lines. A demonhunter who could control all the elements were rare, but a martial artist like Drake bordered on mythical.

Soldiers weren't called martial artists, because most didn't elevate it to an art. Only those that could summon their true inner power could be called martial artists, and they were often formidable army leaders. Skycloud city's greatest martial artist was none other than Grand General Skye himself. He was known as 'the human relic' for that reason. His fists could literally crack mountains.

The only other organization with a higher concentration of martial artists was the Temple.

Skycloud's preeminent organization had a special squad called templars. Few outsiders knew of this mysterious group, composed mostly of demonhunters. No one dared to underestimate what these guardians were capable of.

Exclamations of surprise rose up from the crowd.

Drake's unique martial skill shot out like thunder. It was a display far outside Cloudhawk's estimation. People watched as Drake slipped through the sandy air red-hot sword in the lead, spinning like a drill.

Was this how Cloudhawk would be ended?

Drake didn't expect to break his foe's defenses with the spearhead attack. However, the point of it was indomitable forward motion – never backing down. How else could it be called spearhead? It was too late for Drake to hold back, even if he wanted to. He felt it clearly this time, a hit. His sword wasn't met with air, but Cloudhawk's body.

The blade was about two hands wide, and its edge burned at a thousand degrees. It ran Cloudhawk through fast as a bullet. Even the most stubborn life would be snuffed out after a hit like that.

Chapter 98

Playing With Fire

There was no doubt about it. At the last, crucial moment, Drake broke past Cloudhawk's defenses.

Few soldiers were able to use the Spearhead maneuver effectively. Even someone like Eckard, were he in a similar position, couldn't use the maneuver as well as Drake had. He was the pride of Skycloud's new military generation for just that reason. None of the twenty-something trainees that followed him to Hell's Valley could stop Spearhead head-on. For Cloudhawk, caught with his defenses down, the sudden explosion of power from Drake was a disaster.

Had their new captain bitten off more than he could chew? His ass hadn't even settled in his new seat before he started playing with fire too hot for him to handle.

Dumont and Eckard made a move to intervene once they saw Drake using Spearhead, but were stopped by Natessa. They looked at her in doubt as Cloudhawk's body was split gruesomely in half. Each side of his body hit the ground with a heavy thud.

Drake landed solidly on his feet. A maneuver like that was more than draining, to do it he had to squeeze every last drop of power from his muscle cells. Every ounce of potential from deep in his bones had to be summoned, which meant that the burden and potential for injury were high. As a result, even the mighty Drake took heaving breaths as he tried to recover.

Was he... really dead?

He felt a sharp presence against his throat.

He raised his hand to his neck guard to find it had been cut open. A serious gash split the skin of his neck, and fresh blood gushed from it. His hand came away soaked in crimson.

His throat was cut? But when!?

His eyes darted to the two halves of Cloudhawk still on the ground. It dissolved before him, blown away on the wind one yellow grain at a time. Sand. Where he might expect blood or organs, there was only molten grit.

H... how was it sand? He was made of sand!

The panic was not Drake's alone. None of the trainees could understand what happened right in front of them. After such an incredible showing the soldier came back with his throat slit. He fell on his back with blood still spurting from the wound.

The body at his feet wasn't Cloudhawk!

Cloudhawk's true figure gradually faded into reality behind Drake. Blood dripped from the black-gold sword in his hand, gathering along its biting edge. "I did it while you were attacking the fake."

The sandstorm he'd conjured wasn't a ploy to help him retreat. It was to confound his attacker while he used the Gospel of Sand to create a mirror image of himself. His weapon was completely silent, and didn't even cause much vibration from impact, so in all the chaos Drake never even noticed. By the time he did, it was too late.

The higher a relic's grade, the more its functions. Of course, lower-class relics had more limited uses. The exorcist staff, for instance, was used just for its brute force attacks. The Gospel of Sand had many more applications. It was, after all, one of the treasures of the demon Caliph. Its potential was limitless.

Cloudhawk had to thank that strange spirit.

Without his inheritance Cloudhawk wouldn't have been able to match Claudia's martial prowess. He certainly wouldn't have been able to use the Gospel like he had. Absorbing the knowledge trapped in his benefactor's skull, all of that experience in combat and using relics, vastly improved all of his abilities.

Without it, could he afford to be so arrogant?

Slicing a normal man's throat was lethal in all cases, but not necessarily for Drake. Severing his carotid arteries and esophagus, but leaving the spine intact, wouldn't kill him. ^[1] High levels of bodily control allowed him to quickly seal the wounds and begin the healing process, but it would take time ^[2]. The fight was done.

One left.

Cloudhawk resting his sword against his shoulder as he turned to face the final challenger. His eyes settled on the timid blonde-haired man. "Gabriel? Still interested in a scuffle?" He asked with a smirk.

Several dozen eyes turned to him. He bashfully scratched his head, clearly hesitating. "Let me think..."

As Cloudhawk watched he saw the change come over Gabriel's face. It twisted into a hideous snarl and a palpable sense of danger surged from him.

More specifically, his sleeve. A ripple of power burst out almost right away. Was his hesitation a ploy? He was ready this whole time.

"Well, well... look at you."

Cloudhawk was ready to rush in, when he was first met with a wave of almost imperceptible ripples. In his hurry, he carelessly touched a few. His chest, arm, thigh, even his cheek. Cuts opened up all over and blood started to trickle free.

Not good!

He tried to step back but there were more ripples behind him. Another series of cuts began to soak his back with blood. Caught by the strange attack, he could do nothing but stand still as a statue and hope he didn't touch anything else.

Another surprise for the trainees. It was fair enough they didn't see Cloudhawk slit Drake's throat. He'd used cloaking powers, after all. But what about this time? Gabriel stood just where he'd always been, he hadn't even moved. Cloudhawk merely took a step forward and was sliced by some invisible – and impossibly sharp – weapon.

Had the blonde man acted and they didn't notice? He had to be a wind-focused demonhunter.

It was the same elemental proficiency displayed by the female instructor, Natessa. They were able to manipulate wind- and air-type relics, but that didn't necessarily mean their attacks were invisible. Besides, Gabriel hadn't moved a muscle. He'd somehow attacked without omen or sound. ^[3]

What baffling talent for slaughter, terrifying and mysterious.

“So you figured it out? Extraordinary, so few are able to see through my attacks before they die. The truth is, I’ve already started the fight!” He smirked apologetically and scratched at his disheveled hair. Only, the seemingly innocent act of lifting his hand this way cast out a wave of deadly energy.

Cloudhawk whipped his sword before him to knock it aside, amidst a shower of sparks. He managed to block the most critical parts, but more slices appeared on his hands and legs. The previous two challengers had never even managed to draw blood, only for Gabriel to immediately start to cut him apart. The spectators were still dumb to what was happening.

Claudia joined them in her confusion.

She hated this psychopath as much as the other three, but she couldn’t help but admit surprise. Out in Deadwood Forest he’d been on the ropes, but now he showed a deep and mysterious power she hadn’t even begun to suspect.

Careless! Too careless! That was the thought racing through Cloudhawk’s brain.

He stood in place, unmoving. Constricted pupils fixed on Gabriel as he spoke. “Wires?”

“You surprise me. You really do get it.” Gabriel almost sounded stunned when he said. His fingers stretched out from within the sleeve and one could just barely make out wires, thin as spider-silk. “You’re right. This is my relic, ‘shadestring’. While you were fighting Drake, I was arranging my net. At this point, I should warn you that they could slice right through tungsten steel. Soundless, invisible... most never see them coming.”

Claudia watched from the sidelines. She shut her eyes and focused on the tracking torque around her neck. It glimmered, and sent a wave of energy through the entire field. All at once her eyes popped open full of alarm. They were all over the place, hundreds of threads worming their way through the air, creating a deadly fabric. It was especially centered around Gabriel. Each one was filled with intense energy and was thinner than a hair. Too thin to see, much less reflect the light. He was right – without some special skill, it would be all but impossible to notice them.

If Drake had tried his ‘Spearhead’ move against Gabriel, he would have been sliced into thirty neatly carved chunks of meat before ever getting close. Gabriel’s psychic energy far outstripped Claudia’s, even Cloudhawk’s. He could stand shoulder to shoulder with

senior demonhunters, and would be their equal even at his young age.

You would never know by looking at him, but Gabriel had to have one of the strongest psychic abilities in the whole training camp. Even the most experienced demonhunters might struggle against him with a relic in his hand.

Without question, Gabriel was the strongest contender of the three. He also had the advantage of the first move, having set up his ploy while Cloudhawk was busy with the others. Now he controlled the entire field, fatal threads lingering all around Cloudhawk like the fingers of death.

“We all appreciate art.” Gabriel’s smile was bashful and modest. “Naberius calls himself a sculptor, but I prefer weaving myself. You’re definitely strong, but you have no hope of beating us in this situation. You should just give up.”

“You’re so sure you’ll win?”

“Talents you have, but not in tracking. Even though you know my wires are all around, you have no way to tell exactly where. How can you fight what you can’t see?”

“If I want to know where your strings are then I can. I don’t need my eyes, I can hear them.”

It wasn’t a brag, if Oddball could see through any disguise then it had no problem seeing each of Gabriel’s threads. However, his connection with the bird was still tenuous. Fighting with Oddball’s help wasn’t as effective as relying on his own talents.

It must be remembered that shadestring was a relic. Cloudhawk could hear its resonance.

There were at least eight threads surrounding him at the moment. He could feel them. Psychic energies thrummed through each one, which allowed Gabriel to control them without ever having to move.

He lifted a hand. “If that’s the case, then I won’t hold back.”

The eight threads whipped toward Cloudhawk.

He immediately summoned the phase stone’s power as they swept by. The force with which they tore through him very nearly overcame the stone’s phase field. They

would've carved him up on the spot, but instead they harmlessly passed through him. A boulder some short distance away suddenly crumbled into sixteen pieces. Their edges were cleaved to a mirror sheen. Grooves in the ground showed where the lines passed. They looked like they were carved by the wicked claws of a demon.

Gabriel frowned. *He wasn't bluffing. He really can sense them. But how?*

Shadestring was one of the most dangerous relics on record, due in no small part because its attacks were almost impossible to see. Without this advantage, its danger was greatly reduced.

So be it, he thought. It didn't weaken Gabriel's faith.

"So you use your phasing at last, hm? An incredible power, but with strict limitations. That intangibility works against someone who's your equal, but my psychic ability is far beyond what you can handle. Eight threads? Fine. What about sixteen? Thirty two? Sixty four? What about a hundred? What do you think will happen when they reach a thousand?"

Both of his hands shot out.

He felt Gabriel's psychic power reach through all the threads around him. Gabriel had become a spider, and every thread was an extension of his murderous will. They were both the source of his deadly attacks, and the crux of his defense.

Was Cloudhawk really out of his depth this time?

If He'd known what Gabriel could do he wouldn't have been so cocky! But regret wasn't going to win him anything. Now that he knew what Gabriel was capable of, he wasn't so sure this was a fight he could win.

1. The carotid arteries are the two arteries on either side of the neck, the main arteries supplying the brain with blood and oxygen. It's the one you see people checking when they put their fingers to someone's throat to look for a pulse. Without the blood supply from the carotids Drake would have six minutes before brain death.

2. Better be less than six minutes

3. Wind, as it relates to Chinese medicinal theory, is blamed for a lot of bad. It conveys

illness into the body through your nose, mouth and pores. It can arise internally to wreak havoc. So it would make sense that Gabriel would be wind-type, considering his mental status. It makes one wonder if Natessa is a little off her rocker...

Chapter 99

Mortal Coils

Gabriel twitched a finger, and the ground split open.

Again, and stones crumbled.

Cloudhawk juked between them to the best of his ability, treading the line between life and death with every step. His life literally hung by a thread.

Gabriel, meanwhile, as calm as could be. His confidence was deserved, for threads hovered over every part of their battlefield. Attacks could come from any directions, and no matter where Cloudhawk went there were more to meet him. If the strings could slice through tungsten as Gabriel claimed, one shuddered to think what they could do to a human body.

What could Cloudhawk do, besides rely on his phase stone?

“You think you can just hide?” Gabriel’s smirk widened. “Let’s see how you handle this,” he warned.

He very simply crossed two of his fingers.

Cloudhawk sensed a hundred minute threads interweaving. They started to close in like a dragnet. Like a hawk in birdcage, he was caught. With a flick of his wrist Gabriel tightened the net. Stones caught in its path broke apart with frightening vigor.

The rest of the camp watched from a safe distance.

The edges could be seen because of the marks left on the ground. Ten meters away on all sides. A hundred tiny fissures started to extend toward him, everything was carved to pieces. Even though the others couldn’t see what Gabriel was using for the attack, the unsettling realization that it was closing in on all sides was obvious. His seamless, inevitable assault on Cloudhawk’s last defense seemed unavoidable.

The net wasn’t closing in very fast, but that just made the terror worse. If Cloudhawk

wanted to risk forcing his way through, he would have to contend with at least ten of those threads. He was certain that would only serve to slice him to ribbons, even with the phase stone's power. Gabriel already had his second attack planned as well in the event Cloudhawk somehow managed to avoid the collapsing prison.

Shadestring's wires crept closer, thin as silk and without reflection. Most frustrating was the precise control exercised by Gabriel. They moved only as necessary, shadowing their target. No matter how he moved, there seemed to be no way for Cloudhawk to avoid critical injury.

"You think you can tie me down with a strings? Watch me break 'em!"

Cloudhawk threw his cloak around him, vanishing from view. He followed by shoving his black-gold sword into the net and pulling. The strings offered string resistance, but ultimately warped and began to snap until there was a wide enough opening for him to slip through.

Gabriel's eyes widened. "How?"

Cloudhawk slowly reappeared. "It wasn't hard to see that the strength and length of the threads depends on how much psychic energy is in them. Your focus changes from one to the other, and the ones you claim can cut tungsten are the strongest few. Far as I can tell, I can't get through those. But the others? The weaker ones? My sword is more than good enough."

Demonhunters with common perception couldn't pick out the threads because they were extensions of Gabriel's body. He moved them as easily as his own limbs. Meanwhile, relics like Claudia's torque could mark them, but there was a delay between pulses. There was a long enough interval that Gabriel could change the whole tapestry before the next pulse came.

For Cloudhawk to be capable of knowing exactly where they were at all times was unthinkable. But he could do more than that. Aside from being able to read the whole pattern, he also knew which threads were weak and which were strong.

Gabriel had anticipated that Cloudhawk might, by some miracle, find a way through the net. Thus he interspersed the strongest threads throughout it to avoid just such a thing.

The result? Cloudhawk found the weakest point and neatly cut a hole. Gabriel's

masterful plan was rendered worthless. Not even a high ranking demonhunter could do what he did!

Stern concentration hardened Gabriel's face. He poured his focus through the woven threads and they began to move. The whole network of threads hummed with increased power. Avoiding his next offensive wasn't going to be as easy.

Show me. Show me how long you can hold out!

All ten fingers rose, galvanizing a hundred deadly wires!

Gabriel's tapestry was invisible to the audience. They could only guess its intensity based on the rifts appearing along the ground. They watched as it descended on Cloudhawk like a strange, imperceptible gale. Cloudhawk would vanish and reappear, but everywhere he went stones and trees were being sliced apart.

There was no doubt that this attack would be fatal if Cloudhawk could not find a way free. But it was completely silent and completely unseen!

Cold sweat rolled down the back of all who watched. They couldn't help but imagine themselves in that position. What if they were the ones facing Gabriel's tyrannical assault? How long would they last? Within seconds they would be sliced to pieces! Cloudhawk, on the other hand, was managing to dodge everything that came at him. Meanwhile all this time he was gathering strength, preparing his counterattack. A mass of sand had appeared over his head. Granules whirled around each other for a handful of seconds like a gathering storm cloud, until it blotted out the sun. Wide-eyed, the trainees gasped.

"Go!"

The entire mass gushed forward, formless but intense as a waterfall.

That was his plan. Against anything of substance, Gabriel's threads were a deadly threat. But, against the formless they had no worth. The tidal wave of sand was mighty, it was obvious from the sound and momentum. If Cloudhawk put half his psychic power behind it, it would be like being trampled by a herd of bulls. Gabriel's relatively frail constitution would be flattened.

Beautiful!

The eyes of the other students lit up. What an incredible display!

The wall of sand was reflected in Gabriel's vivid eyes. The corners of his mouth twitched upward in a smile, for he knew what it had to cost Cloudhawk. He gestured with his fingers, and the threads retreated. As deftly as though by the hands of a master weaver, they drilled into the ground, whipping back and forth.

"Rise!"

His hands went up just as the tide of sand was upon him. The earth before him split, and a huge section of it was heaved up by a mesh of threads. It was just large enough to protect him as the sand came surging by. It crashed into his makeshift shield of rock and soil, and could not break through.

Many of the granules disappeared one they struck the earthen shield, evaporated like water on hot metal.

This caused Eckard to lift his brows in surprise. "What's this?"

Natessa offered an explanation. "Shadestring is an ancient and powerful artifact. Killing isn't all it can do. A skilled user can manipulate objects by infusing the threads with sufficient psychic energy. Weaving the threads underground and then lifting it up was how Gabriel formed his wall. The net also radiates with power, enough to evaporate the unnatural sand summoned by Cloudhawk. That is what happens when the power of two relics meet."

"That tricky, eh?" Eckard's face was grim. "No way around it."

"All things in reality live in a state of mutual support, and mutual destruction," she explained. ^[1] "Shadestring is indeed very tricky, but its defect is just as obvious. For instance, against fire- or wind- type powers it loses efficacy. ^[2] Against a demonhunter with superior power, his threads could be overcome through sheer force."

Eckard nodded. "Cloudhawk doesn't have any relics of those types, and he doesn't have the psychic power Gabriel has. He took a gamble with that last attack and it cost him. All that squandered strength, it doesn't look like he's gonna win this one."

For all the talking he did Dumont might have been a mute. He simply nodded his head in silent agreement.

None of the instructors were expecting this sort of talent from their students. There was even a ghost of dread in Eckard's heart. Strong as he was, there wasn't anything he could do to protect himself from the blonde youth's undetectable attacks. If he wasn't careful, he might accidentally wander into a deathtrap and never know it. He'd be sliced up before he could defend himself.

How was Cloudhawk supposed to overcome this challenge? Any way one looked at it, he was caught in a losing battle.

"Cloudhawk isn't as simple as he seems." Eckard said after a moment. "He's got some good combat experience, some things even I don't fully get. That doesn't come from talent, it comes from countless days out in the battlefield. It's beaten into you by conflict. But he's so young. Skills like what I'm seeing would be impossible even if he came out his momma's womb swinging his fists. Crazy... Shame he's a demonhunter, he'd make quite a martial artist."

"Who says a demonhunter can't master their inner strength and become a martial artist?" Natessa challenged him in her soft voice. "This battle is not over yet. Keep watching, there is more to see."

Cloudhawk was already grasping at straws. Was there really more up his sleeve?

His wave of sand hadn't so much as scratched Gabriel. Meanwhile, Gabriel was making Cloudhawk dance like a puppet with his strings. What were his last attacks, but ways to find out what the wastelander's limits were? He knew now what Cloudhawk was capable of, his force, defense, every quality in addition to his relics. He'd calculated it all and knew that Cloudhawk had to be exhausted mentally. Meanwhile, Gabriel had used only half of his limit. His prey couldn't keep up the fight for much longer.

Alright. This has dragged on for long enough. Time to end it.

Gabriel shoved his hands forward, causing the screen of dirt and rocks to explode forth. Deadly strings and rocks like shrapnel fired toward Cloudhawk. Yet, the instant he allowed his guard to drop Gabriel's eyes were blinded by a gust of sand. The air turned opaque as muddy waters. He couldn't see more than ten meters in any direction.

There it was!

Cloudhawk's wave of sand looked like his final hope to try and bury Gabriel. In truth,

it was meant to make his opponent draw up his defenses. If your enemy couldn't see you, there were limitless ways one could attack! Cloudhawk hid himself in the tidal wave, buying enough time to scout and prepare. Passive was not his style.

“You're clever, but not clever enough to beat me.”

1. This refers to a tenet in five element theory. The theory posits that all things are made of a combination of wind, water, fire, earth, metal, and wood. Not the elements themselves, necessarily, but the properties of these elements. These elements reside in a delicate balance, where one simultaneously 'feeds' one element and 'drains' another. Here is a chart to explain. Complicated, I know. There's a reason traditional medicine doctors study for five years before they're allowed to pick up a needle. The two basic cycles are the 'sheng' or support cycle, and the 'ke' or restriction cycle. Support works like this; fire supports earth (like how the ground is more fertile after a forest fire), earth support metal (the compression and component-rich ground creates metal), metal supports water (I got nothing for this one), water supports wood and wood supports fire (obvious). On the other end is the restriction cycle, as follows; fire restricts metal (metal melts), metal restricts wood (metal cuts down trees), wood restricts earth (woodlands take over plains), earth restricts water (stops encroaching oceans, rivers), water restricts fire (obvious). Things in parenthesis are just how I remember the relationships. Long story short, now you know the theory behind what Natessa is talking about.

2. 'Fire restricts metal.' See? Cool, right?

Chapter 100

Who Else?

Gabriel twitched his fingers, and the motion was answered with a series of vibrations along the strings. Because the filaments were all tangled together, the vibrations spread into all of them. They grew stronger as they traveled until the air hummed like Gabriel had plucked a guitar string. But the keen resonance was like no stringed instrument anyone had ever heard.

Nature's greatest weaver was the spider. To them, each strand of silk was like an extension of the self. Through even the slightest sensation along the string, they exerted absolute control over their domain. Gabriel could achieve the same result. Cloudhawk couldn't hide anywhere in which his threads extended.

"I found you!"

Gabriel clenched his hands, and the threads closed in. He was determined to finish this contest right here, right now.

For the moment Cloudhawk remained in his phase state, but the flaw was obvious. He might be immune to harm, but neither could he harm anyone else. Moreover, once he was between dimensions moving around became more difficult. With another pass from Gabriel's threads and his psychic energy quickly waning, how much longer could Cloudhawk keep this up?

Inwardly, Gabriel had to admire his opponent.

The fact that Cloudhawk was in possession of so many relics at his young age didn't matter much. More striking was their varied types. Gabriel had never met anyone who could use so many different kinds of relics, it was frankly incredible. Given time, Cloudhawk would almost definitely grow to be stronger than Gabriel. But for now, he was still green.

Good enough. Time to begin!

His hands rose, revealing his next offensive.

Another net, much thicker and stronger than the last, fell over the area. It was the same as before, only this time Cloudhawk was out of strength and Gabriel had more to pour into his threads. The mesh was finer and the filaments stronger, No blade was going to carve an opening this time.

It was over! Gabriel clenched his fist.

The net contracted, leaving its tell-tale marks along the ground. The indomitable crush of it sent a shiver through the crowd.

Cloudhawk felt it coming; from the top of his head, from under his feet. North, south, east and west. His enemy's web was closing in all around. Dangerous did not begin to describe his predicament. A moment of carelessness and he would be a corpse. Meanwhile, Gabriel was speculating on how Cloudhawk would respond.

Sitting around and waiting for death was definitely not Cloudhawk's style. But, with the net closing in and nowhere to go, he wasn't left with many options. Phasing was his only choice, but once the field surrounded him he was forced to slow way down. The net would be on him, hundreds of threads, the longest he could hope to persist was three seconds before his mental energy was totally drained.

Would that be enough? Gabriel couldn't think of anything other way Cloudhawk could evade him.

Cloudhawk did not pause. He threw up hi cloak, and vanished once again into thin air. As the net continue to draw in he raced to the border. With the phase stone activated, Cloudhawk attempted to slip through. They fought him, but he eventually managed to fight through the resistance.

Invisibility again?

Gabriel found that he couldn't even determine Cloudhawk's position through the string's vibrations anymore, but he did not remain idle. He gathered another large net of filaments and sent it through his string prison. It swept across the circular field, but upon reaching the other side –

Bastard! He already escaped?

Cloudhawk was faster than he gave him credit for. By the time he realized his error, a black-gold sword was hacking toward his face. But... Cloudhawk had to use the phase

stone to escape his net, and that slowed him down. How did the wastelander appear in front of him so quickly? Like he wasn't slowed at all.

What Gabriel did not know was that Cloudhawk's cloak was also an exceptional relic. It didn't just make him invisible, it also sharply increased his speed. It and the phase stone made a very effective pair, for it counteracted the stone's drawbacks. He slipped through Gabriel's net almost the instant he summoned it.

Most of his threads were tied up in the net. What was left for him to use in his defense?

Hastily pulling a few strings free, Gabriel whipped them into the sword's path. The force of their collision knocked him back several paces. For a moment the two struggled. Cloudhawk heaved his sword against the filaments and they started to give way. Quiet carnage's keen edge inched closer to Gabriel's face. He couldn't compete with Cloudhawk's strength. Gabriel's handsome face seemed destined to be horribly maimed.

"Naberius, it's your turn!"

There were two people locked in the young man's body – or, more accurately, two souls. Naberius was his darker side, and once he awakened his bloodthirst would not be abated. However, his malignant nature came with at least twice the speed and strength Gabriel possessed. With Cloudhawk weakened, how was he going to fend off the madman?

He had to deal with him before Naberius woke up.

A bestial growl rumbled deep in Cloudhawk's throat. Veins engorged throughout his eyes and in the depths of his pupils burned a crimson fire. All the white turned sanguine red, nightmarish to behold.

Pop! Snap! Gabriel's strings were breaking, though Quiet Carnage kept it silent. He only knew by the sharp vibrations as they were severed.

Gabriel felt Naberius stirring within. The tides would turn when the sculptor came out, he knew it. He just had to hold on. The two men stared eye to eye and Gabriel could see the burning fires. A stifling intensity was crushing him, like he could stop breathing at any moment. Those fires were almost infectious, reflecting in Gabriel's wide emerald gaze. It was haunting.

He felt a psychic power engulf him. To him it felt like his brain was splitting in his skull.

Cloudhawk's sword bit into pale flesh. A spray of blood burst out!

With a cry, Gabriel hit the ground and rolled several meters away. The cut stretched from his shoulder down to his abdomen, deep enough to cut into the cavities below. Writhing organs were visible to the naked eye. None were lethal, for Cloudhawk had held himself back. It was the only reason Gabriel was still alive.

Gabriel took a long time to recover cognizance. He shook his head, extinguishing the crimson fires that lingered in his green eyes. Little by little he felt the dictatorial presence in his mind recede. Although his physical wounds were grave, the thing that terrified Gabriel the most was how Cloudhawk had gotten into his head.

What had he done? With just a look, he almost totally shattered my mind! For just a moment Gabriel had completely lost himself in those fires. Like a helpless lamb to the slaughter.

It happened in an instant, so quick even the instructors didn't notice. But in moments like that, on the razor's edge between life and death, everything could be decided in an instant.

Beyond the fact that it happened at all, most incredible was that his power was not derived from any relic. It came from somewhere inside him. He'd never heard of anyone doing something like that without a relic to focus their power. It was unnatural, yet Cloudhawk had somehow managed to do it.

All of it was simply beyond the reality he knew.

Gabriel looked up at whatever monster this was. Cloudhawk stood over him, catching his breath. He returned Quiet Carnage to the sheath on his back. Dozens of wounds criss-crossed his body, but the threads caused very narrow wounds. Even now they were stitching closed, and none of them were a serious threat.

"I've lost."

His admission was a great relief.

Cloudhawk looked out over the crowd. In a voice thick with pride and anger he shouted. "Who else?!"

The others exchanged quiet glances. He could still fight? He went on as they shifted uncomfortably. "If no one else wants to take a shot, then it's decided!"

Shit, he is shameless. Cloudhawk could barely stand but he was still putting himself up on a pedestal! Yet after what they'd just witnessed, no one dared look down on the crude young man. He didn't take Claudia, Drake and Gabriel on all at once, but he did still beat them in succession. Formidable opponents, each one. He was strong – at least strong enough to be captain.

"You three!" Cloudhawk turned his eyes onto his defeated opponents. "There's a price to pay for everything we do in this world. If you don't pay for your pride then anyone will feel like they can challenge their captain at any time. You've failed, so now you're going to tell me how to punish you for it."

Gabriel responded the fastest. "I accept your leadership. Anyone who wants to challenge you in the future will have to get through me first!"

Drake heaved a sigh. "From now on I'll listen to your every command or be subjected to punishment by military law."

Cloudhawk nodded his head in satisfaction. His eyes darted to the last challenger.

Claudia felt a churning in her stomach like she'd swallowed a fist full of flies. She knew if she let him open his mouth again the insult would be unbearable. She spoke up. "A loss is a loss, I have nothing to say. I never had any interest in the position anyway."

That was an unacceptable attitude. She couldn't even suffer through a simple pledge of loyalty? But Cloudhawk didn't care, he accepted it.

There were others out there in the crowd, trainees with more talent and abilities he wouldn't necessarily be a match for. But now Drake and Gabriel were firmly in hand, convinced of his superiority. Claudia wasn't happy with the result, but she had lost in full view of everyone. She would have no choice but to listen to his orders. Victory had earned Cloudhawk three mighty henchmen.

Whether there were others who disagreed with Cloudhawk's appointment, they wouldn't be foolish enough to try their hand now. It wasn't just Cloudhawk to contend with anymore. Anyone who wanted the title for themselves would have to be good enough to get through those three before they even had a shot.

“Good. Very good. Now you’ve got yourself some underlings!” Eckard nodded delightedly as he made his way to Cloudhawk. “You’ve proven yourself as captain. You all have a day to get your shit together, then the training starts! Dismissed!”

Eckard turned away.

Natessa gave him a slight nod, then the three instructors each went their separate ways.



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