

Chapter 066 – Downtime: Meetings, Reunions & Skirmishes

28 Calistril – 6 Pharast (March) 4708
Korvosa, Varisia

[Scene #1] Downtime (Week #3)

As a new month began with Spring weather slowly approaching, Korvosa was as calm as it had been since the unexpected death of King Eodred II. There was even a bit of excitement and anticipation in the air for the Magical Games that were fast approaching. And while life had returned to normal for most of the citizens of the city, would it be the same for the Harrowers...?

Danse:

To Danse, little else mattered aside from the pursuit of Yargin. Over the course of five days, Danse relentlessly stalked Silas from a distance, watching his every move like a hawk - well, rather, like an owl. Moroza fluttering silently overhead, Danse wandered through the network of Korvosa's streets and alleys - sometimes engaging an audience in an ostentatious display of skills and daring magical shows, other times skulking in the shadows with his hands on the hilts of his scimitars when shadowing the evasive Silas. Five days pass, and little of Danse's determination had waned. He continued to trail Silas for the time being - as a wandering performer, he found little need to keep a secure home; inns and taverns were always available for those who attracted attention - and when Danse needed to be, he sure was flashy. In doing so, Danse finally perfected his routine - a dazzling display of swordsmanship and illusion blended with magical tricks and an old, Elvish tune from Danse's form of entertainment - and, most certainly, combat - called the Bladesong!

Adding true magic to his performance repertoire took Danse a bit longer to get a handle of than he would've originally imagined. Eventually though, he started to get into a good groove as the week went on and his performances slowly started to return to the standards he typically reached before the change.

Somehow finding a tiny bit of spare time, Danse decided to poke around the more studious area of East Shore! Apparently, there were rumors of the Magical Games being held within Korvosa's walls? Danse wouldn't pass up an opportunity to witness the grand and fantastical - and perhaps learn or incorporate some of the magic into his own acts.

Wandering through the quiet streets of East Shore – heavy with the military presence of the Brigade – Danse found it rather hard to believe that Yargrin would've been able to stay hidden in the district for as long as he had (though using that logic, he had to admit that it would've been a good spot to do so if he could've pulled it off). As he eventually made his way back across the bridge towards the heart of the city, he caught a glimpse of young Kurstin running late to class!

Danse's simultaneously focused yet carefree attitude stuck with him in all his meanderings around the East Shore. He flashed a quick grin towards Kurstin - perhaps Danse would get to see his inventions at work during the magical show. He bumbled around the streets, eyes both his own and his owl's scouring the vicinity for signs of Yargin

Danse was, however, inclined to investigate the old man's rumors about Yargin's soul wandering the area. In preparation to enter the Gray District, Danse comes up with a curious thought - if ghosts and such spirits were proven to be real, why couldn't he have a conversation with the one ghost he knew? While in some private room, Danse brought Zellara's deck, expertly flourished the cards in his elegant

hands, and placed them down before him as the image of Zellara had. "Zellara - I am in need of possible assistance. While we have killed Gaedren, another of his men escaped - and, allegedly, is among the wandering dead. I know little of the subject so I once again seek your guidance - should you be listening, I would request more of your wisdom and knowledge. Furthermore - if you tracked Gaedren initially, I would be very glad to know of any additional servants not slain - and perhaps where they may be." Regardless of the outcome - or if there even is one, Danse trailed towards the Gray District in search of the wizened man.

With the cards flourished in front of him, Danse waited patiently for a response; who knew how long it might take for a spirit to reply back. After about 10 minutes or so, Danse shrugged in acceptance at a lack of response before making a move to leave the private room he had claimed for his spiritual experiment. Before he could open the door himself, a gust of wind slammed the door open and shot through the space, throwing the cards all about before landing all over the small room. Danse would've thought nothing of the occurrence if it wasn't for two things. One, the fact that every window and door in the inn seemed to be closed; and Two, every single card but three were flipped face down, the three face up stacked on top of each other a bit too neatly to be mere coincidence. Closing the door, Danse noted three cards (*The Betrayal*, *The Survivor* & *The Brass Dwarf*) neatly stacked on top of each; what their possible meaning could be - if any - was up for Danse to decide...



Leaving the inn to make the long walk through the length of the Midland District, Danse eventually came across the walls that separated the Gray from the rest of the city. Passing through it, he meandered about a bit before returning to the general area where he had met the wizened man previously. There appeared to be no trace of him. A Danse waited, he did a general survey of the area to no avail; as far as he could tell, there was no sign of the man or the ghost of Yargin as he had claimed...

The reading left Danse equally mystified as it did energized - a mind perhaps too intelligent for its own ambition, Danse drew parallels between the cards and everything which could possibly offer a tantalizing prospect at a lead towards Yargin; Danse was convinced every dwarf he met in passing was secretly responsible for Yargin's disappearance; every friend he had was considered a traitor in waiting. Where many would struggle to make heads or tails of the reading, Danse relished in the paranoia awakened by the cards - and what little was there to besides chase every plausible lead?

In particular, the traitor card was too well-timed for Danse to ignore. It lined up perfectly with his view of Silas - and perhaps Danse was simply looking for an excuse to confront him directly. Rather than watch from afar, Danse waited for an opportune moment to interrogate Silas in a more direct way. He waited for a time where Silas was cutting across a dark alleyway, away from most prying eyes - and using his owl to scout the vicinity and ensure 'backup' was quite far away - before casually sidling up nearby, donning his usual grin and amicable demeanor. "Well, Silas - it seems we meet again. Now, I

enjoy - as they say - cutting to the chase, quite literally in some cases...tell me, Silas, is what you said about Gaedren and your current involvement with him true?"

"What the Hells man!?! You nearly gave me a heart attack!" Silas joked after turning around and seeing the performer behind him. It was early evening in Korvosa, and though there were still many people out and about, on this particular side street, Danse and Silas were the only ones there for the time being. "That again? What, you don't believe me anymore? I told you I didn't know anything. And if you really wanted to ask, you could've just done it at the bar. Doing it here makes me think you're going to ambush me or something!" he added with an easy smile. A smile that did not match his eyes; currently intense and staring directly into Danse's. Before Danse could respond, he mentally heard Moroza share that someone was coming from behind down the street...

"If you really wanted to speak the truth, Silas, you would have said so at the bar," Danse pleasantly offered in response - he brought both scimitars from their scabbards and lazily swirled each in the air once, twice, thrice as a subtle method of intimidation. "Now, my friend, I am afraid the truth must be cut free in other ways."

Fargrim:

Fargrim spent much of the week working in the kitchen at the Boar and Bear with his new Cook's Utensils. He was getting better at cooking and even made some better than decent meals for himself and Grandol.

In the evenings, Fargrim knew that he should probably keep looking for Yargrin but he was captivated by the idea of Blackjack. He spent time in North Point looking for anything he could find that may have led him to the vigilante.

Spending a few days walking through the North Point District, Fargrim was unable to find any leads related to the mysterious person who had spared his life. Though there was much talk about the incident and whispers of whether Blackjack had finally returned, there wasn't a trace of evidence – as far as Fargrim could tell – that he could've used as a clue to track down the figure or learn anything more about them...

"Damn, that's pretty good! Grandol, come try this." Fargrim held out a large wooden spoon with the beef braised in red wine with root vegetables from the cellar. It was quite good.

"You're coming along fella. Cooking can be the gateway to honor for those like you. Creating something that brings joy helps to make up for past misery. Next I'll teach you to make sausages and dried meat that you can take with you on your journeys." Grandol commented.

Fargrim was pleased that his food had been accepted so well by the customers at the Boar and Bear. Grandol told him he wanted to make it a part of the menu and it needed a catchier name than "Plate of Meat". Never far from Fargrim's mind was the thought of his girls so he immediately named his signature dish "Vistra's Amber Stew". He knew it was a sappy name but he was trying to stop bottling up his emotions lately and cooking had helped him with that. He was still learning and not everything came out right but Grandol would step in and salvage most of it. If something turned out really bad, Fargrim would save it for himself for dinner.

The rest of the week was spent working at the Boar and Bear but now as a cook instead of the dishwasher. After the dinner rush he would clean himself up and wander the streets thinking about regrets. From time to time, he would casually ask about Blackjack or Yargrin but he knew that he didn't have a knack for investigation. He was good at getting people to talk to him but not great at sniffing out

info from nothing. If he saw Danse again, he would tell him what he had learned. Otherwise, he would worry about other things.

Randomly wandering through the city streets at night proved rather unfruitful for Fargrim. Nobody he reached out to had ever heard of Yargin and most of the stories revolving Blackjack were the simple myths and legends that everyone knew all too well.

On his way home after another unsuccessful night, Fargrim spotted someone he recognized up ahead on a side street. Turning down it, he called out to them as he had some information that he wanted to share...

Danse & Fargrim:

Worried it might be trouble, Danse momentarily turned around to see who it was approaching them from behind, only to find that it was Fargrim of all people coming towards him. As he processed all of this, he hesitated for a moment. That split second was all that was needed. For as soon as he saw an opening, Silas bolted away from the scene as fast as he could down the street and into the crowd at the next intersection!

Danse's speech, however, was cut off by the sound of a familiar Dwarf. The split-second in which Danse's focus momentarily wavered from Silas was also all Danse needed to reaffirm his views on Silas - fleeing in such a way was, according to Danse, an admittance of guilt. With the full force of Danse's obsessive passion for hunting down what remains of Gaedren, Danse knew precisely what his goal was. His mind flashed back to the cards revealed in the 'reading' he chanced on; now two cards fit in - The Betrayal and The Brass Dwarf. Only for a moment did he even process what 'The Survivor' could imply.

Danse gave a scar-marred smile towards Fargrim and bowed his usual performer's bow. "Greetings, Fargrim - care to join me in this wonderful chase?" he calmly spoke before turning heel and pursuing Silas. The fervor with which his scimitars spun increased in an intricate dance of swordsmanship and bedazzling maneuvers as he charged forward!

With a surprising leap of agility, Danse quickly strode right next to Silas, scimitars barely visible with how quickly they blurred through the air. Danse smiled. "Going somewhere, Silas?"

In a blur of movement, Danse and his blades quickly closed the distance that Silas had made mere moments ago. Surprised that he had failed to getaway, Silas cursed and drew his longsword in a protective manner ready to fight the Bladedancer off.

Fargrim charged forward as well to close the additional distance to Silas. "We just want to talk!" he yelled. Fargrim then swung his warhammer at Silas' legs hoping to trip him.

Sprinting ahead after Danse, Fargrim quickly made up the distance between himself and Silas, though moving as fast as he was, his aim was off and his hammer strike to the Half-Elf's knees just missed wide.

Now finding himself outnumbered, Silas quickly scanned the area for an escape route or some way to help his chances. Not seeing much that could help him, he did the next "best" thing he could think of. Diving away from his pursuers, he lunged for the nearest person on the street - a young man about 15ft away - and took hold of them, using them as a human shield against Danse & Fargrim. "I think we all need to calm down and have a nice and easy conversation. That way no needs to get hurt or killed..." Silas began, doing his best to keep some space between himself and his attackers. A small

crowd had formed around the three figures on the street, staring with mute horror and anticipation; and outside of the wind, it was deathly quiet...

Predicting Silas to be a slippery one - most of Gaedren's followers fought dirty; though to be fair, so did Danse - the swordsman reached into his pocket and brought out three mundane, steel-tipped playing cards. Spreading them in a fan in his tattooed hands, he lashed out thrice with each magically-imbued card, landing three strikes as Silas's flesh is cut by the sheer speed each card is thrown!

Still weaving his scimitars in the air in some strange, unpredictable dance, Danse pursed his lips in a whistle - Moroza swooped down from above and harried Silas by raking her talons across his face before she flew up and out of reach, providing Danse with an easier time as he stepped forward, gave a few feints, and finally slashed down with each scimitar in tandem!

Fargrim swung at Silas' legs again in another attempt trip him though the maneuver failed once again.

Fargrim didn't really know who this Silas was but already didn't like him for making him run after him. Fargrim growled at Silas "This will be easier on you if you let go of that person. If you don't, I have no problem going through them to get to you. Human shields don't work on me, but I will make you suffer if I have to hurt someone else."

Silas was battered, smacked and dazed by both magic and hammer as he tried to make his escape. With his adrenaline pumping, he didn't immediately realize how injured he was or how much his reflexes and senses had dulled. So, when Moroza dove from the sky to harry him momentarily, he was completely unaware of the advancing Danse's blade coming down right across his exposed shoulder...

It seemed for the briefest of moments that Danse's momentum would cause him to shear through Silas and leave him dead or dying on the ground. But at the last moment - possibly due to the aid of Danse's new magical abilities - he was able shift the strike from a slash to a "whap" with the side of his blade, causing Silas to fall limply to the floor, alive, but in very rough shape. The man he had taken hostage moments before tore himself away and out towards the crowd who had mostly stayed to watch the scene in front of them. In the near distance, the sound of clomping hooves or feet could be heard heading towards the intersection Fargrim and Danse now found themselves in...

Fargrim growled at Silas, "If you struggle or scream, I'll ****ing cripple you." He slung Silas over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. Then, to Danse, he said "I used to do a lot of business around here. Let me get my bearings and see if there is somewhere we can get off the streets "

Danse's eyes flashed with vindictive glee as he watched Silas crumple. Something inside Danse told him he should feel an inkling of remorse for the other former prisoner of Gaedren, though memories of Silas's even plausible connections to his former torturer destroyed any trace of pity. In one gaudy maneuver, Danse wiped the blood from each scimitar with two swipes against his blue robes as he delivered each to their respective scabbards.

Some macabre instinct kicked in as Danse gave a sweeping bow to the crowd before turning to address Fargrim. "Thank you for the help, Fargrim. If you permit me to be honest, I never quite expected to get this far. I suspect him to be an ally of Yargin's. If you have somewhere safe to bring him, I would be interested in it."

Suspecting some form of guard to arrive shortly - and hoping his reputation would carry him, Danae gave a grin towards the unfortunate man used as a living shield. The tattooed Half-Elf called out to the crowd; "As the victim can likely attest to, no wrong was done here tonight. The streets are safe from

another bandit," he called to the crowd in hopes of alleviating any undue attention which may be brought on by the city guards.

Looking around the Heights District, there wasn't much that Fargrim could remember regarding hiding spots. There were a series of alleyways that he thought might potentially work. Otherwise, besides rather a few rather upscale bars and establishments, he recalled a few of the houses that he used to visit in past line of work.

As Fargrim thought on places to go, the sounds of an approaching group drew closer...

Fargrim saw a nearby bar and scooped up Silas and carried him in. He walked straight to the bar. It was a very high-end establishment. "Excuse me, my friend here is feeling a bit under the weather. Do you have a quiet room in the back or basement we can take him to get him a bit of rest?" As he says this, Fargrim ploped a small bag containing 100 GP on the bar so that it falls open slightly and the bartender could see the contents. "As you can imagine, he would be terribly embarrassed if anyone knew he was in this state so discretion is appreciated."

The bartender looked from bag, to the rag-tag group in front of her, to back to the bag. "Of course. Right this way sirs." She replied as she quickly grabbed the sack of gold in front of her. Though more than a few of the patrons gave the three men various looks as they walked by, none made any comment – well comments directed directly at them that is.

Danse gave his customary smile and wave towards the tavern's general populace, purely out of sheer habit. He casually sidled along Silas and Fargrim as the bartender led the three down; the implications of Fargrim were certainly easy to pick up on. Any whisper or glance thrown Danse's way were shrugged off like water on a roc's back - no amount of suspicion or hostility could prevent Danse from accomplishing anything on his relentless quest to bring justice to the last of Gaedren's men.

Brought to the back of the establishment to a small, enclosed dining area with a few tables, chairs & couches spread throughout, the bartender led the group in before adding, "I don't want to know what you're up to, but if you wreck this place or I find a dead body in here, you'll have more than just the Guard after you." With a curt nod, she turned to leave.

Before the bartender left the room, Danse fished out a gold from his bag and called out- "Hey, could you manage some seeds or something?" he smiled, shaking the owl on his shoulder and instructing her to trail behind the bartender, make her way to the main room, and keep her eyes and ears out for any mention of what transpired.

"If your bird leaves any droppings on the bar you're out of here." the woman replied in annoyance before pocketing the coin. Moroza threw a withering glare towards the bartender before reluctantly following before the door was closed behind her.

As soon as she left, a small groan could be heard coming from the half-elf. With Danse's and Fargrim's medical knowledge – or lack thereof that is– the duo was unable to tell if the groan - and the fact that his bleeding had slowed greatly from earlier - was a good or bad thing...

Upon the bartender's exit, Danse whirled around and quickly hoisted Silas into a present chair. He patted the man down and removed any coins or weaponry possibly hidden before binding his wrists and ankles to the chair and looking Silas directly in the eye - Danse cared little for Silas's wellbeing or survival; the only thing he desired was information. "Silas, Silas - making this more difficult, are you?" Danse began with a click of his tongue. Intimidation is an act, in some sort of way - and Danse approached it as usual; a cheery smile over his tattooed features, expression beaming and bright. "Now, tell me - why did you run? What are you hiding? If survival is in your interest, just tell me what you know about Gaedren, Yargin, or anyone else who worked with Gaedren. All of it."

"I don't know you, but my friend here does. You still have a real chance to make it out of here alive if you tell my friend what he wants to know. If not, we will make sure you suffer before you die. I paid the owner of this place a lot of money to make sure that nobody will come looking for you."

After roughing Silas up a bit to wake him up, Silas sat up and looked at both of his captors in the eye. "Why did I run?" he began to wheeze out, "I ran because it looked like you were going to cut me down, (cough), and clearly I was right." Pausing to spit what looked like an unhealthy amount of blood onto the floor, he continued. "That bastard isn't paying me enough to die for him, so if you want Yargin, (cough) you can have him. He found me not long after your run in with him and asked me to both hide and smuggle him out of the city. Though I hate his rotten guts like you do, he paid me a lot up front and I'm not exactly swimming in gold pieces over here (coughing fit). Was going to smuggle him out next week during the Games when the city would be distracted and the borders softer than normal. I can tell you where he is and get you close to him (another coughing fit). No tricks. No games (cough). All I ask is if you're going to kill me, make it quick."

Danse, meanwhile, held Silas's struggling form by the chin, expression akin to a cat finally capturing an elusive mouse. "Oh, Silas - it eludes me how one of Gaedren's lambs can aid a previous captor from escaping justice. Really, shame on you," he lightheartedly commented with a click of his tongue. "Take me to where Yargin is hiding out. All I desire is to reduce the pile of filth to mere ribbons. If you're low on coin, I suppose I can help - though if I find you tolerating the presence of any of Gaedren's minions, I'm afraid you'll be lumped into the category of guilty by association." Provided Silas didn't die, of course - and, presently, Danse didn't quite care.

Moroza sent a "So Far, All-Clear" sensation to Danse from the main room. He also received some extraneous positive feelings about the quality of the seeds she was currently nibbling on as well.

Silas shrugged weakly before croaking out "The world's not always so black and white... (cough) and sometimes, you have to do some 'distasteful' things to stay alive. I know you learned that much at least from Gaedren." He paused to chuckle a bit before falling into another bout of coughing. Wiping away some bloody spittle with the back of his hand, he continued. "I don't know where he is, he's moving, but I know where he will be. On the first day of the Games, there'll be a boat leaving the Old Dock. Yargin and whoever else he bribed with Gaedren's leftover money will be there." Sighing for a moment as if a weight had been lifted off of him, he closed his eyes and asked, "So what now. (cough) You going to kill me? Let me go? Bring me to a doctor-" he couldn't finish as another aggressive coughing fit took hold of him...

In response to Silas, Danse let out a mirthful chuckle. "You also have to do some pretty distasteful things to have me remove the burden of your head from your shoulders," Danse replied. He paused. "But, you know - I killed Gaedren; I won't hesitate to kill another of his. Here's the deal; you provided me the information I wanted to about Yargin, right? That's fine with me. That's all I wanted to know. If you're struggling with coin, I'll give you enough to get by for some time - if you don't die before I call a doctor, that is. You can do all the shady business you want after - I don't judge, but Yargin - and all of Gaedren's men - are off limits, you hear?" Only then did Danse notice how much of a bad state Silas was in. Well, that was unfortunate.

Hoghead said to Danse "Look, I already spent 100 gold on this idiot. I'm not paying for no doctor. He's good as dead anyway. I say we carry him out and dump him in an alley somewhere. Then we can either get the rest of the crew and go after Yargin or do it ourselves. I don't know the guy or have a beef with him personally, but I've got your back and if he needs killin', I'd be happy to help."

Danse turned and raised a brow at Fargrim's words, distorting the tattoos inked across his face in the process. "You spent that coin, and I thank you for that. He's an ***** who wanted to help Yargin escape." Danse paused again - his lips press together. "But, you know, he was one of what I was -

Gaedren's Lambs, and something about leaving him in a dumpster, covered in scars, would make me more like Gaedren than anything else. It's exactly what Gaedren did to me. Quite literally." Danse whistled, commanding his rather selfish owl to rise and sweep around the vicinity in search of a clinic or anyone else possibly skilled in medicine. He would need to ask the bartender for some of those seeds.

To Danse: "Suit yourself. We'll find him a doctor then. I'm learning to be less cold, but it doesn't come easy. I would have tied up this loose end if I was by myself. Maybe you're right to help him. We may need him again for something. People remember when you save their lives."

Fargrim twirls his hammer in his hand. "Sooo... How do you want to handle Yargin? You want to get the band back together or handle it ourselves?"

"Oh, yeah. Silas definitely owes me. You heard that?" Danse called back to the injured man. "Anyways - I guess it doesn't hurt to ask the rest of the crew. They might be busy, and I honestly don't really know where they are - but Moroza has a good eye, and she can deliver messages quickly." Danse's smile wavered. "When she wants to."

Once the letter is written, Danse waited for Moroza's arrival - and, with or without a medic in tow, Danse immediately tossed the irate owl back into the air to deliver the letters to the three with intentions of returning if she cannot find them in a reasonable amount of time.

"OK, we'll see if anyone is able to come. I'll be at the Bull and Bear in the meantime. Stop by if you'd like a meal on the house. Do me a favor, Danse. In your travels around the city, keep an ear out for someone named Black Jack. He's some sort of vigilante boogymen. I ran across him recently while trying to find Yargin. He got the drop on me but let me go and told me that you were on the right track. I don't know who he is but he seems to know a lot about us. I also don't trust anyone who acts they are an altruist. You ever hear of him?"

Danse calmly nodded in response to the mention of Blackjack. As a performer on the streets, word tends to spread quickly - and, as one who weaves stories for a trade, Danse has learned to take advantage of hearing tales, adding his own twist, and spinning a more grand version of the tale to the masses the next day. "I've heard of Blackjack! He is my primary candidate to any question in a similar line of 'if you could share a beer with one person, who would it be?'" Danse grinned, folding his tattooed arms behind his neck and making his way from the claustrophobic room, hoping his insolent owl actually managed to pester a doctor enough to drag themselves over. "Self-proclaimed vigilantes are primarily named for show. The real ones don't want their names being known, though if I can be perfectly honest, I'm not one to forgo an opportunity to spread my name. If I find anything, I'll let you know - probably through my owl. I'll meet you at the place when it's time, yeah?"

Agreeing to meet at the appointed time, Danse and Fargrim half-dragged/ half-carried a now unconscious Silas back through the bar and to the street beyond. And with a little prodding, Moroza eventually left her bounty of seeds and followed along afterwards.

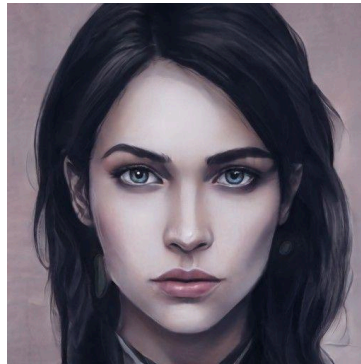
There were no signs of increased Guard activity as the two Harrowers made their way through the now quiet streets, the disturbance they had caused only a short while ago seemingly forgotten. Finding a doctor relatively easily in the richer part of the city, the duo unceremoniously dropped Silas off outside the residence of one before splitting off and returning the places the currently called home for the time being...

Kaisaras:

With the Games fast approaching and spring in the air, Kaisaras didn't give himself room to be idle. With the more or less agreement of various individuals to form the Healer's Guild, Kaisaras spent the early part of his week finalizing fine details and corresponding with members of the 'Founding Council' for the guild to smooth over minor details and ideas. As he wrapped up the work on that end, he moved to restudy what information he had on the Guard. Their history, notable members, etc. He wanted to refresh his memory on what he'd need for the coming week, spending a day reading reports and other such information on what needed to be done, what had been done, and finally, a letter to his father inquiring about his intentions with the Guards.

In the final 3 days leading up to the meeting with Field Marshall Cressida with his siblings, Kaisaras sought the idea of upgrading his gear. Despite being from a military family, Kaisaras was far from being martial in being or training. His strengths lay in his mind and fighting the battles at home with words...the desire to be able to fight on par with others did exist, however, and he had slowly started to believe that if he couldn't match them with his body, perhaps he could use a buffer of sorts. He'd requisition an order to start upgrading his rapier, believing it was past due for such an upgrade, and debated on what minor improvement to invoke upon it. He eventually opted to forge it into a Moon-Touched weapon, believing that such elegance would offer him some aura of authority, while also offering his blade the properties of being a magical weapon, so if nothing else, increasing its durability.

As Kaisaras' worked on finalizing his preparations for the meeting with the Guard, the door to his study slammed open. "I knew I'd find you in here studying!" a loud, laughing voice announced from the hallway. "I thought you might've changed after your 'adventure', but I guess I was wrong..." the voice continued as they entered the space and took a seat on the other couch in the study. Without even needing to lift his eyes, Kaisaras was able to tell that the voice belonged to none other than his younger sister Arcadia. Tall with long dark hair and the build of someone used to fighting, Arcadia planted her heavy work boots onto the table – and over a stack of notes Kaisaras had been reviewing, before giving him a wide grin.



Arcadia

"So, father tells me I'm to join you tomorrow for your meeting with the Guard. What exactly is this all about? Is the High Marshal looking to chastise the Brigade? Is that why we're going instead of Father!" she laughed out.

"This is why I'm glad he's the heir of the family and not you Cadi." A soft-spoken voice replied from the hallway before entering. "Because if that were the case, we'd be doomed!" Entering the room immediately after was a taller and lankier version of Kaisaras with more delicate features and wavy hair that nipped at his shoulders: Kaisaras' youngest sibling Marcus. Taking a seat next to his sister, he added on, "Though to be fair, if Kaisaras was leading the Brigade on the front lines, I suppose we'd all be doomed then as well!"

"Arcadia. Marcus." Despite using their names and his usual stoic tone, Kaisaras was smiling upon seeing his siblings. Even if both had a habit of attempting to drive him up the walls, he had a deep love for his family and was happy to see Arcadia especially excel where he hadn't been able to. He'd offered a jesting eye roll towards his sister especially, "And I had thought that finally letting you go out on a mission would mellow you out, but still...." He offered a look of pity towards his sister as he leaned back into his chair, letting his smile turn into a slight smirk, he then offered a warmer gaze towards his little brother, "As for the front lines... well, I did manage pretty well on my own during my 'adventure', as Arcadia put it. So I wouldn't go so far as to compare it to what would happen if we handed the reins to a certain muscle-brained madwoman."

"You make a fair point brother. And if I'm hearing things correctly, then you're implying that neither of you are fit to lead the Brigade." Marcus began before sighing exaggeratedly and rising to stand on the chair he had just sat down in, "So be it then. It seems the burden shall fall to me. I, Marcus Ironward, second of his name - and by far the most beautiful and talented of the Ironward children - shall take the mantle of High Lord of the Brigade in my failing siblings' stead. I do so grimly yet know it must be done for Korvorsa's fut-" Before he could finish his speech, a well-aimed pillow from Arcadia's direction knocked the gangly lad off his homemade soapbox and onto the floor with a "thud". "You were saying oh High Lord?" Arcadia said with false modesty before laughing to herself.

Kaisaras would continue to bicker and jest back and forth with his siblings for a minute more before letting a chuckling sigh and standing up from his chair. His gaze and face took on a more serious air as he glanced towards his siblings, silently signaling to them he was being serious now. "As for the earlier remark, I reckon that father is testing us. The meeting tomorrow isn't a punishment or even an avoiding of one. During my outing, I came into contact with a number of influential figures, including Field Marshal Kroft, who asked me to inquire to father regarding a union of duties, or mutual support of the Brigade and the Guard." He gave his words a moment to sink in and be comprehended by both his siblings before continuing, though he did take a moment to push Arcadia's foot off his documents at last. "I'm going as father's representative, and to hash out any needed documentation, Arcadia you'll be representing the interests of our people, the Brigade specifically, since you have a more grounded understanding of how things work with them than I can get by paper...if either of you have any opinions or insights on the matter, that would be appreciated." He'd pick up the papers, now dirtied by Arcadia's boots, and turn them over for either of his siblings to look over.

"Sounds boring." Arcadia replied rather flatly as she took the papers from her brother. "But if it's what father wants..." she added (with Marcus echoing the refrain). "Just let me know when we're leaving... And what about this one?" she added as she rose to her feet, pointing at Marcus. "Yes, what about me Brother!?! What shall I be doing hmmm?" Marcus added in a tone that showed a clear lack of interest in joining in on the proceedings with the Guard...

Kaisaras smiled towards his little brother, chuckling at his brother's clear indication of distaste for the proceedings, "Well originally, father wished for you to join us, but I thought it would only be fair to offer you the choice of what you'd want to do. So, Marcus, do you want to come with us to the meeting, or would you rather attend Arcadia's training sessions with the guards in her place?" He could guess his brother's choice, but it was still only fair that he had the choice.

"Neither. Both sound utterly dreadful!" Marcus sighed out. "But I suppose Father will want me busy in some capacity, so I will stay here and figure something out..." Knowing his brother, Kaisaras was pretty sure Marcus would "figure out" how to skip out on his responsibilities again; it would also most likely involve a girl or two somehow.

Once his conversation with his siblings had completed, Kaisaras sorted out his work again, before turning it in and waiting for the day of the meeting.

The Next Day...

With Arcadia in tow, the two Ironwards made the short trip from their home in East Shore to Citadel Volshyenek: the home of the Korvosan Guard. Having been a few weeks since the worst of the riots had occurred, the security around the Citadel was not quite at the level Kaisaras had seen on his first trip to the base. That being said, there were still a decent amount of the Guard in and around the perimeter with many more stationed within. It was clear that the Guard were on constant standby, ready to move quickly should any disturbances rise. As the Ironwards were shepherded inside towards the High Marshal's office, they were both quickly able to sense that many of the Guards on duty appeared sleep deprived or rather haggard. Despite that though, they seemed for the most part to be in relatively good spirits, an improvement from the tenseness Kaisaras had seen earlier.

Eventually brought back into a familiar office, Kaisaras and Arcadia came face to face with the High Marshal Cressida Kroft, looking as tired and run-down as the first time they had met. Standing casually behind her was Sergeant Alena Farima who gave them both a nod and a smile.

Lifting her head as the visitors walked in, the High Marshal, waved them both over to the available chairs before beginning to shuffle some papers off to the side. "Hello again. I see it's already Fireday (Friday)," she sighed as she finished organizing her desk. "If I remember correctly, we're supposed to discuss ways that the Guard and Brigade can better work together in the future? I've been thinking on some ideas and have a few thoughts..." she began as she eyed Arcadia, "But I would hear your thoughts first if that's all right with you."

Arcadia turned towards Kaisaras with a slightly raised eyebrow and a look of "all yours"...

Kaisaras had entered with Arcadia, offering a respectful nod towards the High Marshal and a flash of a smile towards Alena. Once they were seated and had heard out the Marshal, Kaisaras brought on his usual mask and nodded politely. He glanced towards his sister as she urged him to take the lead with her gaze. Mentally he couldn't help but roll his eyes at his sister, but he made an effort to hide it as he spoke towards the Marshal with a calm tone, "While our family and the Brigade are always eager to do our part for the city, we are also honored to work with the Guard who have long marshaled over the core of the city. If it were not for your efforts in the many years you've stood, or even in the events of less than a month prior, I'm certain that we wouldn't have had the freedom to build our own forces to the capability they are able to efficiently function today."

Kaisaras let his words breathe for a moment before continuing, "With that said, whilst we're happy to offer some relief to the Guard at current, especially with how thinly maned and spread you've been, we do not believe that the Guard would be happy to be...well, I do not think I need to explain how others would view us taking on your duties for an extended period of time. So, beyond the immediate assistance to which we shall fulfill our duty to support as members of the city, I'd ask what it is you had in mind of both our family, and the Brigade."

Cressida sighed as she leaned back in her chair. "Flowery language - Court Speak - is a nice sounding and unfortunate necessity in the circles we are a part of, but as I'm sure you'll learn over the years, it doesn't actually get much accomplished." After a quick beat, she leaned forward in her chair once again and continued. "So I am going to be rather blunt with the both of you; perhaps it's because I see a bit of the adventurer I once was in you I don't know... Anyway, the reason why I wanted to speak with *you* is because even before the crisis began in the city, I had been asking for more aid - from the King, the Seneschal and even your father and the Sable Company - to no avail. Each time, I'm rebuffed with the same flowery language and promise of help that'll never come. And now, with the Guard already stretched to its breaking point, I am *still* repeatedly denied with the same empty promises. I suspect your father sent you in his stead without a clear offer so he wouldn't have to deny me again in person. I'm not going to wait for disaster to strike!"

"So you ask me what I want of you? I want the Brigade! All of it. Under the Guard's command." She let that sink in for a moment before continuing. During that brief pause, Arcadia released a long cartoonish whistle while Alena rolled her eyes amusingly in response. "Though I know that's a foolish dream, it is still what the city needs at the moment; what is the point of having a standing army if the city could go under at any point?" Rising to her feet, she placed her hands on the desk and leaned forward slightly to look at both Ironwards straight in the eye; whatever fatigue she had when the pair had first entered seemed long gone. "My more realistic request is this: Give me half the Brigade partially under my control for 6 months. At the head would be you (*she added pointing towards Arcadia*), that way we would have enough support to both keep the city safe while also nipping any problems in the bud before they can sprout. Without a more drastic measure, I worry what'll happen to both the Guard and the City, and this is the best idea I can come up with given the circumstances and resources at my disposal..."

As soon as the High Marshal was done, Arcadia began laugh the way she typically did whenever she found something riotously amusing. In-between laughing fits, she managed to squeak out, "Father is going to hate this!!"

Kaisaras offered an amused smile as well, but nodded along with Cressida's words, "...since you dislike the use of flowery language, I'll drop it. However, I only meant to contextualize, not distract. That said, you'd recall that the Brigade was formed BECAUSE the Guard was often found lacking, be that 300 hundred years ago or today... I support and agree with the Guard's intentions and mission, but without a stable backer, they continue to fall into the same slumps of underfunding and corruption that lead to so many in the populace distrusting it. No offense." Kaisaras dropped his smile and steeled himself, "I'll speak to my father about Arcadia and my brother leading two Divisions, that will give you 120 of our men, roughly and Arcadia's field expertise...it isn't much in the long term, but that will give your people time to recover and rest."

"However." The young lord stood up but didn't move his gaze from the Marshal, "The Brigade exists, both to ease the burdens of the Guard in the Eastern Shore, and to protect the city as a whole from invasion. We are a standing army as you said, not police. We fund the army with our family's coffers and through business intended or founded upon the idea that it was developed to keep the army afloat, for the protection of this city...we shall continue to do so as best as we can. Just like you." He'd then offer out his hand, "Does that seem fair enough to you?"

"This has been one of the most productive conversations I've had since taking over this post a few months ago; sad as it is to hear." Cressida replied as she rose and shook Kaisaras' hand. "Perhaps I'm a bit too gullible and idealistic, but I actually believed the late King when he told me on that day that together, we could actually make some positive changes..." she added wistfully. "It's no matter though, I will take all the help I can get. Speak to Lucian and convince him that this is the right course of action. I'm sure you already knows this, but he can be a hard man to persuade when he wants to be." Sitting back into her chair, all the exhaustion she had temporarily banished seemingly hitting her again in real time, she added, "And this is only temporary. I have ideas and plans on creating a more stable Guard; plans I suspect that will require the assistance of the "Harrower's" to come into fruition..."

"Well I'm all for this idea!" Arcadia added nonchalantly as she leaned back in her chair. She was about to place her boots on the High Marshal's desk but thought better of it at the last minute. "It'd be a nice change of pace from working in the countryside. And besides, watching Marcus try to lead anyone besides one of his "friends" to the bedroom will be more than worth it! I'm still not convinced he actually knows how to use a sword; well, besides the on-"

"Arcadia! That's enough. Can you ever be serious!" Alena interrupted from the far end of the room.

When the Marhs-no, when Cressida fell back to her chair and mentioned the 'Harrowers', Kaisaras couldn't help it as he felt his face twitch at the clear jab to his dealings as an adventurer a few weeks ago. A light sigh relaxed his face as he rolled his eyes at his sister's crude humor, chuckling as he caught sight of Alena's flushed face. "I'm afraid this is her being serious. Though I'm surprised you're still affected by stuff like this Alena, considering how long you've known us."

"I am when the High Marshal is around!!!" she blurted out before looking towards Arcadia. "Are you actually going to be serious if you do this? This isn't a game you know..."

Arcadia stared Alena down as a wicked grin spread across her face. "I'm always serious when it comes to fighting. You more than most should know that..."

As Alena began to make a retort, Cressida put her hand up to still her. "While I've been made aware of your capabilities, it might actually be a good idea if we have a trial run off sorts before making any more long-term commitments."

"Next week, the Cheliixin Magical Games will be taking place in Korvosa; a last minute decision by the Queen. Perhaps we have our test run then and see this relationship pans out. Thoughts?"

Kaisaras smiled at his sister and long-time friend before focusing back on the Marshal. Her offer for a test run was both wise and would buy him enough time to convince his father and adjust the logistics to move the two teams into the city. He stood up and nodded with a polite smile towards Cressia, "That sounds good enough for me. We look forward to setting things in order with you and the Guard." Kaisaras would shake hands with the Marshal if she accepted his, and then move to leave with Arcadia.

Rising to shake both of the Ironward's hands as a sign that the meeting was over and the details would be sorted out later, Alena led both out of the office and back towards the entrance of the Citadel. At the gates, Alena turned to you both and said, "Well that went about as well as I expected. And considering the fact that she's only slept twice - literally! - since the King died, she was actually politer than I thought she'd be; she's been rather short with me lately (for obvious reasons). Anyway, if there's nothing else, it's always a pleasure to see you two..." she began smiling in sarcastic manner between friends, "...and I guess I'll be seeing you both around more often since I'm being forced to work you all now."

After bidding Alena farewell, Kaisaras made an effort of speaking to great lengths with his father and eventually managed to convince him to the trial run with the Guard and Brigade. Beyond that, Kaisaras spent the remainder of his week hashing out the logistics of what would be needed to send the trial teams over, filling their gaps in their own ranks, and finally spending some time on getting his own blade worked on.

Kurstin:

Although Kurstin was working extra-long hours on his artificer invention for the competition and studying into the late hours of the night, he was diligent in spending time with his sister and parents. Irma's abduction had taught him a hard lesson - nothing in life was guaranteed, especially happiness or time with those you loved. Sometimes he had Irma help him with his tinkering work. Other times he encouraged her to practice the 'skills' she had acquired with the Lambs. She actually taught him some fighting skills and had several brilliant insights that helped Kurstin make some interesting adjustments to GHOST. They were working on the homunculus' artificial intelligence and algorithms, intending to use it for sparring practice, when they discovered it had the ability to serve as a combat assistant.

Kurstin had already adapted GHOST's levitation and thrust mechanisms to project a beam of force, but this week, he discovered how to boost the power and range of it. But when Irma accidentally spilled some colored sugar crystal candy dust on the lens device, they discovered this force energy could be converted into a 15' gout of flames! That led to an impressive display of dexterity by Irma - she had the makings of a fine rogue.



GHOST

Overall, things were looking up for Kurstin. His research and magical advancements were progressing at a rather dramatic pace; inventing something (*his homunculus/ Cannon Hybrid*) he was quite sure no one in Korvosa or beyond had created before. As for his family, the twins continued to adjust well to their new surroundings and were seemingly enjoying the dotting attention they received from his parents. As for Irma, while she was still a bit distant, working with Kurstin as he prepared for his review at the end of the week seemed to help her slowly come out of her shell.

Two days before the exam, as he entered the kitchen for breakfast, his mother asked him to fetch his sister who had not joined the twins to the kitchen as she usually did. Not thinking anything of it, Kurstin knocked on the door and entered the three children's room to finding Irma completely covered underneath the sheets. As he sat on the bed and prepared to rouse her up, he quickly realized that something amiss. His fears became reality when he pulled away the sheets to find only a few pillows underneath. It seemed that Irma had once again gone missing...

Kurstin performed a quick search of the room - trying not to let his fears overtake his senses. He checked the bed and the window for signs of a fight or forced entry, but leaving pillows shaped like a body sleeping was a standard trick for younglings who thought to sneak out of their rooms at night. Despite his initial instinct to immediately begin a search for her, Kurstin thought that perhaps she was trying out her skills and perhaps was just running late. He would cover for her with their parents for now, but if she didn't show up before nightfall he would reevaluate.

Kurstin's quick search of the room showed no signs of forced entry or conflict; most of her items seemed to still be in their normal place as well. He did find the window unlocked from the inside and deduced that that was most likely how she had left the house unseen.

Hoping that Irma would return on her own, Kurstin returned to kitchen and gave a hastily devised excuse to his parents for his little sister's absence before beginning the rest of his day as normal. With his sister still M.I.A, Kurstin found it difficult to focus on either his studies or his preparations for the exam in a couple days; his mind often drifting back to where Irma could've possibly gone and if she'd back anytime soon - if at all...

A bit anxious as he returned home, Kurstin was relieved to see his little sister sitting outside the family home with the twins. She seemed happy, carefree and guiltfree, as if she didn't realize that she had been caught (or didn't care).

Returning home early after making no progress on his new design, Kurstin was relieved to see Irma. Sitting next to her and making sure nobody else was near, he casually leaned over to bump shoulders with her and said, "Sooo...where were you this morning, little sis? Sneaking out to practice your skills? Or have you started taking an interest in boys of a sudden?" His grin and jovial voice indicated his humor at her escapade - but his dark eyes gave away his concern for her well-being.

"You all sleep too much so I decided to start my day early is all. Plus, you know how mom and dad have been since I came back... I just didn't want to deal with all that 'hassle' you know?" Irma replied calmly. "You probably just missed me!"

Kurstin heard a slight inflection in his sister's voice...it helped that he was listening for it. He had been sneaking out at night for years now looking for her and having to cover for it. Especially when unpleasantness had ensued, and he needed to lie in even more fervent manner than usual. So Kurstin knew the sound of a half-truth. But he also knew not to push it...Irma had been through a lot. So, he merely replied, "I did miss you, punkin. And I know exactly what you mean about mom and dad... it's even worse now that you're back. Don't worry, sis, your secrets are safe with me. But can we agree to no secrets between us? You look out for me - I'll look out for you. Deal?" He held up his pinky finger to her in the way they had made promises as kids...

Irma stared at Kurstin's outstretched finger for a long moment as she pondered a choice in her head before tentatively extending her own pinky finger out in kind and completing the gesture. "Fine, I promise..." she began before pulling her hand back and looking down at the ground. Though she had been putting up a rather brave face since first finding her in Gaedren's lair, this was one of the first times since that she actually looked like what she was: a child. "It's the other lambs..." she eventually began. "Most of them weren't as lucky as I was to have a family looking for them. They're alone and need my help; and I'm the only one who can. I can't just leave them behind..."

Kurstin nodded and sat quietly for a moment, looking off into the yard. "I know, Irma. I feel the same way, especially now that I have you back." He leaned against her and said, "So... what are we gonna do about it? My artificing creation could use a field test or two before the competition, I suppose..."

"I don't know... How much food can you make..." Irma then went on to explain the situation the other Lambs had currently found themselves in. After escaping from Gaedren's lair, many of them were caught up in the initial riots that took Korvosa by storm. A few of them (about 10) found another abandoned warehouse to hole up in during the worst of the chaos and have been staying there ever since. At first, they were able to survive by using the skills they learned as Lambs to steal food and whatever else they might've needed. But after a few weeks without Gaedren and his lackey's "guidance" to make sure they didn't make mistakes - or at least more than one without taking a trip to meet Gobblegut - the remaining Lambs started to become a bit sloppy and noticed around the city. Now, becoming desperate as it's become more challenging for them to find food and survive, some of the older Lambs have started talking about doing something "more drastic" though Irma did not know what that meant. She's helped a few times so far when she could but she's worried about what will happen to them if their situation doesn't improve soon...

Kurstin listened to his sister, impressed at the size of her heart and how, at only 10 or 11, she displayed the skills to find and help these other lost ones. "Well, I'm no cook, and we're certainly not rich enough to take them all in and take care of them. But we shall do what we can to help them. You know, the big magical extravaganza is happening tomorrow...maybe if they come to the college, they can score some food. But no valuables! Just some free food. After my exam and presentation is over, we'll figure out a longer-term solution. Maybe they can put their skills to better use and serve as the eyes and ears of the City Guard. It sure beats running from them! Can you get word to them tonight to hold on, lay low, and don't do anything stupid?"

"Okay! I'll tell them what you said and that you'll help them out! Hopefully they listen!" Irma replied brightly. Though Kurstin had no idea if his little sister would actually be able convince the other children, his sister's expression left him with a pretty good feeling that she might actually be able to do it.

Kurstin spent the rest of the day tinkering and polishing his homunculus, cleaning away all bits of soot and dirt to make a good first impression. He checked and rechecked the small compartments and their contents - various chemical and alchemical compounds designed to augment the force projectors. He was pleased with the artificial intelligence in the device - he knew better than to tweak that so close to the exam and display. In the back of his mind, running quietly in the background of his thoughts, were thoughts of the other Lambs and how he might help them get off the streets. Maybe his new friends in the Harrowers, or his connection with the Guards.

The day of the exam has finally arrived! At the chosen time, Kurstin was excused from his classes and brought to Verso Hall, the largest building on Theumanexus' small campus. Brought down a corridor he had never ventured down before, Kurstin was led to a handleless door with the engraved symbol of Theumanexus College: eight interlocking circles - one for each school of magic - surrounding a rainbow-colored flame; the engraving seemed to shimmer and glow with a soft magical light. The professor who had been escorting him pulled out a funny looking key and seemingly stuck it into the door to reveal a hidden lock and doorknob. Opening the door to reveal some sort of shimmery gateway, the professor gave Kurstin the "all-clear" and a nod for good luck before stepping back and allowing the artificer to enter the room beyond.

Stepping into the space, Kurstin was surprised to find an exceptionally large chamber. In it was an array of random items and equipment (from practice dummies to archery boards to board games strangely and more) strewn about in an organization system that at first glance seemed to defy any sort of logic. Also randomly placed throughout the space were a series of gravity defying staircases that led up to floating platforms of random size and shape. As Kurstin took in the site in front of him, he couldn't help but feel like he was standing in some sort of magical playroom.

Before he could ponder any further, a booming voice from overhead cut him off. It sounded vaguely like the Headmaster Ellis Toryr IV, but it was hard to tell due to how loud it was. "Kurstin Blacksteam... Welcome to Verso's Demiplane! Or as we've come to call it: The Den. In this space, you will show us all of the skills and magical abilities you've picked up during your time at Theumanexus. Feel free to use any of the items in this space or 'bring' in anything else you may require. Good luck!" With that, the voice went silent and Kurstin was left in the magical space...

Kurstin bowed in respect to the masters and presented his homunculus for the examination. "Masters, I present my artificer creation for your review. It is an artificially intelligent, battle enhancement construct designed to attack enemies and provide aid to allies. It has a self-contained power source and multiple add-in chemical and alchemical elements. I would first like to demonstrate it's ability to independently maneuver and avoid damage."

- The homunculus, named GHOST by the young artificer, floated to the center of the room, hovering about 5 feet off the ground. It begins to maneuver quickly about the room, flitting from object to object, changing altitude, attempting to hide from view.
- Next, Kurstin threw a couple of balls at it to demonstrate its ability to evade.
- Finally, he had GHOST demonstrate its evasion technique by throwing water balloons at it and watching it dodge the splashing water!

"Next, I will demonstrate its combat power. By activating the rune here," he said and pressed an intricately carved design, "GHOST can redirect portions of its propulsive force towards an object. Observe..."

- GHOST is now active as Kurstin's eldritch cannon, and it fires force damage at several targets set up around the room!
- The second attack utilizes a ground crystalline powder to turn the beam into a 15' cone of flame, burning up another set of straw dummies.
- The third attack sends a a streak of crackling energy to another target leaving the smell of ozone and charred wood.

"Finally, my device has protective and regenerative abilities to aid myself or others." Kurstin pulled out his own dagger and tried to cut his arm.

- The first attempt seems to cut deeply, but he barely registers the pain and after a moment the wound is gone.
- For the next cut, GHOST sprays an adhesive mixed with an antiseptic and numbing agent on the wound, causing the cut to heal immediately.

"This concludes my demonstration. May fortune favor you and the gods shine their light upon you."

Kurstin and GHOST stand for a few moments, waiting for any questions on the demonstration, his design, or the construct itself.

Overall, Kurstin felt that he had done about as well as he could've for the judging panel. GHOST, still a prototype after all, was not quite as agile as he would've liked; getting hit by more than a few of the object Kurstin threw his way. It definitively redeemed itself though during its next two demonstrations. During the combat portion, it absolutely obliterated the targets of its force cannon with more power than Kurstin even realized it had. It then performed admirably as Kurstin showed off its other offensive capabilities with flair! Finally, during the medic portion, everything went according to plan with GHOST both reducing and healing any damage that received!

After a pause of almost 5 minutes, the same voice from before broke through the silence. "Well done! That was quite the show and what a curious invention you have there Master Blacksteam! Now, we will proceed to Phase II..." As the echo faded away, a shimmering door appeared 20 ft in front Kurstin and opened on imaginary hinges; beyond seemed to be an identical room with a slightly red tint.

Concluding that Phase II was through the magical door, Kurstin and GHOST walked through the opening and into the next space, finding himself at the edge of a circular ring 100ft in diameter. At the center of the ring was a sloping elevated platform about 20ft high, at the peak on a raised pedestal was treasure chest glowing with a shimmery light. He also noticed two of his classmates at opposite ends of the ring with him, a girl about his age and a boy perhaps 2 years older. Both had confused looks on their faces.

"Now let us commence Phase II!" the voice returned gleefully before a loud "Ding! Ding!" boomed in the space. A moment later, as a group of at least 10 magical homunculi appeared out of thin air, a series of thin 5' wide x 10' tall earthen slabs of rock extruded themselves from the ground obscuring Kurstin's view of the others and the raised pedestal before him...

Kurstin grinned - a true challenge! He thanked the Harrowers and their adventures for preparing the young artificer for this challenge. He moved directly towards the center area, dodging around any earthen slabs in the way. Kurstin looked for either of the other two contestants - his goal was to slow them down but not permanently injure them. He has a couple of initial ideas in mind, depending on what/ who he saw or what happens.

GHOST moved diagonally to the left and forward, programmed to find and attack any opponent with its force cannon. Kurstin ensured it targets constructs first...

The slabs blocking his sight of the others, Kurstin dashed ahead towards the chest at the top of the hill! Though he couldn't see where GHOST had floated off to, he sensed that it had ran into one of the magical constructs in the room and attacked. And though he wasn't positive if its attack had hit, he could sense that it did not take any damage in return.

Making his way to the base of the hill, Kurstin eventually ran into one of the magical constructs himself - who lunged at him cartoonishly without any real hope of hitting him. Around him, outside of the loud chattering noises of the constructs, Kurstin heard two things: a loud boom coming from one end of the ring, and a piercing screech coming from the other...

Kurstin easily dodged the construct's attack, then reached out to attach a small metal disk to the homunculus. Kurstin was too busy with the construct, and focusing on the hill, to be able to perceive any good information from the boom or the screech. He just assumed the other students were facing their own challenges...

GHOST continued its search and destroy programming, hunting for other constructs or perhaps another student.

Kurstin's lunge was just a beat too slow and his electrified disk failed to land – and shock – the magical creature as originally intended.

Meanwhile, having one of the creatures already in front of it, GHOST attempted to attack the creature again, but its targeting system failed to account for the creature's shifting movements and missed wide once again.

One more homunculus appearing next to both Kaisaras & GHOST, the creatures launched at their targets with manic glee. While Kurstin continued to dodge out of the way, he received a mental ping from GHOST that informed him that his creation had been hit!

And elsewhere, while he didn't hear any more unusual noises from the rest of the arena, he did see the male student burst out of the barriers and make his way up the hill towards the chest! A moment later, two homunculi exited from the same area hot on his trail!

Kurstin cursed at his missed opportunity to take out the construct and cursed again when he saw the other student start up the hill. Kurstin quickly tossed a glass globe full of a particularly slick substance of grease and oil, causing a slippery area under the boy's feet! He then made his own move towards the hill and up as far as he can get.

He sent the recall code to GHOST, trying to get them together again. It fired once more at the other homunculus and then moved its full speed towards Kurstin's position.

Leaving its current location, GHOST made a beeline back to its creator, sustaining a few scratches and bringing a few "friends" back along with him.

With quick thinking, Kurstin created a slippery surface right underneath one of his rival's feet causing him to slip and fall all the way to the bottom of the hill. While the female student was still nowhere to be found, Kurstin could see that the male student was once again surround by the magical homunculi and unable to easily get away!

Kurstin positioned himself to be within 5' of the three target homunculi in front of him and pressed a small button on the side of his belt buckle. With a small click, the button completes an intricate set of runes carved into the metal buckle and a wave of thunderous force sweeps out from the belt in a 15' cube!

GHOST emitted yet another force beam at one of the constructs trailing after it before moving closer to Kurstin.

With a blast of runic power, the three homunculi in front of him were destroyed leaving nothing behind but a small pile of magical dust. Charging ahead as Ghost quickly followed behind – taking out one of the homunculi following him along the way – Kurstin made it to the top of the hill first to find the magical chest waiting patiently for him on the pedestal...

Looking at the chest, Kurstin was able to quickly determine two things. One: Spotting three keyholes (one of which seemed to be transforming in front of his eyes into a sketch of one), Kurstin was able to quickly determine that it probably required multiple people to open. Two: The chest was *alive*. He determined this knowledge when he looked down at the chest and found a kindly face looking back up at him in return. "Hello," The chest called out to Kurstin nonchalantly, as if seeing an old acquaintance. "Can I help you with something?"

Kurstin was a more than a bit surprised when the chest actually *talked* to him, although it was precisely something the University would pull on their students! "Good day!" he responded happily. It never cost anything or hurt anyone to be polite, after all.

"It appeared that reaching you was the goal of this little exercise - although now it seems I need the other students to complete the challenge. Is this accurate?" The artificer continued studying the creature, and then suddenly followed his last question with, "Are you a mimic? Or a clever illusion?"

"Well aren't you polite! And no, I am no mimic or illusion; just me!" The chest began brightly. "And indeed you are correct. You cannot 'unlock' me as things currently stand. Whenever the proper conditions are met, I will give you your final test!"

"Right..." Kurstin said, then looked about the testing area. He sent GHOST to the further student - maybe the girl - with new orders to assist her in reaching the chest. He also loaded a healing program in case the girl was injured. GHOST hummed and beeped in recognition of the new task, then floated quickly towards her location, blasting any small homunculi in the way.

As GHOST moved off, Kurstin looked down to the other student he caused to slip down and called out to him, "Sorry about that, mate - I thought this was a race! Looks like we all need to be here to open the next part of the test! Do you need any help to get up here?"

GHOST slowly floated down the hill in the direction of the third student, it's directive clear in assisting her in any way possible to return to its creator. Blasting a few nosy homunculi out of the way, the magical creation was able to find the girl on the ground, a bit dazed but otherwise alright. Releasing a spray to numb any ailments and jolt her senses, GHOST waited patiently for the girl to come to before beeping in a manner that loosely translated as "follow me" and slowly floating back in Kurstin's direction.

Meanwhile, the other student he was competing with gingerly rose to his feet as he rubbed his head in pain. "Is that so? In that case, can you help me get rid of these things then..." he replied back before pointing towards the small group of six homunculi standing before him. Though they continued to block his path forward, they did not seem as aggressive as they once were, as if reaching the summit had made them more docile...

Kurstin moves warily down the hill towards the other student, holding a small metal disk in his hand to apply an electrical shock to any constructs that get too close to him. "Sorry about the anti-adhesive gel I tossed at you earlier...I thought this was an individual competition! Come on - there's a surprise waiting for us at the top - he's quite friendly! The other girl should be joining us soon - then we'll see what the final

challenge is." With a helping hand for the boy and a shocking one for adversaries, the two make their way up the hill to the chest waiting for them.

When the girl arrived, Kurstin waved her up and smiled, calling out, "Come on - apparently all three of us need to be here to get the final challenge. I'm Kurstin, by the way."

GHOST greeted Kurstin with what he thought sounded like a triumphant hum as he led the other student back up the hill and returned to his side. Appearing a bit harried, she looked from the chest, to Kurstin and back said, "Why couldn't this have been a written test..."

"Congratulations on making it this far!" The chest began as brightly as ever as the three students came into view. "Your final challenge is quite short: answer one simple riddle. 'When used it can open doors, but it is not a key. It takes not just one, but more than thee. What is the greatest magic of all?'"

Kurstin smiles and confers with the other two students. "I think the answer is 'Teamwork!' Unless you have a different idea?" Unless they can think of anything better, he will then announce this answer to the chest. "Teamwork - it makes the dream work!"

A smile crept across the Chest's magical face before it replied. "Indeed it does! And do not forget it!" A loud "ding" suddenly filled the space, catching the three students temporarily off guard. Looking back down, they noticed that the chest had seemingly reverted to a mundane object, its top open to reveal the contents inside. Neatly placed on three separate pillows were three golden rings; each etched with a different rune. On the bottom of the hill, another portal spiraled into existence, immediately followed by a familiar booming voice. "Those are for you for a job well done! When you're ready, use the portal to return to campus. We have much to discuss!"...

Kurstin conferred with the other students, then picked up the *Ring of Water Walking*. He slipped it on his finger and grinned, saying "This would have come in handy a month ago! Well, good luck, guys. See you around the grounds!" With that, he heads to the portal, GHOST hovering along behind him.

Entering back into the University proper in one of the practice rooms, Kurstin and the other students came face to face with about 10 other students of various ages waiting for them. Each member of the group seemed disheveled to some degree, and it became obvious quite quickly that each of them had a just gone through a similar experience within. "Splendid, our last members have just arrived!" the headmaster exclaimed happily. "You lucky few were our best, brightest, and most resourceful candidates this year so you should all be very proud of yourselves! The students from some of the other academies, particularly from the Acadamae & from Chelix, are sure to be tough competitors, but I'm confident you all will give more than a good showing on Theumanexus' behalf! Now, I'll leave the rest up to your professors explain to each of you what to expect on the day of Games." With an audible pop, the headmaster vanished once again leaving the confused students behind with the remaining faculty members who stepped forward to begin explaining what was to come next week...

Radgar:

As the caravan approached the gate, Radgar made his way to the front, eager to join in the conversation and hear the latest news from his hometown. His halting attempts at conversation were never quite enough to break through the caravan leader's business-like exchange with the guards and soon he found the entire company swept through the main gates and headed to the warehouse district.

Once the wagons were safely inside and the animals unhitched, Radgar's duties came to an end. At least until the return trip in three days, this time without his brother. His brother who hopped from one foot to the other with unbridled delight at being back home, eager to be free of the tedium of the caravan

and ready to see his parents. Radgar clapped him on the shoulder and favored him with a broad smile.
"Aye boyyo, it's time to go home."

Shepherding Dagnam past the main gates, Radgar was led towards a large tunnel that descended deep below ground to the city proper. Janderhoff: A city of dwarven clans who had banded together long ago was a series of low-ceilinged rooms, tunnels and chambers; each set home to a particular clan that was connected to larger caverns where markets, public spaces and the like were held. Throughout the city, tunnels and shafts could be seen leading deep below ground where the dwarfs mined at the edge of the Underdark; each one guarded by groups of soldiers who made sure that the only things coming up from the depths were their kin or precious metals. And though each clan has its own variations on ornament and architectural style, the symbology of the city – a gleaming-jewel encrusted hammer eclipsing a star – could be seen throughout.

Radgar's shoulders slumped as the door opened to Stonebreaker Hall. The warmth of the hearth, the smell of fresh-baked bread, the frothy mug of ale pushed into his hand. He was home. And Dagnam was safe. It was over.

The relief hit him hard. He managed to make his rounds, kiss his mother, visit with his sisters and make reverence to the shrine of the ancestors before sitting next to his father for the family meal. Nearly collapsing into the comfortable chair to his father's right, he barely remembered the meal or the constant stream of questions about where he'd been and what he'd seen before making his way to bed for the night. Collapsing onto the thin mat rolled out next to the forge, he felt the familiar warm heat wrap around him before darkness took him.

He slept hard for nearly twelve hours. Longer than he could remember sleeping since before his apprenticeship.

The next few days were a whirl of parties and reunions as the Stonebreaker Clan celebrated the surprising return of Dagnam. Word had also spread fast throughout the city and soon the Earther clan and the Hammerhead clan were joining in the festivities as well; bringing with them more food and ale than the dwarves knew what to do with. One of the happiest sights of all for Radgar was seeing his brother seemingly back to the way he was before. The joy on his face as he was cheered, toasted - and tossed into the air more than a few times - was priceless and worth all the hardships Radgar had gone through to find him and more.

After a few days, it was time to say goodbye to the family and return back to Korvorsa. Though Janderhoff would always be home, there was unfinished business in Korvora that he had to take care of; he had made promises to the Guard after all.

Radgar enjoyed the feasts and the feting, enjoyed seeing his family whole and happy, and loved seeing his younger brother begin to heal from his ordeal.

But his true love, the thing that brought him peace and joy, was the forge. He awoke early his first morning home, rising before the first sparks of dawn touched the sky to stoke the furnace and bring it back to life after its evening's slumber. The chore was a joy, a meditation, a reminder of his days as an apprentice and of the power that Gond brought into this fallen world. As he went about the mornings' rituals, lighting the braziers, oiling and anointing the implements, the younger apprentices woke to find a middle-aged dwarf doing their jobs. Confused by his presence, they nonetheless recognized him as a priest of the forge and fell in to help where they were needed.

So it was that when Thodi the Hammerhanded, Master Blacksmith of Gond entered his workshop, crumbs from his breakfast still in his braided beard, he found an extra set of hands already at work burnishing a nearly complete warhammer. A grunt of acknowledgment and a nod in the direction of his once and

always apprentice and the Master set to work.

If the junior apprentices were surprised to see the Master start work on a new project, they were careful not to show it. All day and late into the night the forge was alive with the sounds of hammer and tong, the hiss of quenching steel and the roar of the furnace. Radgar worked alongside his mentor, holding the tongs as Thodi worked metal into thin strips, polishing and oiling the pieces as they cooled, riveting them carefully in patterns on the heavy leather. The armor slowly took shape, each piece masterfully crafted and consecrated to Gond by both Radgar and Thodi himself.

A lovely suit, clearly intended for someone of status, someone of importance in town to command the full attention of Forge Master. The armor hung on the stand, engraved with the runes of Thodi's forge, consecrating the very armor as an act of devotion to Gond. It was a perfect representation of all that Radgar believed in, the skill, the care, the attention to detail, the work of heat and hammer to shape the raw material of this world into something that useful. The armor's ability to mesh with other tools - like the pauldrons and greaves he himself wore into battle or the helmet me made for himself at this very forge - reminded Radgar that we each had a place in this world but that we were always part of something larger, that we each needed to be aware of our place and our role and our duty. The polished finish, the carefully interwoven runes, the flourish of flames licking against the markings, of the perfectly imperfect hammer marks to remind the wearer of the beauty in everyday objects, of the power of the tools we used.

As the last bits of oil was applied and the incense wafted over the completed armor, a sense of peace washed over Radgar, as if he let go of a breath he didn't know he was even holding. His brother was home. Gaedren was dead. His honor was restored. He had completed his duty to his family.

And yet, there was more to do. The city he left was in chaos and he had pledged to help the Guard in its hour of need as so many of them had helped him in freeing his brother. It was time to leave the forge behind once more and return to the world, to work to reshape it into something useful to please Gond. Hammer and fire were equally effective ways to shape cold iron or warm flesh if one had the will and the skill to wield them.



Radgar;s Scale Armor)

As he stood in the forge, wiping the oil from his hands and admiring the beautiful suit of armor his thoughts wandered back to the battle with Gaedren. That moment, that flash as he felt a connection to something more. That surge that drove him forward even as it looked as if the battle was turning against them. He wasn't sure what had happened in that moment, but he wanted to know more, he wanted to fund that connection again.

He went back to this father's home to pack his things and say his good byes, it was time to get back on the road.

As Radgar made his goodbyes to his family and clan, Dagnam - who had turned into a blubbing mess at the news - ran up to Radgar and cried out, "Why 're you leaving!?! We only just got home!?!? What am I gonna do without you!?!?!? What do I do now!?!?!?!?"

Sitting in Dagnam's room as the boy pled with him, Radgar smiled and chuckled, "Aye boyyo, that's the way of things init'. Things don't stay the same for long, and just when you get settled, things change again.' patting the boy on the knee, he went on 'and as to what you'll do, you'll listen to Pa you will. He'll see to yer education and make sure you get set on the proper path. Things will be fine now, I'll check in on you from time to time to make sure, I will.'

Returning to his room to gather his gear he found his old chainmail replaced by the custom Splint Mail. As he marveled again at the workmanship, Master Thodi himself appeared in the door behind him. "You've become quite the smith ye have, and this armor is a fine piece of work. I'm afeelin' you'll need it where yer headed to keep you walking in the light of the forge - or on the ridge of this world fer that matter.'

Clad in his new armor and freshly provisioned from his mother's own pantry, Radgar felt invigorated and refreshed, ready for the road back home.

[Scene #1]

7 – 13 Pharast (March) 4708
Korvosa, Varisia

[Scene #2] Downtime (Week #4)

The city was abuzz all week as the first Magical Games to be hosted in Korvosa in years quickly approached. Everyday, new participants from across Avistan (the continent the game takes place in) – Chelix, Taldor and even the elven kingdoms in Kyonin – arrived to greater and greater fanfare. But while the recovering city celebrated something joyous for a change after the difficulties of the past month, trouble brewed all around it...

[Scene #2]

Out of Character:

Scene 2 –

Downtime Pt. 4!!

A couple general notes/ city happenings/ reminders:

- o The Magical Games are a (2) day event. For most of you, your events will be starting on the first day in the morning (Sunday the 13th)
- o There were no major riots during this time. The Crown and City Guard were given extra emphasis by the Queen to keep things orderly while the games went on, so there are extra patrols in the more reputable areas of the city as a result.

- o Feel free to have conversations/ scenes with NPCs already introduced or you created. For certain NPCs though, I will need to have control over them (and I can play that out or have them react to your post(s)). This includes:
 - Kai's Mom/ Dad/ Sister/ Brother, Irma Gurd, Royalty, Sabina Merrin, Silas, named Korvorsan Guards (like Cressida or Sergeant Farima), and any runaway baddies (like Yargin or the last Power Ranger),
 - In addition, The Caravan leader and Kurstin's professor are included as well.

For each of you, outside of any anything else that you may want to do/ explore/ share, there are also a couple of specific notes that you should take into account for your post(s):

Danse & Fargrim:

- o Let me know of anything you might've done/ any preparations you may be doing before heading towards Yargin's supposed escape route. Feel free to decide when/ how you meet up, and when you're ready to make your final approach on Sunday morning, we'll proceed from there.
- o Also note, Silas is alive, but in no condition to fight (though he can still lead you to the meeting point if you wish to drag him along)

Kaisaras:

- o For this test run, you, Arcadia and about 15-20 Brigade men & woman will be stationed in one block of the arena where the Games will be taking place. Let me know what preparations you may be making for yourself, or with Arcadia to prepare the Brigade for this assignment. Lucian will be attending the games as a dignitary while Marcus will be staying behind in charge East Shore. If you want to do any interactions with your family/ NPCs, just cue me up/ let me know and we can go from there.
- o Also, before you depart for the test assignment at the Games, your new weapon has arrived. It is a +1 Moon-Touched Rapier. Please give us a good description 😊

Kurstin:

- o To start off, let me know of anything you'd like to do/ any preparations you might be doing before the opening of the Games. Similarly to Danse & Fargrim, whenever you're ready to head off towards the Games on Sunday morning, we'll head from there. We'll go over how the Games will actually run in a bit.
- o Regarding helping Irma and the other Lambs, as previously discussed, they will be heading to the University (off-camera) while you are at the games. You've shared with Irma over the past week where best to enter from and how to enter the kitchen, as well as stressing not to steal anything else while they're there... To see how this will eventually shake out, I'm going to need:
 - I'm going to need (3) separate d100s
 - (1) d20 Luck check

Radgar:

- o You're back on the road! To start, please describe the first 4 days of your journey since leaving Janderhoff, feel free to overcome some minor obstacles if you'd like. I will also need:
 - (3) separate d20 rolls
 - (1) d100
 - (1) Wisdom Saving Throw

(For reference, where you all currently live)



Health Status

100% hitpoints:	Healthy
75% to 99% hitpoints:	Light Wounds
50% to 75% hitpoints:	Medium Wounds
25% to 50% hitpoints:	Serious Wounds
0% to 25% hitpoints:	Critical Wounds.

(Let me know if below is correct)

Danse	Fargrim	Kaisaras	Kurstin	Radgar
				
27/27 hit points Inspiration	34/34 hit points	21/21 hit points	24/24 hit points	30/30 hit points

3/3 hit dice; 1/1 Second Wind; 1/1 Arcane Recovery; 2/2 Bladesong; Spell Slots: 3/3 1 st ; 2/2 Harrow Points	3/3 hit dice; 1/1 Second Wind; 1/1 Action Surge; 4/4 Superiority Dice; 2/2 Harrow Points	3/3 hit dice; 3/3 Bardic Inspiration; Spell Slots: 3/3 1 st , 2/2 2 nd ; 2/2 Harrow Points	3/3 hit dice; 3/3 Magical Tinkering; 0/2 Infuse Item; Spell Slots 3/3 1 st ; 1/1 Eldritch Cannon; 1/2 Harrow Points	3/3 hit dice; 0/1 Blessing of the Forge (Armor); 1/1 Channel Divinity; Spell Slots:3/3 1 st ; 2/2 2 nd ; 2/2 Harrow Points
20 Arrows			20 crossbow bolts	20 crossbow bolts

<i>Items</i>	<i>Held By</i>
<i>Giggle's Chainmail & Flail</i>	<i>Radgar</i>
<i>(6) daggers</i>	<i>Kaisaras</i>
<i>Wand of Acid Splash</i>	<i>Kurstin</i>
<i>(1) Dagger</i>	<i>Kurstin</i>
<i>(1) Potion of Healing</i>	<i>Kaisaras</i>
<i>(19) Crossbow Bolts</i>	<i>Kaisaras</i>
<i>Light Crossbow</i>	<i>Danse</i>
<i>7 pinches of Dust of Dryness</i>	<i>Radgar</i>
<i>1 pinch of Dust of Dryness (with water stored)</i>	<i>Kurstin</i>
<i>Silver chest (50gp)</i>	<i>Kaisaras</i>
<i>(5) Sacks of Gold holding 630.8gp converted treasure</i>	<i>Each Party Member</i>

<i>Tracker</i>	<i>Count</i>	<i>%</i>