

Exalted fan collection

Introduction

The intention of the document is for it to be a collection of texts, links, etc. to places that serve well as inspiration for exalted, categorised so it is easy to find inspiration for exactly your idea.

It will be expanded upon as time goes by, if you wish to contribute and to have editing right to the document, email me on c.munk.j@gmail.com. To keep the document from becoming cluttered, no more than ten resources/texts should be listed under each headline (hint, it just means if we find more, we make more headlines).

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Solars

Charms

Glorious Solar Sabre

Fiction

by [JayTee](#)

It was the height of the First Age, and a young Solar knelt at the feet of her Sifu, a Sidereal master of the ancient arts of war. "Master." She said, bowing her head in respect, "Teach me how to harness these strange powers that the Most High grants me."

The Sifu smacked the Solar upside the head with his cane.

"You have no powers." She barked, his wrinkled face frowning at his student. "You are no sorcerer! You cast no spells or weave no workings. Your might is inspired *by* the Unconquered Sun, not *from* Him!"

"But master, I have seen my brothers and sisters do wondrous things! I have seen them walk in to the Wyld and shape it to their desires, I have seen them cure the sick and wounded with but a touch, or move so softly they defy perception! How can these not be the powers of the Unconquered Sun?" She demanded.

The Sifu smacked the Solar upside the head with his cane.

"They do these things because they have skills you do not, talents you do not. But these are things you can learn." He said. The Sifu motioned to the spear at the Solar's side. A simple thing, made of polished wood with a steel head. "Your weapon?"

The Solar nodded, picking up the weapon and offering it to her Sifu. "Yes master, it was with me the day I was blessed by the Unconquered Sun, when I defeated the Hundred Tiger in single combat. It has been with me ever since that day."

"A mighty deed, how long has that been since that day?" Asked the Sifu, a twinkle in his eye.

"Over a month." Said the Solar.

"But you've used this weapon for much longer than that, haven't you?" Asked the Sifu.

"Yes master."

"How long?"

"Since I was a girl, practicing to become a guardsman for my town with my father." She said

The Sifu's face now held a knowing smile. "And how do you feel, with your weapon in my hand?" He asked.

"Lacking." Said the Solar, her eyes on the spear in her master's hand. 'Like I'm missing a piece of myself."

"Stand and close your eyes." Said the Sifu. "Do not open them until I command you."

The Solar stood, her eyes lingering on her weapon for a moment before complying.

"Hold out your hand. I am going to return your spear to you." Said the Sifu.

The Solar held out her hand, and she heard the Sifu toss the spear to her. She reached out reflexively felt its weight in her palm as she grasped it.

"Describe the spear to me." Said the Sifu.

With her eyes still closed, the Solar ran her fingers across the blade of the spear and down the body of the weapon. "It's heavier than a normal spear, off balance towards the bottom of the shaft where I had to cut off the tip where it was recently damaged. I haven't had time to fully repair it. Near the top there is a small nick where I struck aside the Hundred Tiger's blow and moved in for the kill. The center is worn down from use, but the feathers at the base of the blade are still soft." She said.

"Open your eyes." Commanded the Sifu.

The Solar complied once more, and her mouth fell open in amazement. In her hand was not her spear, her treasured battle companion, but instead a glowing shaft of light, thrumming with power beyond mortal imaginings. The noonday light perfectly mimicked the weapon she thought she had held, it even held sparkles of sun-dust in the shape of feathers towards the top.

"How is this possible?" Asked the Solar, looking at her Sifu and seeing that he still held her true spear.

"You have carried your weapon for so long, used it so frequently, that it's become a part of who you are." Said the Sifu, this time truly handing her back her weapon. The Solar accepted it gratefully in her other hand, and marveled at how alike they were. "Because it is a part of you, it can never be truly taken from you. When your soul reached out for a weapon that was not there, your hand answered and granted you a weapon that it knew you could wield."

"Amazing." Said the Solar. "I did not know that the Unconquered Sun could do such things for me."

The Sifu sighed, and smacked the Solar upside the head with his cane.

Sample Characters

"BAD" PENNY

by [Hand-of-Omega](#)

Penelope was born to a peasant family, but her dreaming heart led her to run away from the simple fisherman's life to join a passing troupe of wanderers at an early age. In their care, she learned the arts of dazzling and entertaining bored townspeople, and how to dissemble convincingly, skillfully inventing new pasts for herself to everyone she met. Penny learned how to avoid the Guardians of the Realm and how to bribe her way out of trouble when that was unavoidable. Most of all, she learned how to gain and exploit the trust of others...

Penny realizes that it was one of her more daring schemes that led to a Magistrate and the Black Helms cracking down on her caravan of wanderers, and she's pretty sorry about that, but omelettes require broken eggs, and she'd learned about all she could from them, anyway, so it was time to move on. Besides, they really weren't doing much with all that money they'd gathered, when she could put it to much better use!

So, Penny went to the larger cities of the Realm where she reinvented herself. During her wanderings, she had put her talent for observation and mimicry to good use, and in short order (and many new clothes and accessories), she found that she could pass herself off as a member of any strata of Realm society, from peasant to citizen to patrician.

Swiftly making contacts in the Realm's underworld, Penny soon made a name for herself as a conwoman extraordinaire, dancing through society in a dizzying array of disguises, successfully grifting wealthy commoners and patricians who had more jade than common sense. Eventually, she overreached again, this time by fleecing House Ragara while in the guise of a minor patrician noblewoman from a Satrapy in desperate need of a loan.

This broke one of the cardinal rules of the Realm's criminal element, who survive by staying under the Dynasts' radar. Drawing that kind of heat down on them will make them give up any sister criminal in an instant, and the Dragon-Blooded are quick to make an example of any that dare their wrath.

What happened next depends on Penny's mood when telling her story: Sometimes, she claims to have been Chosen by the Unconquered Sun in the very act of pulling off her audacious scheme, which both necessitated her quick escape and enabled it, as well; other times, she tells of being exposed and captured, only her exaltation enabling her to escape her chains and prison right before her torture and execution. Or, she successfully slipped out of gaol on her own, and was chosen on board the ship taking her off the Isle, as though in reward for her resourcefulness.

Whatever the truth, the newborn Solar took her act on the road.

Penny traveled the Vermillion Road across the South, conning and grifting with increasing supernatural skill as she went: A sizable shipment of precious stones went missing from Gem, several nobles of the Lap lost their shirts in a pyramid scheme, many magistrates in Paragon lost their heads when the Perfect learned they had been swindled, the Tri-Khan won't reveal what he lost to her, but suffice to say, she can't show her face in Chiaroscuro ever again; Harborhead's economy almost crashed when flooded the market with fake jade, and her meddling in Varangia caused the permanent shut-down of many of its famous gambling parlors. As for An-Teng...she doesn't talk about what went down there. That place is just crawling with Bad Crazyiness...

Deciding that the South had become too hot (), Penelope set out for the East, eventually setting up shop in Nexus, a city after her own greedy heart! A place where, so long as you mind the Dogma and Civilities, no one can complain about you ripping them off because there are no laws? Hells, yes! Of course, nothing prevents your victims from taking their anger out on you, either, so you'd better be

smarter, faster and sharper than they are, and avoid the notice of the Council of Entities and their Mercenary Companies...

Penny maintains a few aliases in Nexus, including a wealthy socialite in Bastion, an eccentric artist in Cinnabar, a humble student in Sentinel's Hill, and a beggar in Nighthammer. She is greedily eyeing the Guild, having spent enough time studying its operations in her journeys across the Threshold to identify its patterns and weaknesses; successfully fleecing it would make her name across Creation, but it would also make her enemies as powerful as the Ragaras. It also galls her that she never got a shot at cracking either the impregnable Bank of the Scarlet Throne or the Vault of the Imperial Treasury; if such an opportunity feasibly arose, she'd find it hard to resist returning to the Blessed Isle...

Notes: Penelope has amassed a significant amount of experience in her adventures, much of which went into her Mental and Social traits (Specialties in High Society Disguise, Gaining Confidence and Talking Her Way Out of Trouble), as well as Backgrounds reflecting her Criminal Connections and Resources (easily 5; at this point, she's clearly in it for the thrill rather than the wealth). Her Merits include Silver Tongue, Jack of All Trades, and Cache; her Flaws are Vice (Stealing) and Wanted (House Ragara).

Penny's Charm focus is on Stealth, Larceny, Presence, Performance, Socialize and Dodge. As of yet, she has no Familiars or Exalted Allies, although the Gold Faction is aware of her activities and is awaiting the right time to approach her. Her only Artifact is a set of Everyman Armor she stole in the South, but after an encounter with Shalrina in her shop, she is eager to earn one of the Goddess' Mask Artifacts (as well as her other services, if her enemies ever catch up to her...).

PS: I can't decide on Penny's Caste: Is she a Social Night or a Larcenous Eclipse? Which would you make her?

MELODIOUS ODE, the Wandering Minstrel

by [Hand-of-Omega](#)

He was born and raised in a small threshold village where the very concept and sound of music were forbidden. Many times he had been whipped for idly humming tunes or beating out a rhythm on fences, but the boy seemed addle-minded and good for little else. He became an absent-minded young man without good prospects, regarded as something of a town idiot, until the stranger came calling. He was a traveling minstrel, a bard of many songs and stories, jangling with musical instruments. Quickly run out of town, the songful stranger sadly left, but not before inspiring the youth to lift his voice in true song for the first time.

The villagers were horrified, and tried everything to shut him up, but they couldn't. Even at the town hearing, he joyously sang his defense, the shining mark on his forehead signaling a song so powerful that they could only stand and listen...to the ruin of all. For the injunction against music wasn't some idle whim of distant ancestors, but the only way they could ensure the perpetual sleep of the Behemoth called Song-Eater. While the visitor's music had stirred the creature, his sun-powered song finally woke it, and it came in its hunger. Most of the village was destroyed and its people slain, before he fled, drawing the monster after him, greedily devouring every improvising vocalization he could throw at it.

He finally silenced himself long enough to lose it, and began his wanderings. He had many random encounters with many new and strange people and creatures, but the ones that made the most impression were those to do with his new passion for music. He eventually found himself in the

Musician's Village, where he learned how to fashion many varieties of instrument; when he'd learned all they had to teach him, they gifted him with one of the true treasures of their home, the Unsurpassed Sanxian, bound with the musical soul of the village's founder. They sent him with a letter of recommendation to study the art of composition with one of their patrons, the Elemental Dragon Naresh, a connoisseur of music who bestowed upon him his current name.

From Naresh, Melodious Ode learned the rules of creating music, from short, solo songs to hours-long symphonies for massive orchestras. The Solar flame within him burned brightly, and he churned out pages of music, relentlessly. But he still ached for others of equivalent skill to perform his works, and to play with and against. And he was still haunted by the spectre of the beast that he had unwittingly unleashed, who would gleefully swallow all the music in the world, until it finally drowned in mournful silence...

Still, Ode has hope. He recently won a musical duel against a Faerie Prince, who informed him that the Song-Eater has a weakness, that which laid it low before: A song that even it can not swallow. He did not know this song himself, but hinted that it could be found in the realms beyond those of man, if only in fragments. Even now, he prepares to descend to the dead, whose dirges may recall part of the song he needs; and if he survives that, then must he dare the mad music of Malfeas, to play for the favor of the greater souls of the Yozis themselves. If only he weren't distracted by those recurring dreams of that Nightengale-woman who sings with a voice of silver...

Notes: Melodious Ode has a Mentor in Naresh, Arbiter of Northern Storms, and an Enemy in the Song-Eater. His Driving Passion is Learning and Performing all types of Music, and he has the Prodigy merit for Performance, which aids him in increasing his Specialties; he is quickly working his way up through the Charms the ability gives him. In addition to his Unsurpassed Sanxian, he also has an Ultimately Useful Tube, which he uses in its flute mode most of the time. He bears many other instruments, which he made himself with his Craft Specialty, but they are simply exceptional in nature, not magical.

Most of Ode's development is in Awareness, Dodge, Survival, Integrity and Resistance. He prefers no to fight, but Naresh insisted on giving him some training in Melee (staff) for self-defence.

FREJA, the Renegade Ancestor Cultist

by [Hand-of-Omega](#)

Like most of the Barbarian tribespeople who call themselves the Tear-Eaters, Freja was perfectly comfortable growing up in and around Shadowlands, being raised to believe in her people's strength, and enjoying the bounty the tribe's raiders brought back from both the living and the dead. The one dark spot in her youth was seeing her beloved older brother return from his coming-of-age journey into the Underworld, one of the few who periodically fail and come back as a mindless zombie. Only once did Freja commit the greatest taboo amongst her people, by addressing him, one of the Nameless Dead, as her brother instead of the rotting slave he now was...

Perhaps that was enough. When it was her turn to journey alone into the Underworld, to find the opulent encampment of the Great Dead and to offer her gift to her ancestor in hopes of receiving the right to bear his name among the Tear-Eaters, she too was rejected. Yet, when the wrathful Lich reached out towards her, it suddenly drew back in pain and terror, at the warm, golden light breaking forth from Freja's forehead. The girl herself was too dazzled by the deep, heroic voice in her head: "Long have your people been deceived, used and abused by the dead. Light their way, and lead them forth away and out from this darkness!"

Taking back the enchanted ax her shaman uncle had helped her craft as a gift, Freja fought her way free from the Great Dead and their warriors, blazing with the righteous light of the sun. She ran, as fast and far as she could, until even the Essence powering her strides gave out. Rescued by a kindly village of ghosts, she pondered her next move. She could not go home again, for she had failed in the ways of her people. More importantly, Freja felt the truth of the voice within, and knew both the burden and the empowerment of the divine mission she had been given...

Since then, Freja has extensively traveled the Northwest of Creation, her journey threading in and out of its many Shadowlands. Reviled as the greatest traitor to her people, she has fought off many of their raids, defending both the living and the dead against them. Always, she takes great pains not to permanently harm them, however, and tries to get them to see the truth of their enslavement to the Deathlord who dominates their lives and afterlives; dead Tear-Eaters are beyond help, as far as she's concerned, and she destroys them, and any other harmful dead, without hesitation or mercy. Her legend is growing, and has already reached the Crimson Fortress and its mistress, who smiles and plots to seduce the young Lawgiver into her service...

Notes: Freja is a young woman, still growing into adulthood, but with plenty of exercise rapidly strengthening her tall, athletic build. Her youth in a Shadowland has left its mark on her, leaving her looking somehow frail, despite her obvious fitness, and her unusually pale skin stands in sharp relief to her long, bright red hair. Like most of her hardy folk, she prides herself on not requiring much insulation from the elements, especially thanks to her Charms, and wears little save armor most of the time.

Freja is a Zenith Caste Solar, whose Survival, Integrity, Athletics and Resistance aids her greatly in her wanderings through the wilderness of both Creation and the Underworld. She has grown famous for her use of her Anima power to both defend the living from the dead, and to save those she could not protect from rising to join the ranks of their killers. Her Presence Charms also greatly aid her in addressing both her enemies and possible allies, as well as invoking the Holy strength that empowers her. She has some knowledge of Occult, specializing in ghosts, which also aids her in combat against them.

Freja's main combat ability is Melee, and she enjoys the Favored Weapon merit with her rune-scribed Grimcleaver of enchanted bone. In her travels, she has gained but one steady companion, a Steel Shadow she calls Dusk, as her Familiar. She has yet to succeed in destroying any of the Great Dead, but she has had multiple encounters with one of the very few to break free from the necromantic control of the Lover and to find his own path. This powerful Lich has offered to teach her more of the dead and their ways, and Freja is starting to believe that he may well be her greatest ally in her war against the Deathlord who has stolen her people...

Fanfiction

From out of a Dream

by [Semicasual](#)

Running quest on the official exalted forums: [LINK](#)

It is Written that the Sun chose from the greatest of mankind - those whose courage, ambition, and virtues surpassed all others. Theirs was the will to Power, Power beyond any that humans had wielded before...



ambient music

“Hey. Wake up, we’re here.”

Words slowly invade your consciousness as you open your eyes. It is very dark, and it takes a few moments to realize that this is because there is a canvas covering your head. There is a loud drumming sound. Your head is splitting and your muscles ache – gods, where are you? What were you drinking last night?

“Five fates, I don’t know how you slept at all, but I’m drowning out here. Get your arse out of the cart, get to work, so we can go home, *please*.”

You start moving your arms to pull the canvas away from your face and immediately regret it as water washes into your eyes. You are looking up at an overcast sky, which is raining hard directly onto your face and the canvas around you – hence the drumming. Well, at least you’re awake now.

“And here he is! Honestly, I don’t know how you get the rep you have with discipline like that. When I were in the army, we didn’t get piss drunk right before a fight. You know why? Because – “

“Shut up,” you grunt as you sit up. There is a clanking and grinding underneath you. Somewhat to your surprise, the mouthy guy in the driver’s seat of the cart actually does shut up.

You try to gather your thoughts, try to pull yourself together. Right then, let's start with the basics. Your name is...

- **Nergüi.** You shed your real name years ago, so now you just tell people you don't have one. Most people don't get it, but the ones that do don't ask further.
- **Ganzorig.** Fitting, given your profession.
- **Naranbaatar.** You were actually born at midnight and nobody figured you'd be anyone special, but your parents had a sense of humor. One of the many ironies of your life.
- **Otgonbayar.** You were the littlest in a family of nine. Trying to live past your own name was a challenge you took up as soon as you learned what it meant.
- **Something Else?** (I prefer male Mongolian names for our main man.)

Author comment

Hello, and welcome to my quest thread! I hope you will enjoy yourself.

For the most part, story posts will end in a choice like the one given above and I will be choosing responses based on majority vote. However, I may twist my writing if someone suggests something very interesting or the majority is very narrow. You can expect most posts to have a "something else" option for this reason. Other posts will offer no specific choices, and I will pick whatever response sounds the most interesting or gets repeated by the most people. "Likes" do not count as votes in any situation.

I believe that the best stories are inferred more than they are told, so I am not going to give you *any* information out of character about our protagonist, the setting, mechanics, or anything else unless you tell me that you do not have enough information to make a decision... and even then, I will try to tell you only what you need to know using our protagonist's idiosyncratic language. I also believe that not clearly defining what the protagonist knows or can do means I can change the scope of his abilities on the fly, which I think will be very useful for this semi-collaborative story between us.

I am open to criticism and corrections, but let me warn you that I usually let all dialogue rest in "first draft" state. I find that written speech feels more authentic if you do not attempt to make it grammatically correct or word-perfect.

Text in spoiler tags provides more information about specific people, places, or objects. This information is generally not relevant to the plot, but it might provide you with some insight into how the main man's head works.

All artwork I post comes courtesy of [Kat Brenowitz](#).

Chapter 1 - Power

Your name was **Otgonbayar**, a lifetime ago... but all that is behind you now.

Now, you call yourself **Nergüi**. You're a mercenary for hire, the only one you know who can run alone while getting the pay of ten or more. You're here because some magus wanted some bandits cleared out of some ruins, because there was... something... in the ruins, a jewel of some kind that was really important for some magus business. You didn't ask for details because the down payment was already enough to get completely wasted on the most expensive wine you could find in the city with enough left over to cover living expenses for a year. Maybe two years, if you didn't drink so much... ah, who are you fooling?

You were sleeping in the back of a rattling wooden cart being driven down a muddy road by the mouthy guy, who has now dismounted and is tending to the horses. Also in the cart are a few boxes of supplies for the journey. It is daytime, probably early morning. It is raining hard, typical for the Season of Water. Around you are sopping wet grasslands – low, rolling hills, sparse trees. Peering off into the distance, up ahead on the road maybe two or three miles away, you can make out what might once have been a castle. That'll be your target.

"Where's my weapon?" you ask as you look around, bleary-eyed. You can't decide if the cold rain helps your headache or makes it worse.

"You slept on it, nimrod," comes the reply from the mouthy guy... Li. You're pretty sure his name is Li.*

1

Right, right. That would explain the clanking and the way your spine seems to have twisted up. You groan as you pull the canvas off yourself, shuffle out of the cart, and turn around to look. Multiple weapons lie in the bed of the cart, which momentarily confuses you. Which one of them is yours?

- The **Short Bow "Archer's Paradox"**, made of some kind of ivory you've never been able to identify. It is the only thing you have left of your family. Your father told you once that a true master with it could shoot an arrow that would fly forever, but you're not that kind of master – your arrows usually stop when they hit somebody. It's a very practical weapon – great for hunting, fighting, launching grapnels to out of reach places – truly, an indispensable piece of equipment.
- The **Grand Daiklave "Cleaver"**, the biggest blade you've seen in your life, and also the sharpest. You haven't ever sharpened the thing, actually, but you go through a lot of sheaths. It's a long, broad, double-edged sword that shines like polished bronze. It's made of orichalcum, you think, mostly – the previous owner wasn't in any shape to tell you more about it. Not a great weapon for indoor work, as you might be doing soon, but you just love the way everyone's faces change when you draw it. You remember one time you got a lucky swing that took a man's head off right after pulling Cleaver out, and his face was forever frozen with that look of shock and disbelieving terror. Thinking of it makes you smile.
- The **Twin Short Swords, "Righty and Lefty"**, a pair of short, slightly curved blades you had made with the money you made off your first wetwork job. It cost the entire payout, but it was worth it – they've definitely earned you back what you paid for them many times over. They're made of fine Realm steel and they've never let you down in a close-quarters fight – which should say a lot, given how many close-quarters fights you've been in. You also shave with them, sometimes.

¹ Li is middle-aged retired soldier. You know the type – served a few years, then sold his armor and got a paying job. Won't stop talking about how great it was in the army, but he'll never go back there. Probably never been in a real fight, but loves to play up what a badass he was. Honestly, if he were any good, he'd either still be serving or become a bandit.

He's a little shorter than you and wiry. Thin mustache, thinning hair, dull brown eyes. Currently wearing a hooded cloak to keep the rain off. Kind of skinny – probably doesn't eat much and thinks he's being frugal by starving himself. Works for the magus doing odd jobs, as far as you can tell.

You first met Li yesterday evening when he found you in the fancy restaurant when you were nearly done with your last jar of the night and reminded you that you had to be somewhere. You graciously accepted his offer to drive you out here, after you bought a couple more pots for the road. Actually, now you think about it, it might not have been last night. Maybe it was last week?...

- **Something Else?** (Please provide a name and description. Possible evocations optional)

You blink the water out of your eyes, and it occurs to you that you might be more hungover than you thought. What are you saying? They're *all* yours. Just as an engraver has many chisels, you have many weapons... but **Cleaver** is your favorite, the one you are most practiced with and prefer to use in most situations.

While Li gets off the cart and starts digging around in the boxes, you do a few stretches to limber up and then start strapping weapons to yourself. Cleaver in its sheath across your shoulders, Paradox slung with its quiver behind your back (you remembered to bring both broadheads and bodkins today, good), Righty and Lefty in sheaths on your belt. Also a holdout knife in your boot, the changeable three-section staff Vortex (now collapsed down to the size of a baton) on one thigh, a brace of throwing knives across your chest, and your kusarigama, Reaching Fist, on the other thigh.



The rain by now has penetrated your thick hair, but you don't mind – Your headband keeps it out of your eyes, and anyway this is far from the worst weather you've ever been out in. You pride yourself on being able to shrug off discomforts from being outdoors. Look at Li, there, grumbling under his cloak – it doesn't take a genius to guess he'd rather be in bed under a roof right now. Then again, he's probably been driving all night, so maybe you can cut him some slack.

Li has dug out some dried meat and hard bread out of one of the boxes. "You want to eat? Or do you usually kill on an empty stomach?" he says, holding it out to you. "Before you ask, all the wine's gone. You lush." You take the food without a word and start stuffing it in your mouth. You wish you had some hair of the dog now, but you can at least wash the dry food down by turning your face up and opening your mouth. Li eats too, but less than he gave you, and when he's finished he watches you for a while with an unreadable expression.

"Alright then. This is as close as I want to get, and I'm only this close because of the rain," says Li, unprompted. "So... you can see the old place up there. You know the details already. I'll just wait here, and if you're not back by nightfall I'm headed back to tell Master Himitsu* you cocked it up and died." He starts covering over the boxes in the cart with the canvas.

You pull the leather satchel with the rest of your gear out of the cart and hang it around your neck. You don't want to be wearing it while fighting, of course, but you figure you'll need it later and there's no sense leaving it here.

"That's fine," you answer. "I don't think this'll take long."²

² Himitsu, that was the name. You've never met the guy – one of those rich city folk who don't like to get their hands dirty, probably. Some agent – Wei, you think he called himself – of Himitsu met you in town to give you the job and some money, with the promise of more "upon elimination of the criminal element and retrieval of the object" as he put it. It amazes you how hard people try to convince themselves or each other that they're not paying you to go kill people and loot their stuff.



ambient music

You spend an hour or two walking through the wet, tall grass, taking an approach to the fortress that is slightly off the road. You've seen plenty of castles and ruins in your time, and this one is surprisingly intact. It's an old stone fortress, you don't know how old – funny thing about places like this is that the best ones don't ever really seem to age. Of course, all the wood bits have rotted away, and as you come closer you can see that the roofs seem to have caved in on the towers. On the side facing the road, you can see that a huge section of the outer wall has been torn down along with the gates, and a large hole has been knocked into the side of the main keep. You can imagine some kind of enormous animal pulling the building apart, or maybe a crew of overworked masons on a tight schedule.

There are no signs of life from the keep until you've already climbed up the embankment to the edge of the outer wall and looked in through the great gap. From there, you see cloth or canvas stretched over some of the smaller roofless outbuildings and a small fire burning just beyond the hole in the keep's wall.

You were told there were maybe twenty, maybe thirty men running an operation out of this place – enough to give even a well-guarded caravan trouble. You don't have to kill all of them, or even most of them, but driving them away so that they don't rob anyone else (at least for a little while) or get in your way while you search for Himitsu's desired artifact is a must. The question is, how do you approach it?

- **Rush right in** through the hole in the wall while you've still got surprise on your side. Hit 'em hard, hit 'em fast, hit 'em a lot, and you can rout them before they have a chance to overwhelm you.
- **Stealthily take them out one at a time**, starting with the poor saps in the outbuildings. If you're careful, the heavy rain should provide plenty of cover. Some might even still be asleep – easy pickings. Of course, if they're more alert than they look, you won't be able to stay quiet for long.

- **Draw them out of the keep.** You don't see any real defensive measures out here, but that might not be true of the inside. Make some noise, lure them out, and you can fight them on ground that will probably favor you more than them. Then again, if they're smart, they'll all come at you at once, and then you'll have to fight on the run.
 - **Something Else?** (You may freely guess what Nergüi's capabilities are. If you have another idea, suggest it!)
-

You decide that this challenge requires a subtle approach.

First, you'll need a good vantage point. You run your hands along the weathered stone of the wall as you look towards its apex. Probably, in this castle's heyday, there used to be a ramp or stairs that led up to the top, but you don't see anything like that now. No matter – it looks like it's only about thirty feet high.

You take a couple steps back, make a few short practice hops, and then *jump*. You feel a tingling in your legs as you rise up over the wall's edge and softly land in a crouch on the wet masonry. At once you sweep your head to the side, looking towards the keep for any sign of activity. There is none – if anyone saw you, they're not responding.

You put your satchel down on top of the wall – this is as good a place as any to leave it – and pull Paradox off your back. You string the horn, give it an experimental “twang!”, and start looking for targets. Your eyes focus, and the sheets of rain coming down no longer impede your sight.

You see two men sitting by the fire you spotted before. They're not looking out into the courtyard, like good guards should be – they're looking into the fire. One of them occasionally pokes at it with a stick – they're likely cooking something.

There are three others in the nearest shelter – you can see their silhouettes when they move around a lamp or something inside their improvised hut. There is at least one in an adjacent half-ruined storehouse who you see peeking his head out. None of these look promising.

Eventually, a target presents itself. A big man lurches out of one of the further-away outbuildings and starts walking towards the central courtyard. You pull an arrow from your quiver, draw back the bowstring, take a breath, and release a broadhead into his chest before he can take ten steps. He doesn't scream – just falls over and writhes on the ground for a few minutes while rain mixes with his blood.

There are a few more targets of opportunity like that one – another man from the far building, maybe looking for his friend. One more leaving the wreckage of a tower to empty his bladder. Two more who emerge from the side of the keep, hauling bundles of some kind. You kill each one with a shot to the skull, neck, heart, or lungs, and the downpour covers your quiet carnage. Easy enough, so far. You haven't felt anything on your forehead yet, which is definitely a good sign. You unconsciously raise a hand to adjust your headband, which by now is soaking wet just like everything else out here.

You sit and watch a while longer – you're not sure how long – before you come to the conclusion that no one else is going to come out into the open, and there are too many bodies around to cause alarm if you wait any more. You put Paradox away, still strung, and hop off the wall, landing with a slight splash.

You make for the nearest shelter, contemplating how to kill three before any of them can shout. There definitely isn't room for Cleaver in there, unless you want to try cutting the whole structure apart. You pull Righty and Lefty from your belt, slowing your walk slightly as you approach the doorway. You pause for an instant just outside, then charge in.

You see the three men in the flesh, sitting on what might have been an expensive rug and rolling dice by the light of a wood-and-paper lantern. Two facing the door, one facing away. Time seems to slow as you rush the one who is only just beginning to turn his head and push Righty into his throat. You pull your arm back and kick him away as the other two begin to rise. You move towards the one on the left, who raises his arms defensively around his head, and stab underneath his guard with Lefty, jabbing around his sternum three times before pushing him down and turning to look at the last one. The last is standing and has grabbed hold of a short spear – he is swinging the shaft around like a club, his face filled with horror and confusion. You stop the blow on your right forearm and push the shaft down, moving his arms away before you step in and shove Lefty into the side of his neck. Blood sprays everywhere as you pull free and hop back, watching three bodies sink to the floor. You are surprised and oddly pleased to note that no one knocked over the lantern.

“Godsblood!” comes an echo from the entryway. Your awareness of time returns to normal as you turn to see someone standing in the door, holding a bowl in one hand and a spoon in the other and looking ridiculous as he gawks at the scene. Oh, that's right – there was someone in the next building over, wasn't there? You hoped he wouldn't notice. Maybe you should've nailed him first.

He drops what he's holding and runs out of your sight almost immediately. You bolt out of shelter in time to spot him sprinting towards the keep. You let Righty and Lefty drop from your hands and kneel, pulling Paradox off your back.

The runner shouts “HELP! HELP! WE'RE UNDER ATTAAGH!” before an arrow catches him between the shoulder blades. He stumbles, but to his credit he keeps running with the arrow in his

back and even makes as if to shout again before you put a second one through the back of his head.

You grab Righty and Lefty off the ground, wipe them off on the grass, and sheathe them before looking towards the keep. Sure enough, the not-very-alert guards around the fire are looking very alert now. One of them is looking right at you, and the other is fleeing deeper into the fortress.

It was good while it lasted and you can be pretty confident now that you won't be outflanked, but you've been discovered. Now what?

- **Charge!** They might know you're here, but they're still in disarray. You can do more damage and maybe even break them entirely if you push ahead.
- **Wait, prepare an ambush.** You killed, what, eight or nine? If your sources are telling the truth, at least half of them are still inside. Better to fight them out in the open.
- **Retreat and regroup.** Not because you think you're in real danger, but because you want to hold back. If you have to redouble your efforts now, your Blessing might start to show...
- **Something Else?**

You decide that the best plan for now is to wait for the enemy to come out in force, then ambush them.

You consider the layout of the courtyard in your head, considering and discarding options. Hiding inside one of the buildings is no good - you'd just be boxed in. You could return to the top of the wall where they would be unable to reach you, but if you went back to shooting them and they couldn't attack back they'd just hide in the keep. That hole in the keep wall makes for a natural chokepoint, but you doubt it's the only entrance to the keep, and anyway they'll expect you to stand there. You need a place where you can be sure they'll come within your reach, but out of their sight and with at least one good exit route...

Your eyes are drawn to the stone in the keep wall just above the hole, maybe fifteen feet off the ground. Paradox gets slung over your back again, and you slowly draw out Cleaver. Resting the massive sword on your shoulder, you start running towards the keep.

The remaining guard sees you coming, and makes himself scarce. Good – now you can get into position undetected. When you come close enough to the wall you make another of your practiced high jumps, swinging Cleaver around so its tip is pointed down and ahead of you.

There is a loud "CHING!" as your sword penetrates the stone wall a foot deep and sticks. You let your momentum carry you into the wall feet-first, and you cling there with your sword as an anchor.

Your hands around the hilt support most of your weight, letting you brace your boots against the stone while you tilt your head to keep an eye on the ground below you. You take one hand off Cleaver for an instant to brush your braids out of the way for a clearer view.

You continue to hang there on the wall for several minutes, waiting. Eventually, you hear the sounds of tramping feet and muffled speech, and people start coming out of the keep. Six of them in all, armed with swords and spears and moving in a loose group. They're looking around, searching for you in the dim morning light.

When the last one is outside the wall and almost directly beneath you, you kick off the wall and pull hard on Cleaver, jerking it up and out of the wall. You turn in the air to face the ground, spinning Cleaver about so its edge chops right through the bandit as you land. It's not a clean cut – even with Cleaver, it's damned near impossible to shear through a body's spine lengthwise – but it buys you an instant to rise to your feet while the other five are gaping at the man you just cut in two.

You let out a wordless roar and rush at two fighters on your right, making a wide, rising sweep with the sword. One leaps out of the way, while the second tries to block – too slowly – and loses his left arm. You finish the swing and reverse it as you move forward, decapitating that second man and slicing open the guts of the first.

Terror – that's the key. Any of the three men you have your back to now might kill you if they could fight past their shock and their fear of pain and death. Instead they hesitate, clutching their swords, hoping to find an opening where they can strike at you without risking themselves. That hesitation will cost them everything. To start with, it gives you time to turn about and charge again.

One of them tilts his blade at you to meet your charge. You twist and turn to one side, practically spinning around the point of his sword as you whirl Cleaver around and take off another head. Still turning, you fall to one knee and sweep out with your leg to trip over another brute trying to rush you. While he drops, you jump up, raising Cleaver to clash against a chop by the third bandit and pushing him back. You take a swing of your own at him and he blocks, but the force of the hit staggers him and breaks his guard. Your next swing crushes into his skull and knocks him to the ground. As you pull free, you turn around in time to kick the second bandit back into the mud as he tries to get up and sever his head with a downward slash.

The rain washes away some, but not all, of the blood that now covers you and everything else.

Your forehead is starting to itch a little. You raise your hand up to your face just above the level of your eyes but see no light on your palm. It appears that the headband is doing its job, for now...

With all the opposition outside gone, you retrieve your satchel and make your way into the keep. The mostly-unlit interior is no obstacle, with your eyes. It looks as though this ground-floor level is where most of the bandits have been living. Their debris is everywhere – improvised bedding, discarded weapons or tools, somewhat valuable trinkets, less-than-valuable trinkets, trash – but you find no other signs of life or Himitsu's artifact³. Overall, you get the impression that most of the space in this castle has gone unused. Everywhere you look, there's just bare stone. You wonder why no one has tried to occupy or rebuild this fortress before... or if they have, and you're just looking at it after its latest turn of conquest and abandonment.

You go through empty room after empty room, getting a sense of the keep's layout. There is a storeroom full of food and several barrels of wine, which you make a note of for later. You find the "real" entrance to the keep – a pair of massive iron doors that ten people could walk through side-by-side, kept shut by rust and a sizable pile of rock heaped against it. You also find another hole in the wall, slightly smaller than the one you came through, providing an exit out of a room that you think might once have been a kitchen. Piles of broken rock are heaped just outside. These piles are new – nothing is growing on or around them.

Soon enough, you find a sizable hallway full of stone debris and wooden sledges. At the end of this hallway, you find a great shaft that looks like it goes up to the top of the keep and a level or two down below it. Once, there were probably stairs here. If so, someone spent some time and effort collapsing them from top to bottom. A rope-ladder leading down to the bottom has been fastened to the edge of the shaft, right next to some kind of pulley-lift with a net. Looking down into the shaft, you see a great heap of stone right under the pulley, illuminated by several torches that fill the shaft with ominously flickering light. It seems there is another hall at the bottom of this pit, and the torches lead into it.

You can hear echoes coming from this lower hall - the cracking and clanging sounds of stone striking stone and metal striking stone, punctuated by shouts and grinding sounds. Evidently, the bandits are busy excavating something down there.

What do you do?

- **Descend the ladder and investigate the lower hall.** You won't accomplish anything useful up here.
- **Wait and observe some more.** You've still got most of the day to finish your errand – no sense rushing things.
- **Make some noise and draw the bandit workers out of their hole.** Assuming you mean to kill them all, the ground level of the shaft is a good tactical position to start from. If nothing else, it'd be easy to drop rocks on people from here.

³ It's coming back to you now... the thing you came here to find is called the Stone of Making. It was described to you as a 'head-sized piece of clear crystal, inside of which is an ever-shifting pattern of colors and shapes.' Sounds easy enough to recognize. You don't know what it's for, or how the magus knew it would be here, or why he wants it.

- **Something Else?**

First, you pull up the rope ladder so no one can escape. It wasn't a sure thing when you arrived, but now you're certain that only one person is going to walk out of here alive. It's probably what Himitsu wants, anyway.

You look up into the stairless stairwell, then over at the lift. Struck by an idea, you climb up and onto the arm of the machine. The wood creaks as you balance yourself on the end of it, hanging over the shaft, and carefully turn around to face back the way you came. As you thought, from this angle you can see a series of landings going up the shaft, each one an access point to another level. You bend your legs and kick off the pulley, launching yourself to the first floor.

You land in dust and dirt. This whole castle is dusty and dirty, naturally, but the filth you're standing in now doesn't come from rocks being dragged around and unwashed men not taking the time to sweep. This is accumulated crud from nobody coming up here in hundreds of years, likely as not. As you stand up and look around you see that the signs of neglect from the ground level are more pronounced up here – at least the bandits cleared away the cobwebs in the places where they lived and worked.

You jump back down onto the lift, take a moment to gauge the distance to the bottom, and then hop off the lift backwards. You hear a thunderous crashing sound from below as you drop, but your mind remains focused on controlling your fall. A shudder runs through you an instant before you land on the rock pile and roll, stopping on your feet at the base of the heap. You stand up and dust yourself off, none the worse for having fallen onto jagged stones from a height that would break most people.

Ahead, you can see the torchlit hallway ends in a wall of broken rock and rubble – it appears that at some point in the past, there was a cave-in down here. There is one gap in upper part of the wall – a small one, just large enough for a body to squeeze through. A group of ten men is standing around in front of the wall, brandishing picks, shovels, and hammers, cheering and slapping each other on the back.

You quickly move to the corner of the wall where hallway meets stairwell, and watch as one of the men – not dressed like a laborer as the others are, and carrying one long and one short sword at his side – steps in front of the group and raises his arms. The workers become quiet.

“Well, boys, we’ve done it! Weeks of work pays off today. Double rations for everyone!”

Another cheer goes from the assembled workers.

“Take a short break. Yan, Jang, go get some food and wine down here, and tell the lifters to drop some wood. When we’re all refreshed, we’ll widen the hole a bit, shore it up, and see what’s on the other side.”

Two of the men drop their tools and start walking in your direction, headed for the shaft. The leader-figure goes to a folding chair placed at one side of the hall, while the others take their ease on the floor.

What now?

- **Charge.** This will be slaughter. Most of them aren’t armed with real weapons, they’re not alert, they’re tired from digging, and there is enough space to swing Cleaver around if you keep away from the walls.
- **Extinguish the torches.** You have ways of seeing in the dark, and it’s a pretty safe bet that none of them do. With some effort, you could get past them all without a fight... or get an edge in a fight.
- **Reveal yourself.** You’re curious to know what this is about – you’ll probably still have to kill them all anyway once they figure out that you butchered the “lifters” and pulled up the ladder to trap them down here, but maybe if you talk to the leader you can learn something first.
- **Something else?**

Second Breath

by [JayTee](#)

Chapter 0: This is who I am

You wake up on your back laying on the ground and looking at the sky. It’s overcast, but the clouds are beginning to part, letting the sunlight through, the warm light providing you with some comfort in an otherwise uncomfortable position. You aren’t sure how long you’ve been laying there, but you get the feeling that it hasn’t been that long. You feel like you should get up, but the pull of the earth and the gentle wind that just started blowing make a compelling argument for remaining still.

Then the smell of blood hits your nose, a LOT of blood.

Immediately following this, your skull erupts in to pain, threatening to send you back in to unconsciousness through the sheer agony of it all.

The pain slowly fades as you clutch your head, trying to maintain awareness of your surroundings despite the tortures coming from within. After a moment that lasts too long for your liking, the pain eventually stops, and you are able to get up and and take stock of your surroundings.

Bodies. Bodies everywhere. Some cut in to chunks, other mashed in to a pulp, blood soaks the ground at your feet. Clearly a great battle just took place, and you have woken up in the aftermath of it all.

As you struggle to fend off the smell, or at least mute it, you hear a voice calling out. It's off in the distance, so you have a little time to think things through before you're forced to deal with it. What do you do?

Options:

- >Assess Self
- >Assess Surroundings
- >Assess Voice
- >Other

OOC

I've wanted to do something like this for a while now. Sorta new at this whole thing, so bare with me through the inevitable rough patch of a newbie writer at the start of his hopefully long career.

>Assess Self

You stand at a height of 6 feet tall, your skin is the typical olive color of most river folk. You are garbed in broken and battered armor that is drenched in blood and gore, most of it you're sure is not yours. Your body itself is lean and fit, and adorned with dozens of injuries. At your side is a set of sheaths for two swords, with your back carrying an empty quiver for arrows. Blood from a wound in your head has started to get in your eyes, forcing you to rip off a scrap of cloth from your outfit and tie it in to a makeshift bandage to keep your vision clear. Curiously, many of the superficial injuries you have sustained have begun to fade, even as you look at them. You are certain this is not normal.

Your ribs still hurt like a bitch, though, and you are reliably certain that they are broken, or at least fractured. You should probably do something about that.

>>Unzip

Your manhood is comfortable resting in its loincloth, and you see no compelling reason to expose yourself at this time. Really, given the gore and grime you are caked in, this would probably be a very stupid idea.

>Assess Surroundings

A closer inspection of the battlefield reveals that there were at least three sides to the conflict. One side is garbed in highly professional looking armor, full plate with large broad shields and heavy pikes with short swords as a secondary weapon. The robustness of the plate and red of the uniform of the soldiers does well to hide the blood and death wounds, but given the current volume, it still stands out.

The second side is much *much* more exotic, an assortment of monsters and gibbering creatures that could only be spawned from the wildest imaginings of a child. Multi-limbed beasts with horns of amber and fangs of ivory dot the battlefield, each half again as large as the tallest man. Small and squat green skinned creatures with needle teeth and cold eyes make up the bulk of the bodies of the second side, and here and there, very rarely, you see humanlike figures that are just slightly... off somehow, with sharp ears and strange hands.

As for the third side, you sense a sort of familiarity with them, probably because they wear the same armor as you, but somewhat less ornate. Light and flexible, built for skirmishers and infantry. They are among the least numerous, but most mauled of all the bodies, apparently having fought beyond their body's ability to function, and then some.

>>Did I kill them?

Given the sheer amount of gore on you, the bodies that lay at your feet, the empty quiver on your back and the weapons at your side, you can guess that you killed a lot of them.

>>Assess threats, hazards, possible weapons and cover.

A quick look around shows a discarded bow and two swords laying not far from your position. They feel comfortable in your grip, and were very likely made for you. There is no immediate hazard or cover, but if you felt compelled to hide, disguising yourself as a dead body would be child's play.

>Assess voice

The voice is female, and appears to be calling out for someone or something, as it is repeating the same thing over and over and raising its voice in varying ways. At the moment, you can't tell what its purpose is. It could be anything from wife looking for spouse to a commander looking for any still living subordinates. You feel it is the latter, however, as there is a sense of firmness and iron in the voice, rather than desperation that would normally be found in a spouse.

What do you do?

Possible options:

>Move towards the voice

>Hide and observe the voice

>Flee

>Other

>Recall past

Your memories of the immediate past are somewhat of a blur, as you are certain you took a blow to the head. Or three. However you distinctly recall fighting alongside the skirmishers, rather than the heavily armored warriors. You aren't sure of the context of the battle just yet, however to your unease, the last thing you remember with perfect clarity was one of those humanlike monsters with sharp ears and strange hands reaching inside your head as your own blades pierced its heart and throat.

>Loot bodies

You only have moments to search before you are forced to hide, but you manage to find two arrows that are unbroken or not inside someone already.

>Hide and Observe

You immediately drop to the ground, casually inserting the blade you picked up in to the abdomen of a nearby body (one of the monstrous ones) just in case that they were also playing dead. As you roll over to get a better view, you accidentally look directly in to the sunlight, however you are not blinded in the slightest. Strangely, you instead get a sensation of calm acceptance/encouragement, but that's probably because of the battle high wearing off and the result of prior injuries causing mild hallucinations, right?

After a few moments of waiting, the woman that the voice belonged to came over a nearby hill.

She is... surprisingly ordinary looking. Wearing a simple dress of utterly mundane light browns and whites, the hem of which is spotted in parts in red and brown, likely dirt and blood from simply walking around the battlefield. She is petite in figure, standing almost a foot shorter than you, and moves more like a dancer than a commoner or a commander. Her most distinguishing features are her long blond hair tied in to a loose braid, and bright yellow eyes. Clearly not from around these parts.

Then the sunlight catches her at a better angle, and you notice that she's carrying a thin strip of metal, seven feet long and about as wide as two of your fingers, it's shaper than your own swords could ever hope to be and shimmers with an iridescent sheen. Despite the weight that such an object should have, she's clearly holding it as though it weighed almost nothing. Likewise, her forehead is alight with a [symbol you don't recognize](#). This woman is not normal.

Having given up on calling for anyone, the woman pauses for a moment at the top of the hill, before making her way down. When she reaches the bottom of the hill, something stirs at her feet.

Almost the moment she reaches the bottom, one of the hulking, multi-limbed monstrosities that was presumed dead leaps to it's feet, apparently having been playing dead, much like you. It shouts at the woman in a language you can't understand, and charges her, intending to rip her limb from limb. However ss the bast makes it's lunge, she casually sidesteps the assault and swings her blade once, and only once.

The beast falls down, split from head to toe. It's two halves falling neatly on either side of her, the blood and ichor that would have splattered all over her dress seem to miss her by fractions of an inch.

Moving as if nothing had happened, she continues to survey the battlefield, apparently looking for something. She is about 30 feet from your position and closing.

What do you do?

OOC

No scripted options this time. It's all you. Your next few choices will drastically affect how the game plays out.

>Investigate battlefield

Your observations indicate that the battle was a pitched, three way brawl. Apparently your side was in a conflict with the Fair Folk, when the heavily armored troops jumped in and tried to take advantage of the battle to take out both sides. This did not seem to work as planned, as your own side, while smaller in number, was much more vicious and aggressive during the battle, absolutely refusing to go down without a fight.

>Investigate known knowledge

Your knowledge of the world at large is somewhat hazy at the moment, but your earlier observations did shake loose a few things. You recognize Fair Folk for what they are, as well as the two sides. Those sharing armor similar to you own are a mercenary company called the Seven Headed Serpents, famed for their flexibility in battle and talent at dealing with unorthodox situations. The company seems to have been mostly wiped out thanks to the battle between yourselves, Legionaries of the Imperial Army, and the Fair Folk. Your current location is unknown, and trying to think on it too hard cases your head to throb in pain again. You'll need to be in a safer position to try and meditate on it.

OOC

A full post taking in to account all voted actions will take place in about 4-5 hours.

OOC

Votes are in, looks like we're going to see what her deal is. Carefully.

/OOC

>Stand and inquire

The woman, having dispatched a hulking Fair Folk almost twice her size with the same amount of effort one would use to swat a fly, swung her massive sword over her head and attached it to a harness on her back, apparently convinced that there was nothing truly threatening left on the battlefield. She continues to meander in your direction, pausing every so often to check the human bodies, rolling over those who were face down so that she could identify them. She seems especially focused on the bodies of the Seven Headed Serpents, taking much longer with them than she does with the Legionaries. Eventually, she makes her way to within about twenty feet of you. While her focus is on examining one of bodies, you stand up slowly to avoid startling her. When she is finished with her examinations, she stands up and turns in your direction, coming to an abrupt stop when she sees you.

Almost immediately, her hand goes to the sword on her back, and despite it's size and awkward positioning, you have no problem imagining it would take her less than a moment to bring to to the ready. However she does not assume an aggressive stance, nor does she make a move to attack. Instead, recognition dawns on her face when she sees you, accompanied by a strange mixture of relief and fear.

"I did not expect you to be alive." She says. "The last I saw of you, you intended to head to Throne to see if they could help you with your... condition. I expected them to lynch you and put your head on a pike. How did you come to be here?" Despite her friendly tone, you can't help but notice that she's maintained her distance from you.

What do you do?

>Bluff, pretend you know what she's talking about and go along with it

>Truth, you have no idea what she's talking about

>Lie, make something up and gamble that she'll believe it

>Other

How do you do it?

>Aggressive attitude

>Diplomatic attitude

>Charming attitude

OOC

Now we'll see how good I am at writing dialog...

Metagame

Personality values retroactively aligned: You are someone who favors professionalism and diplomacy when interacting with others, and believes that honesty is the best policy.

Personality Bonuses retroactively Unlocked:

Socialize +1, People who you have met or will meet will be more likely to react positively to you

Presence +1, People who you have met or will meet will be more willing to trust your word

/Metagame

"I'm sorry." You say, feeling confused. "But I have no idea what you're talking about. Who are you?" You look at her intently, believing that if you stare at her hard enough, you'll see something familiar that will trigger a memory. Sadly, you have no luck. For her part, she looks at you confused, and more than a little annoyed. "If this is about what happened last time we saw each other, I *did* say it was a bad idea." She says, her tone turning sour. Seeing your bewilderment at her words, her expression soon softens to one of disbelief. "You're serious. You have no idea who I am?" She asks.

"No, no clue." You answer, trying to inject an apologetic tone into your voice. "The last thing I remember was one of those things," You point to one of the Fair Folk with sharp ears and strange hands "Reaching in to my head as I killed it." You explain. You wish you could remember what happened. The woman seems nice enough to you, if a little shady. You can't tell if you were friends in the past, or enemies. Maybe both? Neither? "I have a few snippets of the past, and sometimes a memory will pop to the surface if it becomes relevant. But beyond that? Nothing." You say.

Several emotions play over her face, too fast for you to catch on to. You can tell that she seems very conflicted about something, however, but she comes to a decision within a few moments. "Right. Well, you shouldn't tell anyone else that. Things are already dangerous enough for your kind without losing your memory. Be careful who you trust." She says. "My name is Swift Mercy. We used to be... Well, friends is too strong a word, associates, I guess. We met shortly after you were Exalted."

You have no idea what that means. "I have no idea what that means." You say, trying to grab hold of whatever information about your past that you can. "It means to be raised high, to have a god choose you as their champion and to be endowed with a fraction of their divine power." Swift Mercy elaborates, exasperation in her voice. "You were Exalted last year, in Realm year 761, in an engagement with a Beastfolk militia during an attack on Lookshy. One of the Lunar Exalted was leading the charge, so a Wyld Hunt had been formed to assist in the battle, with you as a scout under the Dragon-Blooded. I don't know how or where you were Chosen, but the Unconquered Sun must have noticed you, and he raised you as of the Solar Exalted"

As she speaks, memories half lost start punching you in the brain, giving context to her words. Dragon-Blooded: Chosen of the Five Dragons. Elemental warrior aristocrats who protect and rule over humanity. Lunar Exalted: Chosen of Luna, the moon Goddess. Shapeshifting barbarians and monsters who would see civilization brought to it's knees. The Unconquered Sun, your spiritual father and patron deity, distant but supportive. You distinctly recall her telling you all this before. "That sounds familiar." You say, trying to concentrate and focus on those memories to try and recall more. "What happened after I was Exalted?" You ask, urging her to continue.

"After that, you were caught in a conflict with your former comrades, caused enough property damage to bankrupt a small city in the ensuing struggle, and finally fled. If it weren't for the fact that the Dragon-Blooded were already tired and wounded in the fight with the Lunar, you would have died."

There is a look of bitter reminiscence on her face, and you get the feeling that this is not an uncommon occurrence for you.

You pause and think on this for a long time, trying to absorb the information and remember it accurately so you won't forget again. After you finish your rumination, you finally look up again. "So, what now?" You ask. You're at a bit of a loss on how to proceed. You're a fugitive of sorts from the Dragon-Blooded, the company you belonged to (formed?) has been wiped out, and your fractured memories provide no direction.

"For now I would suggest going to Nexus and getting lost in the crowd. You're about a week's journey from there, shorter if you travel by river. After that, it's up to you." Swift Mercy says briskly. She's growing agitated for some reason, and keeps glancing towards the forest at your back. "I'll be in touch with you later, but for now there are some things I need to take care of. In that direction there is a fishing village that should be able to help you if you need it, don't do anything stupid, or call attention to yourself."

Before you can ask her any additional questions, Swift Mercy brings her hand to her mouth and exhales in to it. Instead of featureless air, her breath is extremely foggy, as though she were in a winter climate. Startled by this, you are interrupted in your attempts at continued questioning, and she holds the sphere of fog in her hand for a moment, then crushes it. Instantly it explodes and envelops her completely, and when the fog finally fades, she is gone.

Feeling as though you were just cheated out of something, you are about to make your way in the direction she indicated, when something glints at your feet. Looking down, you see a small, perfectly rectangular silver pendant no larger than your thumbnail lying on the ground, almost exactly where Swift Mercy had been standing. You get the feeling that it was left there by her deliberately for you, as a parting gift that she wanted to give you but ran out of time.

What do you do?

- >Pick up the Silver tab
- >Leave the Silver tab

- >Follow Swift Mercy's instructions, you need to rest, recover and hide
- >Investigate the forest, why was she so agitated over it?
- >Other

-
- >Pick up Silver tab

You lean down and pick up the Silver tab, it is warm to the touch and familiar to you, and you feel a faint tingle in the tips of your finger as you hold it. Magic. It appears to be made of simple silver, with no overtly unique features. Closer examination reveals small writing engraved on the flat surface, but try as you might, you can't make sense of the symbols. Although the script is one you recognize, and you have faint memories seeing it written all over the Scavenger Lands, it is foreign and incomprehensible. With a start, you realize that you have absolutely no memories of ever being able to interpret the symbols.

You can't read. At all.

With a sinking feeling, you realize that this was always the case, and not the cause of any trauma to the head. Dejected and disappointed, you put the tab around your neck in the hopes that you'll find someone to read it to you.

>Find supplies, clean up, provide fanservice

You discard the armor you woke up in, as it is currently battered beyond the ability to protect you, and scour the battlefield for anything of use. You find nothing of use towards the center, where the thick of the fighting took place, but around the edges you find a supply wagon that lets you strip out of your ruined clothing and tend to your wounds. Your shirt goes first, peeled away and exposing your well honed torso to the world. A small bead of sweat from the day's prior exertions trickles it's way down your sculpted chest and snakes it's way between tight muscles in your abdomen. The smaller injuries have almost completely healed, so you bandage your hurt ribs to provide them support.

The larger wounds on our arms are next, standing out against your tan skin. You can see the muscles rippling on your arms as you flex them to apply the badges, before addressing the wound on your head. Brushing aside the long locks of black hair, you wrap the cloth around your head to keep them from obscuring your piercing green eyes.

You also manage to find a full quiver of arrows and a new set of armor and clothing.

>Assess battlefield

It seems still and quite, anyone who had been faking their death would be gone by now, or is committed enough to the deception that they aren't about to make a move unless you force them to. You feel confident that you have nothing to fear at the moment.

>Investigate forest.

>Once you are bandaged and cleaned, your curiosity gets the better of you and you can't help but make your way towards the edge of the forest. The sun is beginning to set, as tending to yourself earlier took more time than expected, so the forest is heavily shadowed. You stop at the edge and peer inside, trying to find whatever it was that Swift Mercy was agitated over. To your shock, you see a pair of bright, glowing yellow eyes looking back at you with a keen intelligence. A low vibration fills your chest as you realize that whatever those eyes belong to is giving off a low growl.

What do you do?

>Back off. You're still injured, lets try that fishing village instead

>Advance. Come at me, bro!

>Other

Metagame

Skill retroactively unlocked: Medicine+1, First Aid +1

/Metagame

OOC

It's not Exalted unless you have some blatant fanservice. Hopefully it wasn't too bad, lol.

OOC

Whoops, sorry about the delay. Here's that update for ya!

/OOC

>Ready bow, back away.

Slowly, very very slowly, you bring your bow to your hand and nock and arrow, all while backing away as gently as you can. When you are about ten to twenty paces from the edge of the forest, the glowing yellow eyes vanish and the growling stops, and is replaced by a strange rustling in the foliage. A moment later, a large bird you don't recognize flies out of the trees. You try to keep track of it, convinced that you've attracted the attention of a forest god of some type, but it banks to the east and you lose it in a passing cloud. You decide to thank your good fortune that it wasn't in the mood for violence.

Putting the bow back in its harness and arrow back in the quiver, you decided to start making your way towards the fishing village that Swift Mercy pointed you towards. You keep a careful eye out while you travel out of the battlefield for any potential trouble, but nothing of note catches your eye. Eventually you find a road leading to the village itself, and encounter a few people coming or going from it. Some are merchants looking to sell their wares, others are traders looking to swap their own goods for some fish. Apparently the village is quite the little hub of activity, located almost directly between Lookshy and Nexus.

While on the road, you hear the clip clop of hooves behind you and a rattling, jostling sound. Turning, you see an old couple and their horse and wagon pulling up behind you. The wagons is full of boxes full of something, and you can guess that it's food for trading. "Ho there, youngster!" Called out the old man. "What's is a fellow like you walking all by your lonesome?" He asks. "I was told there was a village up the road where I could rest. I'm on my way there now." You reply. "You're about a good two hours from there, and the sun will be setting soon." Said the woman, a tone of grandmotherly worry in her voice. "Why don't you climb in back? Old Shaw is getting fat and lazy, and could use the exercise." She chuckled, presumably talking about the horse.

"You don't have to trouble- " You begin, starting to turn them down, as you were told to avoid attention, and the last thing you need is to be seen by people who are going to be welcoming a trader, but the old man cuts you off. "Nonsense! A young man like you in these woods after dark? There's no shame in not being able to catch any game today. Tomorrow is another opportunity!" Apparently they've taken the bow and arrows on your back to mean you're a hunter, never mind the fact that they're military grade, or the fact that you're wearing body armor.

Despite your protests, the elderly couple don't seem to take no for an answer, and since they seem friendly enough, you eventually relent and climb on in the back on the wagon. The couple introduce themselves as Lim and Jao, a farmer pair who grow vegetables to sell, primarily beets. Your immediate thought at this news is to question their sanity, as beets are the worst, most disgusting vegetable you can think of, and you can't imagine why anyone would want to grow or even sell them. Really, just the thought of beets sends shivers down your spine in revulsion.

You then realize that you didn't even know you hated beets! It's a rather petty memory, but it's yours, and it's provided a valuable warning against the dangers of beets.

The couple talk animatedly to you as the wagon makes its way towards the village. They're delighted to have another person to talk to, as their own daughter has recently left to seek her fortune. They even make a few sly comments about setting you up with her for marriage when she returns to visit. You politely turn them down as best you can, and they feign offense that someone would dare refuse their precious daughter's hand, taking delight in your growing embarrassment. Old people enjoy tormenting the young, you decide.



Trying to wrench the conversion away from the prospect of marriage to a complete stranger, you bring out the silver tab that Swift Mercy let for you, and ask if they recognize it. Lim gives the reins of the cart horse to Jao, to examine it, as he can read a little bit. "Hmm. It's hard to make out, the writing is small and my eyes are bad, but I think this is the number five right there." He says, pointing to one of

the symbols you don't recognize. "There's a wise woman-" "More like wiseass!" Interrupts Jao, and the couple share a laugh at an inside joke. "She knows her writings and numbers, so she should be able to tell you what it says." Explains Jao, handing the reins back to Lim.

Eventually the cart arrives in the village. Unfortunately, trouble seems to have made its way to the village before you. A large group of thugs have most of the village surrounded, and are demanding tribute from the rest, who are hurrying and trying to find something to offer them. The one that stands out the most to you is a woman in heavy iron plate, holding an axe with a head as big as your own, and seems to be yelling the loudest and making the most demands.

Lim stops the cart short just as he enters the village, hoping to avoid notice. You yourself find your hands wandering to your weapons, only to have Jao stop you. "You can't take all of them on your own." She says quietly, all levity in her voice gone. "Just let them take what they can carry and they'll be on their way." Lim nods solemnly, and makes no sudden movements when the iron plate woman notices them and orders one of her men to strip the cart of anything valuable. "Everything will be fine." He says.

What do you do?

- >Let the raid happen. You need to avoid attention, and getting caught in a brawl won't help anyone.
- >Stand up for the nice couple and for the village. These people don't deserve this kind of treatment.
- >Try to find a peaceful solution. Maybe you can negotiate with the leader of the raiders and reach an agreement?
- >Other

Metagame

Critical Path choice ahead!

/metagame

OOC

With the vote as narrow as it was, I had to give it some thought on what what kind of game I wanted to run. I decided I wanted to encourage acts of heroism as much as I want to encourage the smart play. You did the smart thing earlier with the forest beast, now it's time for you to be a hero.

/OOC

- >Stand up for the innocent people.

You consider the warnings from Lim and Jao, and debate simply letting the raid happen. It's not your problem after all, and you should avoid drawing attention to yourself. But you can't. These are good people who offered you a ride where they didn't have to. You can't stand idly by and watch them get robbed of their livelihood when you could have done something.

As the bandit approaching the wagon gets close, you take your hands off your weapons and watch the thug approach. Noticing that you're armed to the teeth, he draws his machete and points it at you. "How about you hand over those weapons, tough guy, and no sudden moves." He says, brandishing the weapon carelessly. A part of your mind notes the many flaws in how he's moving and holding the weapon. His grip is too loose, his stance too wide, his guard too low. On the wagon, you also have the advantage of the high ground. He should have told you to disembark. This might be easier than you thought.

"You're holding it wrong." You say. The thug looks confused, part of his mind not fully registering what you said, as it was not the response it was expecting. "What?" He says, before he can stop himself. "You're holding it wrong. A machete is a chopping weapon, you're holding it like you're about to stab me with it." You continue. "I don't care how I'm holding it! Give me your fucking weapons!" He yells, his voice drawing the attention of the other thugs. One of the thugs, a woman with a shortsword, reaches towards another woman in the crowd of villagers to hold her hostage in case you get uppity.

Unfortunately, you feel like getting all kinds of uppity. "That's the problem." You say, spotting the woman with the shortsword. "With your grip so poor, I can do *this*!" Your foot launches out from where it was sitting on the wagon, kicking the thug with the machete square in the face. There is a loud crunching sound of bone breaking as you feel his nose collapse in to itself, and he collapses in a heap on the ground. The machete that was in his hand goes flying in to the air above your head, and you snatch it mid arc as it goes tumbling. Turning towards the woman who is about to grab a hostage, you throw it as hard as you can. It goes whirling through the air like a buzz saw, and cleaves the hand that was reaching out clean off. Just like the other thug, she goes down howling in pain.

Faster than most people can register, your bow is in your hand with an arrow nocked and pulled tight, aimed directly at the Iron Plate woman. To her credit, she doesn't flinch or make any sudden moves, regarding you with a level gaze. "I think you and your friends should go, now." You call out to her. From your vantage point, you count seven targets, including Iron Plate and the two you just downed. The thugs make no sudden moves, but all of them look to Iron Plate for directions.

"How about you come down here and fight like a real man." Iron Plate challenges, pointing her axe right at you. "Or are you scared you'll lose?" She jeers. It's a clever tactic on her part, trying to take away your biggest advantage, but you're not going to fall for it. "I'm secure enough in my manhood that I can stand to shoot you." You call back. From here, you can fill any one of them full of arrows if they make the slightest move. Unless they all...

"Scatter and shatter!" Shouts Iron Plate, dashing behind a building. The rest of her band all move instantly at her command, moving in to cover, too fast for you to target all of them at once. Apparently you're dealing with the smartest bandit crew in the goddamned world, they even have code phrases and everything! Swearing under your breath as you loose an arrow, you manage to catch another of Iron Plate's thugs in the stomach as she tries to hide. Four left.

"Stay low and don't move." You say to Lim and Jao, getting off the wagon. You'll be giving up the high ground in doing so, but staying there would mean putting them in unnecessary danger, which would be unacceptable. The elderly couple give you a look of worry, but otherwise remain put as you disembark and take stock of the situation: The majority of the villagers are in the central area, making them exposed but hard take hostages at this point, as any bandits who try will be left open to the more lethal forms of acupuncture. The problem right now is taking out the bandits themselves without getting surrounded and overwhelmed, you can practically feel them hiding and waiting to get the drop on you. They also likely know the area slightly better than you do, having been here before you arrived.

Since ambushes really only work if the victim doesn't expect it, and all five of your senses are currently hyped up thanks to the current conflict you find yourself in, you decide to skip the inevitable standoff where you take potshots at any bandits who might expose themselves, and bait them out by wandering in to the village. Keeping your bow at the ready, you slowly make your way towards the central area and the people within. "Are you all okay?" You call out to them. "I'm here to help." The

villagers try to respond, but before any of them can say anything, a shadow appears in your peripheral vision, and you hear a clanking sound.

Immediately you are forced to duck as a man swings a heavy chain towards your head. His assault is relentless, bringing blow after blow down on you, and you are forced to give ground to avoid being caged in. More than once the chain nicks you, sending a sharp surge of pain through the unfortunate appendage. You try to line up a shot with your bow, but the sheer aggression in the man's swings make it impossible for you to get off a clean shot without risking the villagers behind him. Spotting a post holding up a large awning, you duck behind it for cover, and the chain smashes right in to it. Before the man can withdraw the chain, you fire an arrow in to the links to lock it in to place. The man struggles to try and pull the chain loose, but his efforts give you just enough time to drop the bow and rush him, driving your fist straight in to his gut and sending him in to the dirt gasping for breath. Three left.

Crack! A powerful blow catches you on the side of the head, and you go to the ground. Dazed and confused, you barely manage to draw your swords before a woman with a stave attempts to follow up on her ambush with an attempt to cave your skull in. You just manage to catch the stave and deflect it, rolling to your feet to try and find your focus, when Iron Plate appears out of nowhere with her axe held above your head. You try to bring your own sword up to match her downswing, but it's not very successful. The weight of her axe, combined with her overwhelming strength cleave clean through the blade and bite deep in to your arm as you try to throw yourself out of the way. You're pretty sure you would have lost the arm if it weren't for your armor.

Rolling to your feet, you manage to draw your other sword and get in a defensive stance as the third and final member of Iron Plate's gang shows himself. A man with two sickles and a nasty grin on his face. The three of them move to surround you, each with their guard up. "Looks like you're the one that should have left when you had the chance." Sneers Iron Plate, taking her sweet time now that she has you cornered. "I know. I just took out half your guys with no problem at all. This is too easy for me." You say with a smile. Never let them see you sweat, even when you're on the ropes. Iron Plate's face turns from a jeer to a scowl. "You sucker punched two of mine and lucked your way in to beating the others. That ends now." She says, hefting her axe above her head once more.

"See, you're almost right, but there's one thing you keep forgetting." You say, slowly letting your hand wander behind you. "And what's that?" She asks. "I cheat." You say, ripping the quiver off your back and swinging it in her direction. Arrows go tumbling out and flying all over, causing her to flinch away, letting you take advantage of her momentary panic and dash past her. The odds of any of those arrows actually doing any damage is absurdly low, but who wouldn't panic when a bunch of sharp pointy objects are being flung haphazardly at them?

Iron Plate lets out a howl of rage when she realizes she's been had, and spins on her heel to rush you down. By that time however, you're already halfway to the fishing docks. With three on one, you need to control the environment and force them to come at you one at a time, and there's no better way to do that than the narrow docks.

To be Continued.

OOC

Fight scenes are hard but fun to write. I hope this was cool. The second half will be up tomorrow.

>Continue being a hero

As you dash along the planks that make up the dock, you hear the pounding footsteps of your pursuers behind you. Knowing that you now control the battlefield, you decide that it's time to take the fight to the enemy. Stopping abruptly, you turn around and swing the quiver in your hand as hard as you can, hoping to catch one of them by surprise. You are partially successful, as Sickie man is forced to back off or avoid being hit by your improvised weapon. Stave woman is behind him, and moves in to cover her comrade with a sweeping motion aimed at your head which you manage to lean out of the way off. Releasing the quiver, you grab ahold of the stave and give it a sharp jerk, pulling the woman holding it in to a headbutt.

She goes down, dropping her weapon, but you can tell that you've only stunned her momentarily. Unfortunately she's too close for you to cut into with your sword, so you'll need to gain more distance. Equally unfortunate is the fact that Sickie man has recovered from your ambush and is now swinging his weapons like a madman. You work your way down the docks, parrying his frenzied attacks and looking for an opening. Eventually faking a vulnerability for him to exploit, he takes the bait and makes a reckless swing, and you lock your arm around his and bash his head in with the pommel of your sword.

Unfortunately *again*, before you can finish him off Stave lady pops back in to the fray, delivering a thrusting blow with her stave to your head. You back off even more to avoid getting concussed for a second time. "Why do you always go for the head?!" You demand, grabbing some rope that's laying on the docks and swinging it like a whip at her to keep her at bay. She and Sickie man are way better than the other's you've taken out so far, not to mention Iron Plate lady.

Speaking of Iron Plate lady, where was she? You cast your eyes about the area and spot her. She's standing on the edge of the docks, as actually getting on it would put her at risk of falling off and sinking. That's the good news. The bad news is that she *has your bow and is aiming right at you!* "You're cheating!" You shout, ducking behind the mast of a fishing boat as an arrow goes whizzing by your head. "You started it!" Iron Plate shouts back. She seems inordinately pleased at her own cleverness, and you hate her for it. You need to regain control over the battle, otherwise you're going to be in trouble.

Spotting Sickie man and Stave lady, you realize that the only way to avoid getting shot is to put yourself in a position where Iron Plate won't want to shoot you, and you realize that the only way to do that is to throw yourself in to the middle of those two. Dammit. This is not nearly as easy as you thought it would be. Grabbing a fishing knife that was on the boat, you rush out and charge Sickie man, swinging your sword in an overhanded blow to throw him off balance. It works, and he's driven back under the pressure of your own assault. Stave lady comes in to rescue Sickie man, but you were ready for her. Catching her stave with the knife you managed to pilfer, you counter attack with a swift kick to the gut to throw her off balance before immediately turning your attention back to Sickie man, throwing him off his attempts to launch his own counter assault against you. For now, you can't let them regain their bearings against you. You need to keep them disoriented until you can find a moment to strike a killing blow.

The three of you duel back and forth across the planks of the docks for several moments, neither able to get a significant advantage over the other. Sickie man and Stave lady's ability to coordinate is only just held off by your own continuous efforts to throw them off. Eventually you feel that unless something changes soon, you'll be worn down and taken out. At least the part of the plan to prevent Iron Plate from shooting you is working, otherwise you'd be dead by now. Parrying a lunge from Sickie man and nicking his arm, you spot a large net of fish hanging above a boat. It must have been getting ready to be offloaded before the bandits attacked. delivering another kick to Sickie man, you dash towards the net, prompting the Stave lady and Sickie man to follow you once they recover.

As you make your way towards the net, you slow your pace to let them catch up. You'll need to time this perfectly, otherwise you'll be back where you started. Stave lady makes a swing for your head (again!) using the superior reach of her weapon, but you duck under the blow and lash out with your sword at a rope. With a thunk and a

whirring noise, the rope snaps free, and the net above comes loose, burying Stave lady and Sickle man under a literal boat load of fish. They aren't going anywhere any time soon.

One left.

The second the thought crosses your mind, another arrow nearly takes your arm off, and you duck behind the side of a boat. You can tell by how Iron Plate lady is standing that she's never used a bow before, which is your lucky break, because she's really good with it already. Looking for something to use as a shield so you can rush her, you spot a pallet of swordfish heads, and a smile. Peeking your head out of cover, you manage to evade getting an arrow to the face before making a dash for the pallet. It'll take her roughly three seconds to get another arrow nocked, which is just enough time for you to pick up the pallet, point those pointy swordfish right at her, and charge.

"Really?!" She shouts, letting lose another arrow. You angle the pallet and catch the arrow in one of the fish bodies, it's juices splatting all over you. IF you get out of this, You're going to smell like fish for days. "That's not going to work!" Continues shouting Iron Plate lady, firing once more, but you duck behind the pallet again and keep charging. You're vision is obscured, but you're only moments away from...

Crash!

Iron Plate's axe smashes the pallet to pieces, raining fish guts all over the both of you, and being you sprawling from the impact. You manage to get in to a roll, and quickly make your way to your feet, sword at the ready. "I told you it wouldn't work." Says Iron Plate, her axe at the ready. "Yeah, but it was worth it to stop you from shooting me." You say. Then you spot your bow at her feet, splintered in two, and your levity turns to annoyance. "You did that just to spite me, didn't you." You say. "Ayup." is her response. "I hate you." You say, pouting. "I hate you more." She says, actual anger in her voice. "Wanna make out?" You ask.

"...what." She asks before she can stop herself, the sheer unexpectedness of the question rendering her incapable of fully processing what you said. Her momentary confusion is all you need to lunge across the space between you, bringing your sword down to cut her throat out. Your cheap shot is unsuccessful however, as she brings her axe handle up to meet your sword, battering you aside and throwing you back. She responds in kind by swinging her axe over head to cleave you from top to bottom, and you backstep just in time. The axe buries itself in to the ground, and you dash forward once more, running up the axe while she's still holding it and deliver a kick to her head.

Which she *catches*, grabbing you by the ankle and throwing you bodily to the ground with enough force to knock the air from your lungs. She follows up with another overhead chop to bury her axe in your chest, but you just manage to avoid it by rolling to the side, kicking out as you do so to send her to the ground as well. Scrambling to your feet, you try to stab your sword in to her gut, but she twists to the side and her armor completely deflects the blow. On the upside, you're armed now, and she isn't, as your first act after failing to stab her is to kick her axe out of her hand just before she gets to her feet.

Unarmed, but by no means undaunted. Iron Plate raises her fists and settles in to a boxer's stance, ready to take you down. You have better reach than her at the moment, but there's no way a blade will be able to cut through that iron she's wearing. Adjusting your hold on your weapon, you grab the tip of your sword and point the pommel and crossguard at her in the [Thunder Stroke](#) stance. Bludgeoning weapons are best suited to take down plate, and while this may not be the best solution, it'll have to do.

She lunges at you, covering the ground much faster than the heavy armor she's wearing suggests she should be able to, and delivers a straight punch to your face which you manage to turn aside with your inverted sword. Shoving her back with your shoulder, you swing at her center of mass for an easy target, which impacts with a resounding clang. Despite the expertly landed blow, she powers through the attack and gets in close, delivering a brutal body blow to you gut. Winded, You're forced to respond with a headbutt to force her back before following up with another swing, which she blocks with her right arm and uses her left to try and target the wound she gave

you earlier with her axe. The pain of the blow almost causes you to black out, but your focus all your attention on remaining conscious. A straight thrust to her gut is your revenge for the attack, and she doubles over in pain, giving you another opportunity to bring your full strength against her with a blow to the head, knocking her back towards the dock and on the edge of falling over.

She loses her balance at the edge of the dock, and almost falls in, grabbing hold of one of the moorings to keep herself out of the water. With a hellacious exertion, she manages to pull herself back to her feet. Only to meet you face to face, with the point of your sword at her neck. The time she spent getting herself back up gave you just enough of a lead to put yourself in a position to win the fight.

"You cheat." She says, with absolutely no fear in her eyes. "I believe this has been established." You reply. Both of you are breathing heavily, your bodies about to give out from under you as the adrenaline fades away. Months later, you would look back on this fight and realize that it was only your nature as a Chosen of the Sun that let you scrape by a victory. "Do it." She says, resolute in the face of death. "I'll only come back and kill you for what you did to my crew."

What do you do?

>Kill her. She's only going to cause more problems in the future.

>Spare her. Maybe she'll turn over a new leaf?

OOC

The end of the fight was harder to write than I expected. I hope I could still make it cool for you.

>Kill her

"Are there any other like you in the area?" You ask Iron Plate, pointing the sword at her heart. "Fuck you." Is her eloquent response. "I don't suppose I could convince you to settle down, stop all this, lead a more virtuous life?" You press, trying to give her an out. "Only after your head is on my wall." Iron Plate glares, trying to will you dead with sheer spite. You let out a sigh of regret. Iron Plate has chosen her path and is sticking to it with, come what may. You have to admire her integrity and commitment to her cause, at the very least. "I am sorry." You say.

Gripping your sword at the base of the blade, you drive the sword through the armor she wears and in to her heart. There is a brief moment where her arms come up in an attempt to strike or choke you, it's not clear, but you withdraw the blade and kick out, sending her in to the river. She breaks the surface of the water with a splash, obscuring your vision for a moment, but once the river settles down you can see her slowly sinking and being carried away by the current. "I hope to meet you again in better circumstances in the next life." You say, giving the quickly fading sight of her a salute with your sword.

Before you collapse on to the dock out of exhaustion, your own injuries finally catching up to you. You struggle to maintain consciousness, but eventually even that slips from your grasp.

...

You awake on your back, your head throbbing in pain. You try to get up, but your blurred consciousness and the pull of the earth make a compelling argument to remain put. This really needs to stop happening, you decide. Eventually greater awareness of your surroundings returns to you, and you discover that you are in a bed, naked from the waist up, and covered in bandages. Out of the corner of your eye you see a small child, a boy, who appears to be mending your torn and tattered clothing. He has an intense look of concentration on his face, as though sewing up your shirt is the most important thing in the world to him.

Eventually you regain enough strength to get up, startling the boy. He immediately starts talking to you, too fast for you to understand. Before you can try to get a word in edgewise, a look of realization comes over the boy's face and he dashes off. A few moments later, he returns with an elderly woman close behind him, using a walking cane for support. "Well now, looks like you're feeling better." She says, putting her hand on your head to check for a fever. You try to get up out of the bed, but she raps you on the knuckles with her cane. "Oh no you don't, I spent two hours putting you back together after that fiasco on the docks, and I'm not about to have you fall apart on me after all that work." Feeling that it would be adverse to your health to argue with her on this, you settle back down in a sitting position, which seems acceptable to her.

"How long was I out?" You ask, looking outside. It's dark out now, and it was late afternoon when you arrived in the fishing village. "Two days." Answers the old woman. "You mend fast, most would be asleep for weeks after that beating you took. The gods must have blessed you for your courage." The old woman gives a quick prayer of thanks to the River God. You try to thank her for her efforts, but she waves you off. "So, little minnow, you're the talk of the town at the moment. A hero riding in to save a poor town from a bandit attack? Half the men want to be you, half the women want to be with you, and the other half of both are gossiping natters who make up ever more outlandish things about you by the hour." The woman settles down in a chair by your bed. "I'm Old Toma, a friend of Lim and Jao. They're worried sick about you, by the way, but I need answers first. What's your story?" She asks, looking at you expectantly.

"I was hoping you could tell me that." You say, earning a quizzical look from Old Toma. "My memories are a blur beyond a few days ago." You say, elaborating. "Some things are clear, others aren't. I was hoping you could read what this says, and that it might give me clue to where I came from." You continue, pulling out the Silver tab and handing it to her. She takes it reluctantly, doubt in her face over your story, and looks at it closely. "Well, for one thing no mortal hand engraved this thing. The words are too fine for that." She says. "This is the character for 'Five', right here." she points at the symbol you were taught earlier. "And this is the character for 'brother'. Taken together, they spell out 'Fifth Brother'." She says, looking up from the tab. "Does that mean anything to you?"

And you realize it means everything to you.

A flood of memories hit you at those words. You remember growing up on the streets in some no name town, a poor nobody that had to sneak and steal to survive. You remember getting good at it, too good. You got overconfident and tried to steal from one of the Dragon-Blooded, and old Fire Aspect by the name of Chatek Nalda. He caught you, and instead of killing you on the spot for your crime, he was impressed by your skill and moxi, and decided to conscript you to serve him and his Sworn Brotherhood. You remember the other members of that Brotherhood. Sweet Viper, a quiet Wood Aspect who always had a sense of wistful melancholy about her. Iron Heart Hui, a boisterous man with a smile as wide as his barrel chest. And... Violet Typhoon, a martial artist without peer, master of a dozen styles, a woman of firm but fair principles.

You remember hunting Anathema with them, or exploring ruins from the First Age, or simply finding heretics, wicked cults, or Wyld incursions, and putting them to the sword. While you could never hope match any of the Dragon-Blooded at what they did, your quick wits and unorthodox talents let you outlive many of the other mortal followers they had. Eventually they began to regard you as a good luck charm, and after a time, a friend. They taught you what they could to help you survive their more dangerous adventures, shared secrets with you when they needed to vent about the current mission or personal troubles. You were family with them, closer than any other. You remember when they gave you the Silver tab on the fifth anniversary of you joining the Brotherhood.

You remember the attack on Lookshy. Your Brotherhood had been tracking the Lunar Anathema for weeks. It was only too late when your Brotherhood realized that an invasion force was headed in the direction of the City State. During the battle, you got separated from the Dragon-Blooded, and fighting a trio of Beastmen to rescue a family of four. You remember standing before a colossal monster, so terrible that the earth wept at its touch, wielding a staff of solid iron. You refused to back down at the sight of it, and dueled it across the city.

You remember standing victorious over the monster, wondering how on earth you dared to defeat it.

You remember not a day earlier, your hand entwined with Violet Typhoon's as you both looked over the river.

You remember the look of betrayal and heartbreak on her face when she saw you and the monster at your feet.

You remember the look of horror and sorrow on the faces of the rest of the Brotherhood, as they demanded answers.

You remember fighting them, running from them, all the while asking why.

"Yes." You say in a whisper, a tear running down your cheek as you look at the tab in your hand. "It was from my family." The old woman says nothing, but places a hand on your leg in silent comfort. She doesn't know why you reacted this way, but she understands enough of the world to know that sometimes, things are better left unsaid.

What is your name?

- > Iron Sparrow
- > Smiling Layoro
- > Yugo Roh

How did you Exalt?

- > I stepped forward to defend a family from the Beastmen, impressing The Unconquered Sun with my righteousness
- > I defeated three opponents who were bigger and stronger than me, impressing The Unconquered Sun with my skill
- > I stood my ground against a terrifying monster, impressing The Unconquered Sun with my bravery

Smiling Layoro recovered quickly from his battle with the woman in the Iron Plate. Many of the townsfolk believed Old Toma when she said that the River God had chosen to bless him for his

courage, and Layoro felt no need to correct them with what he believed to be the actual truth. He did try to downplay his efforts though, if only to make a token effort to maintain a low profile and follow Swift Mercy's instructions. Trying to write off his accomplishments as luck or the poor skill of his opponents was hampered by the fact that everyone thought he was just being humble. He managed to convince them not to hold a feast in his honor, however. Layoro had ruined or lost some of the fish they had caught during the fight, and he would have felt guilty if they had cooked what they had left just to honor him.

Once he was resupplied and his equipment repaired (which the townsfolk insisted on giving him as a gift) Smiling Layoro Thanked Lim and Jao for their company on the way to the village, and Old Toma for looking after him while he was unconscious. It was at that time that that one of the many bargemen that journeyed from Lookshy to Nexus and back again was making a stop at the fishing village to pick up passengers and exchange trade goods. Smiling Layoro bid farewell to Lim and Jao, who wished him luck on his trip. Old Toma gave him a rap on the shin with her cane and said that if he got hurt again any time soon, he would have to answer to her. Not being one to carelessly invoke the wrath of an old lady with a cane, Layoro promised he would avoid trouble if he could help it.

The bargeman regularly stopped at this village as he traveled up and down the river, and had gotten to know several people of the villagefolk. He was understandably confused when a total stranger got such a large sending off from almost everyone. "So, what's your deal then?" He asked as they left the dock. Layoro shrugged at the question, "I just helped them out with some trouble that they were in. I don't know why they're making such a big deal over it." He said, settling down in to a more comfortable position.

Layoro looked down at his reflection in the water and let his mind drift back to when he had been Exalted. With his memory returned to him, he could still see the events clearly in his mind's eye, as though it had just happened. A family, backed against the wall by four beastmen, the look of grim resolve on the father's face as he held up a stick to try and defend his wife. The mother's fear as she tried to comfort her children, knowing that death was swiftly approaching. The children clinging to their mother or begging their father to come back. He remembered drawing his sword and approaching the beastmen, telling them to back off and leave the family alone, to face him instead. Then, light from an unknown source was reflected in their eyes as the beastmen looked at him, and a voice echoing in his soul, regret mixed with hope.

The fires of this world's heroes are spent and guttering, yet from the cooling ashes rises a new Dawn. With righteousness in your heart, wield your sword in My Name.

After that, things had escalated at a shocking pace, and here he was, trying to piece together who he was after getting his mind scrambled by a Fair Folk.

> Righteousness

Layoro knew he was a righteous person, who stepped forward to defend those who could not defend themselves.

> Truth, Diplomacy

He knew he was an honest person, who tried to solve things with words before resorting to violence.

> Kill her

But he also knew that some times people can't be reasoned with, and he was willing and able to get his hands dirty to try and protect those who needed protecting.

> Smiling Layoro

He also knew his name now, and where he came from. His family had been poor, and his father had left to try and earn money for his wife and son. Money had come for a time, and they had been happy, although they missed him greatly. Eventually they learned that he had been killed in a mining accident. After that his mother had tried the best she could to raise him, but she couldn't bare the grief and soon passed away herself. He had been forced to resort to thievery to survive, until he had met Chatek Nalda.

Now he was on his way to Nexus to hide away under the instructions of a woman he still couldn't remember very well. It didn't feel right to Layoro to just hide away now that he was one of the Exalted, but his options were limited. The only other thing he could do was go back and try to find his Brotherhood, but that was just as likely to lead to his death. Sighing to himself, Layoro slapped the water, causing his reflection ripple and distort, before settling back in to place as the barge moved on.

When the waters had fully settled, he saw a pair of bright yellow eyes looking back at him from the depths.

OOC

Prologue is over, core personality and background has been set. Now we'll see how high we can escalate things. Mild cliffhanger for this post, I need to take care of something else for you guys before we can continue. A critical path choice you made needs to be rewarded.

Some extra knowledge that our protagonist is now aware of:

Chatek Nalda was once a member of Lookshy's military, but a botched combat maneuver coupled with his frequent clashes with the higher ups over policy eventually resulted in him walking away from it all after being left for dead. He settled down for a while, got married and took his husbands name to further divorce himself from Lookshy. He would have stayed that way had Violet Typhoon and Iron Heart Hui not came rolling through town on the hunt for a demon worshipping cult.

Violet Typhoon was once the daughter of the mayor of a fairly well off town that held propriety in high regard. However her town was destroyed by a band of Demons unleashed by a cult, and she was eventually taken in by the Immaculate Order as a temporary lodgings. Soon after, she Exalted as a Water Aspect, and her sense of pride compelled her to stay with the order just long enough to learn the basics of the martial arts before setting off to get revenge. She eventually met Iron Heart Hui drunkenly brawling others in the streets, and beat the shit out of him.

Iron Heart Hui was a rough and tumble man growing up on the mean streets of Nexus. Having no money to his name and a head harder than his namesake, he eventually settled in to pit fighting as a way to pay off his debts and earn himself some cash. He was quite good at it, and his positive and boisterous attitude soon made him a crowd favorite, the fact that he was one of the Dragon-Blooded made his fights a spectacular show didn't hurt much either. One night he had a bit too much to drink and got in a fight with some people at the local hole in the wall, which made it's way in to the streets. There he met Violet Typhoon, who was disapproved at how disgraceful Hui was acting. After a brief fight (which he lost handily) he was inspired by her story and decided to join her, wanting to do some good for the world.

As for Sweet Viper... Well, no one really knows what her deal is. She just kinda showed up one day, shot three people in the face that the others had been fighting and didn't part ways with them. She's

proven herself to a loyal and capable woman, wielding a bow better than anyone else, even if she is often lost in her own thoughts more often than not.

Interlude 1:

The Yanaze and Yellow River are among the largest rivers in all of Creation. At their widest point, the distance between each bank is measured in a distance of up to forty to sixty miles. Hundreds of river barges made their way up and down this mammoth cut in the land, all flowing back and forth from Goodharbor at the mouth, to the deep jungles of the far east, the edge of the deserts of the south, or the frozen tundra at the north. To say that things progressed smoothly for these bargemen would be misleading, to say that nothing outlandish happened on their travels would be a lie

One such soul was Riverrunner Ru. Ru was an old hand at traveling and transporting people and goods up and down the banks of the Yanaze river. His father had done it, as his father's father had done it, as his father's father's father before him had done it. He prayed often to the gods of love that someday soon he would find a wife to help him carry on the grand family tradition. After all, what woman wouldn't want a gentleman like himself? Arms strong and firm from guiding his barge. Leathery, skin as gold as the setting sun, and just a hint of grey in his black hair, giving him that distinguished look. Really ladies, grab him quick while you have a chance, he's quite the keeper.

Ru prayed just as frequently to the gods of the River for safe passage and swift travels. He believed that he had a special connection with the god, having once witnessed the majestic being as a child. He had fallen swiftly to his knees in supplication, fervently praying and offering his gratitude for the chance to witness such divinity. The river god had gazed at the boy for a moment, and departed as swiftly as the running currents, and Ru had taken that to mean that the god had blessed him in some way and his good luck all thought his long life had cemented this belief.

The barge that Ru owned was of moderate size. Big enough to house himself and five others in tight quarters and more than enough space for a family! Yes sir! Someday, Ru planned on using the money he had been saving up to buy a second barge, hire a crew and expand his little operation in to something great. Then the money from that would go towards buying another barge, and after that another, until there was a whole fleet of barges under his command, or more likely under the command of his grandchild, as Ru was getting on in years and probably wouldn't live long enough to see the end of that dream. Still, once he had a family, he knew he had a plan to support them and his descendants for life.

Out of the corner of his eye, Ru noticed something odd on the water. Half floating, half submerged appeared to be a body of a woman in heavy Iron Plate. How she was floating was beyond Ru, but he believed that his prayers had been answered, and the gods had delivered him a wife at long last. "Hold on darlin'!" He called out, throwing a stone tied to a rope that was his anchor overboard to halt the barge. "I'm coming, old Ru won't let nobody drown on his watch!" Diving in to the river, Ru swam as fast as he could to the floating woman. Once he reached her however, his heart sank.

Flowing forth from a wound in her chest was a steady but thick stream of blood. The poor woman looked like she had been injured while trying to defend her home, or at least that's what Ru convinced himself. "Don't worry sweetheart, even if you are dead, I'll make sure you get a proper burial." He said, putting his arm around her to prop her head above the water. Steeling himself and his old bones for the upcoming exertions, Ru swam back to his barge, towing in his grip the woman in the Iron Plate.

Huffing and heaving, Ru eventually managed to get himself and the woman back to his barge, which had drifted a little ways before finally coming to a stop. "Come on now, let's get you up out of this

water.” He said, straining himself to his limit as he pulled the woman back on to his barge. “There we go.” Ru said, as the woman settled on the floor of his barge with a metallic thunk. “You poor girl, what happened to you?” He asked, looking for the straps to undo the armor. He could see the faint signs of breathing still coming from her deathly pale face, and knew that if he didn’t find a way to treat her immediately, she would die. Ru had just managed to find the first strap, and was in the process of unbuckling it, when a shadow fell over him and the woman. They weren’t moving, so he looked up, and his mouth fell open in shock.

A god. A god was standing on his barge. Not the river god of his youth, but a god of black robes, iron chains and a mask, a horrific mask made of fouled ice in the shape of a scowl or glare. Ru did not recognize this god, but it didn’t take a wiseman to know what he was a god of. “Please, oh lord of Death!” Ru said, throwing himself at the mercy of the god. “Take not this poor girl, she’s still so young!” He cried, groveling as deep as he could “Take old Ru, I ain’t good for nothing no more. No wife, no children, no one to miss an old man like me. Take me and let her live!” In the face of this black terror, all of Ru’s dreams had been abandoned. He knew, from the bottom of his soul, that he could not let this god take the woman in the Iron Plate.

The god said nothing, regarding Ru in silence for the briefest of moments before raising his hand, to place it on Ru’s brow. “Thank you, thank you for sparing h—” Ru’s gratitude was cut off as a flash of black nothing filled the day, darkening the skies and silencing the birds and insects in the trees. The water and surface of the barge were covered in a fine layer of frost, and Ru’s body was nothing more than ash and smoke.

The god then turned it’s attention to the woman in the Iron Plate, and placed his hand over her head. Slowly drawing it upward, the woman floated upward until she was standing on her feet, and with a shuddering gasp, awoke from unconsciousness. Still outraged at her previous predicament, she started to lash out at the figure before her, not caring that it seemed to be a god.

Before she could say anything however, the the masked figure spoke: ***Death has come for you, yet you stand firm and undaunted by it’s cold embrace. I offer you rebirth, power, and the chance to take your revenge on he who wronged you.***

The woman in the Iron Plate looked at the masked figure, unsure. “And what do I have to do for you in exchange?” She asked.

A loud cracking, crunching, popping sound of bones and ligaments twisting on themselves emanated from the black figure as it’s head rotated completely around, revealing a wicked grinning face where at first there had been a scowl. ***Master yourself and your new power. Lead my armies as my general.***

“That’s it?” She asked, disbelieving.

The figure said nothing, and simply held out his hand.

The woman in the Iron Plate hesitated for a moment, before placing her hand in his. “I accept.”

If possible, the mask seemed to smile wider ***Then Rise, Unrelenting Obsidian Bastion.***

Power. Pure power flooded through her. Power deeper than the deepest oceans, darker than the most forbidden jungle, and more terrifying than a thousand Tyrant Lizards. On her head, a black disk appeared, slowly oozing blood that never seemed to slow.

Then the two of them vanished, and the barge continued to float in the water, where it would be discovered by a fishermen who would wonder why it was floating there with no one on it, but wouldn't stay for long, as something felt unholy about it.

Later, in his black citadel on the back of the Juggernaut, the Mask of Winters would relay his successes to his peers. The tests had been a success. An Exaltation could not only be captured, contained and converted by their hands, but they could also bestow them upon those willing to accept them. Now all that was needed was to crack open the Jade Prison like an egg, and the rest of the Solar Exalted would be theirs for the taking.

Chapter 1: New friends, new enemies

OOC

Sorry for the delay. Would you believe I've never actually played a game in Nexus before? Had to get the scavenger lands book and give it good read to make sure I can represent the city properly.

/OOC

Nexus. What can be said about the city that has not been said before? City of cutthroat trade and shady deals, a city where if you were quick, clever and lucky could make it big, a city where opportunity and danger lurked around every corner in equal measure. A city that embodies of the whole of Creation, magnified, distilled and magnified again, where the best and the worst of humanity could be found. Smiling Layoro couldn't help but be a little awestruck as his barge approached the Nexus Pool Docks. Even in Lookshy, he had never seen such a bustle of people going in, out and about their business. He would have loved to just get lost in the crowd and explore, to see what strange and wondrous oddities had been brought from the far corners of the world to be sold or traded.

It was really too bad that he was being followed by an unknown entity of unknown intent, as it really put a damper on his mood to sightsee. The yellow eyes that he had first encountered at the edge of the battlefield where he had awoken kept flicking in and out of existence, showing up at random points along his travels to Nexus and vanishing the instant he noticed them. Sometimes they had been in the river itself, others in the shore of the banks, and still others in the trees themselves. There didn't seem to be any discernible pattern on where or when they would show up next. From what little he could guess based on their behavior, they seemed to be following him and waiting for something, but as to what he couldn't say.

Resigning himself to the fact that he would have a stalker for the time being, Layoro departed the barge and paid the entry tax to enter Nexus. He had been lucky enough to make landfall on the inner docks and wouldn't have to pay an additional fee to ferry himself to the city proper. Layoro was running low on funds already, and would have to find a way to earn his keep unless he felt like resorting to thievery and sleeping on the streets again. For now, he decided to see if there were any openings at the mercenary companies that were common in Nexus. Hui had told him once that if you were good at hitting things in Nexus, the best money was in pit fighting or mercenary work.

Making his way down the street, Layoro spotted one of the a man in formal blue armor and wearing a hood. Recognizing the man as one of the Hooded Executioners, the de facto police force of Nexus, Layoro began to approach the man to inquire about possible employment, when he noticed two things:

The first was a portly man in fine silks and carrying what looked to be an official document make an announcement before placing something on a notice board. From what he could hear, it seemed as though a recent excavation in to the caves that tunneled under the city had uncovered a ruin from the First Age, and that the Council of Entities was looking for volunteers to explore and secure any treasures within. As always the Council would take the majority of the findings for sale or distribution, but there was a promise that ten percent of the findings would go to whatever groups of individuals survived the dangers of the ruin, while a small amount of the total, the current projections were that even that fraction would be enough to set a man for life.

The second thing was another man, this one thinner and older, with a long beard and spectacles. The man was outside what appeared to be his shop, putting up a notice that he was looking for an assistant. Even from this distance, Layoro could smell the herbs and poultices wafting out from the building. The healer or medicine man went back inside the shop and closed the window, and soon afterwards a sickly looking man went inside, seeking treatment. Layoro knew a thing or two about setting injuries in the field, so he felt confident he could learn from the man

What do you do?

- > Check out the ruins: Highest risk, highest potential for high reward
- > Sign up with a mercenary group: Moderate risk for moderate reward, possible pay spikes during busy times
- > Apprentice with the healer: Lowest risk, lowest reward

>Ruins

Deciding that there was no glory without guts, Layoro approached the Council representative about the job he had posted. "Excuse me, wha-" he started, being getting cut off. "All inquiries should be made at the preliminary meeting tomorrow at noon at the Council Tower, south of Big Market." Said the man, brushing Layoro off and walking away. Layoro frowned at this treatment, but decided that making an scene over it would just be inviting trouble, especially with the Hooded Executioners standing right down the street. Instead, he decided that now would be a good time to try and find a place to stay for the evening. Sleeping on the streets would probably be more comfortable than sleeping in the wilderness, but not by much.

In an effort to plan ahead a bit, Layoro made sure he knew where Big Market and the Council Tower was before he completely retired for the evening. By good fortune, there was teahouse that had rooms available for rent just down the street from the Tower. Per some strange Nexus custom which Layoro didn't understand, the host gave him a seat at a table that was already occupied by another person. A woman with short chestnut hair, an open round face and wearing an outfit of light blue cloth. Despite himself, Layoro's eyes couldn't help but wonder to her ample bosom that swayed every time she reached for her teacup. Around her wrist was a band of silvery silk that traced it's way all the way her slender arms, around her midriff and ended in a sash that tied off a long skirt with a slit down the side, exposing long, silky legs.

Then he remembered he was a professional, dammit, and ogling women in a teahouse was beneath him. Giving himself a mental shake, he sat down and placed an order for some simple green tea. The woman waited politely for him to finish, before holding out a hand for him to shake. "Homalai" She said, by way of introduction. "So, what's your story?" She asked, giving a friendly smile that seemed to imply she was in on some kind of joke. Layoro returned the handshake and introduction, before reaching for his tea as the server brought it to him.

"I just arrived in town, myself. Looking for work to keep a roof over my head. Currently looking in to an excavation job for the Council of Entities." He said, taking a sip of his tea. It was hot and mildly weak, but the warmth of the beverage picked him up. "Really?" Said Homalai, "That sounds like it could be fascinating, I should see if they still have any positions open." She said. Layoro raised an eyebrow at this. "Pardon me for saying so, but you don't seem like the type of person who would be interested in a treasure hunt." He said. "You strike me as more of a dancer."

This elicited a light giggle from Homalai. "You're sweet." She said, placing her hand on his. "But history has always been my favorite subject, ever since I was a girl." Homalai reached down under the table and pulled out a satchel that was stuffed full of papers, parchment and pens. She rifled through it for a bit before pulling one out and laying it on the table. "See here?" She pointed. "This is a map of Nexus before the Age of Sorrows, back when it was known as Hollow." Homalai's voice had started to pick up with her excitement. "I spent months trying to uphold of this, just imagine what we could learn from the findings from under the city."

Layoro didn't have the heart to tell her that the Council was probably more interested in money than history. "Well, everyone is allowed to take a portion of what's found, so if you really want to go I can take you to the meeting location tomorrow." He felt uneasy about the prospect of Homalai accompanying the expedition party. It would be dangerous and she was clearly the scholarly type, not a warrior. Still, time in the field had taught him that knowledge was power in many respects, so perhaps he was underestimating her.

He was about to comment on this, when out of the corner of his eye, Layoro noticed another woman with long blond hair and wearing a plain brown and white dress sitting across the room. Swift Mercy. Her sharp features were easily recognizable even at that distance. When he spotted her she met his eyes and nodded once, acknowledging that they were aware of each other, before getting up from her table (without paying!) and moving towards the exit. She gave no indication that she expected Layoro to follow her, and this was her idea of "checking up on him".

What do you do?

- > Politely excuse yourself from Homalai to talk with Swift Mercy
- > Let Swift Mercy leave unperturbed

OOC

Aaaand some obligatory Exalted fan service for the female inclined, just like with Layoro, lol.

>Stay with Homalai

Layoro nodded at Swift Mercy as she left, which was returned, but otherwise made no move to go after the Sidereal. Turning back to Homalai, he continued his prior line of thought. "I still say it'll be dangerous, but your research could save lives. If you really want to go on the expedition, head to the Council Tower at noon." He said. Homalai looked overjoyed at this, smiling like a child who had just been told her birthday had come early this year.

....

The next day at the Council Tower, Layoro was beginning to regret his decision to sign on for this trip. First he had been forced to go through a physical and mental examination, which included stripping

down for a medical check, answering basic questions about his background so they could write him off as someone expendable, and determine his mental state to make sure he wasn't smart enough to fully understand what was going on. It was only the fact that he couldn't read that let him pass the mental examination, otherwise he would have been disqualified for sure.

The others that had passed the exams were all of the sort you could typically find hiding in the back ally waiting to mug someone. He could see dozens of men and women in armor that wasn't fitted for them, and with weapons that were poorly maintained, to say nothing of what he could sell. His nose was assaulted with a noxious cloud of alcohol and body odor, and some of them didn't seem like they understood the concept of bathing.

"Wow, look at all these people!" Said a voice behind him, causing Layoro to jump in surprise. Turning, he saw Homalai standing there, looking around excitedly. "How did you pass those tests?" Layoro asked, incredulous. He had been convinced that she would have been turned away once it was found out that she could read.

Homalai again gave him a smile that implied that she was in on a joke that he wasn't. "I convinced them that I was more valuable as an advisor than as dumb muscle." She said, grabbing his hand and pulling him to the front of the staging area, where a Council representative would soon go over the plan. "Come on! We're about to get started!" She said. The staging area itself was a raised platform with some diagrams on it that were maps of the underground. A portly man, the same that had put up the notice, was standing in the center and waiting for things to settled down before he could brief them all.

After a bit of rustling and shuffling, the idiots who thought themselves warriors had quieted down, and the Councilman began to talk. "Welcome." He said, drawing himself up straight. "I am Master Assayer Kemek, here on behalf of the Council and the Emissary." He continued. "You are here because we believe you to be the best of the best, capable of surviving the unknown dangers of the ruins."

Bullshit. Thought Layoro. These people were unprofessional and unskilled, and were intended to die so the Council could keep it's ten percent. He had no intentions of letting that happen to him

"As you can tell from these charts, we have mapped out much of the initial area, however beyond these areas lie dangers which you are going to face. From what records we have been able to uncover, we expect living statues, occult snares and hazards left over from the ages." Continued the Assayer, gesturing to various points on the diagrams. "You will each be split in to teams of seven, and will split off from the main chamber to explore the adjoining areas. You are expected to report back every four hours, if not, you will be presumed dead and your share of the proceeds will be forfeit. Are there any questions?" Asked Assayer Kemek.

OOC

Let's have a bit of fun with this one. Give me two question: One really stupid one that the hired muscle can ask, and one smart question that Layoro and Homalai can ask. I can't promise to pick them all, but I can promise to try and include the ones that are the most entertaining or popular.

OOC: I had too much fun with the thug dialog. Oops.

>Custom Dialog

"What the fuck does adjoining mean?!" Demanded a sour looking woman with a shaved head and more piercings than a victim of an archery volley. "It means next to, you idiot!" Said another mercenary. Assayer Kemek looked like he was about to call for order, when a third man shoved his way between the two of them, preventing the two of them from coming to blows. "Yeah, what I wanna know is what happens if I drag a bunch of loot back here for you past the deadline." The man wore dirty white lamellar armor, had rough features with two axes strapped to his belt. "In that case." Said the Assayer. "It would behoove you... I mean be to your benefit to send a runner to inform us of your findings." He continued, it slowly dawning on him that he was working with a less enlightened crowd.

"Can we keep anything that the others leave behind if they die?" Asked a man who looked like he mugged a monk and stole the outfit. "No, but your share of the... cut, would no longer be split among everyone who remained." Responded the Assayer. "How did you map out the current area?" Asked Layoro. This earned him a sharp look from Kemek, and Layoro remembered that he was expected to be dumb muscle, not an experienced soldier. "The maps were donated from an anonymous source. So far they have proven reliable, and we have no reason to doubt their accuracy." Said Kemek. "Will there be a medical team on site in case we get hurt?" Asked Homalai, looking nervous. This earned her some mocking laughter from some of the other mercenaries and a pitying look from the Assayer. "No, you will be expected to look after yourself."

"We get to pick our own teams, right?" Asked a man near a group of people sharing similar uniforms. "If you came as a group, you may work as a group, but no more than seven per team." Said Assayer Kemek. "Alright, I think that's enough questions for now. Make your way to the dig site in the next few hours. Don't dawdle."

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At the entryway to the ruins, there was a bit of a squabble as to who was going to be going with who. Several people had come with friends, and didn't want to be separated, others simply clashed egos, or expected to be in charge. Homalai and Layoro were eventually assigned to a small band of people who had been excluded from every other groups for varying reasons. Layoro recognized Miss Piercings, Axe Man and Mister Mugged Monk, as well as two other people who hadn't called attention to themselves during the initial meeting. A woman with pale, almost translucent skin and stark white hair with a collection of knives, and a man with green hair dressed in leathers welding a spear. The two of them had been off to the side, conversing with each other in hushed tones before joining the rest of the group.

"So." Said Layoro, as the seven of them gathered together. "I suppose introductions are in order. I'm Smiling Layoro. I've gone on a few ruin runs before, so if you follow my lead, I'll do everything I can to keep you safe." He said, nodding at the others. Axe Man stepped soon stepped forward. "Twin Thunder Nog. If something needs killn', I'm your man." he said, resting his hand on one of the axe heads on his belt. The two people who had been quiet until now decided that this would be a good time to speak up. "We are Five Wind Fiona and Ironwood Ryo. We are here to serve the Immaculate Dragons in excavating the remains of an Anathema city." Said the pale woman, gesturing to herself and to the other man. Layoro nearly had a panic attack when he realized that there was a set of *Immaculate monks* right in front of him, but managed to catch himself before he gave any outward signs of discomfort. He would have to be very careful around those two.

The woman with the pricing and the disheveled monk stepped up after that, much like the two Immaculates they appeared to be a pair. "Eastern Shark, and this is Sagacious Ku." Said the woman with the piercings, motioning to the monk. "If you think you're hot enough shit to keep us alive, then fine, but don't expect either of us to bail you out if you fuck up." She said, "Who's the little mouse?"

She asked, looking at Homalai, who until that point had been trying to hide behind Layoro. The poor scholar was starting to act like she may be in a bit over her head. "I, ah, I'm Homalai." She said, giving a little waive. "I've studied these ruins. I'll help where I can." She said meekly. "Fine, just try not to get us killed, girl." Huffed Eastern Shark.

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The tunnels of the ruins of Hollow were dark, dank and dreary. The six warriors and scholar advanced down their narrow corridors with caution, a collection of torchlight and lanterns providing the only illumination. While the others were confined to this small circle of light Layoro's senses had slowly become sharper and sharper as they had gone deeper. He was able to hear the currents of air and feel the vibrations in the ground as they walked, giving him a far broader range of vision. However, with the Immaculates watching him, he couldn't actually make use of this heightened awareness to the benefit of the rest of the party, and he was forced to resort to subtly influencing the path they took by bumping in to them or cutting them off to make sure they didn't step on any pressure plates or trip any traps. Thankfully it was dark, and no one had any good view, so his antics went uncommented upon.

Finally coming to the end of the third corridor they had been through, the exit opened up in to a large room with light coming from an unknown source near the walls. Closer examination showed that it was coming from glowing script in Old Realm, the language of Spirits, etched along the whole of the room. Five Wind Fiona, Sagacious Ku and Homalai all went to examine the markings while the others secured the area. Other than the lights from the writings, the most noticeable feature of the room were a set of statues flanking a door on the opposite side of the room. They were of taller than any two of them put together, in the shape of bulky humanoids with a single eye each, wielding a sword as large as they were planted down in the ground.

"What's the point of putting a bunch of statues down here in the middle of nowhere?" Asked Shark, kicking one of them in the shins. A loud clang echoed throughout the room, rising in volume before fading in an unnaturally slow rate. "What the hell do you think you are doing?!" Demanded Nog, grabbing her and pulling her away from the statues. "Did you not hear what the Assayer said? Living statues! Don't provoke them!" Nog was eyeing the statues warily, looking like he was either about to draw his axes to start swinging or kneel and start asking for forgiveness in the hopes that they wouldn't come alive.. Shark looked like she was about to punch Nog, but Layoro stepped in. "Easy, let's not kill each other before we get out of this. Once we're done and we're all rich, you two can make out and have lots of little babies." He said, putting his hands on their shoulders. Both of them looked at him with a mixture of bewilderment and disgust, but otherwise said nothing.

"Hey, eggheads, any news on the letters?" Demanded Nog, moving towards the scholars. Ironwood Ryo looked like he was about to say something about Nog choice of words, but restrained himself. "Nothing yet, it seems to be mostly gibberish." Called Homalai, after Fiona and Ku failed to respond. Layoro glanced over to where the two Monks were. The two of them were once again standing close to each other, but did not seem to be saying anything. However, Layoro could feel a slight pickup in the wind, despite the fact that they were under ground...

OOC

Decided to post what I have now and get you the rest as soon as I can. It was getting too long, IMO.

The Immaculates were up to something.

Even if they had only been standing close to each other because they were prior acquaintances, even could excuse them using their ability to communicate through the wind as a simple desire for privacy, even if you wanted to write off the looks they gave everyone else as simple distaste for the unenlightened, the fact of the matter was that their every move and gesture screamed conspiracy. It was the way Ryo walked back to Fiona with a subtle weight on his steps that signaled a readiness to commit to violence. It was the way Fiona kept her head tilted slightly downward, so she could better hear the currents of the wind, or feel the vibrations of the earth beneath her feet. Layoro had traveled with Dragon Blooded for a long time, and he was familiar with many of their strange talents. They were masters of the five elements, inherited from the Elemental Dragons themselves, and the forces of nature in Creation sang with them and through them.

Homalai had moved past Fiona and was making her way towards him, and Shark was currently bickering with Nog again over something stupid. Layoro was tempted to go back over there and smack their heads together for getting in to another argument in the middle of a dangerous environment, but Homalai reached him first and put her hand on his arm, leaning close to him. "I don't trust them." She whispered, glancing at the monks. "They're lying about why they're here."

"How can you tell?" He asked, keeping his voice low. In retrospect, Shark and Nog arguing was providing an excellent cover for their own conspiring. "Those characters on the wall, they're a sorcerous binding of some kind. Fiona pretended not to recognize them, but she looked too satisfied when we were looking at them for it to mean anything else." Said Homalai. She started walking away from him, in order to avoid looking suspicious. "Just be careful around them, they have a different reason for being here and it's not going to be good for us." She said.

Yeah, she didn't have to tell him twice. It seemed that he wasn't the only one hiding things down here, and he would have to be far more careful than he originally intended. "Let's keep moving." Called Ryo, who had moved towards the twin statues guarding the doorway. "You, Layoro. Take point. You said you've done this before, so you're our lead." He called. Layoro glanced back to the strange characters on the wall, but otherwise complied with the Dragon-Blooded's order. As they progressed, he couldn't help but notice more of the strange, and apparently sorcerous, characters lined the walls throughout the complex.

>>>

They were getting in to the unmapped part of the ruins now, with Layoro in the lead and Homalai backing him up, they were able to navigate without incident. More than once they came across a large room full of relics, artifacts and assorted paraphernalia from the distant past. Only a handful of them were magical in some way, but the mundane goods they had found were worth a king's ransom, or could be used as a king's ransom. It was not uncommon to find an old tapestry or urn that looked like nothing out of the ordinary, only for Homalai or one of the Monks to comment on how it was a priceless antique worth a fortune. Each time they made such a find, they sent word back at what they had found, and the Assayer's men soon came and appropriated it. It was only the more magical artifacts that they brought back personally.

"This job is a lot easier than I thought it would be." Said Shark, after their fourth find. She was holding a pouch full of acupuncture needles which Ku said were a potent healing artifact. "Are you trying to get us killed or do you just enjoy tempting the Maidens?" asked Ku, who was carrying a locket that played music when opened, and was apparently a sorcerous focus. "She's not wrong, though." Said Homalai. "I expected this to be much more dangerous. I'm actually having fun!" The little scholar was positively glowing. According to her, what they were finding directly correlated to some hypothesis she

had cooked up, but she didn't want to go in to any more detail than that until she had enough proof. "If we all die, I'm blaming you two." Said Layoro, who had secured a plate of Red Jade that Ryo said resonated with Fire Elemental magics.

Exiting the tunnel section they had been assigned, the group presented their findings to Assayer Kemek directly, who had insisted that all artifacts of a magical nature be brought to him. However before they could get even halfway across the room, gasps and mutterings could be heard around the room from all of the workers from the Council, followed by screams of terror.

A man garbed in white robes and hidden behind a silver mask had appeared without warning, standing in front of a group of mercenaries who was leaving for the evening. One of the men had failed to his knees, and was babbling without pause "Please!" He cried, grasping at the hem of the man's white robes. "Please, I'm sorry! I'll give it back, I promise!" His cries went on deaf ears, however, as the white robed man placed his hand on the mercenary's head. There was a twisting, tearing sound as the man's armor, clothes and finally skin were split clean down the middle, falling to the sides. For a moment in time, he looked like a drawing Layoro had seen once in a medical journal depicting the inside of a human being. This moment did not last long, as the body of the now dead mercenary fell down in to a pile of organs, blood and bone. The white robed figure then reached down and plucked from inside the remains a single ring, made of purest gold, and engraved with the symbol of the noon sun on the edges. He then flicked it deftly through the air and in to the hands of the Assayer, who nearly dropped it out of shock.

"No taxes shall be raised, save by the Council" Said the robed man. "None shall obstruct trade. None shall bring an army in to Nexus. No one shall commit wanton violence. None may falsely claim the Council's name of sanction. None shall harbor a fugitive from the Council's wrath." He recited, before finally vanishing.

Silence filled the underground hall as he left, and likely would have continued for much longer, until a voice next to Layoro pierced the night. "The fuck was that?!" Layoro looked to his side, and saw Nog standing there, mouth agape. Judging by the looks on Fiona, Ryo and Homalai, they were also in a state of shock and confusion. "That was the Emissary." Said Layoro, recalling what Iron Heart Hui had told him. "He's the power behind the Council, or their weapon, no one really knows what their relationship is. What is known is that if you break The Dogma, that thing he just said, you can expect a painful death."

"Hesiesh's balls." Nog swore under his breath, earning him a look of reproach from Ryo. "Remind me not to try anything clever with any loot we find. I like my guts on the inside." Fiona nodded her own agreement, "I'd heard stories, but most of them were so fantastical I thought them exaggeration." If possible, she looked paler than before. "Come, we have to report what we found, then we should head back in." She said, walking towards the Assayer, who was trying to get the blood from the ring off his shirt.

OOC

Ugh, Goddamnit. I need a few more things to happen before we get to the cool parts. Oh well, Here's some characterization and conspiracy for you, hope they're enjoyable at least.

It was the third day of the excavation, and things had taken a turn for the worst.

"Watch your head!" Shouted Fiona, throwing a knife as fast as (and encased in) a bolt of lightning. It struck a humanoid statue of bronze clean in the head, obliterating it from the neck up. The statue, roughly the size of a man, swayed for a moment before falling down with a crash, its large spear rolling to the side, only to be picked up by Layoro. The reach and narrow tunnels making it the more optimal weapon than his sword. With a two handed thrust, he drove the spear through the chest of a second statue, before turning to swing it at a third, knocking it off its feet so that Twin Thunder Nog could dismember it with a massive over head swing of his axes.

The group had been fighting for over half an hour, although "tactically withdrawing" would be a more accurate term. Originally they had come across a large rectangular room, and in the room had been a dozen statues made of bronze. In between each of those statues was a small table displaying different types of relics, like a museum or display piece. Like before, the group secured what looked to be the most valuable findings and had been about to leave when Ryo had called for them to stop. At the back of the room had been a thick rod of metal with a diamond the size of a man's fist on the tip. Having faced little adversity before now, Ryo plucked the rod without hesitation. It was at that point that the statues had come alive and had started making a mess of things.

"This is all your fault!" Ku shouted at Homalai, as he delivered a open palmed strike to another statue, driving it back a few feet and leaving cracks in its torso. "I wasn't the one that picked up the jewel!" Cried Homalai, trying to hide behind Shark. "You were the one who said this was easy!" He shouted back. The originator of their current grief, Ryo, was currently in the thick of the statues. The Wood Aspect's had drawn deep on the blood of the Elemental Dragon within him, and whole body was enveloped in a vortex of brambles and thorns, his anima, which was grinding down the bronze statues even as more of them seemed to pour out of the walls.

The seven of them were currently in a staggered line, progressing backwards down the hallway. Ironwood Ryo at the front, handling the unceasing hoard of bronze men. Behind him, Layoro, Nog and Ku formed a second perimeter, taking care of any stragglers that got past Ryo. After those three, Fiona and Shark were in back, using their ranged abilities to provide cover fire, as apparently Shark's piercings were also needles to be removed and thrown.

Behind all of them was Homalai, trying desperately to stay out of everyone's way and wishing she had gotten the chance for more practice when Ku had offered to teach her a few martial arts moves a few hours ago. Her bag was currently clenched in her hands, and it was being used as a shield any time a statue made its way past all three lines of defense, which was becoming increasingly common. "We're getting overrun!" Shouted Shark, as she jammed two needles in to the eyes of a statue that and forced its way past the front line fighters. A splash of glowing iridescent liquid gushed forth from the crystal eyes, before it fell down, dead. Ku gave a grunt of agreement, but didn't offer any suggestions. The statues were much faster than any of them, and running hadn't helped.

Almost as soon as Shark had spoken, the bronze men gave another push against Ryo, five managed to make their way past him, and while one found the end of its non-life at the end of Layoro's spear, the others weren't so lucky. Twin Thunder Nog soon found himself on the ground, battered by one statue and another one was about to follow up with a spear through his belly. Ku was currently trying and failing to grapple a third, while the fourth was moments away from skewering Shark.

Realizing he had only seconds to act, Layoro turned towards his comrades and began to move. Time seemed to slow down as the scene unfolded, a second bolt of lightning from Fiona crawled past his vision as it tried to strike one of the statues that had forced its way past Ryo, but it missed by scant inches. Some part of Layoro knew without question that he could save everyone, rally them, and push back these bronze men once and for all. Another part of him, memories and emotions that were not

his, railed against this idea. To do so would expose him to the Dragon-Blooded, and mark him as a wanted man. Let them deal with this. Better to save who you could, and make up for his failure to save everyone by becoming strong enough to do so next time.

What do you do?

>Pick one person to save. Your identity as a Solar will remain hidden, you will lose two of your teammates, but the Dragon-Blooded will eventually grind down the statues with their Animas
>Go nova. you are guaranteed to save everyone, but there will be no mistaking you as anything other than a Solar Anathema, and the Dragon-Blooded will hunt you down, and it is possible that members of your team will turn on you.

OR

>Find a clever solution. You are limited to three action to save three people, these actions must be within the realm of plausibility for a mortal fighter, but will have an extreme likelihood of success thanks to your nature as a Solar Exalt.

If you pick this option, be mindful of a few things: Do not be afraid to put yourself in danger, as heroism will be rewarded, not punished. You are armed with a spear and a sword at your side, which is currently sheathed, drawing it will not count as an action.

04-29-2015, 06:02 AM

>Find a clever solution

Time became liquid for Layoro, rushing by or pooling in to stillness as his feet pushed against the ground in a sprint. With a great surge of energy, he slammed in to the twin bronze men attacking Nog, sending one in to the other and bowling all three of them to the ground, giving Nog enough time to recover. Rolling in to crouch, Layoro used what momentum he had left to leap in to the air and kicked off the nearby wall to gain extra hight, allowing him to stab the appropriated spear through the body of the statue attacking Ku, pinning it to the ground. Ku would later complain about how Layoro had almost stabbed him in the foot, but since he was still alive he would let it go. Suspended in mind air, Layoro drew his sword even as he was vaulted towards Shark. He slammed in to the statue menacing her, blade first, driving it deep through it's skull before he once more feel to the ground.

Dazed and confused after his second abrupt encounter with the floor, he was only mildly aware of Homalai yelling a warning to him. He swung blindly, and managed to knock a spear that would have sunk it's way in to his heart in to his arm instead. It punched clean through the armor, but was slowed enough that he avoided a crippling strike, leaving a gash. Another blast of lighting from Fiona ended it's existence, and Layoro managed to get to his feet. "Form up!" He called to Nog and Ku, grabbing the spear that he had deflected. "Diamond formation, keep them back!" He shouted, charging forward and ramming his spear in to anther of the bronze men. Ku and Nog quickly followed suit, each substituting their usual weapons for a spear. Between the three of them, they managed to form an effective blockade, preventing any more from overwhelming them.

Slowly but steadily, the seemingly endless hoard of living statues began to taper off. Sensing this weakness, Ryo ordered one last push to be made against the statues. With the Dragon's power flowing through him, he was able to drive a wedge through the bronze men, allowing Layoro, Ku and Nog to finishing off any who survived his wrath. Soon after, they stood exhausted but victorious.

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"I can't believe we survived that." Said Ku, as they exited the excavation area. It had been decided unanimously that they would take the rest of the day off to recuperate. As they had been so successful in their previous ventures, the Assayer had been willing to give them leave. "I thought we were dead for sure." Agreed Shark, supporting Ku as they walked. The Monk had taken a lump or two, but nothing that a good night's rest wouldn't fix. "I don't know about you guys, but I'm going to get something to drink, feel free to join me." Said Nog, breaking off from the rest and making his way towards the closest bar.

The others all went their separate ways. The Immaculates went to places unknown, while Shark and Ku decided to join Nog. Homalai went back to the room she had rented in the teahouse where she had met Layoro. As for Layoro himself, he was going to a blacksmith to see if he could get his armor repaired for tomorrow. He had almost made it there, when someone placed a hand on his shoulder. "You really can't help but make problems everywhere you go, can you?" Said a female voice. Turning around, Layoro was surprised to see Swift Mercy. "What, this?" He asked, gesturing to the wound. "It's nothing that won't heal in a few days." He said.

"I'm not talking about your shoulder. I'm talking about what you did at that fishing village." She said, irritation creeping in to her voice. "What *did* you do? There was a massive surge of deathly energies not a mile from there, and you're the only person I know of who could do something like that." She stepped back and looked him up and down, trying to find something that wasn't there. "It was like a baby shadowland, only more... saturated." She said.

"What makes you think I did it?" Layoro asked. "I tried to stay out of trouble, like you said." Swift Mercy eyed him uneasily, before sighing and pinching the bridge of her nose. "No, you couldn't have done it. You're no necromancer. Venus's tits, Nara-O is going to ride my ass on this." She said to herself. Her whole figure was tense, like she was about to hit something. Having recently come from a stressful situation himself, Layoro could empathize with her, even if he couldn't understand why she was so upset. "Look, just watch yourself, alright? There's something going on that we don't know about, that always spells trouble." She said, turning to leave.

What do you do?

- > Invite her to get a drink at the teahouse. Like you, needs chance to relax.
- > Let her go. She's a busy lady, better not distract her.

05-02-2015, 04:56 AM

OOC

Thanks for the feedback, I'll try to work more on characterization
/OOC

>Invite her to get a drink.

"Hey, do you want to get a drink?" Layoro asked, before he could stop himself. Swift Mercy turned back to look at him, skeptical. "We've both had a rough day, there's a nice teahouse where I'm staying that has some of the best Green tea I've had." He said. Swift Mercy gave a laugh at this, rolling her eyes. "That's because you've been drinking crap your whole life." She said. Layoro felt compelled to

defend the teahouse that had housed and sheltered him (even if they took his money for it), but Swift Mercy cut him off. "Fine, we can get drinks, gods know I need one, but we're going to *my* teahouse, not yours." She said, turning on her heel and walking in an entirely different direction.

Layoro shrugged and quickened his pace to follow her, which was harder than it should have been considering he was a head taller than her. Everything seemed to go just right for her as she walked. The crowd parted in natural gaps that allowed her to slip by, Carts would pull out of her way right before she was forced to stop, and even the omnipresent merchants of Nexus' street vendors all seemed to ignore her as she passed. Layoro on the other hand was forced to duck, dodge, juke and jive his way through an entire crowd, and fend off street urchins trying to distract him so they could pick his pocket.

Eventually they made their way to a tiny, almost unnoticeable alleyway between two large buildings that looked like they were up for renovation. Motioning for him to follow, Swift Mercy walked down the narrow path between them and entered a doorway that was obscured by the shadowed buildings. Layoro followed, and had his breath taken away once he walked inside.

The room through the door was huge, far bigger than the building it was attached to would imply. White marble tiles inlaid with gold and silver traced floor, which lead to multiple stairways made of what looked to be pure ivory. Each of these stairs spiraled around a raised platform with archways surrounded the edges that were draped with fine silks for privacy. Rivulets of crystal blue water circled around many of the platforms, which pooled in to still ponds that reflected lack of a ceiling, and instead it simply opened up to a clear sky from which a calm and pleasant wind could be felt.

"What is this place?" Layoro asked, struggling to regain his focus. "My teahouse." Swift Mercy said, a smug look on her face. "Come, we should get dressed properly for this." She said. She then turned and walked past one of the statues that infrequently dotted the area, a huge lion, three times her size, and made entirely out of gold. "I didn't realize you were a god." Said Layoro in hushed tones.

Swift Mercy let out a peal of silvery laughter that lasted for several seconds, before she caught herself and gave a cough to regain her composure. "I haven't been called a god in a while." She said, trying to hide a smile. "I am not, however. I am one of the Exalted, like you." She turned once more and started towards one of the raised platforms. "I can explain more, if you like, but we need to get moving, we're violating the decor."

Layoro began to follow her and had just crossed the threshold in to the main area when a golden paw the size of his chest slammed down in front of him. Stepping back in surprise and looking up, Layoro found himself looking up and up and up at the gold lion statues, which were apparently also alive. Unlike the bronze men who he had encountered earlier in the day, this one appeared to be intelligent, as it eyed him critically as it leaned down until they were face to face. "Do you have an invitation?" It asked, in a voice deep enough and loud enough that he could feel it rumbling in his chest.

"Bao Sho, it's fine. He's with me." Called Swift Mercy, who was part way up one of the sets of ivory stairs. The lion, Bao Sho, turned and gave Swift Mercy an admonishing look. "It's against the rules." The Lion groused. "All visitors must have an invitation." Swift Mercy gave a wave of her hand, dismissing the complaint. "It's fine, Burning Feather owes me a favor for that thing during Calibration, remember? She'll approve it if I ask her." Bao Sho let out a noise that was somewhere between a grumble and a growl, but removed his paw from Layoro's path. "You may enter, O Chosen." he said, returning to his previous vigil.

Looking upon the lion statues that dotted the area in a new light, Layoro followed Swift Mercy.

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'Getting dressed' meant that a swarm of beautiful dragon flies made of amber and colored glass flew over to and around both Swift Mercy and Layoro once they reached the top of the platform. The dragon fly swarm was thick enough to obscure someone's vision of Layoro, which was fortunate because they quickly disrobed him down to his undergarments. After his armor and weapons had been removed, the swarm placed a robe made of spun gold with a sun sigil on the breast around him. The crystal insects even went so far as to apply perfumes and oils to his body to freshen him up, as well as stylize his hair in to something more presentable than the crude, haphazard appearance he had forced it in to.

When they were done, they departed as rapidly as they had appeared, leaving Layoro and Swift Mercy alone together. She had been dressed in a similar garb, a robe of midnight black with an iridescent sheen with a pentagram on the breast. "Ladies first." Said Layoro, after the two of them had finished adjusting the robes. He gestured to the table in front of them, where two cups of clear water were already waiting for them.

"Don't be cute." quipped Swift Mercy, who nevertheless took her seat. Layoro likewise sat down after she did, and made himself comfortable. There was an awkward moment as the two sat in silence before they were attended to by a being who looked like she was made of semisolid vapor. The spirit took their orders (plum wine for Swift Mercy, green tea for Layoro) and quickly departed and returned with the beverages. "Seriously, where are we?" Asked Layoro, once the spirit had left.

"This is the Waking Dream Pagoda" Said Swift Mercy, taking a sip from her wine. "It's an exclusive club for Terrestrial Gods and the Exalted, where we can relax and forget the troubles of Creation. It's also a neutral ground, of sorts." She said, placing her cup back on the table. "It's owned by Burning Feather, Lady of Intoxicants, a god who's preview includes but is not limited to tea, alcohol and drugs." Swift Mercy made beckoning motion, and another spirit of air appeared, carrying a large plate of succulent fruits and nuts. "This is one of the more refined areas, as the Pagoda spans several miles and has hundreds of entrances scattered throughout Creation."

What do you decide to talk about?

OOC

11:56pm, that totally still counts as friday!

05-06-2015, 03:43 AM

>Custom Dialog

"I hope you're enjoying yourself." Said Swift Mercy, after a few minutes had passed in relative silence where they had both eaten or drank their fill and took in the scenery. During that time sprits of air and water had come and gone at a rapid pace, continually refilling their drinks before they had even emptied or replenishing their plate when they had eaten about half the fruits presented to them. "It's very nice, yes." Said Layoro. He had managed to regain his wits after being exposed to the wonders of the Pagoda, and was enjoying a strawberry. The sweetness of the fruit was incredible, beyond anything he had ever tasted before, but... "It's a little sterile, though." He said.

Swift Mercy looked like she had been told that she had lost a martial arts demonstration because her Gi had been from the wrong Dojo. "What do you mean, sterile?" She asked incredulously. "This is one of the finest establishments in all of Creation, most mortal kings would wage war to have the opportunity to be where you are now. You can get food and drink from the four corners of the world here! Worldly spirits attend to your every need, you can't get that anywhere else!"

"I know, I know, and that's really nice." Said Layoro, raising his hands to try and assure her that he was suitably impressed. "It's just missing that chummy, earthy feel I'd get if I were at Auntie Lin's teahouse. The constant din of people talking, having to jostle your way past give other people to get to your table, the smell of beer and cooked meat in the background." Layoro looked around at the raised platforms and open spaces. "The crowd is your family there, here I feel like I'm one second away from a sniper putting an arrow through my heart."

Swift Mercy gave a sigh and reached up to pull a velvet cord that was centered above the table. With a sound of running fabric, the silk curtains fell, leaving the two of them wholly separated from the rest of the Pagoda. "Better?" She asked. "Much, thank you." Said Layoro, the feeling of tension and exposure fading. "The Lions wouldn't allow that to happen, anyway." Said Swift Mercy. "They would tear any assassins apart, and they would be luckier for it. The last time someone tried to breach the sanctity of the Waking Dream Pagoda, Burning Feather left them in drug induced coma for three centuries, where they were tortured by their own worst nightmares."

Layoro choked on his drink at this, and had to take a few seconds to compose himself before trying to find a subject that didn't involve nightmare induced torture. "What are those Lions, anyway? I saw some living statues under Nexus, but they didn't seem to be intelligent."

"They're guardian gods." Said Swift Mercy. "Incorruptible, ever vigilant. You will never find a more capable being as a protector than a Celestial Lion." Though a split in the silk curtains, Layoro could see one of the Lions look over in their direction at the mention of them. "Do you deal with gods often?" He asked, still having trouble comprehending the fact that the woman in front of him spoke of the divine like they were casual acquaintances.

"Very often half the time I'm working with them, the other half I'm working against them. It's apart of my job. Like you, I am one of the Chosen. Mercury was my patron, like the Sun was yours. Have you ever felt your head burn when you were doing something strenuous?" She asked. Layoro nodded "Only once or twice, though it faded after a short time." "You must not have looked at yourself while it was happening, or else you would see the brand on your head that marks a divine soul within you. All of the Chosen have markings that signify their patrons." Swift Mercy said, closing her eyes for a moment and taking a deep breath. When she reopened her eyes, the yellow sign of Mercury adorned her brow. The color of the mark called to mind something else. "That reminds me, I've been seeing a set of yellow eyes following me everywhere. You're in with the gods, would you know of any spirit who would take an interest in me?"

Swift Mercy's face darkened at the question. "There are many gods who would be interested in a Solar. But the person you're talking about is no god. It's a Lunar, one of the Moon Chosen." She said, taking a grape and crushing it in contempt. "Are they like us?" Asked Layoro. "No, Lunars have set themselves against anything that resembles order and civilization. They're barbarians who have decided to wage war against The Realm and my people, the Sidereals. Any chance they get to ruin a good thing, to kill a good person, they take. They're hunters and shapeshifters, who kill man or beast to take their form."

"And this Lunar is following me because...?" Layoro prompted Swift Mercy. "To get to me." She replied. "It knows I'm keeping tabs on you, and it wants my heart for whatever reason those heathens want to take someone's shape. Probably to infiltrate the my brethren and wreak havoc." Swift Mercy met him with an intent look. "If you ever meet a Lunar, don't trust them. They lie and steal to get what they want, and destroy what they can't." Layoro nodded, taking the advice to heart. So far, Swift Mercy had been full of good advice, and he didn't see any reason to stop now, although he was curious why she was so helpful. "If I might ask, why were you there, and why help me? I'm very grateful, especially since you returned my tab." He said, his hand going to the amulet. "But you seem to have an interest in my survival. Why?"

Swift Mercy's face went pale at the question, and she let out a long sigh. "I was hoping you would have forgotten that." She said, her voice turning bitter. "I was there because I was hoping to find you alive. I was hoping to find you alive because I was the one who almost got you killed by dropping those Legionnaires on your head." She reached over for her cup of wine, and downed the whole thing in a single gulp. "I was hoping to get you killed because as a Solar Exalted, you are one of the most dangerous people in Creation, and many of my colleagues believe you are too dangerous to be allowed to live." She put the cup down and stared in to the empty vessel, refusing to meet Layoro's eyes.

At her words, Layoro's mind flashed back to his old unit, the Seven Headed Serpents. Loyal men and women who served with him, worked with him, fight with him and died for him. He had trained Mashi, their best archer, himself. He had helped Mashi and Junta get together when the two of them refused to acknowledge their feelings for each other for fear their emotions compromising their judgement in the battlefield. He recalled being named godfather to Junta's first child, and had helped comfort the two parents when it had died a few days after it had been born.

He remembered drinking with Ultek, a northerner who always put everyone under the table. He could still see the maps that he and Yorken had poured over while planning a raid on a bandit camp for some noble who's heirloom had been stolen by them. He recalled bickering with Irah, a swordswoman from the south who staunchly believed that curved swords of the south were clearly superior to the straight swords of east.

"You... killed my men." Layoro's breath was beginning to quicken, as the image of his friends, the people who had been family, flashed before his mind's eye. His fist was clenched so tight that the knuckles on his hand were beginning to turn white, and cracks were starting to appear in the tea cup he was holding.

"Yes. I did." Said Swift Mercy. "For what it's worth, I do regret what I did, and have done everything I could to try and keep you safe from those like me. I even put a spell on that tab you have to keep you out of their sight." She said, still looking away from him.

The cup shattered in Layoro's hand, and he stood up from the table in a fury, knocking the chair he had been sitting in back and over the ledge of the platform. "Why?!" He demanded. "Why try and kill me? Why go back on it?"

"Because I'm tired." She said. "I'm tired of fighting a war that wont end with the Lunars, I'm tired of constantly harassing gods to do their job, I'm tired of hunting down Solars who's only crime was getting noticed by the Sun and killing them for something that they *might* do. I'm just so tired of it all." Swift Mercy slumped her her chair, looking defeated. "At first I was just going to leave you be, make a token attempt to stop you from going to Thorns and getting yourself killed, but you didn't, so I got the alert and headed down to kill you myself. After I saw how hard you fought to protect your friends, I

realized I had made a mistake, that we had all made a mistake. No one who fights that hard for what they love can be wholly evil. After that I tried keep an eye on you to keep you safe, even brought you here thinking we could be friends.” She gave a bitter laugh at private joke. “Sidereals and bad plans, like a match made in Malfeas.”

What do you do?

>Leave. She killed your crew, your family, she doesn’t deserve your friendship.

>Stay. She tired to make amends, in her own strange way, give her a second chance.

>Stay.

Swift Mercy’s words struck an unusual chord in Layoro, despite his anger. In them, he recognized the same burnt out, regretful sorrow that Chatek Nalda had held when describing the state of Lookshy on the rare occasion he had spoken of it. The disgust at the current state of affairs, the constant uphill battles to get even the simplest tasks done, the refusal of allies and fellow officers to do anything that wasn’t in their own interests, it was all echoed in Swift Mercy. This, more than anything else, quelled much of Layoro’s fury, seeing in her the same bitterness as his surrogate father figure.

“You get one chance.” Layoro said exhaling through his nose and sitting back down, his chair having somehow returned after being thrown off the edge of the platform (Layoro would later learn spirits of air had put it back in to place). “One chance to prove you mean what you say. My people are dead because of you, all so you could get to me. The only reason I don’t take your head here and now is because I owe you for this.” He said, pulling out the Silver Tab, the sentimental value of the item now further enhanced by it’s occult properties. “But make no mistake, we’re not friends, not yet. You need to earn the right to call me that.”

Swift Mercy nodded, all business. “Of course.” Despite the seriousness of the situation, her attitude became much less glum, glad that she was being given a second chance. “I know it will take time for you to trust me, but I hope in time I can prove to you that I’m on your side.”

The two of them sat in silence for a time, avoiding each other’s gaze and trying to think of some way to change the topic without actually appearing as though they were trying to change the topic. Eventually, Swift Mercy spoke up, asking what seemed like an easy question. “Why did you ask me out for drinks?” Layoro looked up from his own cup, confused at the specific topic. “What do you mean?” He asked. “Most of the time, when someone seeks an audience with an Oracle of Heaven, they need advice, or information of some kind. I thought there might have been some secret you wanted to know about.” She said.

“Oh.” Layoro said, suddenly feeling very uncomfortable. “I was going to ask if you were single.”

Swift Mercy’s mouth opened and closed several times at this, and she began to feel equally uncomfortable. “I.. see.” Was all she managed to get out.

“Yeah.” Layoro said, not sure how to proceeded from there.

“I, um, am. If it matters.” She continued.

“I... don’t think this is appropriate right now.” Layoro said, trying and failing to maintain an aura of stoicism.

Swift Mercy’s face colored when she realized her faux pas. “Rigt... Right.”

Another awkward silence came, and with it, spirits of air and water to refill their drinks and replace the eaten fruits with newer and more exotic samples. After a time, Swift Mercy spoke up once more. "I can answer any other questions you might have. I am an Oracle, knower of many things." She offered. Layoro was silent for a time, mulling over what was most important to him at the moment, before finally speaking. "How did my friends die?" He asked. "I don't remember how it happened, just that it did."

Swift Mercy signed once more, and resigned herself to another uncomfortable conversation. "They died bravely. Fighting for you, fighting for each other. I don't think they fully realized what was going on, but you were with each other when the end came, and gave as good as they got." Layoro nodded at this, trying to think back to the aftermath of the battle. "That sounds like them, they never new when to quit." He said. "The Chosen of the Sun are often capable of inspiring people to such hight through word and deed." Swift Mercy said.

"But why target me?" Layoro asked, some anger coming back in to his voice. "Why try to kill me for something I might do?" It didn't make any sense to him, his only concern before all this was to keep his crew safe and make them enough money to retire.

"In the long ago past, the Solar Exalted once ruled the world." Swift Mercy said. "It was a golden age, the likes of which had never been seen before. Over time however, something went wrong. The Solars began to go mad, threatening Creation itself with their abuses, and my fellows determined that the only way save the world from their madness was to dispose of them all. " She continued. "But Solars cannot die, not truly. Their souls are eternal and imperishable, and when not guided by the hand of the Unconquered Sun, they are forever seeking their next incarnation. To ensure that we would not be battling the newly reborn Solar Exalted forever, we sealed their souls away in a prison, deep beneath the sea. Some managed to escape this however, and your soul is one of them, and has been becoming an even greater threat with every incarnation."

"How can a soul become greater after it's reincarnated? I thought that when we were reborn, our past lives were washed away, so we might start anew." Layoro was unfamiliar with the more nuanced tenants of the Immaculate Philosophy, but this was something that even children were aware of. "A Solar's soul is too strong for death, too great to be fully cleansed of it's past life." Swift Mercy explained. "Having so many past lives all whispering to you, guiding you and helping you makes you especially dangerous because every time you are reborn, you grow stronger and more cunning. You're more able to avoid our detections, and fight your way out of impossible situations when we are finally able to find you. It was widely believed among the Sidereal that eventually you would become too dangerous, and would ruin everything we had been working to protect."

"But I no longer believe that." She said. "I don't think I ever really believed it. It was just an accepted, unquestioned fact that all the Sidereal Exalted learned once we finished our training: Beware the Dawn, for he will bring ruin upon us all if allowed to live."

>Input custom dialog

OOC

I hope this isn't making Layoro come off as too mary sue-ish. It just seemed like the logical consequence of a Dawn Solar who reincarnates very frequently after being murdered by Sidereal death squads.

> Custom Dialog

"Do all of your people feel this way?" Layoro asked, once more feeling like he had a giant target painted on his back. He had known that the Immaculate Order had declared all those like him Anathema, but he didn't realize that there was an entire organization of Exalted who conspired to murder him as well.

"Unfortunately, yes. The abuses of the past have not been forgotten by my compatriots, and many would arm themselves and move against you even now if they knew what I was saying." Swift Mercy motioned for more wine as she finished, and another spirit entered the veiled enclosure to pour her another cup. "I hope I can impress upon you the severity of what I am saying. I could get in a lot of trouble for even talking to you, let alone telling you about our part in the Usurpation of the Solar Exalted. Many would consider this conversion to be tantamount to a betrayal of everything we've worked for in these past thousand years."

"But you want me to trust you, which is why you're telling me all this." Layoro said, frowning in contemplation. Swift Mercy nodded at his observation, but said nothing. "This seems a lot bigger than just me, how deeply involved are the Sidereals in hunting down other Exalted?" He asked.

"Very." She said. "We influence much of The Realm, and the Immaculate Order that supports it. Traditionally with so few Solar Exalted being reborn, we focus our attention on the Lunar Exalted, who viewed our assault on the Solars and our seizure of their empire as an affront to them. They were the Solar's second in command in the old realm, and much of what we took from the Solar Exalted we took from them as well, and gave to the Dragon-Blooded."

"And that, coupled with your supporting an organization that demonizes them, has lead them to declare themselves your eternal enemy." Finished Layoro.

"You catch on quick, yes. We've been fighting each other for thousands of years, with neither side able to gain any real advantage over the other." Swift Mercy said.

Another silence fell on the pair, and Layoro's attention was draw to the fruits in front of him and the cup of tea in his hand. "How does one gain membership of the Pagoda?" He asked, wishing to change the subject to something less somber.

"It's not that hard." Swift Mercy said. "Simply be a Terrestrial God, or one of the Chosen, and do a favor for Burning Feather. She's very accommodating. If you like I can set up a meeting between you and her."

Now that was an interesting thought. To meet a god was something that only a handful of people got to experience in their lifetime, and many would give their left arm for an opportunity like that. "I'm not sure." He said, "I don't think I've earned that honor just yet."

To his surprise, Swift Mercy let out another laugh, just like she had when he had questioned if she was a god. "Layoro, I don't think you fully realize your position." She said, placing her wine cup back on the table and smirking. "You are one of the Solar Exalted. The Unconquered Sun, your spiritual father, is the Most High of heaven itself. You are considered his son in all things, and many gods would be very happy to see you, although just as many would fear you for the changes you might bring."

"Gods would fear me?" Layoro asked, skeptical. The idea that a god would fear him seemed laughable, they were gods! What fear did they have for mortals?

"You are one of the Chosen, the greatest of all the Chosen. Should you find yourself in such danger, know that yours is the power to *kill* them." Swift Mercy said, her voice as hard and deadly serious as a blade.

"I.. see." Layoro said uneasily. On the one hand, it was once to know that he could potentially fight his way out of a divine ambush or whatever, but on the other hand the idea that a god could be rendered mortal by his hand was an uncomfortable idea. He had known his former Brotherhood to put down rogue sprits when they were praying on mankind, but gods? That was something new all together.

"Maybe I can meet her later, after I'm done with the excavation job." Layoro said, who needed time to process everything he had been told, and did not want to add to that amount of information unnecessarily.

"What excavation?" Swift Mercy asked sharply, a look of worry on her face.

"The Council found some First Age ruins under the city and hired a bunch of people on to help get their hands on anything valuable. I needed money to stay off the streets, so I signed on." Layoro explained. "Why? What's the matter?"

"The Lunar I told you about, the one hunting me? I'm setting a trap for it in those ruins, using two Dragon-Blooded who work for me from time to time. There's an old prison down there sealing something away from during the Great Contagion, I'm hoping to trap it down there until the two of them kill each other." Swift Mercy explained.

"Oh, Five Winds Fiona and Ironwood Ryo, I've met them. They're in the same group as me." Layoro said. Swift Mercy's mouth fell open when she heard those words, and struggled to say anything for several seconds before she finally managed to pull herself together.

"How have you not been killed yet?!" She hissed, still shocked. She took a deep breath and leaned back in her seat. "Never mind, I don't want to know. Just be careful around them, alright? They aren't looking for a Solar, so as long as you don't do anything idiotically heroic and draw attention to yourself, you should be fine."

"Would saving two teammates from certain death from four living statues single handedly count as idiotic?" Layoro asked, torn between concern and amusement at her semi panicked state.

"Yes. Yes it would." She said through her teeth. Swift Mercy let out a long, exasperated sigh before continuing. "They'll probably think you're touched by the Dragons now, and approach you to try and include you in their plan. They won't give you much choice in the matter." Layoro started to say something, but Swift Mercy cut him off. "Whatever happens, let them do the most of the work. The less you exert yourself, the less likely you are to expose yourself as a Solar and make yourself a target. Understand?"

"Alright, alright, I get it." Layoro said, wondering how he had gone from being ready to cut Swift Mercy's throat out to trying to calm her down. Upon realizing that he was becoming too chummy with the woman who had killed his men, Layoro decided that he needed to break this meeting off before he forgave her completely. He still wasn't completely ready to let go of what she had done, but she had managed to earn herself a chance for forgiveness. "Look, it's getting late and I need to get back to

others so we can make plans for tomorrow's expedition. I can't say I enjoyed myself, but I will say that I appreciate your coming clean like that." He said.

Swift Mercy seemed to recognize his unease and nodded her thanks. "You're... welcome. The exit is over in that direction." She motioned to where they had come in. "I'll be in touch." She said, watching him get up from the table to make his way down the stairway and out of the Pagoda. The Lion god at the entrance gave Layoro courtesy nod as he left, and the dragonflies returned to swarm him once more, returning his normal clothing and weapon before he ventured forth, the night air ready for him when he exited the building completely.

>>>

Layoro was about halfway to Auntie Lin's teahouse when he heard it. A low, rough breathing sound coming from a dark alleyway, and the smell of matted fur hit his nose. Hair on the back of his neck began to stand up, a sure sign of danger to come.

Some part of him knew what it was before he had fully thought about it. Swift Mercy had said that the Lunar was going to use him to get to her, so it only made sense that it would reveal itself now that he had met with her.

Stopping in his tracks, he turned towards the sound of the breathing and was met with hulking figure shrouded in the shadows of the alleyway, towering over him by twice as much. No simple feat when he over six feet tall. He had to look up to see it, but there they were, an unmistakable pair of glowing yellow eyes.

The two stared at each other for a brief moment in time, before the source of the eyes spoke, it's voice low and harsh. "So, playing nice with that Sidereal bitch? You must be brave or stupid to trust her after what she did."

How do you respond?

>Aggressive
>Diplomatic
>Charming

>Charming

"Just because she bought me dinner and apologized doesn't mean I'm about to trust her just yet." Layoro said, casually walking towards the darkened alleyway, stopping just before he crossed the threshold. "But if it makes you feel better, I don't put out on a first date." Layoro placed his hand on the pommel of his sword (the metal one) as a sign that he would be ready to throw down if it came to it, but otherwise made no overt displays of hostility. "Probably the third date, if you really wine and dine me."

The shadowed figure's whole demeanor changed. The yellow eyes, once narrowed like a predator stalking prey, widened and become more akin to a confused and bewildered dog. The low growling stopped short, and even the figures' posture changed from a low crouch ready to strike at a moments notice to a slack and unfocused state. The yellow eyed figure could only let out a strangled "What." in reply.

"I prefer to give people a second chance wherever possible, and you don't make friends by shutting them down, especially if they do you a favor." Layoro continued.

Yellow Eyes remained silent for a time, considering Layoro's words. Eventually, it spoke once more, its voice was less harsh, but no less guttural. "You are a fool to trust her. Her kind lie and manipulate the unwary in to doing their bidding. I am Pearlescent Fang, and you should heed my words, Solar. For I speak from experience."

"Trust is a hard thing to do when you won't even show me your face." Layoro said. The fact that Pearlescent Fang had been stalking him for the past few weeks also did little to add credence to the Lunar's story.

"The bitch does not know my true face, despite her best efforts." Replied the Lunar with a hint of pride. "I will not reveal myself here and now, but if you need cause to trust me, know this: You are not the only one who has lost a loved one by her hand."

Despite a pricking at the back of his neck warning him that pressing the issue would be a bad idea, Layoro went ahead and pressed the issue. "And who lost their loved one?" He asked, with a feeling that he already knew.

"*She killed my master!*" Pearlescent Fang roared, the sheer force of the Lunar's rage caused dirt and debris to rise from the ground, and shattered nearby windows. "Right in front of my eyes! She killed him and would have killed me had it not been for his sacrifice!" Silence descended on the night air after that outburst, punctuated only by the barking of dogs and scattered cries of fear by the populace. Layoro knew that the time for dialog was soon coming to a close, as people would be arriving to investigate the noise.

"Take this." Said Pearlescent Fang, tossing something out of the shadows to Layoro. He caught it out of reflex and held it up in the moonlight to examine it: A bone flute, with small feathers attached to it. There were only three holes along the entire shaft, despite it having enough room for twice as many. "What is it?" Layoro asked.

"The first note will let you send a message to anyone you know. The second note will call a spirit of fire to aid you. The third note will break any enchantment or spell." Said Pearlescent Fang. "They will only work once, but you may use the first two at any time you desire. Do not use the third note, as you will need it for what is to come." The Lunar's form began to twist and distort, shrinking down in to the form of a large bird. "You ask if I am trustworthy, and I give you a tool to escape my trap. Take that as you will." And with a rush of wings, the Lunar was gone.

Layoro watched the bird for as long as he could, before he eventually lost it against the blackness of the night sky. He then put the flute away in a pouch on his belt, and began to walk back to Aunt Lin's Teahouse, thinking.

While it hadn't been the Lunar's intention, Pearlescent Fang's gift put things to a new perspective for Layoro. Gone was the Oracle of Heaven, gone was the shapeshifting superpredator Anathema. In their place were two rival factions who wanted each other dead, and who both wanted his help.

The first faction had screwed him over in the past, but was trying to make nice with him by giving gifts, offering exclusive intel, and an offer to join high society for his cooperation. The second faction was

shady, emotional and unpredictable, but hadn't done him wrong and was willing to both pay him in advance and warn him of their plans against the first faction, albeit in a very roundabout way.

Both appeared to be completely genuine in their intentions.

Really, that's all this was, another job for the mercenary in him. All he needed to do was decide which job had the least risk for the best reward.

Which faction do you have a preference for?

- > The Oracle.
- > The Anathema.
- > Neither.

(This choice will not lock you in to anything just yet, but will color your future interactions with both)

Lunars

Sample Characters

SOROL SANDSWIMMER

by [Hand-of-Omega](#)

Sorol began life as every other Dune Person, growing up in underground caves, learning the legends of his people from manskin tapestries, and eager to prove himself to his close-knit community. On his 17th birthday, Sorol set out on his adult rite of passage, a quest to hunt and kill a human being, render them down and bring back their thighbone as his own personal sleeping bone, marking him as a full adult member of the tribe.

Things did not go as expected. Sorol soon found himself the hunted one, and captured by a caravan of Guild slavers. They laughed as they tied him to their wagons, and showed no mercy as the relentless sun seared his uncovered flesh. One or two days of such treatment should have been enough to finish him off, but Sorol hung on through the pain, promising himself that he would survive this. On the fifth day, as the pitiless sun sank, and the desert cooled, he lay in agony, until distracted by the capering antics of a tiny silver mouse caught in a complicated rope. Sorol spoke words of camaraderie to the rodent, praising its never-ending struggles until it finally freed itself. On a whim, he imitated its movements, suddenly finding the pain recede somewhat from his now-fluid limbs. Shrugging off the ropes, Sorol instinctively dove into the ground as though it were water, easily escaping the Guild.

Exhausted and agonized, Sorol made it back to his tribe, presenting himself to his elders. The oldest shamans were quickly called and consulted. On the one hand, he had clearly failed his quest for adulthood. On the other, he had been touched by Luna herself. But why had the Changing Lady blessed him with so...questionable a form? For the Spirit Shape Sorol had been gifted with was that of an Eight-Tailed Mole Hound, the ancient hunters of tribes of the sand!

After consulting with the spirits, the shamans gave their verdict: Sorol would have to complete his quest, but the bone of a human would no longer suffice. Instead, he would have to find the bone of a

suitably challenging target, appropriate to his new status. Bidding goodbye to his family, Sorol once again set out...

For half a year he traveled, exploring his new powers and the lands of the South. Soon, he was discovered by the Lunar elder Ka-Koshu, who identified Sorol as the reincarnation of his recently deceased companion Namiha Featherback. Ka-Koshu explained the basics of being Chosen by Luna to Sorol, put him through the Trials, fixing his Caste with Moonsilver tattooing, and bestowed upon him the deed-name of Sandswimmer. Before he sent Sorol on, he warned him that his destiny could well take him beyond the confines of his people.

Since then, Sorol Sandswimmer has ranged across the southern deserts, attacking Guild caravans, fighting desert basilisks, running with furnace rhinos, debating with Ash Devourers, and communing with the desert spirits. One incident lingers in his mind, where he drove off a pride of fae Lion-Folk. He was simply attacking the Raksha, but was unprepared for the cheers and applause from the human settlement they were attacking. Sorol has since used the many animal forms he has acquired to sneak into human camps to observe them closely.

These observations are confirming Ka-Koshu's teachings and his own hazy memories of the First Age: That humans are not so different from his people after all, and that both share a common heritage; but can his people be made to accept that? For now, he seeks a human fit to perform the Sacred Hunt upon, that he may walk among them as one of their own, an experience he hopes will determine his future course.

Sandswimmer still must become a legal adult of the tribe before they will listen to him, of course. He has heard increasing tales of humans Chosen like himself, only by the hateful sun. If he could bring one of their bones back to his people, that may be enough of an accomplishment to unify all the tribes of sand behind him...

Notes: Sorol Sandswimmer is a newly Exalted Changing Moon, with the Spirit Shape of an Eight-Tailed Mole Hound. His albinism has become his Tell, with his Mole Hound and Hound Man True Forms having stark white fur and pink eyes. He has learned Stamina charms that enable him to withstand the bright light of day without harm, but he still avoids it as he finds it uncomfortable.

He does not know that Eternal Crimson Sunset, the Solar who created his people in the First Age, has reincarnated as one of his people, a Malefactor who uses her wiles to subvert their people to the will of the Yozis. If Sorol learns this, he will stop at nothing to claim her for his sleeping bone. Unless she turns out to be his spiritual mate...

II

by [Hand-of-Omega](#)

IT no longer remembers the name it was born with, or much of anything else about its mortal life; occasional flashes of family life, villagers on fire, running through the woods, surviving on whatever it offered. There was a shining silver deer keeping it company in those days...or perhaps it was an owl...or maybe a young boy, it remembers its companion differently sometimes. She told it many things, singing words and stories which it often wishes it could remember. But it remembers the lessons well enough, how to hunt and take on the skin of crawling and flying things, so that it could crawl and fly itself.

Then, the Burning Men came. Well, some of them burned, others threw lightening and rocks. It fled again, this time into lands as fluid and changing as its own skin could be. It stayed there, perhaps too long, for soon it found itself changing without meaning to. Keeping a stable form took real effort, especially after the storms of strangeness ripped its own shadow away from it. It wept, and chased after the laughing shade, but wasn't fast enough. Shortly after, it changed so much that it couldn't even recall what it had originally looked like. And the hunger grew, and wasn't satisfied by the little animals anymore...

The Laughing Hunters came soon after. It fled again, but this time, was angry, and so hid, tracked them and took them by surprise, running them down and ripping their shimmering hearts out to feast upon. So nourishing, those hearts, even if they gave strange dreams. Soon after, another one found it, but this one was beautiful and kind, not unlike the Silver Friend it barely remembered. She sang to it, whispered and stroked it, and gave it gifts. In time, it was utterly charmed. With its permission, she reached deep into it and pulled forth its Love, which she cunningly fashioned into a shining silver necklace, that she looped around its neck. Then, she pulled forth its Restraint, and with a theatrical flourish, turned it into a voluminous cloak to wrap around its shifting body. Then she told it where it could find its shadow, back in the still, quiet places, and sent it on its way...

It now returns to the fixed lands, marveling at how much things there *don't* change, and at how much clearer its own head seems. The hunger still remains and grows greater still, but it has found the means to quell it for a time. Yes, there will be no more running now, only hunting; its own shadow and anything else that gets in its way...

Notes: It is close to full Chimera-hood, if not there already. It possesses whatever random Mutations the ST feels it needs, the Amnesia and Phobia (butterflies) Derangements, and has the access to the shifting Caste powers that all Casteless enjoy. It has had its Compassion and Temperance Virtues forged into Grace Artifacts by a Raksha Noble; the delicate-looking silver chain-collar gives her some control over it, while the cloak helps magically conceal its mutated nature until it is too late for its victims. This process seems to have cured its insanity, somewhat, making it more capable of clear and complex thought, speech and action than the average Chimera.

The Wyld sliced away its capability to cast a shadow and gave its old shadow independence and awareness; its shadows' true whereabouts and activities are up to the ST. It has a powerful Intimacy to regaining this shadow and will do much to further this. If it succeeds, then it may also regain many of its memories and even its name...

(I wrote this right after having the idea, without consulting the rules, so feel free to tell me what doesn't work, and/or how it can!)

ALIYAH the SAND WITCH

by [Hand-of-Omega](#)

Occasionally, a rare child is born into the Jackal Tribes with none of their diseases or deformities, and manages to survive to adulthood. Woe unto them, for their lot is a hard one, as they are resented for their unblemished bodies, and given most of the hardest work, and the least of what little the tribe has. Aliyah was one such child, and stoically took her burden as she was taught to. As she grew taller and more beautiful, however, she incited more jealousy, as well as resentment, and some sought to mar her blossoming beauty permanently. They secretly made offerings to the Gods of disease that they worshiped to strike her with all their ailments, that she may be even more disfigured than most, if she survived at all.

This the gods did, and as the poor girl swam in the delirium of her maladies, she beheld a silver light, sometimes a butterfly, a vulture, or a hyena, but always laughing, just out of reach. As Aliyah finally caught it, her fever broke and the diseases fled before the silver radiance bursting from her. The shaman trying to cure her and the women glorying in her death all stood amazed, and fell prostrate before this miracle...

In the time since, Aliyah has redefined her position in her tribe. She realizes that she does not yet have the wisdom to rule it, and so is content to learn from the God-Blooded shaman who does, and who has explained to her what she is. The others all give her much more respect now, and are just as fearful of her. As for those bitches who condemned her...she does nothing to them. This is not mercy. She knows that she could rend them apart or set spirits upon them to drive them to madness...and they know this, too. Instead, she simply smiles at them, and lets them wait for her eventual vengeance. After all, there is nothing they can do now, and in a way, she owes them for her new elevated status. And even if she never moves against them, they must still live out the rest of their lives being themselves, which is the worst possible revenge...

Aliyah knows that there are others out there like herself, but has not seen them. As she finishes learning all that her Shaman can teach her of thaumaturgy and the ways of the spirits, she considers leaving her nomadic group, and seeking them out. Or perhaps she should instead seek the truth of the legends of the Jackal Prophet she has always wondered about...

Notes: Aliyah is a very young Lunar, currently Casteless, and has little in the way of Backgrounds, besides Mentor, growing Influence and a few Contacts among the spirits. Her aptitude with learning Thaumaturgy and interest in Sorcery suggest she would make a good No-Moon, but other Castes can also specialize in the greater magics. Her Spirit Shape is, fittingly, that of a jackal, and her Tell is a body-wide network of white plague-scars blemishing her otherwise flawless dark skin. Her leading Virtue is Compassion, and her Virtue Flaw is the Curse of the Whipped Dog.

TYR

by [Hand-of-Omega](#)

Tyr was a native-born Haslanti, raised in Icehome, from which he joined the Fyrd, eventually graduating into the elite commando division of the Ears of the North, the Blooded Hawks. Unlike many of his ferocious compatriots, he found the time to divide his life between this duty and a well-balanced home life, marrying the love of his life and raising a family with her, stationed in one of the League's largest iceholt barges, a virtual village in a boat, parked on the far Great Ice of the frozen White Sea.

After a mission, Tyr and his comrades returned to find the iceholt mysteriously gone, with no tracks in ice or snow. A quick divining revealed that it had been swallowed by a rare bank of Wyldfog, which instantly transported it further into the North. As time was of the essence, the small band of Blooded Hawks readied themselves, and marched to the rescue of their people, armed and armored against the Wyld.

Unfortunately, they ran into something worse: the shambling dead, in the process of being taken over by a Deathknight. She slew Tyr's fellows one by one, reanimating them to join her army. Tyr fought long and hard, so much so that when he was finally overpowered by the husks of his teammates, she mockingly told him that he had earned her respect, so that she wouldn't kill him on the spot or reanimate his corpse. Instead, she had him crucified with daggers upon a boulder, and left him there, her derisive laughter faded with the howling wind, that carried the scent of his blood to any predators

in the darkening evening. And then the Hushed Ones came...

After pulling himself down off the boulder, slaughtering the Hushed Ones and treating his wounds, Tyr considered heading after the Abyssal or going home for reinforcements, but his loyalty to his family was stronger than anything else. And so he set off into the rising snowstorm northward. On the way, he fell into the snowtrap burrowed out by a Snow Lion, which instantly attacked! Its pelt helped keep Tyr warmer and dryer than he had been, just as its meat helped him keep his strength up.

But as the miles stretched on, the driving wind and snow was almost too much, and he sank to using his hands to drag himself on through the snow, never stopping, never slowing...Tyr didn't even notice when the whipping wind whisked the pelt off of him, because now he had an almost identical one of his own. He could suddenly see with the help of the silvery radiance lighting up the snow around him, snow which no longer froze and hurt his paw-like hands as he effortlessly pulled himself through the snow, driven by a primal hunger of the hunt, somehow catching the scents of his home and family, nearer than he had hoped for!

Tyr found the iceholt, his newly-sharpened senses easily putting together the tale of what had happened here; how the Fair Folk had descended upon this ripe morsel, slaying all of the capable defenders, and taking the rest to stock their frosty larders with, that they could slowly feast upon the steaming hot nightmares they would painstaking wring from hot, tortured hearts and souls. Fortunately, Tyr caught up with them before they reached their Freehold, driving off the Winter Folk and gathering the survivors for the long march home. While not all made it, his wife and children were among those who did. Tyr then presented himself to the Oligarchs, announced his new state, and declared his renewed loyalty to the Haslanti League, if they would but allow him to serve.

While they deliberated, the Grandmothers, the true power behind the Ears of the North, evaluated Tyr. Unknown even to those wise women, one of their number was Keen-Eyed Snowcat, a Lunar Exalt who monitored the League for the Twisted Stone Pack. She approached Tyr, took his measure, and swayed the others to allow him to stay, albeit as a "special asset" for exceptional missions, not unlike the League's loyal Night Caste Elias Tremalion (Tyr has not yet worked with Elias; he respects his talents and accomplishments, but doesn't think much of the man himself, so far).

Tyr is now coming to terms with the fact that, at least as far as his fellow Haslanti are concerned, he belongs more to the supernatural world than to their everyday one. Even his closest friends and family cannot hide the superstitious awe they regard him with, and the pain this causes has led him to absent himself from their company more and more. He has become a frequent visitor of the House of Nine Hearths of Emerald and Silver, visiting with the Triads of Ice, Dreams and Fate, and can even be found in Winter Fastness, the castle of Master Winter and Lady Chimney Draft, enjoying their hospitality and listening to their tales of Ages past.

Notes: Tyr is a beginning Lunar, with the Spirit Shape of a Snow Lion and the Tell of a white mane (his hair was bright red, but turned white during his Exaltation). Keen-Eyed Snowcat is hisMentor, who introduced him to the Silver Pact and their ways, oversaw his trials that fixed his Caste as a Full Moon, and continues to teach him about the politics of both the League and the Pact, as well as his own nature and duties as Chosen of Luna, and the intricacies of the northern spirit courts.

Tyr's Backing from the Haslanti League has given him the ability to requisition many supplies, weapons and resources (such as collapsible gliders, crossbows and Feathersteel weapons and armor), giving him a high Arsenal rating. Master Winter has personally created a weapon for him, a Daiklave forged from glowing blue Unmelting Ice, that Tyr has named PermaFang; in addition to having the traits of a Perfect Sword, it inflicts an external penalty of +4 to all creatures vulnerable to

cold.

Tyr is constantly seeking to sharpen his combat skills by sparring with the Gods of the Ennead, as well as with Keen-Eyed Snowcat and her occasional Lunar guests. He is rapidly mastering Lunar Hero Style and other native Combat Charms, and his Mentor may soon see to teaching him other Martial Arts. He looks forward to training with Tremalion, and testing his skills out on the Iron Wolf...

Sidereals

Sample Characters

RED, Chosen of Battles

by [Hand-of-Omega](#)

Nexus, a metropolis well-known for its many mercenary companies, has even more places to service them. One of these places is a place called "Red's". A tavern specializing in catering to soldiers, Red's has strong drink, diverting music, and a very welcoming atmosphere for those of a military bent. It's especially a great place for those who are new in town, looking for a new outfit to serve with, as the posting board is always full of offers for new commissions.

Red himself, the owner of the establishment, is almost a living stereotype of the grizzled old soldier, a retired campaigner who is heavily battle-scarred but still wearing his outdated uniform, albeit without any rank or insignia. When not serving drinks or wiping down the bar and glasses, he's telling unbelievable tall tales (some of which are nonetheless true), encouraging the raucous carousing, or simply listening to a shell-shocked soldier pouring his heart out.

What none of his clientele even suspect is that Red is a Sidereal, a Shieldbearer who once served with great distinction in the Crimson Panoply of Victory on a Convention of Demons for centuries. On one sortie, his life was saved during a demonic incursion by one of the Panoply's soldiers, a lesser Goddess of Warfare, an event that started a torrid love affair that eventually led to them being married by Red's favorite Joybringer. The two fought powerfully side-by-side and loved even more strongly, eventually having a child. Red's hopes for many more were dashed, however, when his wife was slain by an Exalted Akuma.

In his desolation, his determination to raise their baby girl, all that was left to him of his wife, kept him going. Cashing in some large favors, Red took an extended Sabbatical for her, which he is still technically on. While doing so, he opened Red's, in hopes of continuing contributing to Fate's Plan, even if it's in some much smaller way. After almost two decades there, he is surprised to find out how much he loves these people, with their dreams and their problems, as well as how much he can affect the world's events through subtly steering certain groups of heroes together or apart, or suggesting they take this road or that mission. His charms help him determine such things and he is not above deftly placing blessings and curses on those he feels deserving of them to help them to their destinies.

"Red's" is not always found in the same spot. It's owner occasionally uses Neighborhood Relocation Scheme to move it about the city districts, either for astrological purposes, to fulfill some plan of his, or just on a whim or for a change of scenery. It is most often found in the area catering to mercenaries' needs just outside of the Barracks in Cinnabar, just inside the city wall in Bastion where newcomers to Nexus can easily find it, or in the Nightside ghetto of Nighthammer, but it could really be anywhere.

The city's residents act as though it has always been where ever it is, even if they must cross the entire city to find it.

So far, the Fivescore Fellowship has been content to leave him to his own devices, which he knows will not last. Eventually, some disaster or other will require his attention, and he will have to leave all this behind. As always, his primary concern is for his daughter, Stellara, who knows nothing of her father's true nature or calling. She's a true soldiers' girl, able to hold her own in a duel, martial arts match or barroom brawl, but her blazing gaze and razor-sharp tongue are enough to keep order in Red's during those times he checks in on Yu-Shan and leaves her in charge. She has her mothers' flame-red hair, and isn't bad-looking for her 19 years, which has made Red a bit overprotective of her. Due to her father laying a Presence-in-Absence charm on her, that replaces her flirtation attempts with his intimidating presence, the poor girl has never even been kissed or asked out, let alone anything more!

Notes: Red exalted during the Contagion, and has always had more sympathies for the Independent Faction, but at this point could be swayed to either Gold or Bronze depending on events. He has mastered Violet Bier of Sorrows, The Art of Forceful Declaration and Throne Shadow styles, and had almost mastered Scarlet-Patterned Battlefield Style when his wife was killed, which has created an unfortunate association in his mind that prevents him from finishing learning it.

The persona of "Red" is a Resplendent Destiny of the Spear, and is very close to what he actually looks like. His true name and identity have been offered up to a One Direction Invocation vow to gain revenge for his wife's murder. Stellara, and a few regular customers, are both Acquaintances and Shadow Fingers of his, and bear Astrological adjustments to their Destinies.

Red has three Familiars: The oldest is a Strix, which he has evolved into a Godly Companion, and who watches out for his interests in Heaven. The next is an Omen Dog, a Spirit Shape Companion, who is largely content to nap by the fire at Red's, but who will act to defend the tavern and Stellara if circumstances call for it. The last is his War Horse, which he has yet to raise to a higher state of being, but is still a powerful animal, and useful for his Ride charms.

The Old Ball and Chain is a Starmetal Fated Weapon that Red painstakingly crafted from the star that fell when he lost his wife. He speaks to her frequently and, with the aid of Destiny Knitting Entanglement, never lets her far from his sight. He intends to reintroduce her to her killer at the earliest opportunity...

Comment by [Murcushio](#)

If I were GMing a game with Red as an NPC, I would pull an interesting swappity-do on my players by giving Red five "phantom" dots of either Connection of Backing (probably generically "Bureau of Destiny") and then "commit" those dots to him basically being a Ronin without, y'know, being a Ronin. So as far as anyone who knows what he is can tell, he's a Sidereal of no particular importance or influence.

Until and unless he goes back on the job. When those dots uncommit. And suddenly it turns out oh holy balls, the old warhorse knows everyone and everything, how the hell did he get that requisition form, oh god one of his drinking buddies is my supervisor, Maidens preserve us I think he might be in my house right now. Not because he broke in. *Because someone gave him a key.*

EAGLE-EYE SALITH, Chosen of Journeys

by [Hand-of-Omega](#)

Every child raised on Mount Metagalapa dreams of being selected to become one of the elite Hawkriders who are celebrated by their society, but few are chosen. Salith was one of those few, although her lack of discipline and eccentricities made her family and trainers despair. Sometimes she felt that the only one who truly understood her was the war hawk she grew up alongside, Steelbeak.

When she reached 17, the age of becoming an official Hawkriders, Salith's wild improvisations and difficulty keeping in formation almost led to her being drummed out of the organization, an unheard of disgrace. Since most figured it was only a matter of time before her natural curiosity and wanderlust made her take off for the Questing, she was quietly encouraged to do so immediately, in hopes that she would have matured over the customary 10 years wandering.

Sidereal exaltation can be an odd and long-lasting thing, and to this day Salith is still not sure exactly when or why it happened. One day she's seeing the sights, reveling in the sheer freedom of flight, occasionally landing to talk to various peoples in small towns, the next she's being accosted in mid-air by a couple of folks riding small clouds. After some trouble getting Steelbeak past the Celestial Lions, Salith was welcomed to Yu-Shan and began her training for the Fivescore Fellowship.

It has been a few years since then. Salith never declared for Bronze or Gold, by default remaining Independent by just focusing on doing her Vizierly duties and having fun once those are over. Her exuberant willingness to help fellow Seers of any Faction keeps her from having enemies, however.

Most of Salith's job involves monitoring aerial trade and communications, a task she is well-suited for. She is welcomed in the crystalline cities of the Cloud People floating high above the earth, and she regularly takes tea with the Council of Winds. She oversees that the development of the Haslanti air fleet is proceeding as it should, without Out-of-Fate interference, and has even visited the People of the Air in Sezakan. She dreams of visiting Vanelith, but knows that she can't do so via Steelbeak. Carrying out her duties has made her an enemy of the Deathknight, Starving Rider of the Dark Wind, and his giant bat steed, Bloodwing, as well as a Ring of winged Raksha hunters of men's dreams.

Technically, Salith is still on her Questing, and the time for that will soon be up. She knows that, by now, none of her family or friends will remember her in her former home, but she still has increasing feelings of homesickness. She has been asking her mentors if it's worth the pain to put together a Resplendent Destiny that will allow her go home again, only to interact with loved ones who won't know her. She has yet to decide what to do...

Notes:

Salith is a young Harbinger, and has focused many of her Charms in Ride and Throw. Hawkriders are trained to be proficient with javelins, and she expresses this in her favorite weapon, a Starmetal Vajra with lightning-based Evocations called Skybolt. Steelbeak has been upgraded from a Familiar to a Spirit-Shape Companion, enabling him to assume a humanoid form not unlike the hawkmen of Metagalapa; Salith fears enhancing him further, as his resultant heavenly duties would then mandate separation from him.

Salith has her eye on a Wings of the Raptor cloak owned by one of her fellow Siderals, and keeps trying to persuade him to part with it by varying means, much to the amusement of the Fellowship. She wants it, not only to experience winged flight under her own power, but also because it will allow her to study Dagger Wind style martial arts under a Dragon King sifu in his dojo atop the clouds of Yu-Shan. Her fellow Seer knows this, and keeps stringing her along mercilessly...

BARRISTER ZHENG, Chosen of Secrets

by [Hand-of-Omega](#)

Born into a wealthy Patrician family on the Blessed Isle, Zheng was educated for the Imperial Service, where he soon discovered that he had a knack for memorizing and disentangling the byzantine complexities of the Imperial Code of Law. He quickly made a reputation for himself in both the Dynastic and Common Courts, as an advocate who save seemingly last cases from the jaws of persecution, even in the notoriously corrupt and cutthroat Imperial Bureaucracy. If anything, it was all almost *too* easy for him...

Exaltation as a Dragon-Blooded would have been a boon, but as a Sidereal, it destroyed Zheng's career, as his name and accomplishments were all but forgotten. In despair, he followed his Sidereal finders to a new life in Yu-Shan...Where he discovered an even more ancient and complicated law code, maintained by immortal spirits thriving in an even more corrupt bureaucracy! Now, THIS was the challenge he'd been missing all his life!

Over the next year and a day, Zheng learned all that was required of him as a new Seer, but threw himself into studying the Laws of Heaven with a passion that was mystifying to his tutors. It all paid off when he persuaded a fellow neophyte Sidereal to allow him to represent her against trumped up charges, a routine harassment from Celestial Lions. When Zheng was done, not only did she not even have to pay the smallest fine, but she got a Salary raise, and a court-ordered public apology from the arresting Lion!

Zheng's star only rose from there. Soon, he was in demand from Viziers of all ages and factions, successfully defending them in so dramatic a fashion, that court attendance rose, while frivolous badgering of Siderals dropped. Needing new cases, he started representing spirits, preferably Elementals and disenfranchised Gods, whose Ambrosial payments nevertheless allowed him to live well above his official Salary level.

Life turned into a whirl of success-fueled hedonism, as Zheng accumulated so many favors that he was even able to exempt himself from normal duties of his rank. Instead of serving on Conventions, he attended Celestial Coke parties; instead of sorting out Loom entanglements, he had a different Goddess (or three) every night. All the while, his Elders simply shook their heads and sighed; they had seen (and done, in some cases) this story before, and they knew how it would most likely play out...

Zheng's star crashed back down to earth almost literally. Even he could not avoid a mission assigned by Oversight, and even he could not foresee that it would go so horribly wrong. He survived, barely, and although the healers of heaven were able to put the young Oracle's body back together flawlessly, the scars inside linger. He was thrown face-to-face with the fact that his fast-talk and skill at working the system seemed powerless against the sheer, naked brutality of life in Creation, an almost feral existence that mortals must deal with everyday...

Zheng's Celestial Manse grows dark and quiet as he kicked all out the revelers and hanger-ons, and takes some time out to recuperate and figure out his next move. IS there some way to apply his social maneuverings to advocate for the people of Creation, to better their lives (and his own, of course)? Hmmm...

Notes:

Barrister Zheng is a Social-focused character, who has placed most of his development in Mental and Social Attributes, and in the Bureaucracy, Lore, Performance and Socialize Abilities, with Specialties in Realm and Celestial Law. He has the Signature Style Merit, which aids his dramatic courtroom Stunts (stirring rhetoric, surprise witnesses, etc). He has plenty of Connections, Spies, Reputation and Followers, although few actual Allies, and many, many Favors.

Zheng's Artifacts are ones suited to his work, such as an Audient Brush and an Authoritative Stamp. Outside of an exquisitely tailored set of Silken Robes, he is woefully unprepared for combat. A situation he is now pondering how to rectify...

LO CHEN, Chosen of Serenity

by [Hand-of-Omega](#)

"Uncle" Lo Chen was an up and coming functionary in an underworld syndicate when he exalted just before the Contagion. On being whisked away to Heaven, he quickly realized that the same methods of how to gain power and keep it applied to the Gods there; only the goods and services were different, and being a Vizier gave him prime access to those.

The Contagion was a godsend to Uncle's business, as it resulted in tons of newly destitute deities now in need of his discreet aid. Lo Chen still makes sure to publicly attend all the duties expected of a Seer, including Convention work, but it all takes a backseat to his true, lucrative, passion: Expanding his influence throughout the underworld of heaven itself.

Of course, Uncle was not the first Sidereal to have these goals and methods, nor the last, but he has proven to be the most successful, buying out or eliminating his older rivals, while incorporating the younger ones into his organization. Privately, he denounces both Gold and Bronze Factions as idealistic fools, and he only has slightly more respect for the pragmatic Independents. However, Lo Chen happily accepts interviews from all Seers, most of whom hear whispered rumors of his influence and come to him for help in personal matters, which he is glad to provide for favors to be named later, if ever.

Gods also come to Uncle for help, whether for aid in swaying the bureaucracy of Yu-Shan or for Astrological Blessings and Curses, which he sells at a premium (his influence is also good for assuring another Sidereal's Astrological petition quickly gets the many co-signatures it needs). Uncle lives well above his actual Salary grade, in the best manses that the Celestial City has to offer. However, he headquarters his business in the Empty Quarters and Secret City of Yu-Shan, where his Sidereal and godly lieutenants sell prayers, mortal slaves, even new domains for desperate gods to represent.

Shining Barrator utterly despises Uncle, and lists taking him and his organization down as one of his top missions in life...but even if he were to succeed, it would be unlikely if the Elemental Dragon judge at his trial would do more than give him a slap on the wrist, maybe a century in the more pleasant side of the Archipelago of the Exiles, nowhere near the Gaol of Roaring Thunder, which the Implacable One thinks Uncle richly deserves.

Notes: Lo Chen is near the upper limits of Sidereal power, incorporating almost an eon of experience. Much of this is in his Mental and Social traits and charms (esp Larceny, Stealth, Occult, Dodge, Performance, and Socialize), or in his extensive Backgrounds. Although his lackluster work record has only given him Backing 2, he has an effective Salary of 5 (although he is careful not to show this off too much); much of this wealth is scattered in safe houses, as per the 5 pt Cache merit. His many

Connections have earned him many Favors of varying levels, although this has earned him the Dark Secret (his criminal organization) and Enemy (Shining Barrator) flaws.

Uncle has the maximum number of Familiars available to him, all of which he has advanced to Godly Companions. Most are well-placed in various positions where they can watch out for his interests, the sole exception being Purring Ember, a pampered hearth-cat who sits on his lap most of the time, when she isn't in the form of a dazzlingly-beautiful cat-woman who is also Uncle's best thief. One of his most important Allies is The Red Right, a Bloody Hand of exceptional power and cruelty who serves as his chief leg-breaker and enforcer.

Uncle is always impeccably dressed, thanks to his Infinite Resplendence Amulet (5 dot, Starmetal and Moonsilver version), whose larger-on-the-inside pockets hold his many Artifacts. Most of these are formed from spirits he used Terminal Sanction on, as a lesson to others, so they have a limited time he can use them; but there are always more examples to be made. His current favorite Artifacts are a pair of Heaven Thunder Leaves, and he is quite skilled at dancing with them to attract spirits. Of the many hearthstones he has use of, Uncle considers the most valuable one of his least-used ones: a five-dot Home's Hearth stone, for quick escapes.

Lo Chen is a true master of Throne Shadow Style, and has innovated many custom charms and combos that he has never taught to anyone else; he counts his top lieutenants as his Shadow-Fingers. He has fully mastered White Veil Style, which he began learning when he belonged to that most secret of societies as a mortal. He now complements this style with the mysteries of the Black Claw. Chen has yet to learn any of the secret arts of his kind, largely due to lack of time and interest; he sometimes ponders what original style he could create. Master's Hand Envisioned Anew allows him to use war fans/fate rings as Form Weapons with all of his martial arts charms.

An accomplished Celestial sorcerer, Lo Chen makes good use of such spells as Corrupted Words, Private Plaza of Downcast Eyes, Faithful Ally, Shadow Theft, and Ivory Orchid Pavillion. He is also a past master of Astrology, and has Resplendent Destinies in The Peacock, The Pillar, The Banner, The Mask, The Sorcerer, and the Haywain as well as access to all their Resplendencies. He and his compatriots enjoy many astrological enhancements in their endeavors, both from himself and from other Viziers beholden to him.

HEL, Chosen of Endings

by [Hand-of-Omega](#)

The North, while having one of the smallest populations in Creation, holds a disproportionate amount of human misery and suffering, from attacks from the walking dead and barbarians, to being preyed upon by mutated monsters and the Winter Folk, as well as the fallen standard of general lifestyle quality in the Second Age. Into this harsh world was born Hel, a young girl who quickly showed a talent for a soothing manner and a healing touch that qualified her for apprenticeship in the famous Hospital of Fella.

Her Exaltation came in the form of a group of traders who were set upon by the hungry dead; the survivors were brought to the nearby hospital, where she helped tend to them. Suddenly, Hel realized that she could tell which of the injured would live and which would die, and who was the most efficient use of her time and attention. Despite this, she chose to defy Destiny to save a life she could tell was doomed...and succeeded. Shortly afterwards, the Seers of Heaven came for her.

When undergoing the traditional minor hazing of being shown the Loom of Fate for the first time, the vision of Hel's future self did more than wave at her from across the chamber, as often happens. Instead, she came over to her younger self, and whispered something to her. This is unprecedented, and the Chosen of Secrets would give much to know what was said, which Hel has never revealed. Nara-O, who may know, has respected her privacy and blocked any efforts by curious Oracles to look it up...

While excelling at her studies, Hel was shocked at the prosperity of Yu-Shan and how quickly most of her Fellowship left Creation behind for its comforts. While understandable, she felt that the Chosen owed direct action to alleviating suffering in Creation, especially since there was an entire Division whose concern was meant to be the health and happiness of humanity, and set about a campaign to reform the Bureaucracy and End its indolence. Unfortunately, as she was so young, help and influence were in short supply for the crusading firebrand. She was largely a lone voice for over a hundred years until the Solars returned...

Hel has thrown her lot in with the Gold Faction with great enthusiasm. When not attending to her duties for the Division of Endings and the Convention on Healthcare, she donates her time and efforts to spreading her knowledge to those Solars who are willing to learn and caring for the Cultists who are injured in their service. And destroying zombies; there's ALWAYS time for that.

Notes:

Hel is still a fairly young Reckoner, but, disgusted by heaven and its denizens, has spent much of her time learning and growing in Creation. She still considers Fella Hospital her true home, and its surgeon-director, Jerva, the immortal God-Blooded daughter of the Northern God of Healing, her Mentor (Jerva is powerful enough to see through her students' Arcane Fate). Jerva knows what she is, as Hel returned to finish out her residency after her initial Vizier training. As a graduation present, Jerva gifted Hel with one of Fellas' true treasures, a Resplendent Satchel of Healing.

Hel bears the glowing Essence tattoo of a Fellan physician, and wears a violet, silken-armor version of their distinctive uniform; she is rarely seen without her breathing mask, which aids in Resistance rolls against disease. Her surgical gloves are actually Gloves of Martial Readiness, and she carries a number of Starmetal Needles, which she has Specialties for using as both Thrown and Melee weapons. Hel's Needles can block Essence flows, inducing paralysis in living beings, and can also block Necromantic animating energies, making them useful against the undead. They are also useful for introducing a wide range of drugs and medicines into the systems of resisting patients (like all Fellan doctors, Hel is an expert thaumaturgist, and always has a number of alchemically brewed potions and pills on hand).

Learning Violet Bier of Sorrows Style was mandated for Hel by her trainers; she is not fond of violence, but doesn't mind unleashing it against the hungry dead, esp supplemented with her Medicinal charms. Her preferred fighting art, however, is the Compassion-based Art of Victorious Concession, which she learned from a like-minded Lesser Elemental Dragon of Wood whose life she saved. Hel has been refining her Essence in order to learn Citrine Poxes of Contagion, but has yet to find the time and a good Sifu to instruct her in its mysteries.

One of Hel's Allies is the Zenith Glimmering Horizon, the chief physician of the Cult of the Illuminated. Glimmering has learned much of healing and defense from Hel, and the two are fast friends, often travelling the Scavenger Lands in each others' company on Cult business. The two can often be found in Hel's Fellan-sponsored clinic, Blissful Waters, a hotsprings resort renown for its curative waters (Wood Manse, with the Life-Sustaining power); Hel has given Glimmering Horizon its Hearthstone, a Stone of Healer's Flower. A Sobeksis called Bhangi runs and defends the place when

they are gone; an Ice and Fire Binding to protect the patrons of the hospice keeps the water elemental's more unsavory nature at bay, so far. Hel also currently enjoys the effects of an Earth and Sky Bargain with a dying Serpent-and-Egg elemental, which is still recuperating inside of her.

Hel often walks the world wearing Resplendent Destinies from The Crow, The Rising Smoke and The Sword, and many of her patients bear Blessings that aid in their recovery. She wears her shiny black hair in a long ponytail, which many of her fellows believe is out of vanity; few know that it is almost the length it was well she saw her future-self...

Martial Arts

In Exalted 3rd edition

Black Claw

Found in: Core book

Crane

Found in: Core book

[Fight Like an Animal-crane](#) Video; 13:05

Dreaming Pearl Courtesan

Found in: Core book

Ebon Shadow

Found in: Core book

Righteous Devil

Found in: Core book

Silver-Voiced Nightingale

Found in: Core book

Single Point Shining in the Void

Found in: Core book

Snake

Found in: Core book

[Fight Like an Animal-snake](#) Video; 5:54

Steel Devil

Found in: Core book

Tiger

Found in: Core book

[Fight.Science Fight Like an Animal Tiger Style Kung Fu](#) Video; 9:26

White Reaper

Found in: Core book

Not in Exalted 3rd edition (yet)

Heavens Latter

Praying Mantis

[Fight Like an Animal-praying mantis](#) Video; 7:12

Modern

Exalted modern stuff. I (truemonk) is not so much into it, so unless someone else takes it up it will not be so developed.

Sample Characters

JAHN SUNSTRIDER, the Spacefaring-Adventurer

by [Hand-of-Omega](#)

Jahn Krem had fought, killed, and bled for His Divine Lunar Presence's Thousandth Dynasty, and the people of the Central Empire, but in the end, all his conscience had earned him was a dishonorable discharge for refusing to carry out his orders during a routine "pacification" action. Disgusted with the Imperial legions, the ex-soldier defected to the Frontier, where he could at least live on his own terms.

Since soldiering was all he knew and was good at, he made a living at it, aside from that short stint as a Sky-Taxi pilot. There was no shortage for hired guns, and he had a good enough reputation that high-placed organizations started asking for him by name. One such was an exploratory mission, that had obtained supposed maps and codes to Rael, the legendary lost planet of the Solars, at exorbitant price, and needed equally high-priced bodyguards. Despite misgivings, Jahn signed on...

The mission went well, at first: The system was found, and the defensive perimeters let them in. Once they landed, however, it all went very bad. No code could save them from the engineered creatures, mechanicals and behemoths that had all been programmed to slay any non-Solar outsider, and Jahn could barely save himself, let alone those who had accompanied him. He was the last survivor, forced to watch helplessly as they all died, and set himself to go down fighting...when a golden miracle descended from the sky.

The legends were true; at least one ancient Solar still lived here, and it was the famous Contentious Sword, no less! He had been watching, but had only been moved to act by Jahn's willingness to die fighting. Taking Jahn under his protection, he treated him as a lowly servant at first, but warmed up to him over the weeks and months, finally regaling the mercenary with long-unheard tales of the ancient days of the galaxy. Eventually, he started sparring with him, quickly training Jahn in the forms of superior swordplay long since forgotten.

It was when he made Jahn demonstrate his mastery of the final striking technique of this style that the point of all this became plain. Contentious Sword dropped all his defenses, allowing Jahn to strike home deeply, and fatally. As he died, he passed his Exaltation to the stricken soldier, along with instructions as to what to do next, chief among them, not to waste his life and power as he had done.

Jahn first proved his mettle by interring his masters' body in the golden tomb complex that he had long ago prepared for himself, which was a dangerous task in itself. Once past all the traps, a holo gave him two rewards. The first was a treasure of a lost age, which even Contentious Sword barely understood and none today could replicate: An Orichalcum Beamklave, one of the few to ever exist.

The other waited hidden in an underground hanger: An Orichalcum Artifact starship, the *Invincible Sword Princess*, as sleek and beautiful as she was fast and deadly, and co-piloted by a spirit-program of the same name. Activating her eager engines and Anima Circuits, Jahn finally bade farewell to the only world he'd felt at home at, and ventured out into the canals between the stars to make a new name for himself...which would come to be "Sunstrider".

Notes: Jahn Sunstrider is a young Dawn-Caste Solar, who specializes in Melee, Firearms, and Pilot. He always carries his trusty old Starcaster as his primary weapon, but has several others to fall back on. Perhaps his most dangerous weapon is his Beamklave, which he has the Favored Weapon Merit for. As he learns to apply his Essence to the sword techniques he learned on Rael, he has been teaching himself the Charms for Single Point Shining Into The Void Style Martial Arts, of which he has learned up to the Form Charm.

Invincible Sword Princess is a unique starship about the size of a space yacht, able to carry a crew of about 5-10, at most. Her Heavenly Guardian Defense shields make her tougher than her delicate build would suggest, and few ships are faster and more maneuverable in direct combat. ISP herself often speaks as a disembodied voice, but can manifest as an image, either on the view screen or as a small figure on the controls. She recognizes Jahn as her master and will only take his orders, although she sometimes refers to him by her former masters' name by "mistake", when she's peeved at him.

As one of the first Solars in action in recent years, Jahn's more flamboyant activities have attracted the attention of various powers, seen and unseen, in the galaxy, many of which have begun to seek him out. Perhaps the most interested of these is the Seven-Devil-Killer, one of His Divine Lunar Presence's top assassins...and the bearer of the Moonsilver sibling to his Beamklave.