

1 - The Mission and the Message

“Why should I work alongside damned terrorists?” A comparably edged elf articulated this cutting tone. Everything about Lyn was sharp, from his pointed ears protruding through short black hair to his unnaturally spearlike fingers to the shapely jawline that accentuated the pristine crease of his collar. “And two of them at that,” he continued. “Second Hells. We should know that intel from the beginning. Not after we’ve dragged ourselves out here.”

Lyn’s military uniform snapped to attention with the extension of his accusatory arm, pulling away the meticulously tucked undershirt. An ‘ER’ insignia was carefully embroidered into the right sleeve and twinkled with red gemstones. The jewels reflected the patchwork lighting rigged to the canopy above, fighting to glisten through the rust-colored soot that perforated the stagnant air in the tent.

Sweat accumulated on the dwarven general's indifferent face. He was deep into his first flask of foul liquid. The offhanded grumbles and grunts he managed to get out did no favors for the tension. But what was the point of explaining? Half of the crew wasn't there. The last thing on his mind was repeating himself. He brandished a stained, sand-colored military outfit with crescent moons stitched into it on either shoulder. Several significant metals dangled on his chestpiece. Their details and meaning faded. The only one that made sense to clean was his name badge reading Kastor.

A black oak platform raised him and his podium off the dirt. Behind the stage was a holo-projector screen. Tomorrow's date and Code Name: Diver was written at the top in bold text. Underneath was an array of the headshots and names of all the chosen recruits sorted into buckets based on their affiliation. Each container was color-coded and marked as Erland, Sorton, or Neutral Block. A natural categorization that should be no cause for alarm. And that was true for the rotund soldier who sat in the center of the room. Not so for his infuriated elven companion.

“Had your fill, Lyn, sir?” Monj pulled his comrade down by the shoulder. Large, leathery hands firmly wrapped around the joint completely.

"Working with Sortons," said Lyn. He set his uniform back in place. "Second Hells."

"Sure there's a good reason," said Monj.

"There's never a good reason if it's them."

"I guess."

Monj wore a poor replica of Lyn's red uniform. Worn loose and poorly buttoned to accommodate his stocky frame. His thick legs resembled logs more than any body part. It was an affinity replicated by his arms, chest, neck, and bald head. The semblance was made stronger by the numerous scars that decorated his physique like tree bark.

A rapid succession of eleven chirping beeps penetrated the awkward air. It came from the digital clock hung neglected on a spare rope in the back of the tent, sounding over the berating tapestry begging for their attention with a whipping flap. It was now eleven o'clock on the fourth day of the week. The morning came and went. The remaining cast was officially late.

Kastor grunted. There was no time for this. No time at all. They had to set out by tomorrow and not a day later. Did The Three not account for this?

Monj shrugged his massive shoulders. "Though, boss. Lyn's got a point," he said, returning his stout frame to the undersized seat. The stool creaked under the weight. "Normal Neutral Block ops, we got an idea. Or we got a bunch of documents during the trip. To fill us in."

"A briefing," said Lyn, enunciating rigidly.

"Right. A briefing. Saying it's with Sorton."

"With the enemy," corrected Lyn.

Kastor gave his neck a crack before leaning into the podium. "I'm afraid ain't none of us here got any control over that," said Kastor. "Wait a bit. I'm fixing to fill y'all in. I can tell you that the rest of them ain't from any military. That calm you down?"

"Explains their tardiness," scoffed Lyn. "What a foul lot. Leave it to Sorton to pluck cannon fodder from the streets."

"It's concerning, boss," said Monj.

"I didn't come here to hurry up and wait," said Lyn.

"They ain't from no street," said Kastor.

"Political puppets then," said Lyn, drumming the desk with his fingers. "Rich folk. Parlement type. That's *just* what we need. A bunch of paper fitters too scared to even show up."

Lyn glared down at the pair of lower-ranked guardsmen still propped up near the door. It was more akin to a large gash in the tarp rather than a proper entranceway. Their amused chuckling didn't go unnoticed. With a dash, they patted themselves down and hurried outside to return to their post beyond the frayed opening.

Much to Lyn's disappointment, he didn't have time to mumble an offhand obscenity before someone stumbled through the tattered tent opening. It was no soldier or aristocrat. But a hunched elder. Sundried tattoos stained his scalp, neck, and forearms. He dressed in a patternless, light-brown robe. An unflattering garb. Though upon a sash was pinned an iron broach, dimpled from countless hits from the smithing hammer and shaped into a crescent moon. The symbol of Neutral Block.

Monj's eyes lit up. A reaction reciprocated by their newest arrival. "By the Bloody Ends," said Monj. "Orden. It really *is* you!" He hoisted his sturdy frame and shuffled towards the entrance, belly smothered by the tight rows of tables that lined the room.

"It truly has been a long time," said Orden, arms uncomfortably pinned to his sides. "A very long time indeed."

"It has!" exclaimed Monj. He reached out as if to shake hands. But at the moment of contact, Monj pulled away before wrapping his massive arm around them. Before he knew it, Orden dangled several feet off the ground.

"I do not. Miss. This." Orden's words strained under the tension, begging silently that his ribs remain intact as he swung.

Gently, Monj sat Orden down and gutted out a hardy laugh. "Thought that was you up there. Like the new look, boss. Jan make you shave it?" Monj gestured towards Orden's bald head.

"Well, there has been a lot that has changed since your last visit." Orden peeked around Monj and scrutinized his headshot. It was taken at least ten years prior, by his best guess. He used to hang on to what little hair he had left. "But--"

"Sit next to us!" Monj pointed over toward Lyn, planted in his seat. "We're sitting over there. Got a lot to catch up on."

"Indeed, there is. However, perhaps there will be a more appropriate time. I think this may not be the most opportune moment for recollection." Tired eyes looked upon the general's disgruntled face. Orden dusted himself off and flattened out the fresh wrinkles. Looking more presentable was out of the picture at this point. "But yes, I suppose I shall join the both of you."

Orden gave Kastor a low bow. It was the very least he could do. To his relief, it was responded to in kind by the general. Orden shuffled alongside Monj to the center of the room. An abrupt chill ran up his arm. He rubbed away at the goosebumps as he pulled the chair out. An odd sensation of an intricate examination from a source unknown. Though a passing feeling.

Lyn's spiked fingers clawed at the table. "An acquaintance?" he quickly asked.

Monj didn't have the time to get comfortable. Not that the restrictive seats gave him a chance. "We go way back," he said, still stirring into his chair. "From my first assignments. Those escorts to the Education Districts. Remember then? Back when that was *all* I did?"

"Yes, I do recall," said Lyn. "You always had some story each time you returned to the capital. However, your friend here must have been skimmed over."

"I would have brought Orden up."

"Is that so?" Lyn leaned forward, trying to get an angle around Monj. He examined Orden with a blank expression. "Name's Lyn. Pleasure."

"The pleasure is all mine, Lyn. That I can assure y--"

"I do remember it now." Lyn leaned back into his chair. "*That* professor. I'm surprised you lasted as long as you did."

"Wasn't dangerous stuff," said Monj. "Pretty ordinary really. Most of the time time with Ord--"

"I mean of boredom. I should have been able to get you assigned to something less insulting. Though, I guess it did get you involved with the Strike Branch." Lyn rolled his thumb around his chin. "And those connections will prove to be useful."

"Wasn't boring at the time," corrected Monj. "Like I was saying, Orden is the Keeper over in the Grand Library. Is that right?"

"N-no." stammered Orden. He tightened out the wrinkles in his robe. "Not anymore, I am afraid."

"*Was* the Keeper then. Anyway, they had a sort of..." Monj's large mitts circled each other as if trying to shovel the right word into his mouth. "Conference," he finally settled on, "area built next door. That's where we took our clients. He and the other professors offered their homes to the squad. We avoided the streets." Monj eked a nervous puff.

"As they should have," said Lyn. "The privilege to house our brave soldiers should be part of the deal."

"Maybe. But *I* was lucky enough to stay with him." Monj padded Orden's back, getting a soft chuckle out of him. "Was two... or was it three? Yeah, three years

straight. Back and forth between the Capital and his house. Haven't seen him since I got reassigned."

"Stop making your promotion sound like misfortune," said Lyn.

"Don't mean it like that." Monj turned towards Orden, head down and hands pressing against his lap. "Sorry for not visiting, boss. Jan must be furious."

"It is quite alright," said Orden. "Vacation is a long-lost liberty for you, I am sure. I am awestruck that you can even recollect my name or recognize an old picture. It is a blessing. And quite telling of your character. Something I am glad to see has remained."

"I'll make it up to you," said Monj.

"I am hardly one to refuse company. Especially one of such high quality."

Lyn let out a deep sigh before pulling himself away to stand. Scooting around the table, he slid to the other side and faced Orden. Long, slender digits extended like prodding blades. "It's relieving to know that there is one decent person in Neutral Block."

Delicately, Orden uncurled his hand and complied. "There are many more reasonable people in these lands than you may assume," he said, returning his arm in the same measured fashion. "Alas, it is challenging to know of such things without the attempt to see for oneself."

Lyn's lips coiled. "Well, this damned mission has left quite the first impression already. And by the sounds of it, may continue to impress."

The clock chirped a single beep, fifteen minutes past eleven. Kastor's incipient boot-tapping accelerated to a near frantic pace. He rummaged through the back compartment of the podium, letting out an audible click of his tongue after an apparent failure. Everyone's focus lasered in on the final two profiles still unaccounted for.

"Looking like a few others are a wee bit tardy," said Kastor, clapping his hands together. A puff of dust escaped his unwashed palms. "But Second Hells, we'll bother to debrief them later. For now, let's get to it."

Everyone in the room gave a silent nod. Well, Lyn didn't. Kastor chose to ignore that. He clicked a small controller implanted in his left forearm prosthetic. The digital display behind him expanded and pushed the projection into the room. It enveloped the entire tent in a sparkling glow of twinkling colors. Each of their headshots and names appeared above their heads. Monj attempted to swat away at it, but dots of lights passed through his hand like a phantom.

"Gentlemen, we are at the start of a large-scale effort between the three major kingdoms. For this mission, you will *not* act on your interests. You do *not* represent

whatever family y'all come from. And you do *not* fly the flag of the country you love so much. No, y'all fighting for The Three and their orders. They're optimistic about what success could mean for the whole damn continent."

This time, Kastor didn't wait for a response.

"Now, y'all may be familiar with some of y'all here." Kastor glanced towards the center of the room where Lyn, Monj, and Orden sat. "And others not so much. Y'all going to have plenty of time to get your pleasantries. But let's get this out of the way, this is the first cooperative mission in a damn long time. You ain't gotta go on, on all the blood you and your father and father's father spilled to save your damn whatever the Second Hells they fought for. Hear enough of that already. But what's most important is that y'all get mighty familiar with Orden. He will be acting leader of this op. If it comes from him, it's like it's coming from The Three. This *ain't* negotiable."

"What," said Lyn. He logged his fingers to the table. "There is no reason to waste talent and time. Take orders from a newt." The thought made him laugh.

"A challenge to this is a challenge to The Three," said Kastor. "This mission is in Neutral Block territory and using equipment and supplies that *our* militia has provided. I'm sure Orden is a capable liaison in return for the generosity."

Lyn's fists tightened more and more on each utterance, carving a healthy mark into the table. He drew back, but a warm touch on his arm distracted him. It was Monj, shaking his head. Lyn's grip loosened.

"If it is what The Three have decided," said Lyn finally.

"I too have faith in them," said Orden. "For we must."

"They must have forgotten."

"I have not forgotten."

Lyn gave the professor a thin glare. "No, I think you have. Sortons are heartless murderers. They will not stop--"

A figure stumbled through the tent opening, scattering the few particles that stagnated on the tent lining. Hands grasped at damaged knees as he heaved in the filthy air. The two guards poked their heads inside, curious about who they failed to stop tumbling through the canvas. Looking at the projector, one would see that this man was Doctor Issac from Sorton.

Issac was a younger-looking man with scraggly blond hair and a short and skinny demeanor, with no help from the bowing of his sizable satchel imposed upon him. Olive-colored clothes were smudged in dried mud, making it appear he wore a swatch of broken earth rather than any sort of cloth. His boots left a muddled imprint in the dirt as the clay finally loosened its grip.

Issac puffed out his words between strained breaths. "Excuse. Me. I. Got. Distracted."

"That's understandable, Dr. Issac," said Kastor, not attentive to Lyn's muttered slurs. "A man of your high recommendation must have got... overwhelmed?" Kastor was surprised he was even giving this odd doctor an excuse. "By the new surroundings?"

"Yes," said Issac, scrambling to his feet. "Yes, it was. Something like that. Yes. A bit dark in here, don't you feel?"

"We just started the debrief. You go on and get a chair. We're behind schedule, so we'll catch you up afterward. Though it's looking like you know that."

"Yes, of course. I'm so sorry about that."

Issac took his seat, choosing the one closest to the door. Clumps of gravel tumbled as he brushed off the last remnant of debris clinging to his jacket. And with a thud, he set down his oversized backpack, jettisoning rolled-up parchment, maps, and odd tools.

"It appears I forgot to buckle the top tight enough. My mistake." Issac fumbled down and wrangled what he could in two handfuls. Shoving them back into his bag proved to be a dauntless task. Half-finished, he returned to his chair with an awkward grin.

"At least someone from Sorton made it." Kastor's eyes lingered on Issac. He couldn't remember the last time he ran into such a dunce. Educated folk sure were an odd bunch. "I know y'all got plenty of questions over the mission. But before we get ahead of ourselves, let me tell you again now that Doctor Issac is here. The Three decided personally on each of y'all for a reason. A good reason, I hope. All clear?"

"As a muddy crystal," joked Issac.

There were no real questions.

Kastor didn't bother deciphering such a weird response. He fiddled with the interface in his prosthetic. The floating lights around the room shifted to a map of Neutral Block. It enveloped the entire scene in a sandy brown hue. It zoomed to a fifty-mile radius of their location. Markings and informational flags appeared over this landscape of lights.

"For a good while now," started Kastor, "pits have been discovered all around the area, ranging in about two to three meters in diameter."

"A pest problem?" asked Monj.

"They wouldn't order us down here for that," said Lyn.

"I enjoyed the joke," said Orden.

"Thank you," said Monj.

Kastor gave a wide unamused smile. "No. Unless they burrowing to a depth that we ain't reaching."

"Wait, what do you mean?" spouted Issac. "Are you saying it could just be a creature of some kind? Some ancient colony?"

"What I mean is that we don't have a clue on what's the cause. Even though it's been... what must be twenty-two years since the first one of them cropped up."

Lyn leaned closer to Monj. "Sorton propaganda to hide experimental weapons in Neutral soil. There was a recent report on this."

"What's stopped us chucking down a signal probe?" asked Monj.

"Well, it's looking like there's some sort of interference being emitted from the bottom. Round seventy-five to one hundred meters down the signal gets lost. That or corrupted. Any more HiFi than a damn hammer breaks. So we've had to rely on personnel. And that ain't been great."

"All HiFi?" asked Lyn quickly.

"Not all of it. Anything directly connected to bio is alright." Kastor held up his left arm and flexed the mechanical digits. "Like this would get down there just fine."

"It must be a counter signal," said Lyn. "If it's selective. Sounds like there's someone wary of your investigation."

"A possibility."

"The interference is at a substantial depth," said Orden. "Have we been able to scan the rock structures immediately above that threshold? Anything abnormal in the consistency or material or appearance?"

"Negative, bio-scans show some chunks of clay and limestone. There's some other miscellaneous bits but ain't nothing out of the ordinary."

"Someone else got down there first," said Lyn.

"The Three would know about that," said Monj.

Issac rubbed the back of his neck. "A bit of a perilous thing, no?"

"Shame it didn't collect anything," said Orden. "Monj, remember that one time--"

"Who'd you send down?" asked a voice from the back of the tent.

The chattering stopped as everyone turned to face the mysterious question.

"Quill," said Kastor. "Didn't notice you come in. My mistake. Nice to meet you." It wasn't nice to meet him. How long was this one back there? Why were they silent until now? And did he even care? Everyone was finally here after all.

"Who's this bastard?" asked Lyn.

"The other Sorton," said Monj.

This new arrival sported a black windbreaker, which he promptly removed and placed on the table. Being seven feet put him a head taller than about everyone but a full-blooded orc, even while sitting. Quill wore an ordinary, mono-colored shirt. Deep violet. It paired well with his dark-shaded pants, boots, and buzzed hair. The nocturnal colors contrasted against two golden globes that he called eyes. A feature so acute, that it almost distracted from his expansive frame. Almost.

Lyn eyed him down as he went. "You mentioned personnel," continued Quill. "Plenty of scouts could fit into an opening of that size. And looks like you have sent a few down there." He pointed to three indiscriminate locations around the topography. It took some squinting, even from up close, but each one had a data point in common: desertion. "But even then we still came up empty?"

"Second Hells," said Lyn, turning back to the projection.

"Correct," said Kastor slowly. "Though we've had more than a handful of failed goes at it." With another quick toggle, the map zoomed in once more. After calibrating, the black circular markers appeared four times the initial scale. A laser pointer shot from his wrist, and he circled it around the points of interest. "This view is within a five-mile radius of our location." Nine of the markers updated and changed their color to a stark red. A bright 'X' appeared above them to match. "The ones in red indicate the ones we tried to explore. And as you can guess, red don't mean nothing good. Each one a complete failure."

Kastor enhanced once more to a singular spot. The info flag above it now shot towards the front of the tent and splayed across the wall from end to end. The details did no favors in increasing morale. "Initially, there was no fear of sending them down with a HiFi automated climbing unit. One malfunction later, we had learned that lesson. The rest we did the old-fashioned way. Rope, some spikes, and a belay. We recruited the best we could from Neutral Block. All of them pulled back up before reaching the bottom. Got spooked or something. No one could give a straight answer. But they all said something was compelling their body to turn around."

"Self-preservation," thought Issac.

"Our hypothesis," said Kastor with long pauses between syllables. "At least the last one the research team told us about, is that there is some warm gust of air coming out from the bottom of the caverns. Couldn't tell you the exact science around it. I'd let Dr. Issac or Orden explain it. But on two occasions, we believe we got someone down to the bottom."

"Never heard of hot air cutting the ground," said Monj.

"The great hills and valleys and mountains were carved in the very same way," said Orden. "Even here in the arid climate, there is so much history to be observed. If one dares to look for it. I am sure the good Doctor Issac would--"

"Water," said Lyn.

"What?"

"That's water, not air," repeated Lyn. "Water carved the valleys."

"Air is in many ways like water."

"Some Neutral nonsense you newts say?"

"No, I do not suppose it is."

"I don't know," said Monj, scratching away at his chest. "Did sound poetic."

"You don't know a thing about poetry," said Lyn. "A philosopher in charge of soldiers. Going to cut down an enemy with clever limericks?"

"Could you define believe?" asked Issac, trying his best to project over the rabble behind him. "Don't we trust the first-hand accounts of those two we sent down?"

"We ain't got nothing to trust," said Kastor. "We didn't hear back from them."

"Did they find anything else down there?" asked Orden. "No samples from the floor or the walls down at the bottom?"

Again, Lyn leaned in closer to Monj. "This guy has an obsession with the ground or what."

"No. Orden's a big history guy. Told me a bunch of stories. I can't remember them though. Weren't the easiest to follow."

"I can believe that."

"No, nothing," said Kastor. He massaged his temples to no avail.

"Wait, they didn't return?" realized Issac.

"They were captured," said Lyn.

"Report said 'deserted' though," said Monj.

"If what's written is a fact," said Lyn.

"Shamefully, it is," said Kastor, reaching for and pulling out a packet of tobacco and pipe. The box was as beaten down as the dwarf. He lodged the pipe in his mouth and apathetically stuffed the end. A swift flick of his metallic fingers lit the packing.

"Even now we ain't got a clue," continued the general. "Waited for ages for them to return. Never came. Couldn't read nothing once the slack gave" He blew out a wobbly smoke ring. "By the time we pulled the line, the only thing left was their harness clipped to the rope. They removed it. The first time it happened, we didn't know what to think. Figured the worst. But the second time--"

"By force," said Lyn. "I knew there were some down there already."

"No signs of struggle. The equipment was in good condition. No blood stains. No markings. Nothing. They were supposed to never remove them. No matter what."

"I wonder what would compel them to remain down there," said Orden. "Most intriguing indeed."

Issac ran his fingers through matted hair. "I'm starting to get a bad feeling about this."

"Whatever they found must be better than what is up here," said Orden, trying to get the attention of Issac. Little did he know, that was an impossible endeavor. "So if anything it must be something truly marvelous. A real sight to behold, no doubt!"

"Or they were tricked," said Lyn, scraping circles into the table.

"Yes, all of that is possible," said Kastor. "Which is what makes this mission so important. Instead of one personnel, we are sending all five of y'all down all at once."

Monj thudded the sides of his belly. "We going in a three-meter hole? I know I can't fit."

"There ain't no need," said Kastor. He plugged away on the terminal mounted in the arm. Immediately, the room shifted. Blasting the zoom out and in again on another location. This one had little to no information displayed. However, there was something obvious about it that the entire room did not miss: it was massive. Far beyond any sort of burrow, but a full-blown abyss.

"Regardless of the lack of intel, the one constant is that these holes go straight down. And I do mean straight. From end to end, it's sheer. This one, as I hope you can see, or we are in more trouble than we realize, is much, much larger. It's approximately *twenty-five* meters in diameter. Lovingly refer to her as The Well. And though we ain't been able to get someone there and back, we have been able to measure its depth: on the northside of nine thousand meters. This is what we are expecting out of this one as well."

"Yeah, that's plenty big," said Monj under his breath.

"Your objective is not to engage. Not to attack. Not to interact. Your scope is *just* to scout the immediate area, take samples if you find anything, and report back. Y'all staying alive is imperative towards this and future missions."

"It's starting to sound like you expect us to scale a damn infinite cliffside," said Lyn. "That is not going to happen."

"Future?" asked Issac.

"It could be fun," said Monj. "Be a great workout."

"I tend to disagree," laughed Orden. "These old bones would not make it very far. I have a hard enough time down the library steps in the morning."

"Agree," said Lyn.

Kastor flicked the last bits of tobacco from his pipe. "As I was saying," he said, "your well-being is very important. So, we got a new method. We constructed a lift to lower everyone, including equipment and supplies, down to the bottom. It will be analog. No HiFi at all. Good old mechanical wheels and cogs and hard iron and steel. We can't risk using anything that has a chance of being impacted by the wall of interference. Even your weapons will be simple. Axes and swords."

Lyn's thin eyebrows rose. "By the Good Gods, we're using antiques."

"Anything made in *my* lifetime categorically can not be an antique," said Orden. "Unless that is how you see me. Or is that how everyone would see it? Dear me."

"Honestly, I could."

"How long will it take?" asked Monj.

Kastor shuffled through a loose pile of notes on his podium. "Looks like your estimated time is..." He squinted. "Arrival at the bottom of the cave will be ten hours from the initial descent. Give or take."

"Ten hours? How slow is this damn thing?" demanded Lyn.

"It's for your own safety," said Kastor. "Besides, it'll give y'all some time to get to know each other."

Lyn scowled towards the back of Issac's unaware head.

"Let us ensure that The Three have made a wise decision to choose you lot," said Kastor. With a swipe, the lights which had danced across the room, vanished.

"But why us?" asked Orden.

"To Second Hells if I know. That info they decided to keep away even from me."

"Shame about the Sortons," said Lyn, still drilling his glare into the statuesque Issac. "The lift has taken away their only job: slowing us down." Issac absentmindedly picked away at an old tool he had pulled out during the front half of Kastor's speech. "And too chicken to say a damn word back either," he continued.

Issac's head darted around the room as if someone was saying his name just out of earshot. Eventually, Lyn's seething energy pulled his attention around. Issac's mouth hung open. "Wait, are you talking to me, or just in--"

"This the best group, boss?" asked Monj.

Kastor had finally removed himself from the front and now sat at a chair near the entrance off-stage. He pulled an unusual container from his boot and drank from it. Old reliable. "Like I said," he humored, swiping away at a moist chin. "Ain't none of this is my decision. I ain't got a damned clue what they thinking." The last bit he mumbled not too quietly to himself.

"They have slotted quite the unorderedly bunch," said Orden.

"The others seem nice," said Monj.

"Clang it, Monj" Lyn stood up from his chair. "Don't start complimenting them now. How reliable can they be if they can't even show up on time?"

"Calling it like I see it, sir," said Monj.

Kastor threw his head back, pouring the last straggling drops from his metallic vial. The dregs stung in the best of ways.

"Please Lyn, indulge your comrade and let us simmer down," said Orden. He reached out with wrinkled hands as if he could help.

"Orden's right," said Issac.

Lyn slapped away at Monj's grip. "What was your name again?"

The doctor paused for a bit. He had noticed their difference in stature. Issac was human but frankly resembled something closer to that of a halfling. "Issac," he finally said.

"Cheers. Listen here, Issac, you street-streak sore bastard. Be more like your friend over there and shut it."

Despite his best attempts, Quill could not restrain a chuckle from breaking the tension in the room.

Lyn snapped his body around. "I did not attempt to humor you, sore."

Quill's blank demeanor failed to flinch. "I'm sorry to say I am not as acquainted with him as you three seem to be with each other."

"W-when are we expected to depart?" stammered Orden. Though it was a question directed to an empty spot. Kastor was no longer even in the tent, having already stormed out of the room leaving footprints and an empty flask, tossed to the floor without care.

"Tomorrow. At sundown." Quill had straightened up. "It said so up on the holo-projector when we came in."

"Bless our hearts," said Orden. "So soon? Could it not wait a few days?"

"No."

"Oh dear, then let us try our best to calm down and perhaps get comfortable with each other?"

"I'd rather not," said Lyn, collecting his things.

"Orden is right." Kastor appeared from the tent opening. His two guardsmen plus a stalwart general were with him. "This is the lot chosen by The Three and there ain't much we can do to change it. I am not here to ask y'all to get along, I'm *telling* you. If you don't want to stop squabbling, then ain't nothing to me. Use the descent to get used to your roles. Ain't asking y'all to be best friends. So say your piece and

start acting like adults.” Kastor's gaze focused primarily on Lyn, even as he continued to pack up.

“Just what Neutral Block wants. How typical.” Lyn marched his way out of the tent past the general.

“This will conclude today’s briefing.”

The guards started passing out a large stack of documents to everyone. Monj requested two. Kastor continued. “Feel free to read up on as much of the report as you like. These men will direct you to your quarters. Dinner is at six sharp in the dining hall. You can find it on the map provided. Should be the last one within the files. Y’all are dismissed. A guard will stop by tonight to get everything else that y’all want to be brought down. That all clear?”

No one said a word.