

Chapter 16 - Passionate Intensity Wherein Things Fall Apart

COVER: Litriya in better days. Sara, Ruffles, and the other twins are sporting with locals, but Siya is separated and isolated, looking on with obvious bitterness.

LIZARD TOWN

Ruffles and her brother are sheltering inside Nanna's house. The sound of vliegeng bombing comes from above. The cavern rumbles, dust falls, Masek makes his way down the scaffolding.

Masek: *popping his snout into Nanna's shell* Have you seen Roan and the boys?

Nanna: They left yelling and rattling with cutlery. Masek! What's happening?

Masek: I have to tell them I'm sorry... they were right. The spiderpaws have come for us.

Nanna: What have you seen?

Masek: The pilgrimage house is on fire, and soldiers are coming from the sky!

Nanna: Minnow will help us.

Masek: The storm stopped and the riverfolk have all gone. She will have gone with them.

Ruffles: Minnow left us? She left us?

Masek: She is only a small god.

Ruffles' brother: Will the spiderpaws kill us if they catch us, uncle?

Masek: They won't catch us, my beautiful. *Masek holds his head and kisses him - a final goodbye and a last memory to steel him during the fight to come* No one leave here. The boys and I will not let anyone into our home!

Ruffles' brother: I'm a boy! I'll fight too!

Ruffles: No! I order you to stay here with me!

Brother: You don't need protection, where's your pointy stick?

Ruffles: They took it! *cries*

Nanna: Come here, little eggs, both of you, and lay with me. Lay with nanna how you did when your tail still was curled, and you thought you owned the world.

Ruffles: *Another explosion rattles the shell and the kids panic!* Ah! It's so loud!

Nanna: You have to be strong, little eggs. I will tell the old things so you'll know how strong we are.

Ruffles: I don't want to know old things, Nanna, I'm not old yet-

...

Nanna: Long, long ago, when wise and winged Ilganyag was queen of we inak, we lived with her on high beneath a sky so thickly blue that we could ourselves climb into it, and walk with her among the stars. But then the BEASTS slithered from the sea. Unconstant, changing, lying, false. They were fishes, then frogs, then rats, then hogs. And finally they discovered a shape most pleasing, most useful, and they became the spiderpaws. Ilganyag began to favour them over we inak because they shared her face. Their babes fascinated her, their loins enticed her; the rich cauldrons of their frothing, insatiable wanting. Such wanting. Spiderpaws wanted our treasures, and Ilganyag made us give them away. Then spiderpaws wanted even our sky, and Ilganyag made it theirs. Into the earth she abandoned us, stacking stone upon stone atop our heads, and we have ever since been in the dark, begging for help from whatever other gods shone their small lights.

But you must know and remember always, little eggs, that WE INAK were here BEFORE spiderpaws crawled from the mud. WE INAK are older than their world. And though so much was stolen from us, we keep in us still the wisdom of the oldest gods and the blood of the sky-wanderers. We are not two-toes. We're not lizards. We are INAK! INAK!

Ruffles: *scared of the bombing, confused by Nanna's story, shaking her head* I don't care about Inak. The salt lizard left inak! Minnow left inak! Sara and Siya leave inak! I'm not inak!

Nanna: Ruffles!

Brother: Sister! Come back!

Ruffles: Leave me alone! I'm not inak!

Ruffles runs off through the shaking cavern as the world explodes around her

Outside and above, the sky is blue and cheerful. A soldier's blown apart by a pressure blast from a circling vliegeng. The vliegeng then turns its sights on Keon, surfing just above the green fields around Litriya on a cloudstone. The lumbering snake can't hope to hit the expert Aseptic, and is ultimately turned aside when Keon kicks his cloudstone into its windshield, cracking it and fouling the gunner's aim. Abby and Hetr rejoin him, panting

Keon: *to the nearby longwalker* Save your ammo! We're exposed and outnumbered, disengage!

Hetr: Aldish vliegeng in the centre of Cresce. While I live and breathe.

Abby: They took that bordertown, Grenzlan, and are using it to launch these raids. General Bell was right! Something is afoot here, and these snakes know it too. They've been waiting out the storm.

Hetr: Well, they were smart to do it. We must message the nearest garrison and get soldiers out here. Abby: to it! This may be a scheme of Sonorie's but it doesn't benefit General Bell to have it fall into Aldish hands! Sacred twins are in this place. Let me lie face-down in that river before I see an Aldishman touch a single one of them.

Keon: *gifts a rare, companionable smile* That's the first thing you've said since meeting you that hasn't made me want to put my boot through your teeth. Cresce First.

Hetr: Cresce First.

Keon: Let them land. Wrights, to me! Let's get our people across the river and engage them in the shrine!

Hetr: This is the twin Gods' own house, my brave warriors! And these aren't just Alds; do you see the yellow lion? The venomous green? These are snake-fucking heathen Ssaelit! Do we suffer heathens in the Gefendur Twins' own country?!

All: NO! SSAELIT SUFFER IN CRESCE!

Deep under the river in the construct facility, Duane, Toma, and Elka soberly survey a radar screen

Toma: That's three vliegeng?

Tech: Yessir, and two of them packing Aspect tanks with Pressure blasts.

BOOM, facility shakes

Toma: Yeah, I can tell that much. Do you have any exterior defenses at all?

Tech: Eh, there's a cannon but it's not shielded or really finished... I don't know, the Chief was working on it. She gets bored really easy and we've been stuck here with nothing to do but record screaming waterwomen data.

Duane: *approaches the portal through which Minnow fled*

Toma: Where are you going?

Duane: I am going to ensure the shrine's women and children are out of harm's way, then direct the Aldishmen down here.

Toma: You have it all planned out, don't you!

Duane: You should flee. I don't wage war on you, Toma, but on your Queen and her plottings.

Toma: Then we absolutely will make war-

Duane: Think on your child- *splashes into the river and makes his way towards the fray*

Toma: I'm starting to hate that bastard - and I have a policy of not hating anyone unless they're shitty to my dog.

Elka: Sir, I can't make it through that much water - I have to speak to cast. But I can go nab Pantoffel and ride up top; defend the shrine while you man this cannon thing.

Toma: *holds his mangled arm* Gods, that's a nice way of saying I'm frigging useless-

Elka: Never, Captain Toma. You get 'em from one end, and I'll get 'em from the other.

Toma: You don't try to "get" anyone! You make sure the civvies are safe and you surrender if you're found! We're outnumbered! And these are Alds.

Elka: Yes, sir! *exeunt*

Toma: *To the tech* Where's this cannon?

Tech: The east end of the building! We haven't built a lift yet but Chief or I can spell you up--

Chief? *looks around* Where's the Chief?

Toma: ...where the hell is Quigley.

We see the Chief's mask/helmet on the ground just before the ferry. Quigley has her slung over his shoulder, her face a bloody mess, his fists red, as the ferry takes them back to the shrine

At the entrance down to lizard town, Ruffles beats at the heavy locked door leading up to the shrine, crying

Ruffles: Let me out! I'm Ruffles the human girl! I won't be a bad lizard! I'll cook and wash dishes and clean behind the statues if you let me be with you! Saraaa! Siyaaaa! Mistress Loriiii!

Inside the dark pageant hall, Sara and Siya are sitting together with the two eldest twins, nervously listening to the noise of battle. Every girl in the shrine is crowded into the room along with every kedis they could hurriedly manage to find and relocate. The adults confer anxiously, trying to exude an aura of confidence, of competence. Siya is drawing Ruffles in her sketchbook, seemingly oblivious

Sara: How can you do that now? Now?!

Siya: Leave me alone.

Inis: It's all right, Sara. Soldiers will come. They'll come to fetch us for the ceremony now that the storm's stopped, and they'll fight off the Alds. *Her younger twin, the sacrifice, is laying beside her, unhappy*

Ilia: He said the gods are dead.

Inis: He said a lot of stupid things. Why were you even listening to an Ald?

Ilia: How do we know they aren't dead? Yerta never talks to me when I talk to her. Tirna never answers back.

Inis: I've told you, you just don't listen hard enough. Or you're asking stupid things and they're ignoring you. I do that all the time!

Ilia: Why are they allowed to ask so much, and not even talk to me?

Sara: I never would have whined about the rain if I knew it was protecting us. We shouldn't have let Sette in, probably. We shouldn't have let HIM inside.

Siya: It was fine until you had to show off and put him in the pageant. This wouldn't have happened if you'd just... if you'd stopped and listened to anyone else!

Sara: I was trying to be friends with Sette! Couldn't you see she'd never had a friend? No, you never see anything but what's in your stupid, ugly drawings!

Sara grabs the book and hurls it away, as hard as she can. It slides across the floor, past Jivi's feet, and we see he's eavesdropping on the adults

Mistress Lori: *quietly, to her fellow ladies* I need you to stay calm. We can't upset the children. It's true, the military has been using the decommissioned facility beneath us to develop a construct program, and I've helped them. But we are not unprotected.

Other Mistress: How could her Majesty do this? How could you keep it from us

Lori: We are not unprotected! Her engineers went to great pains to reinforce this hall and make it a safe harbour. If the shrine is breached I'll seal us in - NOTHING will be able to get inside. If we just stay calm, everything will be fine.

Jivi: *rejoins Sara and Siya, sketchbook in hand. He returns it to Siya* It sounds like it's safe here... but I have to find Matty. And Sette.

Sara: Jivi! If it's safe here you should STAY here!

Jivi: And I will, but the Quigleys are my friends and they need to be safe too. And Sette is... I don't know.

Siya: Jivi.

Jivi: Wh-what?

Siya: I'm going to put you in my story.

Jivi: Thanks... I'll come back with them. You listen at the door and let me back in. I'll call your name so you know it's me. All right?

Sara: Do you think this is my fault?

Jivi: Gods... I think sometimes the winds can tangle a line into a knot that looks damn near handmade.

Sara: I liked Sette... but she's really messed up, I guess.

Jivi: Yeah... I think she was trying though, in her own stupid Sharte way. I don't know. Matty thinks everything's contagious. Nice makes nice, or something.

Sara: My nice didn't make nice.

Jivi: Says who? *kisses her*

Sara: Careful, sailor boy.

tips his cap to her, and slips out the door

**Back at the drydock, Uaid shifts with anxiety and confusion. The drama playing out inside him feels like a bellyache. Chief Nora was beaten unconscious, but she begins to rouse now, her brow crinkling, eyes fluttering before squeezing briefly shut again. Finally she trusts them to open. Quigley is binding her hands in anti-pymary shackles as she's pressed against Uaid's restraining tentacles*

Quigs: One word of pymary out of you-! One word and there won't be a second.

Nora: Wh-what..?

Quigs: I want a hostage. You seem important. Dropped your little hat thing. They'll figure it out. I'll let you go as soon as we're over the border.

Nora: This has never... worked out for you.

Quigley grinds his teeth and shakes her

Quigley: Stop talking like you know me!

Nora: But I do. I know you cowered in your wife's shadow, and couldn't stand it.

Quigley: Vienne Quigley was a little idiot who never understood how the world worked. She banged away in that workshop reading newspaper articles about things happening far away, and thinking she had every answer for all of it if only someone would knock on her door and ask.

Matty: *climbing down the ladder into Uaid's belly* Vhefhen? Sollemun kochakocha mmik?

Quigley: <The Aldish army. It sounds like they've landed their snakes on the roof. I'm going to open the sluice gate and we'll slip out under the river. The waterfolk are gone and the turtles should be too. This woman will help us get out of the country.>

Matty: Vhefhen, <not again>

Quigley: I'll be right back! Go up top, put on the Field Spreader and wait!

Quigley jumps out of Uaid's chest, his heart hammering louder than the thunder of the artillery above

Nora: *watches him leave, then looks at Matty* Matty? Ssomal shenut? <Tell Uaid to let me out please. Your father is sick.>

Matty: *frowns, confused, backs away, reaches for the ladder*

Nora: <I can tell you things if you let me go. I can tell you things about your mother.>

Matty: You're lying. I'm not stupid.

****Quigley is racing for the sluice controls****

Nora: I know you're not stupid, and neither was she. Cresce could never trust your father, and your mother couldn't trust him either. But you know that. You know that. That's why she made Uaid so he only listens to you. That's true, isn't it?

Matty: ...yes.

Nora: When you both fled Alderode and her Majesty gave you shelter, we engineers searched Uaid in the night. We searched all through him looking for plans; for information. His field spreader is very valuable.

Matty: To steal.

Nora: Of course. But your mom was too smart. She was very, very smart. She made a part of Uaid's memory that your father didn't even know was there. But we found it one night. We found her formulas there. And we found--

****Uaid slams his own chest cavity to and shut her up, jostling them around****

Matty: Uaid? It's all right! Uaid, let her go!

****Nora falls forward, then scrabbles to her feet****

Matty: Tell me. Uaid, make her tell me! Uaid!

****Distressed, Uaid flails, blocking her way, wanting her to shut up or leave, but bound to obey Matty****

Nora: What do you remember of that night? Uaid can't talk. And Uaid was made to never hurt you... he couldn't tell you if he wanted to. But I saw what he saw; found it tucked unwanted in that unsounded black.

****Years ago, Vienne's workshop burns. We see Vienne's shadow cast on the workshop wall as the Asepticks perform their torturous work. The Asepticks are amorphous shapes; impressions more than people. Mouths, teeth, hands, cruel and sociopathic masculinity; the black shadows in your peripheral vision when you don't have the nerve to look an aggressor in the eye. They're what Uaid remembers but what Matty and his father remember too. The Asepticks of Alderode are Dammakhert-cloaked, and too terrifying to ever be looked at directly****

Aseptick: <Remove the boy. I have come in utter amity, but a child's wails bare in every man a hidden heart that dreams of drinking blood.>

****A tarry, goopy, monstrous hand grabs blinded, sobbing Matty by his shirt and carries him bodily from the workshop****

Aseptick: Now, Mrs. Quigley, you've been very cooperative so far, and we've cooperated in turn. You disabled the construct you seem to care so much for, and it will be very well taken care of. And because of it, your lad will be just fine. He's a beautiful little thing, your lad, I'd not want to see him brought to further harm. ****Uaid looks on, pitifully**** Of course you realise your crews' lives are forfeit but you, Mrs. Quigley, there may be a chance to save yourself. If you can give us a detailed roster of anyone else in your village who supported this foolish endeavour, I promise you will see the dawn. We will need your testimony against them-

****A shot of torture, disconnected from Vienne's screaming face****

Vienne: MAAAATHHIISSSS!

Aseptick: Is that the husband?

Aseptick: Yes. I see. Perhaps that is where the misunderstanding lies between us, Mrs. Quigley. Your husband is not coming for you. Your husband is the one who informed us that his wife had, in fact, fallen into an uncontrollable hysteria, and he requested we aid him in the matter. He does not blame you. He rightly blames the seditionist factions spreading their propaganda and their lies even to here, deep in our pure Aldish countryside. You have my pity, Mrs. Quigley, for what chance has the soft feminine intellect against these seditious pamphlets? *holds them up,

crumpling them in his fist* They are turning our women into shrews and schemers... but by the six rings and the Aldish kings, they will have fiery nights of their own... soon enough.

throws the pamphlets into the fire as flames rise around a screaming Vienne

Vienne: MAAAAATHISSSS!

Nora: Matty. Dan paesabi.

The heavy sluice gate hinges open, and Quigley races back towards Uaid. Jivi almost knocks into him

Jivi: Quigley! Mistress Lori's got the pageant hall rigged up safe and reinforced! Come on!

Quigley: No, Matty and I are leaving. Thank you for all your help.

Jivi: Leaving- do you know what you're doing? I couldn't even see through the windows, there's so much smoke. What did you do with Duane? Is Sette with you?

Quigley: No. Thank you for all your help, get back to safety.

Jivi: Quigley, if the Aldish army catches you they'll- they'll- I don't think you should go! I don't want anything bad to happen to you or Matty! Don't go try and fight them! Please-

**Quigley yelps when Nora is thrown suddenly into him and they both tumble to the ground.

Uaid's chest slams closed and he stands, thunderously**

Quigs: Matty! Matty, what are you doing?!

Jivi: Who- Lady, you all right?

**But Nora, dazed, sucker punches Quigley with an uncharacteristically cute heart of Solidity, then runs off while she can. Desperate to find some salve for his upset older brother, Uaid grabs Jivi, stuffs him in his mouth, and leaps into the water. Jivi tumbles down the ladder, frustrated that the Plats are acting up like THIS. And NOW?! He makes to tell Matty off but the words won't come when he sees Matty's face streaked with tears. Matty stands with his arms laced through the ladder, staring at nothing*

Jivi: Matty, what are you doing?

Matty: All grown-ups are bad or dead, Jivi. Let's go away.

**Outside, the pilgrimage house and lands and woods around the shrine are burning. Broken beams and rubble crowd the once pretty path that leads up to the main entrance. The second vliegeng lands and its crew disembarks with a roar, mounted and regular soldiers streaming towards the main entrance of the shrine. The door opens and Hetr is there with Abby, mounted. Hetr roars into the frey, sword slashing, while Abby supports him pyramically. Keon, too, helps the rest of their white-cloaked men across the river, and there's a fracas there against the base of the burning shrine.

Hetr's dog snaps into an Ald's throat, kicking another into Abby's waiting spell; she splits him in half from underneath, spilling his stomach.**

Abby: Mother's LOVE, there's nothing like seeing what a fucking Aldishman had for breakfast!

Hetr: When can we expect those reinforcements, Abby!

Abby: The next town's not far, Sir, and they've a garrison. Maybe half an hour if their walkers are ready to go!

Hetr: They're fixated on the shrine or we'd be corpses already!

Abby: They're dropping wrights! Hug the building and stay out of their line of sight, sir!

Inside the shrine, Duane has his ear to the pageant hall door. We see the dog butt twins on the other side of it. He jumps when they suddenly shriek at the shadow of his boots visible beneath the door

Twins: GO AWAY, BADDIES!

lori: Get away from that door!

Duane does just that. Elsewhere in the shrine we see the weapons closet thrown open, garbage strewn around it, the beautiful halls wrecked. We see the door to Lori's office open. Aids are tearing through it with their prizes of weapons and pyramids. They're Ssaelit soldiers, Soud to a man, in green and gold, helmets over their eyes

Aldish Soldier: Look at these gilt frames, sir! Antique Westgate First Timber furniture.

Soldier: Think these tapestries are Ulestrian?

Soldier: Ech, that's a lot to carry.

Ricker: *eating candy from Lori's candy dish, he gestures to an adornment in the wall* Is this just an opal set into the wall like a nipple?

Soldier: I think it's an eye, sir.

Soldier: An eye only to the chaste and godly. You see, everything is about sex in Cresce. That's how Sonorie keeps them leashed. If you think it's a cigar, it's probably a prick. Think it's a peach? Definitely a twat.

Soldier: What's a tit?

Ricker: Solid bloody gold is what it is. *snatches it*

Soldier: Gold for the golden delight?

Ricker: Don't blaspheme!

Soldier: No disrespect, sir, but it's a lot of superstition and hogwash by my way of thinking.

Ricker: *he scowls at the irreverent fool* The golden delight was flying above the spires of Grenzlan when we took that town from Cresce and began this bloody campaign. The golden delight was impervious to them! Again and again: impervious to Crescians! *gets hissed at by a kedis, and dropkicks him exactly as Sette did earlier*

Soldier: Keddy objects t'your theology, Captain.

Soldier: Look at these spoils.

Ricker: It's always the same, lads. Cresce works its people to death and hordes the sweat of their brows in its palaces and shrines. Imagine one bitch cuckolding an entire country, and you've imagined our ancient rivals to the south, hahaha.

Soldier: *laughs* Oh, but the only crime is greed, Captain!

Ricker: Then let us remove temptation. Someone pry me out that wall nipple.

Soldier: I really think it's an eye, sir-

Soldier: Why do they tolerate it, sir? Cresce works its people to death.

Ricker: I told you: Queenie has them by the prick. Shrine maids, for instance. Blokes get their pick of 'em. Say what you like about our own Geffies, at least they don't use their kept twins like toilets. Come. We DO have a mission.

Soldier: Sir, you said WE would fuck the maids. Where are they?

Ricker: Hiding in that hall we passed. Blame the bloody wrights announcing us like-

Ricker turns to exit the office, and Duane is standing there. Duane punches. Ricker spits out his candy, gapes in shock for a beat, then rips the axe from his back. He swings at the strange spectre only for the axehead to smash into the floor. Duane has vanished

Duane: "Of dark and pale aspect both, those rejected by the gods. Kin and friends I found there but also foes once bitterly blamed. How clear now in the light of eternity: it had been my own that I had slain! I had taken their women, drowned their babes, shrieked horror in my campaigns. The gods make us different to keep us weak and our hatred is all the same; now reconciled men would bring their end and -I- would show the way. Death is the Gods' crime, my beloveds, my brothers. It is clear they cannot remain."

Ricker: Who are you-

Duane: One formerly of Sonum Ssaelt's unflinching - but to look at that force now and find you sneak-thieves, I burn with shame to admit it.

Duane: You are too late to seize the constructs here, but the facility lies below. Therein are both the plans for the Quigley field spreader, and engineers well-versed in Queen Sonorie's latest machinations. Their defenses are disabled and they will make fine prisoners. I suggest you go

to them presently. Harm civilians along the way, and I will smear you from this world like the errant emission that so inconvenienced your hired mother.; for you are now haunted by a being so monstrous God did not want it in his khert, and so would not let it die.

...

Ricker: ...did everyone else see that?

Soldier: Was that- That wasn't... *really* Ssa-

Ricker: Of course it wasn't. There is fuckery afoot here and not the kind I wanted.

Soldier: His Tainish was perfect. Durlynian, even.

Soldier: HIS? ITS. It was a plod! The khert STINKS with him!

Soldier: A plod? I did recognise the artificial voicebox. They never sound quite right...

Ricker: Ach, the unclean thing touched me. So they mock us with a rotting corpse dressed as Ssael? DOGS. Plods were made illegal in warfare after the Treaty of Blue Ruspage. Well, we're not falling for their mind games.

Soldier: *rights one of the office chairs*

Ricker: You going to sweep up too?

Soldier: Think we should, sir?

Ricker: I will hurl you down this hall by the hairs of your ass. Come!

----CUT----

**Outside. Keon walks atop the water to the middle of the river, and taunts one of the vliegeng. It fires a blast at him, which he redirects at once of the parachuting dogmen, blowing him away.

Keon smiles up at the pilot, spreading his arms.**

Vliegeng pilot: Oh, *fuck* him, I'm climbing.

Some ways away, Duane is picking his way through the fire. He sees the soldiers battling through the smoke and gloom, and flashes back to Avelpit, to his Plats. He makes to follow one of the soldiers, and trips over the body of an Ald. He flips it over, and sees bisected Jon. He shakes his head, returning to his senses, and looks up to see Keon has spotted him. They exchange a glance, and Keon feels him out through the lines, fingers flexing

Keon: Huh. Plods were made illegal on the battlefield fifty years ago.

Duane: Perhaps I am only a gardener.

Duane strikes to flip the ground beneath Keon. Keon indeed flips, but gracefully, flying into the air and launching a leech, which Duane himself elegantly spins around, cloak whirling. Duane gathers flames and weaves them about the falling Keon to cook him, but Keon extinguishes them with a blast of pressure from a battery on his belt. He dragoon-dives on Duane with his harpoon, which Duane deftly catches, but then is zapped by. He falls back, stunned, but still managing to blast Keon with a column of stone, breaking them apart. Duane tumbles hard, then catches sight of Diva in the sky, and catapults to the roof. Keon lets him go, eyes narrowing up at the blue snake

Back inside the shrine, Ricker and his squad penetrate the unlit depths, following Duane's directions

Soldier: Something's off here, sir. There was a dead waterbaby in the tank in the back of that office.

Ricker: That makes sense. They must have been provoking waterpeople into raging that storm for so long.

Soldier: Are we following the pipes then, sir?

Soldier: Nawt else for't. We know the facility is connected to ogre tunnels. We have to go down.

Soldier: We're not getting any women out of this at all, are we.

Ricker: You're surely bitching and moaning like one. Shut it, the lot of you, and stay sharp. The guard's dead and Captain Adelier will keep the tatterdemalions across the river off our arses, but I won't lose my last eye to another dusky bitch.

****At that moment, a two-toe melts from a service passage in the wall! The rearmost Ald gets a blade in his throat before the lizard vanishes again****

Soldier: Jacque!

Jacque: Is this- ha, a bloody spoon? I'm fine.

Soldier: There! Roacheaters! ****he points downstairs where they see a tail disappear into the dark. The knights pursue, someone conjuring a light****

Ricker: Recruited the Help, have they?

****The soldiers reach a landing. The doorway to the kitchen is on the right, while a dark doorway to a scullery is on the left. A bunch of pots and pans clamor from the kitchen and they turn to enter and pursue when Masek springs from the dark scullery with a great cudgel. He swipes it across one of the knight's legs, breaking it gruesomely. At the same instant, Roan and the other two young male lizards spring from the kitchen, inflicting some superficial damage. But Masek is thrown back, and Ricker brings his great axe down, slicing open one of the lads and then finishing him off. The three lizards retreat into the kitchen and away****

Ricker: Don't let them get away! Harold! Hold and we will return for you!

****The lizards race through the cobwebbed service ducts***

Roan: I TOLD you, uncle! We can't fight soldiers! We're nothing! We're servants! Linden!

Masek: I didn't make the world this way, Roan!

Roan: But you made us!

Masek: You children have me so turned around - so afraid and stupid! These aren't Crescian soldiers at all! they must have been summoned by the hooded Ald I helped. They are Alds! From the north! They are here for the secret things underground!

Roan: Men! Men! All the same! We will blow them up, uncle! Kill them all!

Masek: Put that away! Roan, you remember the words to open the big door? Yes, we will negotiate with them! Come, I have a plan!

****Back in the great hall, Ilia has cornered Siya by the door, and whispers desperately in her ear****

Ilia: Siya, I heard what he said to you. "You wish to live."

****Mistress Lori has apparently decided the time is right to initiate Nora's shield. With the room shaking and thuribles and greenery falling from the high ceiling, she gestures to the walls and recites****

Lori: *Cloak us now with the Queen's own Aegis, by order of Shrine Mistress Lori Ripa!"

****The Great Hall's walls glow and throb, and the kids are generally impressed by it****

Sara: No! Jivi and Matty aren't back yet!

Lori: They shouldn't have left. Everyone stay away from the doors.

One Pilgrim to another: Shouldn't her name be Lori Litriya? She was raised here the same as the others, wasn't she?

Sara: Mistress Lori was disgraced. Her twin ran away to be with a man and abandoned the sacrifice. She's not a proper divine twin now... but she's a good Mistress.

Other Mistress: And the gods saw it. I knew the price would be terrible one day, but not like this...

Lori: Shut up your babbling. My sister abandoned me but I stayed. I stayed as the Gods have willed. They have not abandoned us, her Majesty has not abandoned us, and I will not abandon you!

Ilia: You say she abandoned you... but you could have gone with her. Maybe you abandoned her.

Lori: *makes a sour face* I don't see it that way. Listen, I want us all to gather in the centre of the room, and Mistress Clar will read. It will be like a normal day of lessons, and then we'll sing.

Siya: I heard boots. They're going downstairs.

Sara: Gawds, we're missing out on Tirna's Day...

Siya: Ruffles is downstairs, with her family.

Sara: I'm sure they're safe. What do Aids want with Two-toes?

Ilia: *perched at the door* Siya, this could be the only chance we ever have-

Sara: *looks back at Siya, confused, then grabs her suddenly as she gets a whiff of what Siya and Ilia have been whispering about* No. I'm not going to let you be crazy-

Siya: I let you be crazy all the time-

Sara: Not this kind of crazy-

Siya: **runs for the door! Sara is momentarily stunned, then has no choice but to chase after her, goaded by her indignance more than anything else**

Pilgrim1: Hey you girls! You can't go out there! **gives chase (ask Ziya's mom about her going with)**

Lori: STOP THEM! You can't come back inside once you leave!

But Lori noticed too late, and the girls have slipped through and the pilgrim has followed, leaving the hall door slightly ajar

Sister Clar: Oh, those little fools! They have always been the troublemakers! The lizard-lovers and the brats! Lock it behind them! Quick!

Lori: Gods help us! *holds her head*

Sister Clar: *mean* Stop your babbling, mm?

Lori: *grabs her* The lizards stole detonation instructions from my office-!

Clar: You said we'd be safe here!

Lori: Then STAY HERE and be SAFE!!! *slaps her, and runs after the girls*

**Sette gingerly creeps down the dark stairwell and finds the guard with the broken leg, sweaty and swearing, a ciggie on his lips. The landing is thick with blood, the body of the dead two-toe quickly cooling.*

Soldier: Allekh efhsefhn shartitol... ins maelifholl moya ghal, da fhamman e kall.

She glares and trots past him

**Litriya is burning. Further down the river, Uaid bursts from the water on the far bank. He clutches at his middle.

Matty: <I knew! I always knew!>

Jivi: Matty! What's going on!

Matty: Never I'll be with him, never!

Jivi: Matty-

Matty: Let's go away!

Jivi: And leave everyone? We can't!

Matty: Let's go away-

Jivi: Gonna be like HIM, are you? He's ready to take you, leave everyone high and dry! No! You're not like him!

An explosion sounds from outside. Uaid runs from spellfire in a panic as one of the vliegeng wrights draws a bead on him. Lem and the kids look on from their own mount

Mason: God's beard, that is the- I think that is the Quigley construct!

Lem: Well, those are some words.

Mason: The Quigley Construct, sir, I've read about it! A renegade agent joined the seditionists and built a construct into that baby mountain ogre. He discovered a new way to make an anti-pymary field. I wager he's on the sting list, sir.

Miki: Wow, there's probably a bounty! Let's capture them!

Lem: Wilson is on it. What the hell is keeping Ricker.

Another spellblast chases Uaid, scorching his side. Jivi sees the flames through his ribs and hauls Matty to his feet

Jivi: You've got to get it together, Matty! I need you to help with Uaid, c'mon!

**Jivi hauls him up the ladder. Uaid is trying to avoid the blasts, but he's knocked over sideways, his side blackening. Jivi and Matty hang off the ladder perilously, but manage to make it to the cockpit.

Jivi: The field spreader!

Another blast is barrelling down on them, Jivi's eyes meet the wright in the belly port of the vliegeng. Close up of both their eyes clashing in recognition. Jivi activates the shield in the nick of time

Jivi: YEAH! You can't touch us, Ald SCUM! (oh, sorry, matty) ALD SCUM!

Hetr, Keon, and Abby are taking shelter behind burning rubble as Aldish wrights loose spells from the shrine roof. They are surrounded by the corpses of their slain soldiers. A blast scatters them from their cover. Hetr catches an Aldish spell on his sword, then knocks an Ald away on the backswing. Smoke and debris cloud his vision

Hetr: Keon!

Keon: Snipers on the roof! Make for the shrine, you've a clear line, I will cover you!

Hetr bumps into Abby, nearly slices her

Abby: That way, sir!

from the perspective of the rooftop snipers, we see them squinting through the smoke. One of them lines up a shot. Keon senses it, takes out the guy next to him, but Abby is sliced to ribbons, falling at Hetr's feet a smoking husk. Hetr, sword up, scared, freezes to survey the desolate battlefield, Abby's smoldering corpse, the bloody dead carpeting the grass

Hetr: "Let the warbeast rend 'til Heaven's end and its howls unwind, unfailing.

For tho' thund'rous be its roiling bombs and crack of spells assailing,

The following silence is awful'r still, and brings with it the wailing."

Hetr and Keon make the entrance, and disappear into the shrine

Uaid is stooped, recovering, as Jivi peers down through the dust at his burnt foot

Jivi: It looks fine, Uaid! I think Quigley made you a little tougher. Matty! Tell Uaid we're gonna smash the invaders! We're gonna save the shrine-

Or not! A vliegeng dives hard into Uaid, nearly knocking him to the ground! Uaid catches himself and pushes back, mouth agape, but Jivi gets an eyeful as the great snake snaps and snarls in his face! Inside Uaid's metal middle, Matty "sees" the vliegeng's claws cut through his ribs, knocking the grating aside before Uaid can throw him off. The snake slides, rebounds, lunges, and skewers both of Uaid's defending hands! Overcome, Uaid bawls. Jivi can't decide if he's more angry or embarrassed, but either way he has to do something!

Jivi: Leave him alone! He's just a baby! Kick him, Uaid! **But Uaid doesn't know what Jivi's saying! He bawls and bawls, and the Aldish pilot has to laugh. Jivi rips his shirt off and jumps up onto the edge of Uaid's cockpit!** You gutless snake-diddling evil swab! HERE! Fight someone your own size!

The vliegeng opens its maw to bite Jivi in half when Matty appears, grabbing Jivi around the middle

Matty: <UAID KICK!>

Uaid does! The vliegeng gets a bellyful of feet and flies back, chastised. Uaid lands hard in the grass. Matty hugs his nose

Matty: <I'm sorry I yelled at you. You were trying to protect me. But I'm big brother. It's my job to protect YOU. I love you. Good warm dirt brother.>

**They hug, and Uaid deftly hops over another lunge from the snake, newly inspired. The vliegeng doubles back, ignoring Lemuel's signal lamp. He's not going to let a couple of kids show him up! Obviously the construct is inept! Broken! It was crying like some kind of infant. The pilot brings his snake in for another lunge only to be caught up in Uaid's middle! Uaid closes the door on him, pinning him, spins three times for momentum, then hurls the monster out over the river! Jivi can barely hang on to the cockpit railings, and thinks he's lost his mind when Litriya's Yerta statue....

suddenly...

grows a cannon out of its mouth?

Great slashes of Edge Aspect cut the flying snake into three parts. Lemuel and his copilots look on in blank awe. Jivi cheers.

Jivi: Uaid the hero! Mae Illuda!

Down in the construct facility, Toma is irate. Gods, working with engineers is excruciating.

Tech: Direct hit, Captain!

Tech2: Told you it would work! Just needed some educated thwacking.

Toma: A working visual system would be SWELL. Keep calling it out little guy, you did great-

Tech: FIRE! FIRE NOW!

In the sky, Diva yelps as one of the pink slices nearly fillets her! Lemuel flies her higher, to the selvage, slashes of Edge chasing her all the way. At the top, Lem unbuckles his harness.

Lemuel: I wouldn't have brought you if I thought we'd see battle. If your mother ever finds out about this she will make toast of most of me.

Mickie: Burnt toast.

Lemuel: You're out of range at this height. Retrieve me at my signal. ONLY at my signal!

Co-pilots: Yes, sir!

Lem: *leaps gracefully from Diva's saddle. On the shrine rooftop below, the Aldish sniper wrights are fleeing from the Yerta cannon's wild slices - and they flee right into Duane! They regard him in shock and uncertainty, then unleash spells all at once. Duane glides and dances around them, catching some shots, avoiding others masterfully, bantering with them as he goes**

Duane: A pymary unit of the great Lions of Mercy, yes? You are far from home, lads. And you are late. There is naught remaining here but equipment and research. Still, it will not be put to use for Cresce again--

Duane: Killian, you still are not clearly eliding diphthongs.

Duane: Glover, stop telegraphing your leeches; more tells than a tosspot at the tables. You I don't know, but if the Lions have recruited you I indeed weep for my old Order. Who has been training you lot? The cook? The construct facility is through the drydock on the second basement level! Proceed carefully, destroy what you find, but in Ssael's name harm no innocent!

Lemuel is in the sky evading attacks with equal grace. The techs below can't keep up as Toma struggles to score a hit

Tech: One o'clock! Three-thirty! Lunch time! *whiff* No, two o'clock! I said two!

Toma: The hell? Lunch is at noon!

Tech: Man, I'm sorry! Chief goes at noon, Dini at one, I go at two! Haven't you ever worked in an office-

Toma: NEVERMIND. Where is he?

Tech: GODSGODSGODS he's got enough pymaric firepower to light the capital - don't let him near! Try four o'clock but he's so tiny!

Toma: *switches the laser from "PROJECT" to "STATIC"** Let's make a net for the bug then.

The slices weave a grid-shaped shield but alas! It was designed for giant vliegeng and not a tiny Aldishman. Lem flies effortlessly through the mesh and alights at the mouth of the cannon.

Lem: Mama Yerta, nice girls don't spit. **he drops a pressure grenade down the muzzle, then pirouettes away as Yerta's head is blown off. Below, Toma and his tech friends are thrown from the control platform.**

Toma: Not gonna sugarcoat it, folks. That was real underwhelming.

Chief: *enters* No, I missed it!

Tech: It worked good for a minute there, Chief! Didn't blow up in our face like you were afraid of.

Toma: Woulda been nice to know that was a possibility.

Tech: Eh, would it though?

Toma: Are you all right? Where's Quigley?

Chief: I gave him something else to worry about. Lyle, fetch the dog and come on. We need to get out of here before the Mistress blows the place!

Toma: Blows the place?

Chief: She has a copy of the self-destruct spell and I imagine she is feeling very twitchy right now. It's not a great spell either. This building's ancient, and though we could find the original plans, it's been everything from a fishing boat repair centre to a military base over the centuries. Didn't have a lot of time to figure out what to blow and what to spare.

Toma: According to your staff you've had plenty of time down here to come up with something better!

Chief: Yes, and good thing I started making the cannon, wouldn't you agree?

Toma: Better thing if you'd perfected the self-destruct spell!

Chief: Don't you think that would have been kinda glass-half-empty?

Toma: I think your HEAD is half empty.

Chief: Wh- That isn't polite at all!

Toma: I'm not feeling very polite! Torturing waterwomen, sticking a cannon in an ancient goddess statue, endangering children and priestesses - how much does her Majesty know about all this!

Chief: Desperate times, Captain Toma. The self-destruct detonates everything outside the original shrine's plans. It was an elegant solution! Anyway, I've come back for you, haven't I? Get the dog, and follow me, there's an emergency exit!

Duane watches Lemuel alight on the roof of the shrine, overcome.

Duane: Ah - del - ee...

He lands, cautious, and looks up at the stranger through hooded eyes. Duane feels those eyes splash over him like boiling tar. He feels everything suddenly - hunger like a knife, the skittering love of every insect, the hollow coldness of a breath he can never draw, the ache in his bones, the hole in his heart, the emptiness he circles in a perpetual gyre towards an unreachable nothing. He stumbles.

Duane: <I sent... your comrades to the facility below. I will show->

But Lemuel attacks!

----CUT-----

Astride Pantoffel, Quigley and Elka trot up from lower stories

Quigley: I have to get to Matty!

Elka: How in the hell did you let him get away from you?

Quigley: I... made a mistake-

Elka: Hey, I hear kids- *hops off Pant and bangs on the pageant hall door** Her Majesty's Peaceguard here! Don't open the door but is everyone all right in there?

Door: Yes! Oh, please help us!

Elka: Just hang tight! There are Aids in the building!

The kids cheer and slide cute pictures underneath the door. Flexing Crescian soldiers! Dogs with huge teeth! Fierce waterwomen and snapping mosbuik!

Elka: Oh, no, they're cute.

Sara, Siya, and Ilia are going down to lizard town. Ilia and Siya are intent on their mission but Sara is an anxious, protesting mess

Sara: This is the stupidest thing you've ever done. Both of you! You can't get off the island, where will you go? There are Alds outside that are probably here to kill us! **grabs Siya's arm* If you wanted to leave you never said anything. You never said anything! Where is this even coming from, Siya?

Siya: I don't... I'm not leaving. I have to get Ruffles. Like Jivi went to get Matty. It's what we should do.

Sara: This is like when you jumped in front of Duane and got hit. Why do you get like this?

Siya: I don't know.

Sara: Ruffles is probably a lot safer than we are!

Siya: We didn't- I didn't speak up for her before. I never do... you know?

Ilia: I'm... I'm going to hide down with the lizards. And when they come for me you tell them that I died, all right? That you saw the soldiers carry me away, dead.

Sara: What about your sister?!

Ilia: They won't do anything to her if they think I'm dead. She won't be a twin anymore, and she can go home. Mistress Lori, she did all right without her sister. It'll be fine! I can't stop thinking about what will happen if I go to the city today. I can't stop thinking about it.

Sara: I- I thought you were ready to be with Yerta.

Ilia: I thought I was too. *cries into her hands* I liked dancing with that white-haired boy. I liked playing with Uaid... I even liked when the Aldishman made his lions and pulled your hair and killed Mistress' owl.

Sara: You liked it?

Ilia: If I go away what else will I miss? Everything will go on, and on, and on but I won't be here to see!

Siya: *writing down what she says*

Sara: Stop it. This is real life!

Siya: Yeah. There hasn't been much of it around here until now.

Sara: Maybe for you! Stuck in here all the time! You keep stuck in here, and you ignore- no, you HATE anyone who lives any kind of life or has any kind of fun that you don't think is the right kind! Everything I do, you HATE!

Siya: Everything you do is stupid! It's like you don't see what's coming and won't look!

Sara: It wouldn't matter, you just hate everything about me! I'm not in here at all! **grabs her sketchbook** Because you HATE ME. You have- you have Ruffles in your story, and Neva, and Mistress Lori and even found a place for Sette's tail, but where am I!

Siya: You're the mountain!

Sara: Yeah, you made my butt a mountain, but where am I?!

Siya: Why do you care, you don't care about anything I make anyway. When I'm gone, you'll throw it all away and never think about me again--

Masek runs past, bleeding

Masek: Girls, get out! Now!

**He vanishes down the stairs to the drydock, a spell flying after him. Sara screams!*

Siya: Shut up! That's Masek!

Sara: He's hurt! Why isn't he with the others?!

Ricker: This way! **Soldiers rush into the hall, Ricker gestures to the girls** Chalmer, Elleri!

Somabi ta loban! Lunit, mo dan!

Ricker pursues Masek and Chalmer wrenches Ilia to himself. Elleri tangles Sara's skirt to trap her legs, Siya grasping at her arm as she tumbles

Glover: Fham, fham. Mae sefhn dem'afh!

Chalmer: Elim kim ssomun reshtpen! Elim somalen ta moya llunsh llo- **He wrenches Ilia around so he can hold her by the titties. Elleri reaches for Sara, laughingly looking back at Chalmer, and Sara motherfucking stabs him in the face with Siya's pen.**

The doorway to the construct facility. Ricker and his goons look around for Masek, who's taken shelter beneath a fountain, out of sight in the drainage basin

Masek: SPIDERPAWS! This is what you're looking for, on the other side of this sealed door! I'm sorry, we don't want to fight you! I made a stupid mistake. We panicked and thought you were Crescian soldiers! W'd NEVER knowingly attack Aids. Proud, wise, noble Aldishmen who surely have sympathy for what Cresce has done to the two-toes.

Ricker looks unimpressed by the flattery

Masek: They've murdered and displaced us for seventy years! We have no loyalty to them, and now we're newly threatened. The death of the Queen's sister is being blamed on us, and Cresce wants us in CAMPS now. We can't work, feed ourselves, live free and safe!

On the other side of the sealed door, Rroan awaits his uncles word to spell it open. A flash of GREEN accompanies his suddenly surprised face

Masek: *back outside* Maybe the Crescians outside will drag us off right now. Maybe it's only been the storm keeping them from it. Generous knights, my family is small, my mother is sick, we have little ones. HELP US. Take us with you. Say yes, and my nephew on the other side of this door will open your way forward.

**Masek bows, simpering, the perfect picture of obedient two-toe servility. But then the sealed door opens, Rroan stumbles out a bloody mess, and we see the soldiers Duane sent down from the roof are the cause. Ricker's goons blow Masek away.

Ricker: We don't treat with the HELP.

Back yet again in the bloody stairwell, the pilgrims and Lori are looking for the girls. The soldier with the broken leg is missing... until the lady pilgrim turns into the dark kitchen, and he meets her in the doorway. She yelps and jumps back only for Hetr to run the poor bastard through! Her friend grabs a sword from the ground and jumps to her aid, but he's no warrior. Hetr cuts him apart, then finishes her off. Lori gibbers but Hetr fancies himself here to protect her

Hetr: Flee somewhere safe, priestess! I am here!

Shrieking, Lori runs in the opposite direction, leaving Hetr to monologue gallantly in her wake. Keon sighs

Hetr: If this must a day of denouements be, let this blade limn them. Aids, to ME! I fill this quill with your northern blood!

Back with Sara and Siya, the pencil'd Ald is beating Sara to a pulp. Ilia is pressed against a wall by her own captor. He drops his pants and pants in her ear, showing off his ass to Boo and Sette up in the dark pipes lining the ceiling

Sette's voice descends like a very squeaky rumble of ominous thunder

Sette: Listen here, you loo-stinkin' pissmop! You dunno who you got there! That's Sara Litriya, boss of this whole Litriya gang! She's clever and evil, devises schemes as no one else could devise even in a dream! And that mirror of her, that's Siya Litriya! Her name's stoopid but her hands make things magicker than any wright can! That other I dunno as good but she's part of our gang, and ya don't insult the Litriya gang!

Glover: Anteit Vaosa! **Sette leaps on his back from behind and buries her knife into his neck. Or tries, at least. It glances off his clavicle and she slips off. He draws his sword and raises his off hand to fuck her up with a spell-- but Boo leaps into his hand to block his spellport with his fat

Silver tail! The spell backfires, blowing off his entire arm! Sara, Siya, and Ilia look on in astonishment**

Sette: **suddenly self conscious** Sometimes... ya gotta get red.

Sara shows off her own bloody hand, slick with pencil cheek juice

Sette: Y'a'right? I'm sorry I cocked up. Cocked up in a way as isn't... socially acceptable nor excusable as only charmin' foreign roguery.

Sara: Yeah... W-well, you did the pageant good! You were the best Tirna ever!

Siya: Maybe TOO good a Tirna.

Sette: And you were a good Yerta! You penciled that wankstain direct in his face!

Sara: He shouldn't have disrespected twins! Even Alds should know what you do to us you do to the gods! Sette, Sette listen! That invitation to join your gang - is it still good?

Sette: Aye.

Sara: Well, we accept! Siya and Ilia, they wanna leave but we dunno anything about what it's like to be out in the world being normal people who aren't divinely favoured. It seems hard, honestly. But it's what Siya wants so I guess I gotta suck it up.

Sette: **deadly serious** I'll protect you always.

Sara: **unconvinced and unenthusiastic, but resigned** Thanks.

Sette: I'll steal you cakes! And more handsomer lads'n Jivi Flask!

Sara: **a hint of a smile** Thanks.

Behind the locked door to lizard town, Ruffles hear the commotion

Ruffles: SARA! SIYAAAAA!

The girls take off racing for Ruffles! Huffing and puffing, Lori is only a few rooms behind. She leaps inelegantly over the pipe room carnage, hearing their voices ahead

Lori: Girls! This is where the gods put us! There's only more of this outside! Only knife-twisters! Only evil!

Ruffles hears them coming and draws away from the door... only to notice the sudden stampede of beetles pouring from the stairwell. They sense doom

Back at the doorway to the construct facility, Ricker and his goons are torturing Masek with kick after kick

Ricker: **to the soldiers streaming out of hte door** Where in the hell did you come from?

Battlewright: You won't believe it but some... someone done up like Ssael whisked us through ten stories down from the roof.

Battlewright: It was amazing spellwork. For a minute I thought it was... bah, nevermind. You didn't know him and he's dead as Riv.

Ricker: Oh, I do know him - that meddler again! There is something cursed about all of this!

kicks Masek Do you know anything about that hooded son of a bitch? *kick* Henasa hha!

Mashky man! What know yeu?! WHO IS MASHKY MAN!! *kick* Stewpid roacheater, DIE THEN. Yeu've not done shite to we blessed by the golden delight!

Masek has nothing to say. Ricker spits on him in disgust. The soldiers make their way through the giant door. Down in the drainage basin, LInden reads from the self-destruct instructions

Rroan: "Let the Sisters' AEGIS BURN!" May Minnow fill your lungs! May Lady Ilganyag take interest in your dreams! May Shaensigin brittle your gods-damned longbones, spiderpaws!

**The spell detonates, and the entire area is engulfed with explosive fire. Down in lizardtown, Nanna glances up, her lizard babies sleeping around her, as light suddenly burns across them from the doorway. We see the ferry explode, the workshops, the control room. The lizard boys are vapourized along with the soldiers. Ricker's shielded armour flares and he backs into the corridor, blasted by percussive force. Hetr, Elka, and Hetr's men are throw backwards as a wall collapses. Ruffles screams as a great carpet of beetles scatters up the stairs to escape the water, covering herself and the walls. Lizardtown is rocked by explosions and a fissure opens in the wall, letting in a massive, deadly blast of water that begins to flood the cavern. Ruffles is

thrown all about, and tumbles into the dark water, shrieking. Everyone in the hallways falls as the whole shrine shakes, and Lori catches up with the girls**

Sara: Mistress Lori...?

Lori: Up, up!

Sette: *climbs to her feet** What asploded?

Lori: The self-destruct! Get back to the Great Hall!

Siya: I hear Ruffles!

Sara: Me too!

They race down the corridor, the roof falling in around them, Lori hobbling after

Lori: The other way!

On the rooftop, only Duane and Lemuel are oblivious to the chaos around them. Duane has one of Lem's throwing knives in his chest. He flinches back a step, looking down at it. When he looks up, Lemuel has closed the space between them and is striking forward with one sword. Duane leaps into the air to avoid, coming up behind him, but Lemuel is already there, striking and slicing as Duane bends and dances with impossible alacrity. We see flashes of them in life again, stick fighting in the snow. Lemuel flings another knife, Duane sidesteps, and the knife embeds in the flowery rooftop. Lemuel strikes at Duane again, he takes a step back and trips over the embedded knife. Lemuel puts a sword through Duane's stomach

Duane: Is that... 24 to 17, then, Lemon?

Lemuel's face transforms from grim determination to mad, unbridled, boyish ecstasy. It's Duane! He tears the mask off!

In the darkness of lizard town, Ruffles wakes up, momentarily knocked out by the blast. In the blackness she reaches around to feel only cold water. Dim, flickering lights from lizard town reveal only scary shapes that make the black blacker

Ruffles: Nanna!

Bodies float face down all around her. Rocks fall from the ceiling, and a great piece of the foundation suddenly rips away from above, smashing into the water and a few injured lizards, who are lost. Alone in the dark, in the rising water, Ruffles screams and screams

Above, the girls reach the locked door down to lizardtown, and can hear her screaming

Sara: Is that her?

Siya: I think so!

Sara: *pounds the door* Ruffles?! It's locked? They locked you in?! I didn't know! Ruffles!

Siya: Push it! *they push the lock bar up, and the door swings open along with rocks and water. The girls enter messily, rolling debris aside**

Sara: Ruffles!

Siya: Ruffles! We're coming!

They struggle through the rocks and bugs with Ilia, but the way is unstable, water gushing in great fists, dust choking the air, little fires breaking out. Before Sette can follow, Lori appears and snatches her wrist

Lori: They went in there?!

Sette: A-aye-

Lori: Girls! Come back! Sette, go get your friend! Bring him!

Sette: We ain't friends no more, he'll kill me!

But Sette goes - what else is there to do? Below, Sara grabs screaming Ruffles as another piece of foundation comes down

Ruffles: Nanna! Brother! Uncle! Auntie! Nanna!

Sara grabs her up in a hug to calm her down, to stop her, to do something! They have to get out of here! She drags her from the water

Sara: Ruffles, come on!

Ruffles: Nanna! Nanna!

Sara: We'll come back for them! Everything's coming down!

Ruffles: Nanna!

Ilia: Oh, Gods...

Siya: WATCH OUT!

****Another explosion rocks the cavern, and an immense slab of foundation smashes into the staircase. Ilia is crushed. Driven by terror, Sara and Siya barely make it back to the steps, covered in beetles and blood****

Siya: Ilia! Ilia! D:

Mistress Lori: COME OUT THIS INSTANT!

Siya: Mistress Lori! Ilia!

Sara: Siya, go!

****Rocks are falling, and the stairway cracks open. Siya makes it over the gap but Sara is wrangling Ruffles. Siya squeezes back into the stairwell with Sette and Lori's help pulling her wrists. Sara pushes Ruffles up the stairs but she fights her, turning around to try and get to Nanna****

Ruffles: Nanna! Get Nanna!

Sara: No, Ruffles, go! ****Sara pushes her through the gap, into a little space before the final gap leading to the corridor. She tries to follow but can't get through****

Sara: Ugh, stupid big butt!

****The cavern shakes and quakes and water squeezes into the corridor past Sara as the lights go out. Sara looks at her sister for the last time****

Sara: Siya-- don't leave me out.

****A final explosion closes off the corridor, and water gushes out over Siya and Lori and Ruffles****

****On the rooftop, everything is blue and sharp. Diva and the copilots gaze down at the Adeliers. Lem can't look at what's become of Duane's face. He cringes back, staring at the ground as if he's been struck. Duane props himself up on one arm.***

Duane: haha... haha...

Lem: *wrinkles his brow, why is he laughing?*

Duane: ...you've haunted my thoughts of late, phantom.. What a terrific coincidence, today, to find you coalesced. Why have you stopped cutting your hair.

Lem: Duane.

Duane: I... Yesterday I regaled the children of this place with our old salt lizard adventure; they crowded around me as she- as the lads once crowded us, when the campfire hungrily lapped up the black night, and Darid played his strings, and you played you and I played me, japing like eels until the captain ordered us abed... But my memories of it have sharpened, Lemuel; like a silhouette in the mist one takes for a friend until he draws near and you see the knife. My yesterdays scuttle inside me, tapping their segmented legs, feeling for seams, or to susserate unbearable conceptions.

Lemuel: Duane.

Duane: I talk too much. Ever you told me so. Are you well? Has Leysa remembered... how to smile?

Lemuel: Your voice. You don't sound like Duane.

Duane: Everything... wilted. I rebuilt it. Voice. Tongue. Lungs. And these false eyes you found me, they have made of horrors their daily bread; but today you are a fairer fare, thank God. I... I gift this place to you! Your comrades should have reached the construct facility by now. I'm certain you are searching for constructs but I regret to report they were relocated. Take solace in the engineers; your men - churls though they appear to be - will return with them and you'll find they have valuable intelligence on all of Cresce's machinations.

Lemuel: Crescians captured at the border were tortured, interrogated, and made this facility known! Queen Sonorie plans to make some gift of advanced constructs to Alderode's enemies; to domestic terrorists keen to overthrow the government. She's using the very mountain ogres we saw in Foi-Hellick's mines fifteen years ago. This is the next step of what she began then; what we heard that day in the salt lizard's cave.

Duane: Is it then? Truly Ssael's hand guides the brothers Adelier.

Lemuel: *by God, he's speaking to Duane. He holds his head* Duane. *he smiles sadly, drunkenly, happily, then in terror* You disappeared. Lost your mind, attacked me, then disappeared. I couldn't find you. It's been nigh seven years. I thought you- I didn't know what to think. It's been almost seven years. How are you still standing.

Duane: Self-slaughter is a sin. To rot is a sin; I dangle between, and the crows pick me clean.

**Lem realises suddenly that Duane will... Duane will what? If he sees her? What will he think? He'll know then. He'll know everything. Oh, God. Lem's face twists in fear and sickness as Duane reaches for him*

Duane: I've hidden away, the doddering penitent, but these coincidences mount too high not to be immaculately aligned. You play you and I play me and we'll adventure again. We will seek out the Queen's constructs, hunt them out, conclude a tale begun long ago, and then- home- Just a taste of home. A glimpse of good wife, of little son- *reaches for him*

Lemuel: **smacks his hand away** Don't touch me, unclean thing! You're not Duane. It's been seven years. You sound nothing like him!

Duane: *fumbles. He shouldn't have revealed himself. He was weak, weak weak. He looks down at the ground as it rumbles* Forgive me. I pray your mission is a success.

Lemuel: Mission? You know nothing of this mission. The Queen has endangered a Gefendur shrine and when the children inside die for her recklessness, her people will hate her for it and her domestic enemies grow stronger. The worst of us have been chosen to go inside and give these dogs more reasons to hate Sonorie. I'm sick with it, but it's the way it is, and arranged by a wiser man than me! Alderode wants the Queen laid low and Roger Foi-Hellick in the ground beside her!

Duane: Don't be foolish. Your mission is to investigate this facility; it's of no benefit to Alderode to harm children-

Lemuel: THE BEST THING THEY WILL EVER DO IS DIE.

Duane: *moves instinctively to pop him in the jaw but Lem catches his wrist*

LEMUEL: Maybe you ARE Duane. He was a grand one for speeches. But when the time came to live the Word... he tucked his tail and shrank away from threats to his tender... sensibilities. Well, there aren't pages enough in Ssael's writing, nor Gefendur scripture, not even the Book of Duane Adelier to describe all that's been lost for the tender sensibilities of WEAK MEN.

Lem signals Diva

Duane: If innocents must die then what is it all for!

Lemuel: I can't look at you. At the sight of your face I could sick up every meal I've ever forgotten. You're not my brother. He wouldn't stand here a rot-eaten ruination pleading the case of Cresce. How can you bear yourself? A sin against every sense; you're an affront to all Ssael left the world... GALIT.

Sette climbs her way through the wreckage to stand unsteadily on the roof

Sette: Duane!... Lemuel?

The ceiling shakes, Lem looks back at Sette and they exchange glances, then Diva swoops low and Lem escapes

Sette: Duane! Siya and Sara need help rescuin' Ruffles! Ya have to go help them now! Didn't ya hear that asplosion? All's a wreck inside!

Duane: What are you talking about! I directed the soldiers to the facility! Sent the wrights there myself, and the girls are safely locked away!

Sette: The place where the two-toes live is all wrecked!

Duane: What are you talking about!

Sette: Duane, please don't argue no more and go-

Duane: Get away from me! **Duane sinks down through the roof portal to where he sent the three dudes. Sette runs after. Duane alights in the smouldering wreckage of the underground waterway. It's unrecognisable and full of charred bodies. Ricker and his wright pick themselves up from the rubble, battered, bloody, and limping**

Ricker: I wisely... take us inside a soft target for laughs, a lick of breast, a sniff of pudenda, and a vulnerable coffer... and you bring me a bomb in their BASEMENT.

Wright: Sir, our intel was already threadbare, how was I supposed to know?

Ricker: Wrights SENSE things. You wiggle your digits and you stick them up the khert's arse and you tell me what it's shit smells like today. YOU SENSE THINGS.

Wright: Anteit Vaosa, they're all gone.

Ricker: Come. We fly.

Duane doesn't notice Ricker, barely notices Linden sobbing down in the drainage basin. A horrible realisation is dawning. He flees from the decimated space, dropping down through the floor towards lizard town. It's flooded; as black and suffocating as the Hells. And like the Hells, in it, he finds only the dead. Sara floats among the two-toes. But monomaniacal Duane sees only Mikaila, Jon, Cara. His own losses. His own failures. And yet something inside him, a long quiet observer of the obsession that has both driven him and blinded him, has had enough

Ssael: Look at her. She's not yours. But she's yours.

Sette's friend.

Can your perfect memory even produce her name?

Sara.

I was doing as I thought best.

You're so desperate to vindicate what was done to you; to find the meaning in what you lost and what you've suffered. If you stop a Queen, uncover a plot, slay a monster, would I forgive you? Would I somehow undo your undoing?

...

The gods put in motion a cruel and bitter world. Only mankind can find the beauty in it; can hew away the rind, forge rhymes of awful times and make art of broken hearts and sad declines. But this bitter world has treated you so tenderly. It made a gift of a girl so starved of love she grew fangs to try and hunt it out. How quickly you lost interest in her. A river brought you here to this wanting place, and offered opportunity for you to be what you've always claimed to be:

Protector. Teacher. Example. Friend.

You rejected this gift. You chose to be none of these things.

And still you screech for meaning. Still you wonder what good YOU can do, when goodness itself was here, now, begging for alms at the high walls of your unseeing heart.

God, grant me strength not to disappoint you.

TO YOUR FEET THEN, BOY. I ask you: What meaning has any of it if we must intentionally kill one innocent to maintain it? But perhaps this is a question that must again be put to Lemuel. He never did answer it.

--Ricker and his second briefly engage Keon and Hetr.

-- Jivi orders Uaid to hand-fly him to the shrine island, telling Matty to wait. Matty tells Uaid; "Let's go."

-- Puking, distraught, Lemuel sees the army coming, asks aloud where Ricker is, tells the kids to get down

-- Keon kills Ricker's second, Ricker goes through the window. Hetr sees the army arriving.

Hetr: Our forces have arrived!

Keon: Our forces? Bell hasn't seized control yet, you moron. They're still the Queen's.

Hetr: If in General Bell's name this be the day of our glorious martyrdom, then I go to the Great Father with no blemish on my heart.

Keon: I don't have any interest in the General's agenda.

Hetr: What DO you have interest in, Keon?

Keon: Power. Intelligence. And the freedom to exercise them as I see fit.

Hetr: So your soul does align with that of our great General.

Keon: Did you know the Black Tongues have taken the weight of a man, killed him, weighed him again? The number didn't change. The soul weighs less than a pubic hair. Less than a fart.

Hetr: Perhaps YOUR soul.

Keon: Toma was unaccounted for for a week after Ethelmik. There's no telling who he's reported to.

Hetr: No doubt General Bell is attending to it-

Bell: Like he's attending to all this? He didn't even know about what's happening here until the last gasps of some dying soldier turned his head.

Hetr: History doesn't remember cowards, Keon.

Keon: I'll bet you the soul of a coward and the soul of a martyr weigh the same.

****Why didn't Duane take her with him! Berating him in her head, Sette races through the shaking bowels of Litriya, retracing the breakneck dash she'd made up to the roof only a few minutes ago. She's soaked through and panting, but she can't have Sara thinking she'd abandoned her! She turns a corner into the stairwell that leads to the dusty hall to lizard town- Only to splash into water! The stairwell is flooded. Everything's flooded! She cries out, confused, short-circuiting. What now? She backpedals a few steps and Siya is there****

Siya: You! All of this came with YOU!

Sette: Siya! Where's Sara?

****Lori is standing down the hall, dumbstruck, watching the ground, holding onto Siya's journal.**

Quigley and Elka and Pantoffel are there too, watching, bemused******

Ruffles: ****coldly**** Leave.

Quigley: Sette. Let's go.

Sette: No! Where's Sara! Did you leave her? ***pushes Siya*** You're the ugly twin, the stoopid one no one likes! Where's Sara!!!

Siya: ****Lunges at her with Ruffles but Duane rises from the flooded stairwell and separates them. Lori snaps out of her reverie when he puts an arm on Siya, leaping forward to try and beat him off her. But Duane crushes Sette to him and falls at Lori's feet in deepest shame****

Duane: I made a mistake. I didn't know this would happen.

Quigley: Yes you did. You didn't think about a bloody thing for a bloody minute but your own bloody crusade. You said yourself the best thing these children could do is die.

Elka: You said that on Tirnasday? You're a real piece of shit.

Duane: I- I did not mean it in that way! I would not have had this! We are not taught to think of them as children but as wasted lives; lives wasted without God.

Lori: Sara and Ilia didn't have a duty to teach you how to see Crescian children as children.

Their purpose wasn't to play the victims in your personal morality play!

Duane: You're right. ****reaches into his sash and retrieves the waterbaby pearl. Holds it out to Lori****

Duane: What was this little one's purpose? Surely not to moulder away... in a very bitter woman's closet. Mend her. Mend yourself. Mend... all of this. ****shot of waterbaby. Lori grabs the pearl****

Duane: ...what casual villains we all are.

****Toma rounds the corner**** Toma: You know, it's when we think the gods have stopped listening that they're listening hardest. Tirna must have you up against her ear like a seashell, Adelier.

Quigs: Toma, have you seen Matty?

Toma: Yeah, he's in Uaid with his little friend, a few miles off in the trees. The army's arrived too, a big ol' unit of Firelopers and cavalry.

Quigs: *relief*

Toma: You stick to us like glue if you want to come out of this, Quigley. No more of your dogshit.

Duane: Toma, this is not the way of the country I love and the brother- men I served with. He wants me to stop them- The vliegeng pilot, he wants me to stop them.

Toma: That's an interesting conclusion to draw.

Duane: They have allepakh; it's a-

Elka: Allepakh- a juicer? We gotta get out of here!

Lori: What's that?

Elka: It enters the khert in an area and liquifies whatever materials it's been set to. It's not like a quickie state swap; as it persists, the khert struggles to normalize the environment and the consequent temperature shift creates volcanic conditions, then a khert fire. This island'll be lava and us just, really fuckin' gross soup.

Toma: Super.

Elka: Naw, it's called a Juicer, sir. I mean I guess they could have called it a Souper-

Lori: So it's a spell. Our warded saferoom should be-

Elka: Temps aside, an allepakh is overwhelming; it'll break all the spells cast on that room. The only real protection is like, a complete barrier of First Materials to cut off the infected khert. There're some suits of armour that'll get you through but...

Toma: All right, the battle outside is done. Headmistress, take these two outside, flee down to the water, get in it. Allepakh can't liquify liquids, it's safe. Elka, Quigley, we're evacuating the kids.

Duane: He wants me to stop them.

Sette: Duane-

Duane: This is the first thing that's felt right in so long. He wants me to stop them.

Quigley: God-drunk dullards - you think you plant roses, then are baffled by the thorns.

Duane: ...I shall tend this garden!

--The Crescian Army opens fire at the two remaining vliegeng who are trying to hide in the smoke.

Army leader: Motherfuckers attacking a shrine. Make it rain Aids! Ready all cannons! Fire!

A huge volley pierces the smoke

Wright: They're hiding in the smoke!

Lem: **expertly dancing Diva around the blasts** Make yourselves small!

Ricker sounds his horn from as high as he can climb in the ruins of the Yerta cannon. Lem moves to pick him up but a blast from the Firelopers separates them

Lem: Ricker! Where is your squad?!

Ricker: Golden Delight! My salvation! They're gone! But you won't leave my old bones here, will you!

Lem: What do you mean GONE?

Duane: **racing towards them** Lemuel!

Ricker: Ah! There he is! The masked freak! HE directed us down there! HE must have KNOWN there was a bomb!

Lem: Fuck me...

Duane: I can help you escape, Lemuel! There is something I must tell you!

**Another volley flies through the air. Ricker falls from the statue and into the fiery rubble below.

Diva climbs, and Duane takes a few halting steps after, as Sette catches up**

Sette: Duane! Let's leave, I don't wanna be here no more! We can go wherever you want, we can chase the silver more. I'm sorry I made ya be in the play, I cocked everythin' up-

Duane: Do not apologise to me. I cannot bear it. **Duane pyramically cilmbs the building at breakneck speed. Sette half-runs after, calling**

Sette: Duaaaaaane!

****He slams back into the ground beside her, then proceeds to punch the shit out of the ground****

Sette: Wh-what're you doing?!

Duane: Banking Momentum to fly.

Sette: ****punches the ground too**** Wait, you're goin' up after your brother? Duane, no. Duane, it ain't no good.

Duane: I must tell him about the Silver. I'll not have another chance-

Sette: The- the peril that Tittybird showed ya? *blinks* Duane, it ain't no good. Can't ya see it's no good? It's too easy, it's too handsome a knot.

Duane: Get in the water as Toma said.

Sette: Duane, I never said nawt for not t'offend ya, but I didn't like what I saw of your brother. He's like the paladins at home: does only as the gods say, and the gods always tell him t'do what he wanted t'do anyways.

Duane: Your-

Sette: Aye, aye, your gods're dead.

Duane: No. You're a good judge of character. Get in the water.

****But Duane flies into the fiery heavens, after Diva****

Lem: Make yourselves small!

Mason: Sir, are we going to retreat? We can retreat!

Mickie: Mason, no one's going to hit us! Captain Adelier is the best vliegeng pilot in Alderode.

Mason: I know.

Mickie: This isn't your first battle, is it?

Mason: Y-yes. I just wanted to see Cresce... Maybe get a shot at that coward Foi-Hellick. Isn't it your first?

Mickie: No.

****Toma, Elka, and Quigs are racing through the shrine's upper stories, towards the warded pageant hall. Elka debriefs the Captain****

Elka: ...didn't get to engage anyone. Found Pantoffel, then ran into the plat bleeding on the ground. Got us out of the lower storeys just as that self-destruct went off.

Quigs: You didn't do me any favours.

Toma: Chief princess and her engineers fled to the next town, but we did score a vliegeng. Uaid and the kids helped too, Quigley.

Quigs: ...

Elka: You should have fled with her, sir, and reported to her Majesty.

Toma: Not without you.

Elka: Ah. The seduction is complete.

Toma: Well, you had my dog.

Elka: Understandable. Saferoom's ahead. That's a helluva shield around it, don't touch the door-

Quigley: Incoming spell, get off the floor-!

Elka: Keon launches lightning, then floor spikes at Toma, Elka, and Quigley, scattering them.

Quigley: Up there!

****Quigley slices loose the hanging thuribles on the ceiling, launching him and Elka after Keon.**

Toma is left alone with Hetr, who draws his sword**

Hetr: Alone at last. So much has dragged at our heels as we've danced towards each other from opposite ends of the same stage... A burning town, unconstant Keon, mad Abby, your pig-faced lieutenant...

Toma: *How dare he insult Elka, Toma glowers, suddenly bristling with motivation* You wanna fight me? Do you? That why you broke my sword arm when you had the chance? Because you wanted a clean fight with Emil Toma? Coward. Traitor. Piece of SHIT.

Hetr: No, I am General Bell's right hand. And once he today ascends the throne I will stand at the head of all the armies of Cresce.

--

Swarm is summoned from Quigley's cloak and Keon leads him and Elka on a chase down a long hall**.

Elka: Give it up, snowflake! The whole army's outside and the Alds are threatening to drop a juicer! Now ain't the time for this!

Keon: *hesitates a moment at this news, then lays his hand against the far wall, opening it up to the outside as he considers a wise retreat**

Elka: The rat gonna abandon ship?

Keon: I've never understood why rats are judged so harshly for their healthy sense of self preservation.

Elka: What's your game anyway? What's an Aseptick doing working with a lunatic like Bell? Hasn't Cresce been good to you?

Keon: I suppose we should have a conversation, Lieutenant, but not now. Why don't you go get the kids out, then get to the Port. Take my longwalker.

Elka: Fuck your longwalker and whatever this is now. You're a murderer; a fucking psychopath, and Elan Aled's blood is on your head!

Keon: Perhaps only psychopaths move the world forward, while good men wring their hands-.

Quigley: I'll drink to that-

Trailing Swarm, Quigley leaps past Elka and goes through the wall with Keon

--

Hetr: **chasing crippled Toma through the shrine and greatly enjoying his advantage. This is too pleasant, too long-anticipated to rush!** It's so sad all you'll miss, Captain... Delicieu's Silver arrives this very day in Port Morstorben. It will tear that city open and devour Queen Sonorie as she celebrates Tirnasday. As it does so, there will rain down an attack by Aldish air forces recruited by shadowy figures in thrall to our high-minded leader!

Toma: Bell's working with Alds... so what, this is nothing but a power grab? Not clashing philosophies, different methods of keeping Cresce safe... the dog just wants all the biscuits?

Hetr: And why shouldn't we have them? Power should be taken; not given. It is why the old woman beneath the crown is so weak, so dithering. The Council will see it too. In their terror, greased by unctuous Karl Toma, now married to the gracious Lady Toma and among the nobility, they will not protest when conquering General Bell claims the throne. He'll direct the Silver into the sea, towards Alderode, then banish the vliegeng. Bell's line will rule a thousand years, and the Hetrs will ever be at their service.

Toma: She REMARRIED already? I've only been dead two weeks!

Hetr: The fickle heart of woman.

Toma: You know, I wonder if those Alds scheduled to attack the Port today are the same sorry bastards now laying in pieces all over this shrine. Would really be a cup of cold coffee with your biscuits, wouldn't it?

Hetr: ...

Toma: And I wonder if the Queen's massive experimental constructs were moved outta here not only to hide them, but to have them positioned against the Silver. Wouldn't that be funny? Godsdamned hilarious?

Hetr: I... It won't matter.

Toma: No, YOU don't matter. Bell sent your sorry ass here to get out of his way. You were useful as the head of the Ethelmik guard but otherwise you're a headcase, a moron, a prancing shitheel! Bell wouldn't give you a cigarette much less command of his army.

Hetr: You- don't know anything. My name will blaze a hundred miles high on history's page! My sacrifices will leave schoolchildren in breathless awe! My soul... is not a fart-!

**Toma yanks a rug out from under him and skewers him in the armpit.

Hetr: N-no!... those can't be my last words...

Toma: Don't worry about it. No one's going to look them up.

Elka: **breathlessly returns sans Quigley** Sir! Are you all right? Quigley and Keon fled outside- Hey, you got Hetr!

Toma: Didn't need a right arm to do him; still had my tongue.

Elka: Gross, sir, unsexy. *takes Hetr's badge* Gods, I'm sorry, I shouldn't have left you alone with him! I owed you for earlier. Stitching my arm, yanking me back inside the tent.

Toma: Owed you? What, are you keeping a grocery list in your head?

Elka: Yep.

Toma: Well, I owed you for catching us when we went over the falls.

Elka: Oh, guess that's true. Well, so, we're even?

Toma: And I thought spellwrights were good at math.

Elka: You handle the kids.

**Quigley is chasing Keon across the river. Keon pauses just short of the bank, draws his harpoon. Quigley senses an ambush and vanishes. Keon reaches land, turns to attack Quigley, but sees he's gone. He's jumped by a hefty unit of soldiers, wrights, and AP constructs.

Soldier: Aseptic Rion Keon! By order of Queen Sonorie, you will silence your spellmaking and submit yourself to our custody!

Keon: You fools, I have done nothing!

Soldier: You should have opened your belly, traitor. Well, it's too late now.

**Keon screams, panics, flails, but it's no use. The state is going to make sure he suffers.

Quigley races through the woods around the shrine, disturbing hares in the undergrowth; flightless birds; squirrels and shrews. Suddenly it's that awful day again when he saw the smoke on the horizon, heard Matty's toddler sobs. He hears the Asepticks again, their sibilant, serpentine invitation.**

Aseptic: We know you're not happy, Mathis. How could you be happy? You are not master of your household, master of your child, master of your wife. Is it not true that she makes every decision?

Mathis: I wanted nothing to do with it. She doesn't mind me at all. It doesn't matter what I threaten, what I say. It's like I'm not even there.

Aseptic: You're a good Aldishman, Mathis, and good at your work. Your success rate isn't among the best, but you've never refused an assignment. Such loyalty should be rewarded.

Mathis: Please don't hurt her.

Aseptic: You'd like nothing more than for us to make it go away. Is that right?

Mathis: Please don't hurt her.

Aseptic: Would you like us to make it go away?

Mathis: Yes.

Matty and Uaid clomp through the trees. Matty tilts his face back to the sunlight, smells the breeze

Matty: <We'll go to Sette's town, Uaid. That's where we'll go in Sharteshane. When Duane and Sette come home we'll hire Duane to write letters. We'll write to Rahm and Iori. We'll write to Siya and Sara. We'll write to Jivi and ask him to visit. He'll come on the water in his pirate ship. Sette will want to be a pirate too and maybe we'll be pirates. Aye, that's how we'll make money! You can walk on the bottom of the water behind us and push the ship when there's no wind! You can push all the ships when there's no wind!>

Uaid smiles softly, but he can see the Firelopers creeping closer behind them, at the periphery. They're not going to go to Sharteshane

**Kel Unit's pilot is straining through the smoke, trying to read Captain Adelier's signal lamp.

Another volley sends him scattering, and his vliegeng's forced to grip the shrine roof so as not to plummet from the air**

Pilot: What did that say?!

Mason: Watch out!

Miki: We're not getting out of this.

Lem: Yes, we are.

****Another volley!****

Copilot: Drop it! Captain Adelier says drop it!

Pilot: Kel! Climb! Man the release!

****Debris and shrapnel rain onto the shrine island. Sette and Jivi dance around it. Toma and Elka and the kids stop in the lobby. Toma looks up at the juicer, terrifying close****

Elka: Oh, fuck me. Fuck me.

****Copilots unstrap the juicer as they soar higher, pilot raises an arm****

****Duane alights on Kel's back, punches them both out and binds them. Pilot looks back to see the very image of Ssael approaching****

Pilot: Oh, God!

****A volley slams into the vliegeng, and it begins to cook alive, shrieking and flailing. Duane's nearly thrown off, and is no position to catch the juicer. The watchers below point up at it and scream as it unmoors - But Diva emerges from the smoke to catch it!**

Duane: Lemuel!

****Across the river, Lori and co. are being helped ashore and covered in blankets by soldiers****

Lori: Stop firing at them! They have some kind of juicy bomb!

Soldier: A juicer?

Captain: Shit-

Diva holds the bomb aloft

Captain: Clear the lopers! Clear them a wide path north! Let them go!

****But the lopers are too fast, and a final volley is launched. Duane catches one shot, but it's sloppy, and his gloves alight. The second shot grazes Diva and scatters its riders. Duane pulls Mason back from near death. Miki sees them through the smoke and launches an attack, which Duane catches. He recognises her spellery, rubbing his fingers together. He drops Mason and stumbles back to the saddle where Miki's mask is singed, lens broken, hanging half off her head, bleeding. Duane gapes in disbelief.**

****Cut away to That Night... except now the story continues from Mikaila's perspective after Duane is clubbed. She wakes up to the sound of counting. Strangers have their backs to her. One of them is Johfrit Jeffers who is sloppily emptying vials of red into Duane's mouth. Duane sputters and gags against them and Johfrit curses. Bastion's not thrilled either****

Bastion: Paralyze the pharynx as I showed you! And take care not to detach his tongue-

Johfrit: Right, right. **snf** Is this concoction cherry-flavoured, Bastion?

Bastion: Old habit from attending children.

Johfrit: Haha. A cough syrup that delivers a hell of a cough. I didn't know you could distill it like this.

Bastion: I lifted the tech from my old Master.

Johfrit: Old Delicieu? When do I get to meet him? Or is it too soon in our relationship for an introduction to dad?

Bastion: Fuck off. Watch what you're doing there. The plague is still a death sentence.

****Mikaila cries out suddenly, the wound in her shoulder galling her. The poor Crescian mook who inflicted it grabs her, panicking, and calls for Bastion****

Bastion: Shut up! I told you I sealed the artery! You've made a shambles of this. If she dies it is on YOU. SHUT UP.

****Bastion pulls the Silver spine piece from his satchel and Johfrit's eyes widen****

Johfrit: That it?

Bastion: Aye. Moment of truth. Stand clear and mind all the glass.

****The wrights back away and, at the periphery, the masked assassin watches in disapproval****

Assassin: God won't forgive you damning one of his clerics, Black Tongue. He's WATCHING.

Bastion: I hope he is.

**Bastion perches atop Duane's back, hunching over Duane's extra spell port like a wizard over his crystal ball. His snake eyes burn white, and red eats up the contours of his palms as he connects one to Duane's spine. Duane's life flashes before Bastion's eyes, nonsensical, a blur of panic and rage. The cleric's ragged breathing grows more and more laboured until blood oozes into his lungs. A death rattle joins each dying exhalation. And then it is done. Death closes its fist around the Soud's heart, and his soul unmoors from his body. Bastion delights as the soul does not scatter! A spectral green hand rises from the corpse's flesh hand, like morning mist about a river, but it is a whole hand! Unbroken! Unblemished!

Bastion doesn't remain that way himself. Mikaila isolates the Edge Aspect from the scattered glass and rakes it across the villain in a sudden, grievous assault. The mooks scatter and even Johfrit isn't certain entirely where the spell came from! Mikaila slumps forward, her body refusing to obey her as she orders it to reach papa. Unconsciousness claims her - and so does the attentive assassin

**When we return to the present day, Duane peels the flight mask from Mikaila, exposing her green eyes, her pretty face. She and Duane lock eyes. How is this possible? This isn't like his evening visions. This isn't his Mikaila. And yet, inexplicably, it is SOME Mikaila. She is here, solid as he is, and doesn't scatter like starflies at his touch **

Duane:Mikaila?

Mikaila: **sees Lem over Duane's shoulder, and her gaze flicker towards him** Papa?

Duane: **she recognises him?? No. She's looking over his shoulder. Duane begins to turn, mind spinning with a thousand half-formed realisations**

Lemuel: It wasn't meant to happen like this. I thought I'd outsmarted God. But I'm damned. I've always been damned. This is what I deserve, but not you.

Duane: ...I'd not have brought her to the temple that day if YOU had not asked to see her. YOU headed that night's patrol. Where were you men? Where were you? How is it you were so readily able to replace my eyes? Lemuel? Why-

But the only answer Lem has is to cut Duane's head from his body. He falls, and Sette watches from the ground in horror. Mikaila flings herself into Lem's arms

Mikaila: Papa!

Lem: Are you all right?

Mikaila: Yes! Yes! Who was that mad person? He wasn't Crescian - was he a traitor working for them?

Mason: Sir! They're letting us withdraw! GO GO!

Lem: Put out the fire.

Lem turns Diva around (still carefully clutching the Juicer) and makes for the trees. And there, on the horizon, is Uaid clumsily running from a pair of pursuing Firelopers.

Mikaila: There! The ogre!

Lem: Call it, da aliaol. I don't trust my eyes.

The lopers throw a pymaric net around Uaid, more intent on capturing him than harming him any further. Matty furiously puts the field spreader back on and Uaid bursts free. In the sky behind him, Diva dives with the Juicer, releasing it almost delicately into Uaid's path. Matty can't see it, can't hear it, but he can FEEL the enormous burst of Aspect as it closes in

Matty: TAOMABI TAOMABI TAOMABI! UAID! RUN! UAID UAID UAID!!

**Uaid smiles at the approaching snack. He'll run after he partakes-
BOOM

Diva pirouettes over the explosion and the kids cheer. Lem is stony-faced.**

Mason: DEATH TO TRAITORS! Right in its ugly puss! Vaosa! How'd a girl get to be such a deadeye?

Mikaila: Hahaha! Not just a girl- Mikaila Adelier! The Golden Delight!

Still reeling from Sette's news that Sara would not be leaving the shrine, Jivi sees Uaid go down. Blind with rage he peels a bloody sword from the ground and starts hacking the bodies of Aids. Movement catches at the corner of his eye. It's an officer. Jivi stumbles towards him and starts hacking at him like a side of pork, the sword sparking and spitting against his armour. Toma intercedes, putting his sword through Ricker's remaining eye. He scoops Jivi up.
Deep in the woods, Uaid lays collapsed and burning, surrounded by his own artificially arranged mind. The squishes circle in lazy liberation amidst the clouds of loose First Earth, smoke, and shafts of late morning sunlight. Crescian wrights warn Quigley away but he doesn't hear them. He searches through the fallen trees, among Uaid's wreckage, and finally finds Matty laying in Vienne's arms**

Quigley: Don't take him, Vienne! I need him.

The vision vanishes. Matty sits up. He grasps Chitz and stumbles brokenly towards Uaid's remaining eye. The light fades from it, and Matty presses his palms mournfully to the swiftly cooling stone

Later, the twins have all been evacuated from the shrine. Ruffles sleeps uneasily against Siya's side as Lori watches over them, chatting with the soldiers. Elsewhere, Sette is hunting out Duane with the dog butt twins. She catches his stink and finds him sitting headless beside a stream, crows pecking at his open throat. A hurled branch scatters them and Sette approaches uncertainly

Sette: ... I got us a ride. Y'keen t'get back on the road?

Duane sits up at the sound of her voice. He reaches into his robe, produces Bastion's amulet, and hands it to her. He surrenders.

Lady Ilganyag scavenges the khert for memories. She pulls a memory of Siya's sketchbook from the aether

inset: "Western Alderode. The quarantined plague district of Fachlyne."

Fachlyne is filthy. Crows scavenge the open dumpsters and trash-filled gutters, pulling prizes out for themselves in an echo of Ilganyag's scrounging. Around them, the diseased and forgotten wander the streets. Above in the abandoned old apartment, Bastion slumbers on. Timofey tries for the hundredth time to turn the page of the book he's reading, to no avail. A rat pokes its snout from the wall and he brightens

Tim: Hungry scholar, there is more to these volumes than the nibbles you collect. Whole feasts lie inside; multiply coursed meals to sate tastes coarse or refined. And you, studious creeper, possess the crucial contours necessary to dish those victuals. Lend a starving student a single toe; one corporeal claw that will turn this page and serve me the next crumb-

But the rat scampers off, and Timofey despairs. Fortunately, Bastion finally coughs and stirs

Timofey: Master Winalils!

Bastion: KOFF KOFF!

Timofey: Master Winalils!

Bastion: How long'd she keep me asleep this time?

Tim: Four days! I feared she'd freed you at last from your fleshly cage-

Bastion: Touching.

Timofey: Leaving no one here to turn this page!

Bastion: Touching.

Timofey: And that is my shortcoming! Touching! I want to touch!

Bastion: Did you develop existential angst while I was gone? At'gwe, I pissed myself...

Timofey: I tried to bribe one of your prostitute friends into tending you but she responded with such a hand gesture I for a moment bethought she'd traded a whore's arts for a spellwright's.

Bastion: ...I feel terrible.

Timofey: Certainly she will forgive you...

Bastion: No, I mean Tiddybird nearly broke my neck. Four days... At least I know she still values me too much to let me die. How fare Adelier and the girl?

Timofey: There roared and roiled a great battle in the centre of a river. For a while I watched; then innocents began to die. I could do nothing; only a shadow. Only a voice. I fled, and have since been rereading this page again and again and again... watching the little rodents enact their more civilised dramas inside the walls.

Bastion: But where is-

Tim: Adelier is in the custody of the Peaceguard. They are speeding towards the coast, towards a city in which the Queen of Cresce is scheduled to oversee the great Tirmasday twin sacrifice. Are you truly unwell?

Bastion: Food will help. *starts stuffing himself*

Timofey: There will be no more page-turning from the hands of the Litriya dead. Their stories have stopped. There is nothing more. How am I any different? At least Adelier can bend a blade of grass.

Bastion: Would you prefer to be him, then?

Tim: No...

Bastion: And I doubt he'd trade down for you. It's crucial in this life to have others we are pleased not to be; and still others in a better station towards which we can aspire. There are a few solipsists among the Black Tongues. By my lonely cock, they are as insubstantial as you are. No, look at Adelier and be grateful you've a head heavy with neither God-bothering delusion, nor bone-eating beetles. Perhaps he would look at you and be grateful he can scratch his own ass.

Tim: I saw such bravery. Such sacrifice. And I cannot turn a page. For even an ounce of Adelier's agency I would surrender things I dare not name... How do you count this poor shadow a success at all?

Bastion: Well. You're cute at least. But if you think anyone - particularly Adelier - has significant agency in this world... then I need to sharpen your reasoning processes.

Timofey: Perhaps you do! I cannot puzzle out what Lady Ilganyag wants!

Bastion: ...she's been in my head since I was a boy; a mentor and a friend when I had no one. Surely I know her better than any other Black Tongue ever has, but I don't truly know her at all... Only... that she is good. I know that she is good.

Tim: You cannot know that when she has such control of you.

Bastion: I don't take it personally. Every player is an egg in her nest; and the patient parakeet has long been incubating us. Not much of a mother when we hatch, is she... She abandons or kills us as soon as we've served our purpose.

Lady Ilganyag: I have never killed a man; not even those men who would be grossly improved by it. What is your bodycount, boy?

Bastion: Save me your sophistry.

Lady: Oh, the cruel things you say when you think I am away. Ssh. I will not soothe you to sleep again-

Bastion: SOOTHE me? You nearly KILLED me-

Lady: Nearly, yet here you remain to grouse and complain. Well, I accept your resignation.

Bastion: I- Well, I am! I mean I do! I resign! I'm through with you! And doubtless you're through with me. What's left? You have your righteous corpse now shambling dutifully to the waltz you play him.

Lady: Jealousy twists you into an ugly shape.

Bastion: I am not jealous. I think you're perfect for each other. The carrion crow and the crowing carrion... Was I never anything but a tool to create him? And the Black Tongues... were they a tool to create me?

Lady: You think highly of yourself.

Bastion: To create Prakhuta, then. Cutter. Delicieu.

Lady: I love you.

Bastion: We Black Tongues all were tools; a succession of whetstones, one generation sharpening the next. All of us gears in a dreadful clockwork, turning, turning, turning, our teeth compelling the next generation towards machinations we could not see from within the machine.

Lady: I love you. But I cannot protect you. You are safest if you do what you want most in the world, Bastion. If you resume your work here in the plaguelands. Tend to the suffering, pursue a cure, research the plague.

Bastion: Are you- are you giving me the sack?

Lady: I thought you resigned.

Bastion: Maybe I was playing hard to get.

Lady: The result is you are hard to want. The Black Tongues will hunt you no further. They will soon have Delicieu's research, and will stop pursuing you.

Bastion: You're lying. I took Master Delicieu's notes and destroyed them.

Lady: ...if you do not do as I say, disaster will befall you. You will LONG to die. That is not a threat, that is the future I have found.

Bastion: So the dumpster-diving crow has put it all together.

Lady: I have found signs in the darkness... but I must be careful. I am like a wright. The khert will annihilate me as an irritant if I am not subtle in my shaping.

Bastion: ...you fight reality itself, then?

Lady: We all do, my beloved, at different scales.

Bastion: Did you know Ruckmearkha would take over the Black Tongues when you left them?

Lady: Like me, Ruckmearkha was created. There is only one way Ruckmearkha can be; driven by his appetite and blinded by his lust. He doesn't concern me. But men... men were grown. From seed to stalk to bloom they rose, stretching towards the sun. This chaos is their strength. At the beginning, we senet beasts watched that winding way and marveled. We thought we could control it for our benefit and for yours, but we were fools. They died. And I learned senet beasts cannot control man.

Bastion: But you're trying.

Lady: With a lighter touch. I am the sun you reach towards; the cool water that compels your roots. I nourish and I hope, the careful gardener. Thus far, the shape is pleasing.

Bastion: Pleasing? You're inspiring murder and madness.

Lady: I am inspiring growth. But you know as well as any man that the price of growth is destruction.

Lady: With purpose. Senets make up less and less of the world. Man continues to wind through the garden, choking out all other life. The khert is choked. Red-faced and gasping. It is full, it is forgotten. Where has the gardener gone? The nursery is on fire, the children are screaming, and where has their keeper gone?

Bastion: ...

Lady: The dead do not leave the world, Bastion. The world leaves the dead.

Bastion: ...are you going to destroy the world, Lady Ilganyag?

Lady: There is nothing you can do. Stay here. Recover. Work. I love you.

Bastion: *to Timofey* ...she was slightly less cryptic than usual. Things must be going her way.

Tim: Well, it is no longer our concern. She gave permission to stay away from it all! Stay here!

Bastion: Which means it's the last thing we should do. If I'm to beat her I must do what she least expects!

Tim: Put on a shirt?

Bastion: I'm going to angrily climax all over this flat.

Tim: WHA NO! That's not unpredictable at all!

Bastion: Great angry eels, it's going to splurt across the room and flay the paint from the wall like a Quartermaster's lash. There! A fine analogy for my favourite poet!

Tim: No! You unforgiveable libertine, you mustn't mix metaphors!

Bastion: My spunk has sunk to my phantom junk and who woulda thunk it's not quite defunct-

Tim: HOW DARE YOU SLANT RHYME-

Bastion: Better move-

Tim: Move where?

Bastion: Go and aid the girl in whatever way you can. Prakhuta is going to that city. I will join you once I've recovered again from the brink of death.

Tim: I don't want to see more horror!

Bastion: Then stop it happening, ssaemalin!

Tim: I can't stop anything!

Bastion: I say we can. I say we must!

We see the medium sized farming town that lays a few miles from the Port. It's Tirnasday afternoon, and a great procession is making its way down the street. Kids hang up their shoes for Tirna and adults are roasting the evening hogs.

Kid1: Here comes the Lions! Come on!

The kids race to see a circus procession of animals. Grebbers, great ostrich-like fowl, a giant kedis, and some dogs in lion costumes.

Kid2: RAWRRRR!

Kid1: Who's going to slay them? All the best fighters are away at war.

A skinny girl in Peaceguard armour waves at them

Her: I'm on it!

Kid1: Man, this is the worst Tirnasday ever.

**Just then, a richly accoutered plod twirls into a skinny Peaceguard keeping parade goes out of the street. It has dumb baby arms and is trying to distribute candy, but can't fling it very far.

The kids tentatively creep forward to snatch goodies from the ground**

Darkest Paul and Maur are on top of a lavish parade float. Papier Mache renditions of the gods serve as its centrepiece

Paul: Why did you give them the baby arms, Maur? They got a candy-throwing range of five feet.

Maur: Miscommunication, Darkest. I didn't know we'd be distributing candy and Compeer Lauricella said the baby heads were too disturbing.

Paul: Why did there have to be baby anything?

Maur: Well, I wanted to use them up before they started to turn. Don't you think it lends a sense of occasion to things? New beginnings!

Paul: That was the idea behind the candy! After centuries of hiding, the Black Tongue Brotherhood is out of the shadows at last! We will reconnect with the common man; show them we are nothing to fear! *Maur flings some candy out, and some kids catch it. They grow a duck bill when they eat it, and another grows a tail. Still another breathes fire**

Paul: I doubt her Majesty wants our visit today to be ANY sort of occasion. She's going to put the screws on.

Maur: Well, she wants our work with Roger Foi-Hellick finished, and who can blame her? Her citizens are unhappy, the two-toes are revolting, her General is conspiring against her, and she needs a win. And we'll give it to her! Maybe not quite yet with poor Roger, but we've worked out some excellent strategies for dealing with that town the Alds are occupying at the border.

Paul: Hrm.

Maur: It almost feels NAUGHTY, doesn't it? If Lady Ilganyag still were directing us... if she could see us flouting her old rules and siding with Cresce...

Paul: She'd garrote us.

Maur: Do you think what Bastion said is true? Do you think she plans to kill us?

Ruck: You are chicks to her! In your beaks she vomited half-digested truths. She never would kill her chicks. Are you not reassured to know Ruckmearkha has more respect for you than that?

****Paul and Maur exchange grimaces****

Ruck: ****waving, as Yerta**** To be the centre of a swarm of glittering eyes and screaming mouths. There is no god so terrible that he does not crane his neck towards the songs of worship!

****Outside town, on the road to Litriya, plods are cleaning up dog poop from the recently passed procession****

Guard: Come on now, plods, come on! I don't want to miss the lion fight.

Guard: Lizards are so much better at this. When they letting them outta those camps?

Guard: I don't know. I think the Lord General wants them all deported from the country. I know there're baddies among 'em, but seems rotten for them and rotten for us too to paint with such a broad brush. Hey, you want any lunch? This market has killer chowder.

****One of them dashes inside a little roadside bodega. Ana watches him, and retrieves a piece of Maur's candy from the dust. Inside the shop, an older lady lizard is stocking the shelves. The guard sees her and gibbers****

Guard: ***Wha-? You still have lizards here? You're going to catch hell, they were all supposed to go to the camps!**

Shopkeep: Our Deiedra and her kids have never hurt anyone in their lives. The guards can come drag them off if they want to but then who's going to tend our garden? Stock our shelves? Stiv and Jani went to fight Alds; now the state wants to take our lizards too? I won't hear of it!

Lizard: Thank you, sir.

Guard: Well... I don't suppose it's any of my business, but if they make off with half your inventory one night and leave only a few slashed throats behind you'll have only yourself to blame. Pack of papers, two plugs, and a bowl of that daily special. ***breathes into the breathbox***

Shopkeep: Any sign of the Twin from Litriya?

Guard: Last I heard the procession was turned away by a stormie blow! But they'll bring her! They will!

Shopkid: ****peeps his head up from behind the counter**** What if they don't though? Tirna will be so mad.

Shopkeep: Kial told me he heard all kinds of ruckus coming from the river, and Old Seen swore he saw vliegeng hiding in the clouds.

Guard: Vliegeng out here? He's cracked. as a Sharte. Watch your fire there, you got eels.

Shopkeep: ***tries to fan them away*** They've been bad all day. Something's going on. Ill omens abound! Yerta shield us from the younger sister's wrath!

Lizard: ****A fireball suddenly erupts from the cookpot, and she pulls the shopkid away from the molden contents. Giant smoke eels suddenly evanesce in the cooking fire! The bodega begins to burn, and the family rushes outside to see Prakhuta, Ana, and a small army of liberated lizards marching down the road. The human family runs off only to encounter a swarm of blood-streaked Silver tentacles! The shopkeep grabs the kid by the scruff of his jacket, hurling him down an alley, then turns to combat the monster with a hefted stick****

Prakhuta: You're liberated, sister!

Shop Lizard: Liberated? From one fire to another!

Prakhuta: A death chosen is a life lived! We march to the coast! We march on the queen! The old gods have sent us their favour! The marrow! The marrow! The storied Silver Marrow of the Agib!

Shop Lizard: Lady Ilganyag the Betrayer! She's in your head just like in the old stories. Don't do this! Evil! That one! He has an outcast's scars!

****Inspired, the lizard kid throws a rock at Prakhuta. It strikes his head, and he bleeds. Prakhuta approaches the kid, dips a claw in his own blood, and draws lines across the other's face.****

Prakhuta: Now you have them too. We are all of us pariahs! Man has made us pariahs in our own world!

Shop Lizard: But that's a spiderpaw with you!

Prakhuta: She has renounced them.

Shop Lizard: Where are you from? Who was your family?

Prakhuta: Dead now. Killed. Killed by a spiderpaw. **Flash to him standing over their dead bodies** Like so many of our families. But together, and with Lady Ilganyag's favour, WE will kill spiderpaws.

Another of the Lizards raises his spear, and rants: We deserve a place in this world! A place that isn't underneath the boot of the men who run it now! We aren't animals! If the old world and the old ways are gone, Cresce must make us Crescians. Make us men!

Prakhuta: *laughs and laughs* Oh, don't put it like that. You wouldn't like that!

Other Lizard: What then?

Prakhuta: Make... uss... REMEMBERED.

Alongside a hound paddock at the foot of a pretty hound kennel set half a mile back of the coastal highway (but the sea is still in view), three old Crescian men are regarding Knock as she struggles to keep her balance atop a jenga tower of roughly hewn blocks that prevent her dangling unsupported from the noose around her neck. A bored looking little kid marks off "ssphw" from the fourth of five possible lines on a slate nailed to a fencepost. A little stickman drawn above gets one more leg

Man1: One more guess, Sharte.

Knock: toldju... ah don't... read..!

Man2: Shoulda thoughta that 'fore you tried ridin' off with my Molly.

Knock: I need a hound t'get t'Ana! Ana needs savin'!

Man3: We don't look kindly on hound thieves 'round these parts, Sharte.

Man2: Myep. Shartes.

Man1: Hate 'em.

Man3: You got one more guess. Make it a good one!

Knock: *looks around desperately at all the watching hounds, the hound hat on the kid, the hounds on the kennel sign* Uh... Hound?

Man1: *HOW DARE SHE GET THE ANSWER. He flips the table and approaches her in a rage* I thought you couldn't read!

Man2: Cheatin' Shartes.

Man 3: Hate 'em.

He goes to kick the final brick away when Keon's Longwalker scoops her up, leaving her executioners to blink dazedly up a cut noose. Knock falls into the main compartment of the vehicle. Elka's hair is done, and she's in a nice, crisp new uniform with armour, looking clean and sharp

Elka: You all right, pinky?

Knock: Ya seen how that mob turned on me all for pettin' a dog? I'd never steal no dog, I'd never steal nawt save a second glance at beggin' orphans t'be certain they ain't spilled none've the liquid alms I left in their outstretched beer glasses-

Elka: Why do Shartes always assume honest people are stupid?

Knock: Honest? Me old uncle Nary says honesty's conditional on a round belly and an indifferent prick. You chasin' the Silver?

Elka: That's the plan.

Knock: Now you try tellin' me the gods don't love the Frummagem.

Elka: Go sit down and don't make me regret nabbing you

Knock: **Goes into the back of the transport where Sette is sullenly sitting next to headless Duane, looking out the window. Quigley and Jivi are in the back with Matty** Sette! Still alive?

Sette: *shrug*

Knock: *looks at headless Duane* ...he lose weight?

Up front, Elka enters the cockpit to find Toma shaving at the wheel. He looks back at her, just happy to see her smile

Toma: You lost your wild woman look. I'd gotten used to it.

Elka: Ya know it struck me that if everyone thinks I'm dead I probably lost my spot in the Reta Salon.

Toma: They good?

Elka: I thought so. Sweethearts too; they got me right in after my promotion, so I could get my little swoop. Gotta make up for the rest of me somehow, right?

Toma: It's a powerful swoop. Sure wish you'd lay off beating up on your looks.

Elka: ...yeah. I don't know why I do it. I just feel I gotta let people around me know I know what I am.

Toma: And what's the thing you know you are?

Elka: Uuuuuggo.

Toma: Well, you're not. You're objectively wrong.

Elka: You just like me.

Toma: No, I don't like you at all. I love you.

Elka: Well, now I REALLY can't trust your judgment.

Toma: You're such an asshole.

Elka: Right? But you gotta see all the kit, sir, this transport's like a fieldhouse armoury in the back!

Toma: Watch them sticky fingers. None of it's requisitioned to us! I'm already nervous about uh, reappropriating this transport of Hetr's.

Elka: But there's even a mini burner, I was able to coordinate with my swoop *shows off her blue* Want me to do you red?

Toma: Oh, hell yeah.

Elka: Making yourself all civilised for your old lady?

Toma: Please. The Queen's in mortal peril from some combination of another Aldish air raid, a pain-eating First Silver superweapon, and the treacherous General of her armies, and you think I'm worried about looking good for my ex?

Elka: Yep. She's a noble. Wouldn't she get an invite to feast with her Majesty today? Maybe we'll see her eatin' for two at the buffet table.

Toma: *grumble* Hetr said she's already married that Karl guy.

Elka: She can't be married to him! You're not dead. She's still married to you!

Toma: Yeah, well, the legitimacy of the thing isn't foremost in my mind right now, Lieutenant. I don't know how to feel. Sounds like she's been played. I can't decide if I should be pissed off or scared for her.

Elka: Pissed off.

Toma: Easy for you to say.

Elka: It really was. Only two syllables.

Toma: If I see her, I just- don't want to look like I just fell out of a mountain ogre's asshole, is all. And I don't want to scare my little girl.

Elka: Wish I knew what we're heading into. Sure it was a good idea bringing the circus in the back?

Toma: Adelier and Quigley took the Silver down with me beneath the Nevergreen. They have incentive to do it again... and I couldn't trust any of the reinforcements at Litriya. I'm a damn fool but I couldn't leave the Plats with them. Lotta bad blood seeing a shrine attacked, and they might just "lose track" of any Aldish prisoners. Until Bell's head is kebab'd on Hondbeen Spire, we can't trust anyone.

Elka: Except Queen Sonorie.

Toma: Wasn't thrilled with her using that shrine like that. Don't lie and tell me you were. Kids died in there. They'd gutted those waterwomen like marlins.

Elka:..I heard her Majesty once say in a speech... the true evil of Alderode is all the evil we... deliriously imagine committing in order to rid the world of it.

Toma: I guess there's a lot to be said for staying on the farm.

****From Duane's blind POV we see Sette wiggle his eyes around trying to tune them back in.**

Finally her face comes into view as his vision sputters. Knock watches with great fascination.**

Sette: See awt yet?

Duane: *thumbs up as he holds his head, gauging the damage to his speaking apparatus*

Knock: Thrift's a virtue, me girl, but could be time t'buy a new attack zombie. Takin' the head off's got to void the warranty anyway.

Sette: Naw, he's still good. Bung me the sewin' kit out our bag.

Knock: Ya plan to t'stitch his head on? Ya think him a ragdoll?

Sette: Mmmm, reckon I can hold his head on if the inside bits is reconnoitered. Cor, Duane, ya do need a plodman t'mend ya proper, your bones is all unboned.

Knock: What done it?

Sette: His brother. His brother's a wicked ultravillain.

Knock: Ain't that ever the way. He got his hair up in a tail? Queer coloured eyes? Kills people just to watch 'em die?

Sette: Ya know him?

Knock: They're all the same. Never known a plod t'have its brother come after it tho.

Sette: I dunno, I ain't never had no sibs I can recall.

Knock: Uncle Nary always were a careful one. 'Til YOU. Queer t'ponder, tho' mebbe you've value as a collector's item.

Sette: Da needs me so I can take over the gang. He's testin' me; he's... he's... *pauses, and thumps her chest with her fist, looking down in realisation*

Sette: ...ya know what the silver monster is? S'the eel that kicks up in here when I fret o'er Da. It's warrin'. It's killin'. It's dyin'. It's sibs who do you rotten and da's that leave ya to swing. It's Stockyard and Sara and Ruffles' fam and Uaid and fat blokes who'll never care what y'are so long's ya got what they want. It's every bad thing bein' awful forever and never able to be forgot.

Knock: Reckon there's a lotta home in there. A lotta Nary. Lotta Ana. A lotta me. Mebbe lotta you?

Sette: *makes a fist over her heart, then throws it away, as though discarding her pain. She looks up, suddenly all bratty smiles* Naw, none've me. I ain't gonna be no home for eels. I'm too busy.

Knock: That's right, girl. Fuck it. Wager you was a terror back at the river. Wager you was a true Frummagem!

Sette: *wipes her eyes, it hurts too much to think of what really happened* I were! A mysterious warrior swooped in from faraway lands to kill'n defend against hordes unnumbered! There were flying snakes but our mountain ogre weren't concerned and tied 'em to knots. There were Ald soldiers but the Litriya gang weren't scared and cut all their throats and aired their moldy innards. There were wrights but mad two-toes hamstrung the lot and ate their faces when they tumbled t'the ground. Blood, blood, a sea of blood. But a tidy victory. After we settle the silver... on our way home I'll nick Siya and Sara presents and bring 'em to 'em and visit with 'em and there'll be laughs and songs loud enough t'cow the sun.

Knock: You're a terror for sure.

****In a change of clothes, Jivi is watching Quigley tend to a cleaned up, sleeping Matty.****

Jivi: Looks like some ghosts got in Chitz back there. Matty, is Chitz still working?

****Matty ignores him. Pantoffel whines and Jivi finishes ripping open a bag of feed for her****

Quigley: You called me a liar once. You always knew.

Matty: **opens his eyes but doesn't speak. Jivi looks on**

Jivi: Matty, you all right?

Matty: ...

Quigley: He did this before, too. It's irritating as piss.

Jivi: Did what?

Quigley: Stopped talking. After his mother died. His mother was using her forge to construct Uaid for a faction rebelling against the government of Alderode. Before her inevitable discovery, I went to the government and told them what she was doing so I might be spared. They tortured her for information, then killed her.

Elka: Y-YOU? You ratted out your wife? That's not how the play goes!

Quigs: That play always sounded like a fine world. Never saw it, but it sounded fine... We're only allowed thirty years. Not a lot of time for plays. For wives. For sons...

I think it's easier for other Plats. They pair; they fuck; they clone themselves; they sink into the delusion that the Gods can't wait to bring us home... Love's an idea that lives in the world of the playhouse, and I've never had a lot of time for it.

Jivi: Quigley, shut up! **Sits by Matty as though to protect him. Quigley stands up, smiling the most ugly, capitulating smile**

Elka: But you- you went after them. After the agents that killed her.

Quigley: When I found him blind in the wreckage of the forge I hated that he still was moving. Because it meant I couldn't die with her. Hysterical, that. I turned her in to save my skin, but after she was gone I could think of nothing but dying. I think the khert laughs at that. I do.

Elka: No. No, I've heard of this. Alderode has some kind of mind control shit in place. You loved her but they- they messed with your head. They made you turn her in.

Quigley: Too much playhouse, Leftenant; too many plays...

Elka: It doesn't make any sense!

Jivi: I HATE Alderode. I hate YOU. **flees to Toma. Sette blinks after him uncertainly**

Quigley: *to Matty* We were happy before he was born. We'd never belonged anywhere in our lives until we belonged with each other. Or at least it felt like that, for a while. We talked about breaking traditions, upsetting patterns, stepping off wellworn roads. But then the boy was born and she became a stranger to me. All I could see in him was something else that belonged to Alderode... You can air your complaints at an unjust system, but when you wilfully condemn a new life to that system, how are you not precisely as culpable in its damnation? I couldn't stand the sight of him. And Vienne, who'd always been able to understand, couldn't understand THAT. And if I was going to be guilty of a crime that enormous, why should I care about betrayal and cowardice and lies...

Toma calls for Elka, and she's too happy to leave, staring at the ground in hollow disappointment

Q: **But Quigley needs someone to engage with him. He needs someone to hate him; to call him evil so he can agree. I can play the part of villain. Villains don't have to feel; they don't have to care. He hangs in the doorway and stares down Duane** You can't understand the peace that came when I told them what she was doing. Everything made sense again for a few perfect minutes, and I was among men who understood how I'd suffered for her selfishness; her crimes. I was a limb of Alderode in a way I'd never even known I wanted to be. Briefly, I wasn't afraid anymore. Now isn't that the most awful thing you've ever heard? Isn't that a fucking crime?

D: ...I would have done the same thing.

Quigley is completely broken by the reply. His hand slips from the door frame. His smile dies. Tears well

Q: ...you would have?

Duane meets his eye and nods

Something deep inside Quigley breaks. He sinks to the floor, sobbing like a child

D: ...

Q: You believe Ssael killed the Twins. Why... didn't he remake the world after? Fix us?

D: Ssael was only a man. If I asked you to remake the world, would you even know how to begin?

Q: You really believe that dogshit...

D: I do.

Q: The world behaves... uncannily as it would if there were no intelligences behind the curtain... no Gefendur Twins... no Ssael the Godslayer. Only a dispassionate khert and the men who twist it to their purposes.

D: How are you certain your heart is beating? Can you hear it? Feel it? No, only in extremis. Only at the best of times - and the worst.

Q: ...

D: That's my certainty of God. He's the beating heart of me.

Q: You are a... barking... prison for maggots and worms.

D: Perhaps... this life a wash for you. But you and I - we must endure until the khert is through with us. That is the only responsibility we truly cannot escape in this imperfect world.

Q: Gefendur say Plats are on their last life. We die and enter the Twins' Kingdom. I hope it's true... so I can shit at their feet.

--

Back in the cockpit, our Crescians are looking at the ruins of a moderately sized town - the same town that we saw the procession pass through earlier

Elka: This is Ethelmik all over again...

Toma: General Bell's done this. Purposefully, accidentally, I don't know, but the Queen knew Delicieu's Silver was dangerous from the start; and it's Bell that went forward with it anyway.

Elka: Maybe it's not the Silver. In Ethelmik there were like, vines everywhere, smoke eels, carnage galore... Look, you can see the walls of Port Morstorben ahead; they have the shield up. The Queen is there!

Toma: I see it-

Outside town, Anadyne and Cutter look on. Smoke eels burst suddenly from the panel and Toma loses control of the longwalker. It careens towards the cliff!

Jivi: Captain, what're you doing?!

Toma: It's not responding!

Everyone in the back gets tossed around as the Longwalker tries to suicide-throw itself into the sea

Toma: Elka! Eject the Aspect Battery!

Elka does so, and the Longwalker topples over into the dust. Our bedraggled heroes crawl from its belly and into the grass only to find Matty has vanished. Quigley screams out his name, bolting into the woods. Not too far away, Ana is stumbling towards Port Morstorben, holding onto her belly

Cutter: Eyes bigger than your stomach? That was a feast.

Ana: I hear... that man... I hear...

Ana pukes up Starfish, who immediately uncurls and slithers his ungainly bulk towards the sound of Quigley's cries

Cutter: Feel better?

Ana: ...yes.