

Entry

A rough worn path winds through seemingly endless trees, the only route through these woods traveled by wanderers and merchants. The leaves start to turn color and fall from their branches, and the air grows chilled; autumn is approaching. Two pairs of feet carry their owners as they navigate this forest path, kicking up dirt and leaves as they go on their way.

"Why hasn't anybody made an effort to clear a better path? Cut down some of these trees and make a real road," comments one of the two men traveling this path. He is a somewhat short but robust man, just barely over 5 feet, with a messy-yet-groomed head of brown hair just barely tickling his shoulders, and his average-yet-pleasant, middle-aged face sports a well-groomed moustache. The man is garbed in brown cotton breeches, with well-worn leather boots and a woolen overcoat covering a simple cotton tunic and vest.

"While the gods don't much care what the sapient beings do with the lands they live upon, people still tend to revere places they ascribe meaning to. Especially places where the planar energies emerge, such as this forest; the power of the Agrigarium flows strong here, encouraging the growth of plant life, and any efforts to clear out a path would see the work undone in a matter of months. It is a shame that this area was a forest to start with, because it would otherwise be quite the boon as farm land," replies the man the fellow was accompanying on this trek. "Darven, my fine fellow," Sarun addresses the shorter man, "have I ever expressed my thanks for being my traveling companion? For someone who doesn't age, having a reliable friend belonging to one of the long-lived species has been of great help during this journey. It is still some time yet before I finish my task, so I hope that you continue accompanying me 'til it is done."

The taller man is an intimidating sight, standing at least a head taller than what people would consider tall, nearing almost seven feet in height. This man sports a pair of sharp blue-grey eyes and unruly shoulder length dark brown hair peppered with almost as much grey & silver hairs as those of his original color. His face bears an equally unruly and colored beard, and exhibits gruff-yet-pleasant features marred by a look of exhaustion and determination. Possessing the build of a lumberjack and wearing a set of fine cotton pants and shirt with an elegant long coat sporting a fur collar over it, Sarun made for an imposing figure. It is obvious to any who observe him that he is a man of status, even though those days are long behind him.

"I consider it an honor to be thought of as your friend, Lord Sarun. I will gladly accompany you until your task is done. It seems that we are approaching the exit; the trees appear to be becoming slightly sparse," says Darven, a look of relief crossing his face as he realizes that his plight of tripping over tree roots and nearly getting lost in the thick forest was coming to its end.

"It appears as such, Darven, my friend," Sarun states as they seem to be reaching the edge of the forest. Coming out of the darkened forest into the bright light of day, the sun is beginning to reach its apex. "It appears that we got here before noon," he says as he sweeps his eyes across the landscape. Some slight hills and land that had been flattened to farmland lead the way to the edge of the village they were travelling to.

Noticing the apple tree orchards, he comments, "With this land close enough to the

forest, the planar energy would still have an effect on some of the crops here. I Imagine they make a mighty fine cider with these apples,” he chuckles. “One day, hopefully, I can enjoy the taste of food and drink again, but let us not dwell on these things; we have a journey to continue.”

Darven watches as the silhouette of his lord and friend begins to stride towards the village. “If the gods saw fit to bless you with that holy blade, then I see no reason they could not return you to your past mortality,” he muses to himself out loud. “Perhaps it could be a boon after you correct your past mistakes.” Whether Sarun did not hear him or simply did not care to respond, no reply or conjecture comes his way. Following behind and speeding up his pace so as to not fall too far behind his lord, the pair continue their way to their destination.

As they pass through the fields, they notice that the harvest for some of the crops seems to have simply halted or been ignored. While it seems fairly recent, an occurrence like that can only mean that there is a threat to the village bad enough to dissuade the farmers from plying their trade. “I believe we’ve come to the right place,” Sarun says with a grim look on his face.

“Indeed it does, my lord.” They continue towards the village, their approach revealing the state of the place with every step: overturned carts, dead beasts of burden, destroyed fences, yet no signs of the residents.

“All this ruin, yet no bodies... I can’t imagine that’s a good sign, my lord,” states Darven.

“No, it isn’t at all,” responds Sarun, a grim look crossing his face. Finally reaching the entrance to the village, the pair witnesses what seemed to be a ghost town: empty and void of life.

“There doesn’t seem to be anybody left, my lord.”

“It may appear as such, but there are a number who still remain; they seem to be taking refuge together in a few of the larger buildings,” Sarun’s eyes glow red as he gazes past the walls, peering through his surroundings. Behind the walls of the town, he notes each faint silhouette huddled together.

Striding with purpose, Sarun continues to the most sturdy and defensible building in the village: the local temple. “Temples such as these are usually constructed with the aid of wandering priests. Blessings of various deities allow them to make a communal safe house for the community, so most long standing villages have one. Unless they happen to be exceptionally remote, new settlements will usually have priests accompany the settlers these days. Not much use in case of a siege or other kind of long term defense, but plenty useful against wandering monsters and the like.”

Darven follows after Sarun while mulling over this information. “In the case of an extended stay, it would simply wind up being a tomb, wouldn’t it?” muses Darven.

“Indeed, like anything else, whether something is a blessing or a curse depends on

perspective and context,” Sarun replies with a conflicted look on his face, quickly shaking his head and composing himself.

Standing in front of the door to the temple, Sarun raps the sturdy front doors with exceptionally heavy blows. Shuffling sounds and murmurs come from behind the door, faint voices chattering, “It’s not night yet...”

“Who would have come all the way to our village? It can’t be merchants.”

“Everybody get ready; even if it’s that monster, if enough of us try to run him through, not even he can fight back.”

Sarun sighs, “It looks like cooperation will take some convincing,” he states as he turns towards Darven with an exasperated look.

“Why do you say that my l-” Darven is cut off by the sound of the church doors slamming open and a shout of “CHARGE!!!” followed by a cacophony of war cries as a hodge-podge of the old and young, men and women, as they pour out of the church wielding makeshift spears.

Darven instinctively shrinks back and tries to make himself as small a target as possible. Sarun turns to face the oncoming mob, sighing as he raises his leg and proceeds to stomp with all his might straight down. His stomp causes the dirt to crater slightly and throwing the mob off balance, making them take a second to catch their balance, halting their charge in its tracks.

“I come not to cause harm, but to stop he who does; cease this and allow us to converse,” Sarun demands as he brings all his regalness to bear as he stares down the mob. “Who here speaks for you!?” his voice echoes across the town.

An old woman, hunched and walking with a cane, and helped along by a young man, slowly steps out of the crowd. “I am the elder of this village. The name given to me is Denae. What business causes you to come to our suffering home? A large number of our people have been taken and we have nothing to spare for travelers.”

“I seek the one who has reduced you home to this state. If there is one among you who can direct where he is, I will ensure that this issue is quickly resolved.”

At this point, Darven, who had still been cowering, finally realizes that he was not about to be overrun. Standing up straight, he steps forward to join Sarun, attempting to act as if nothing happened. Much to his relief, it seems like no one noticed, with all eyes currently on his lord.

Out of the crowd steps a man of about middle age, being a rough looking fellow dressed in hunting garb, and carrying a hunting bow. As he passes the elder, he rests a hand on her shoulder and gives her a nod before presenting himself to Sarun. “I know not who you are, traveler, but if the strength you demonstrated today is not for show, then I will guide you to that abomination’s lair.”

“What is your name, hunter?”

"I am named Fourn."

"Very well, Fourn, I will trust you to guide us there, but first, to ensure that nothing happens in that time," Sarun observes the perimeter of the temple and nodded in satisfaction. "I require some things to ensure the safety of the temple. Once you gather these things, then I will strengthen the protection of the temple." Sarun proceeds to give the villagers a list of items including various herbs, pigments, and other odds and ends.

Sarun then begins to scribe various symbols in a ring around the temple, placing the focuses at several key points. Once the preparations are done, Sarun directs everyone gathered in the temple to pray for protection. He himself stands at the front of the temple with Fourn and Darven. He draws his claymore from the leather holder slung across his back, and holds it in front of himself, the flat facing away from his body.

Raising his sword with both hands in reverence, he begins his prayer, "Sarun, champion of Kyseleen, beseeches the gods to protect these innocents from harm. Nurimas the Pacifier, I beseech thee to bring these people peace and safety. Gottefur the Unifier, I beseech thee to grant these people the strength to stand together with each other to overcome this hardship. Khanrael, She who Razes, I beseech thee to not visit destruction upon those here. Kyseleen the Unyielding, I beseech thee to burn away that which seeks to harm the people with your corrosive waters. Ionu the Purifier, I beseech thee to ensure that corruption does not find its way to these people. I make these wishes known to the almighty ones; I make my intentions known to the almighty ones; I make my desires known to the almighty ones. With the devotion of this humble one, may my will be yours and my will take form." With his sword now glowing a faint green, Sarun thrusts it skyward, a bubble forming into an opalescent shell covering the entire area around the temple.

"Make sure that none of you cross past this barrier," Sarun instructs those inside the temple. "No matter who or what appears on the outside, this can only protect you so long as you stay inside. There is no telling what tricks or traps may be attempted while I am not here, so you must rely on yourselves. You will make it through this so long as you stay safe."

Prayers for the group and pleas for Fourn to get back safely issue from the temple as the villagers see them off. Fourn gives a small wave before continuing on with these travelers. Darven looks with interest as Fourn takes the lead to guide them to their destination. A small smile crosses his face, happy to have someone potentially more talkative than his lord accompanying them, even if only for a short while.

"So, Fourn, I hadn't thought to inquire as to the name of your village before now! So, what do you call it?" Darven asks.

"Valurt. Named for the original settler. It's been around for many generations, though how long, we're not sure. But it is definitely old," Fourn replies.

"Are you a native of Valurt? Do you have a wife, any children?" Darven pelts Fourn.

Fourn holds up his hand, shushing Darven and stopping. "I can not be distracted if I am

to guide you there.” Fourn continues forward, leaving Darven to grumble, muttering to himself about never getting to have a good conversation on these journeys.

Sarun feels the corner of his lips turn up a little as he lets out a small huff of a chuckle at Darven. ‘He truly is an odd one; nothing like any of his fellows that I met otherwise,’ he thought.

It takes them hours of navigating the forest, with the trees getting older and more gnarled as they venture into this part of the woods. Below, roots threaten to trip them, and any potential underbrush was choked out by the tight canopy of leaves above, greedily hogging the sunlight for themselves. Barely able to tell the time of day for the lack of light down here, the coming of night is still noticeable, as what little light made its way down here is finally starting to disappear.

“Will you be able to see, Fourn?” asks Darven. “I know humans have trouble seeing in the dark.”

“I have my ways.” responds Fourn, retrieving a small wooden container from a pouch on his waist. Opening the container, he reveals a paste of some kind. Smearing his index and middle finger in the paste and closing his eyes, he proceeds to rub the mixture over his closed eyes. Darven watches with curiosity, and Sarun merely observes with a small nod. The mixture seems to seep into Fourn’s eyelids, and as he opens his eyes they give off a purple glow.

“Herbal magic doesn’t require anything but knowledge and practice, but having practiced the craft to this degree of competence is impressive. I imagine you might be one of, if not the only one in your village that can make concoctions like this,” states Sarun.

“You would be correct, and I am honored by your praise,” replies Fourn. He stashes the container back in his belt pouch and cinches it shut before gesturing to continue.

After a bit more of walking, Sarun suddenly grabs Fourn by the shoulder, and Darven almost falls from the sudden stop. “I believe we’re just about there; you should head back, Fourn,” Sarun says with a tone of utmost seriousness.

Fourn, looking confused, glances at Sarun, not understanding the sudden halt. “What is the matter? We should still be a bit away.”

“We might be a bit more time’s worth of travel away but it is no longer safe for you to continue with us; get back to the village. If you have some more concoctions you can use to make your journey swifter and safer do so. Now,” Sarun ends any discussion by shoving Fourn back the way they came and beginning to walk forward.

“He can be a bit gruff, but he truly cares about keeping those alive that he can,” Darven states with a small sigh and shrug of the shoulders, following after Sarun.

Fourn watches as they disappear further into the forest, somewhat exasperated that they felt that he would be useless. But then again, it wasn’t as if he was of any real help when the

monster attacked their village the last few times; the villagers got dragged off anyway. Heading back to the village, Fourn utters a small prayer on the duo's behalf.

"Before you ask, no, his herbal magic would not have been helpful enough to allow him to accompany us to this fight," Sarun says matter-of-factly.

Darven looks at his lord and shrugs, "Yet my magic is enough?"

"You are an actual wizard, and a quite accomplished one at that, if I recall."

The pair continue their walk, with the forest abruptly coming to an end as they come upon a small fortress that was seemingly ripped from the very ground it stood on.

"This man was your court wizard if I recall, my lord."

"That he was. During his days in the royal court, he pursued magic in order to better the lives of my people, but after the turning, he let his pursuit of knowledge consume any of his remaining humanity. I imagine he's been using the kidnapped villagers as test subjects for his experiments. Just as my generals and various ministers all let their darkness consume them after the turning, so too did Xenathor. At one point he was a great friend and advisor, but now he is simply another fallen that is my duty to eliminate. He is one of the last, the journey shouldn't be much longer after this."

"What will you do after you're done my lord?"

"Rest. I will rest, Darven," Sarun's voice echoes his exhaustion; the exhaustion of a man who has been killing every friend, advisor, confidant, and family who originally made it out alive after the turning; the exhaustion of a man who has been journeying for over a century to haunt down these men turned monsters.

Darven stares after his lord, a conflicted feeling welling up inside him. What is 'rest' to his lord? What does it look like for him to finish his duty? A corruption that exponentially spreads from person to person cannot be easy to stop. Luckily, none of their foes seemed set on spreading the corruption; even one who has died once is scared of true death, he guesses. Regardless, he is here to assist his lord with his current task.

Reaching the front gate of the fortress, the pair prepares for the fight ahead. Sarun draws his claymore and closes his eyes in silent prayer, a golden glow veiling him in a thin skin of light. Darven chants something in an unintelligible tongue, the words echoing around him; rocks roll towards and gather on Darven as they form a coating over him, creating a protective barrier.

"I believe we've done what we can, my lord. All we can do from here is to receive what comes as it does."

“As always, I entrust my back to you, Darven.”

“I appreciate your trust as always, my lord.”

Finding no resistance as they shove the front gate open, an eerie silence permeates the air, the lack of sound causing Darven’s ears to ring, and the slightest sound echoing with the voice of a thunder clap.

‘Be ready. This is almost assuredly a trap. Unfortunately, we have no choice but to walk into it,’ Sarun’s voice echoes in Darven’s mind.

‘Understood, my lord,’ Darven thinks back.

Proceeding forward, their every step echoes, shattering the silence. They march without uttering a sound, quiet determination radiating from them. Making their way towards where the center of the fortress would be, the smell of dried blood and aging flesh hangs heavy in the air, with the sound of flying insects humming from the distance.

‘It appears we’ve almost reached his lair.’

‘That it does, my lord.’

Arriving in the center chamber, the sight would have horrified anybody else, and while still disturbing to the two, they have seen enough similar atrocities to be able to stomach this kind of thing. Bodies in various states of disrepair litter the room, hung from ceilings and strapped to tables, and some even just tossed into corners in piles. A man sits at a desk in the center of the room, its surface littered with tomes and parchments.

“I see my liege has finally deigned to visit this lowly one. Finally come to inquire as to the state of my research. I’ve made great strides, you see, I’m close to being able to force planar convergence. Since that Daemon lord granted us such a wonderful gift, I surmised that a suitable favor ought to be returned in kind,” Xenathor chuckles with a disconcerting air about him, his hunched and wizened figure heaving slightly with every exhale. “How could a gift such as eternal life be bad? Even at the cost of the lives of others. Imagine the feats we could accomplish! The truths that can be discovered! An eternity of research and study; what could be more important than that?” Xenathor spits at Sarun.

“Power without morals is tyranny. Knowledge gained without ethics is merely cruelty. You have lost your way my old friend. In Kyseleen’s name, I shall cease your inhuman acts here and ensure you can harm no others.” Sarun assumes a battle stance, stepping his left foot forward while raising his sword with both hands, parallel to the ground and pointed towards Xenathor, held at level with his head. Darven follows suit, spreading his legs with his left leg forward and his right leg back, arms raised to either side of his head, and palms open and facing inward, ready to defend himself.

A tense few seconds pass as the three are in a stand-off, waiting for someone to make the first move. Xenathor looses a small chuckle and shakes his head, his eyes emitting a dull red glow as he flicks his index finger down towards Sarun; an ethereal hammer springs into

existence and slams down, and Sarun brings his sword around over his head in a circle to parry it. A loud boom rings from the sound of the impact as the hammer is diverted to the side and crashes into the ground next to him, with Sarun's sword carrying the motion forward and tracing through the air into a diagonal slash in front of him. Resuming a stance with his sword held low and at an angle with the tip upwards, he prepares for the next exchange.

Xenathor snaps his fingers and a curtain of fire rolls forth from him; Darven stretches out his arms wide, "Extinguish!" he proclaims as he claps his hands together, causing the curtain of fire to go out with an angry hiss.

A flicker of respect and awe crosses Xenathor's face before he raises his arm high, closing his hand to a fist, and slowly draws it down. He utters a single word: "Return." As he does so, the bodies around the room start to jerk, limbs cracking back into place with sickening squelches and snaps as they free themselves and make their way to the pair.

"Well, this is unfortunate my lord. But nothing too odd yet, I'd say."

"Normally, I would agree, Darven, but we must contend with Xenathor while also not getting slowed by the horde. While they cannot realistically harm us, they can slow our movements enough to give Xenathor an opening to exploit. As such, you must handle his spells while I deal with the reanimated dead."

"Understood, my lord."

Sarun steps towards the horde, swiping his sword and sending waves of green fluid into the group with a flick of his hand. Thin sheets of green fluid emanate from the sword with every flick, cutting through and dissolving the areas it cuts, the waves crashing over the undead and corroding them away as they do.

Darven, on his end, is trading spells with Xenathor; one would send a boulder flying across the room, and the other would shatter it; one would create ethereal weapons, the other would create a protective dome to block them. Seemingly on equal footing, they keep each other in check for a while, before Xenathor sighs, with Darven confused at this seeming disinterest.

"I had wanted to bring this to a swift close, but this is dragging on too long. I had hoped that my liege may be tempted to abandon his noble crusade, but I see now that he is set on his path. Unfortunately for the two of you, I still have things I wish to accomplish, so, as such, I need to deal with you both sooner rather than later. Though, as it sits, my preparations are lacking, and as much as I hate to waste these resources now, the chance to summon the Daemon Lord will arise again."

Sarun finishes cleaning up his side of the fight, and as he turns towards the wizards, he sees that they had paused for a moment. Darven begins trying to pelt Xenathor with spells, and in kind, Xenathor simply erects a wall to stop the hail of projectiles as he starts rummaging through his robes, clearly trying to find something.

'Whatever he's trying to do, it can not be good,' thinks Sarun. Rushing forward, he

charges at the dome surrounding Xenathor, crashing his sword with all his might against it, trying his damndest to cleave through both it and the man inside. The dome cracks from the impact, the energy emanating from the blade corroding and slowly melting into it.

“Aha!” exclaims Xenathor as he retrieves an apple sized, dark red gem from his robes. Sarun’s sword finally shatters the dome and carries through to Xenathor, but a thin sheet of energy stops it from finding purchase, with Xenathor holding an outstretched hand toward the blade.

“It was a pleasure seeing you again my liege! Unfortunately the work must continue. If we meet again, then we may settle things.”

The red glow accents Xenathor’s features, casting his face in an even more sinister light. He proceeds to crush the gem and the very air in the room begins to warp, with papers and detritus getting sucked into the small crack in the air where the gem had been, and the things getting drawn in being stretched into a fine line. Darven and Sarun, suddenly realizing the danger they’re in, attempt to find a way to anchor themselves to avoid joining the scattered objects within the nascent singularity. Unfortunately, they acted too late, and as their forms began to turn thin, Xenathor addresses them, “May we not meet again, my liege. It was still nice to speak to you one last time.”

Darven and Sarun find themselves pulled into the tear in reality. Once their senses return to them, they are floating in a pitch black void; no light exists anywhere here, yet they can still see each other.

“So, would you happen to know where we are, my lord? I imagine that this place isn’t any of the planes proper, because that would mean we are somewhere. And this,” Darven does his best to gesture around as they float helplessly, “appears to be nowhere.”

“‘Nowhere’ would be a good description. There exists a void that the planes exist in, the original emptiness that existed before creation. I can only assume that’s where we are. Unfortunately, from my understanding, there are still outer entities from the war during the end of the Age of Creation. Assuming we don’t run into any of the abominations, we most likely will just float here for all eternity.”

“That is rather unfortunate,” replies Darven. He’s beginning to get the hang of moving in the void, having assumed a cross-legged sitting position as he floats...upside down? That is how it appears to Sarun, at least, and there’s no telling if orientation is even a concept that exists here. A small crack in the void seemingly comes into view of the pair, a flicker of hope crossing Darven’s face as he begins to try to swim towards it. Not making much headway, Sarun grabs him under his arm as he seemingly walks on air.

“How are you walking, my lord?”

“It seems that a strong assertion of one’s will allows minor feats to be performed here.

As a wizard, I figured you would be able to achieve a similar thing.”

Darven just shrugs and gives a light chuckle. He may be a wizard, even a good one, yet even then, this was too alien for him to easily grasp.

Reaching the crack, they move to cross through in the hopes it might take them to a place where they can begin the journey back home; their task wouldn't wait for this mishap to resolve itself, after all. Unfortunately for them, this place opened to nowhere in their realm. This place of colors, indescribable through language, stretched as far as they could see. Innumerable streams of silver-white energy crossing the space, appearing almost like deep sea ocean currents. Darven and Sarun exchange looks, both confused as to the place where they find themselves.

“Well, my lord, at this point, swimming through the streams seems like the only real way to find our way anywhere.”

“It would seem so. Let us attempt, then.”

Entering the stream, they are swiftly carried away by the current, presumably to some kind of outlet. As they are pulled along the stream, they notice what seem to be people being carried in their own streams. Before they have another chance to ponder their surroundings further, Sarun and Darven are ejected suddenly from a hole in the air. Tumbling on to a cold hard stone floor, taking their surroundings in, it appears they were in some kind of extravagant temple, given the size of the interior, various murals, and rich materials used in its construction. People of all races, species, shapes and sizes walk through this place, dressed in ways that seemed familiar but also in ways that were foreign and alien to them.

As the pair are soaking in their new surroundings, a concerned voice rings out from behind them, coming from the direction that they arrived from, “Are you two okay? Is this your first time using a terminal? You took a pretty nasty tumble on the way out of the portal there.” A woman with some kind of polished stone slab in her arms stands before them, wearing the oddest blouse and skirt they had ever seen. A metal badge with the name “Roberta” on it is present on her chest.

Standing up and brushing themselves off, Darven and Sarun look at each other before glancing back at the strange woman.

“We are quite fine, my lady,” Darven says with a bow, with Roberta looking somewhat confused and concerned at his response. “As for your other queries, I have never heard of a terminal before, so this would be our first time using one.”

A look of understanding crossed Roberta's face. She interacted with that strange stone slab for a few minutes before looking to address Darven and Sarun.

“As new entrants to inter-dimensional travel, we will need to register you, as well as your home dimension, to prepare for your people to join the wider multiverse. If you'll follow me, we'll get you temporary visas as well as register your home dimension for the records.” Roberta confidently espouses, puffing her chest with a seeming sense of pride and self-confidence.

Sarun nods. "We will do as such, since this is the way of your land. I would like to inquire as to the nature of this place, if such information is in your purview."

"I can indeed provide you with that information!" Roberta says as she hands the stone slab over to Sarun. "I imagine that technology is not quite to this level where you're from? I'll give you a basic explanation." Roberta gives Sarun and Darven a basic rundown of how to use this 'tablet.' She pulls up what she called a 'slide show' that serves to give the viewer a basic rundown of Thraelos and the terminals, as well as interdimensional travel and the multiverse at large.

In turn, the pair answer questions about Calonnau, their homeworld, and the dimension it exists in. Arriving at the testing facility, they are instructed to stand upon some pedestals where some machinery was installed, which proceeds to project light upon them; after a few moments, the people standing behind the metal podium told them they could come down.

"Unfortunately, your home dimension sits outside of our mapped area, so it will take some time to locate it and establish a connection. In the meantime, here's your visas," says a twig of a man wearing glasses, some paper charm on a necklace around his neck, and simple breeches and a button-up shirt, both seemingly made of silk. He hands over a small booklet made of a strange leather, with their picture on the front page, as well as some information including the name of their world, species, and age.

Sarun Regata, Homeworld: Calonnau, Species: Human (Vampire Patriarch), Age: 867

Darven Abhara, Homeworld: Calonnau, Species: Dwarf, Age: 283

Darven and Sarun glance over their respective documents before checking each other's, surprised at the accuracy of the information, and further surprised at both the professionalism and lack of reaction these people had towards Sarun's status as an exceptionally powerful vampire. Receiving a small stipend to get a room for the night and food, they are sent on their way, advised to seek out an employment bureau to make ends meet for the meantime.

Making their way outside, the pair stands in shock as they see all these massive buildings constructed from solid stone, metal, and glass. Having never seen anything similar before, they have no idea how to react to a place like this other than awe. Wandering the streets for a time while trying to operate the map located in the 'smart phone' given to them by the attendants, they asked some bystanders to help them find a place to stay for the night with the intent to find some work in the morning.

Making their way to an inn (that the people they asked referred to as a 'motel'), they are flabbergasted at the quality of the building; having been told it would be cheap, they expected a hovel of some kind, but even this place is more outstanding than any other structure they had seen in their travels around the continent of Arcadia.

Entering the front doors, everything about this place amazes them: the expansive carpet, the furniture, and the glass box with labeled buttons, filled with cylinders of various colors. A man clearing his throat at the front desk grabs their attention as they compose themselves.

“Newcomers huh? Well, welcome to Thraelos’s premiere motel, ‘The Last Choice Inn.’ Now, I imagine the welcome committee at the terminal gave you some money to help with your stay? Get over here so I can take your payment and give you your room,” says the grumpy man at the front desk. Greasy with thinning hair, thinned rim glasses, an exhausted look hangs on this man’s skinny, sharp face.

“Very well,” Darven replies with a grin, withdrawing the cash from a pocket in his coat, passing it to the man.

The man takes the money with a grumble, something about ‘backwaters of the multiverse.’ He counts out the money for the room, and hands the rest back to Darven, who accepts it with a nod and smile before stowing it back in his pocket.

“If you’re looking for work, some odd fop dropped this flyer off. Asked that I show it to anybody who seemed to need money. No idea why, but It’s something to do,” he states as he hands the pair the flyer.

“THE ADVENTURE OF A LIFETIME AWAITS!!!”

YOU! yes, YOU!

Have been given the chance of a lifetime.

Join the celebrity psychic Cain, owner of the one and only Hourglass. Marrow’s premiere psychic and fortune-telling shop.

Join Cain and fellow thrill-seekers as they adventure into the depths of the most haunted location on Thraelos; THE BIFROST TERMINAL!

Fame and fortune await the brave and the bold in this attempt to exorcise the infamous BIFROST TERMINAL!

Pay to be discussed upon completion, survival not guaranteed, life insurance not offered.

“What an odd flyer,” Darven states while looking up towards Sarun.

“Indeed. Yet dealing with the undead is nothing new to us, so I see no reason why we can not join this attempt,” Sarun responds, tucking the flyer into his jacket. “We will check this location in the morning. As far as I can tell, using this ‘smart phone’, tomorrow around noon should be the designated meeting time. The map’s directions says that it would take 8 hours of walking on foot to get there, but I would assume that would be time for a normal person’s pace. We should be able to make it in less than an hour if we walk safely through the city, and then travel as quickly as possible once we’ve left the city.”

“Very well, my lord. Then we will proceed as such.”

The clerk at the counter hands them a pair of 'plastic' cards, their confused expressions prompting an explanation of what this strange material is. "There's a block above the door handle; stick the card on that and the door'll unlock. Enjoy your stay. Or don't. Also, if you take anything from the fridge...the small metal box, in there you'll have to pay extra."

Nodding in understanding, the pair continues to their room, unlocking the door as per the clerk's instructions. Letting themselves in, they finally have accepted just how much more advanced this world is than the places they're used to. Sarun settles on the floor in a meditative position, beginning his nightly prayers. Since he didn't need to sleep, he mostly spent the time that Darven slept in meditative prayer. Darven begins to investigate the fridge, taking one of the bottles. Removing the lid he took a sniff, a look of satisfaction crossing his face as he took out multiple of the bottles.

"It's been a while since my last drink! While the drinks may be extra, I can not imagine that they'd be that expensive," he says before downing bottle after bottle until he felt a slight buzz.

"It appears that I will be getting a decent night's rest tonight," Darven says as he snuggles into the soft mattress and blankets, a light snore emanating from him almost immediately.

Heading out first thing in the morning, the pair travels to the terminal. Located on the top of a mountain, it was blanketed in snow, with a base camp seemingly erected nearby, serving as the meeting place for this expedition.

Looking around at the assembled individuals, Darven notices that there were some particularly odd individuals. Species and races he had never seen before, beings nothing even resembling the form of life he was used to. He couldn't help but to drink in all these sights, but it isn't long before Sarun gives him a light rap upon the back of his head.

"Staring is rude; one should not do it."

"Can I have your attention, please?" shouts an elegantly-dressed man near the entrance of the terminal. "I appreciate all of you who have volunteered. I see we have some very interesting individuals joining us for this exorcism attempt. Without much further ado, let us enter!"

Everyone begins to file in. The lobby is gargantuan— so much so that a ceiling can't be seen beyond the imposing darkness. Only a few dim points of that soft cyan glow can be spotted further in, old emergency lights somehow still producing low output after all these years. It's quiet... As the last of the group enters and Cain follows behind, the main doors shut.

Violently.

Sealed supernaturally.

Before anyone can react, a tempest of unseen winds swirl throughout the open space, conjuring up bright magical strands of the cyan— when a shrouded entity forms in the center of it all, floating several feet above the dark marble floor. The pressure in the room is otherworldly heavy. There is an expression of horrified familiarity on Cain's face. Two piercing points of cyan pupils spark to life suddenly upon where it seems the creature's face would be.

"This can not be good," Darven says flatly. Sarun nods in agreement.

A distorted commanding voice fills the air around the group as the entity finally speaks.

"The powers that be finally deigned to do something about us, huh? I should've figured when that idiot—" An arm-like wisp gestured in Cain's direction for emphasis, "—came in here whimpering about being here to help. Let me guess, they told you to get rid of us by any means necessary? That they would pay a king's ransom for your service. Hmph, typical. Now you're trapped in here with me. I'll tell you now: in the Bifrost Terminal, I am creator, judge, and jury. Nothing happens without me knowing.

"You are all still in one piece because I decided you should be. So, explore the terminal, ask questions. You are all here for a job, aren't you? Well then, allow me to assign you your work task: figure out how to free the souls trapped in this godsforsaken facility. And as incentive, the *first* among you to succeed in freeing all of the spirits here shall be allowed to leave The Bifrost Terminal. As for the rest of you... If you don't finish *first*? If you slack off or annoy me and your fellows instead of putting your nose to the grindstone? Well... I'll leave that to your imagination."

Everyone can practically feel the predatory grin in that final remark.

The entity disappears in a violent hurricane as quickly as it appeared, leaving everyone still present to consider the situation they are in and, most alarmingly of all, how to move forward with the knowledge that only one of them can finish first and be granted freedom.

"So... how do you want to handle this, my lord?" asks Darven with a sigh.

"I imagine plenty of people will resort to sabotage or murder to ensure their survival. We must be wary and proceed with caution, while also not making ourselves a target. We treat this as any other foe we've dealt with." Sarun clenches his fists. 'Regardless of anything else, we must return. I have not finished my task,' Sarun thinks as he readies himself for what is to come.