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English 1

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Ascension

The room was dark, so very dark. If it weren't for the lone light-bulb illuminating it, it might have been pitch black. There was a semi-circle of dim monitors directly above a table with a map tacked down onto it. The door-way was covered by a canvas flap, meant to keep out the desert sands.

Two men in long robes were placing stone figures down on certain areas of the map, red for their own influence, and a mosaic of colors as well. Both were bald, and one was quite short, only a little taller than a child. The other was tall, but not unusually so. He quietly said, "Sir, come have a look."

A man in the back, sitting in a large, dark chair, slowly stood. He analyzed the map, gauging the importance of each area. "Move the Western Bandits. Have them march to the mountains just north of Albatar. We must establish control!"

"I'll send the message!" The shorter one exclaimed as he sprinted out the room.

"What would you have me do, sir?" asked the taller lackey.

"The board is set. Let's make our move. Move camp to Albatar! We meet in the bandits in three days!" He grinned mercilessly, "Then we can really start this campaign."

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"What!?"

“We need to keep the walls in shape for the demonstration. We need another coat on before the sandstorm arrives.”

“This is an outrage! There’s no way that I could finish the first one by then! You need to give me more men. How do you expect it to happen, do you think they’ll magically appear around sixty leagues of steel?” Fury was bubbling off of Rafae’s face as he sputtered every last syllable.

“Sweet Teira!¹ Don’t shoot the messenger! I don’t give any of the orders, I just carry them.”

“Well carry this back then. Tell ‘em it’ll never happen unless I get about 20 more men.”

“Fine. They sure as hell won’t be happy though.”

“My men need a rest. They’re hard workers. I don’t think the other shift would be halfway done with their coat by now.”

But the messenger was already off. So Rafae turned around, braced himself, and yelled, “Double time! Double time! We need another coat before the storm.” He gestured towards the horizon. The storm looked to be ‘round three hours away.

There was a commotion above as a worker dropped his roller. “Careful! Just a bucket of that costs enough to make the Crown itself weep!²”

He always felt bad about pushing the Boys this hard, but he hardly had a choice. The city was overpopulated, and he had to help somehow. After all, until the Crown

¹Local deity of worship. Goddess of the mountain stream which provides them with water. Pronounced: tee-rah.

²The resin that they are coating the walls with are a variation of modern plastic, in order to preserve the structural integrity of the steel. Around a fifty-coat thickness is the standard, as that will stop the average projectile from hitting the steel.

acknowledged the need for a Seventh Tier, Albatar would stay over-populated, and largely unemployed. That was a trap that Rafae would not fall in.

“I’m going to go send a messenger, to tell your families you’ll be late.” Rafae began towards the market district. It wasn’t too far away, only a half mile. If he hurried he’d get to the wall in time to help the second coat.

Around 15 minutes later he arrived at the market. After buying himself a small honey-roll, he found the messengers' stand. “I need a message sent to these locations, as soon as you can get the Currier.” Rafae put a slip of paper on the counter, with about thirty addresses on it. “How much would that be?”

“I'd say about... 30 Zara.”

“Damn. Your rates are soaring lately! What was it last time, 24?”

“Sounds right. People just keep taking it themselves these days. It's ruining the business!”

“I hear ya. Just tell 'em to lock up, and that the wall-workers are gonna be late, if they get back before the storm at all.”

“Done, done, and done. Ascule! Take this message!”

Rafae began to walk away, when he felt something tug at his shirt. The world seemed to stop spinning as he whirled around, grabbing the thief with his left arm, and taking out one of the bronze blades at his belt. A real nasty thing; five inches long, curved and with a long barb at the end of it. Its twin lay on his left side, a yin to the drawn blades yang. It was a deep, black, oil rubbed blade. The two were day and night,

one a sun and the other dark.

When he saw who he had grabbed, it was shocking. He saw a boy, thin as a stray dog. “Don't kill me!”

Rafae released the child, and sheathed his blade. “Here,” he threw a ten Zara piece towards the boy, “don't waste it. Eat slowly.” The boy squealed and ran with the money, stumbling through the crowd. A rough circle had formed around them and was quickly dissipating as Rafe walked away.

Albatar had always had a bit of an orphan problem, but never had Rafae seen one unprovided for. He made a silent vow to give more next time he saw a poor soul like that boy.

Soon after, he arrived back at the wall. The workers had finished the first coat, and were just beginning the second. Rafae plopped down on a drum of protective resin and began sharpening his blades. A dozen more workers came through the wall, clocking in and grabbing their buckets and rollers. Rafae yelled, “Rafters two, seven, eight, and twelve, you're on break. Platforms down! Be ready in five, the storm's almost here! Newbies, fill in the blanks.”

The new workers grunted as they pulled their platforms up. Rafae, as he often did, began to ponder what the symbol on his blades meant. It was a diamond shape with each of the four lines extended out about a centimeter, the opposite color of the blade. Everyone said it was nothing, merely the smiths brand, but none could identify it nonetheless.

Frustrated at this nagging riddle, he threw his blades, sticking them in the ground a few yards away. Rafae then decided to do something downright odd. He picked up a blade, took a full swing, and jabbed it into the wall. There was a loud ringing sound as it bounced off. The workers stared at him. “Just a quality check. Back to work! You!” Pointing at those on break, he yelled, “Get to work.”

Aware of their obviously irritated boss, the workers ran to their platforms.

A day of waking is a day much shaken, was a piece of local wisdom. Rafae had never believed it, but that orphan... It wasn't right. Things like this just don't happen. How could things have gotten so bad that there were orphans in the street?

Bong. Bong. Bong. “Everyone! End shift.” Yelled Rafae, “Run home! The storm is upon us!” Sprinting through the city, he barely stayed ahead of the storm. The bell would ring every time the storm hit a new Tier. Hustling through the door, Rafae slammed it behind him, locking it tight. The sound of sand on rock filled the air with an ominous static. The rest of the house was silent.

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Taki could hear the wind howl as he worked. The Boss was really pushing them, and the desert sun was scorching their backs. A loud ringing could be heard below platform 11, but Taki knew not to look. The Boss was in a foul mood, and he had work to do.

Dipping his roller, Taki heard a yell, “Just a quality check. Back to work! You! Get to work.” Taki picked up the pace: dip, slather, spread, repeat. Over and over he had to repeat this to protect his city. He wasn't in combat, and he wasn't in the guard towers,

so he was never in danger, but his payroll suffered.

He always got enough to live, and the Boss wasn't too hard on them. He had a home, a bed, and a good pay. Every day he woke before dawn and went into the mountains. From there he would swim down the Teiriro³ and end in the Fifth Tier, where he lived. He would change clothes, eat breakfast, and head to work; all in two hours.

Today was different. Taki wasn't able to swim, hike, or even eat. All he could do was lock his windows, nail everything to the floor, and lock the door as he left. A miserable day was all he had, and there was still work ahead.

Bong. Bong. Bong. Taki knew what that meant. He took his rope, as Sonji took the other and quickly lowered the platform. Rafae yelled, "Everyone! End shift. Run home! The storm is upon us!"

Five minutes 'til the Inner Tier, was the only thought in Taki's head. His hands reacted automatically as Tanjin yelled, "Slow!" The rope began to heat his leather gloves as his hands clamped down. There was a thud as the platform bottomed out. Taki jumped the rail and ran. There was no way he would make it back to his home. Struggle was hopeless. He would be buried by the sand.

Suddenly, from the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of bronze. Hope in his heart he ran after it. As he rounded the corner Taki saw Rafae. "Boss! Wait up!" The Boss kept running, seemingly deaf in terror. Through three Tiers and two bells Taki followed his employer. Finally, the Boss turned into a house. Taki turned the knob, but it didn't move. The sand began to hit him.

³The river of the goddess Teira.

Rafae had just began to sit down when he heard a loud banging at his door.

“Boss! Open up! Please” Bolting towards the door, Rafae threw it open and pulled Taki inside. Cuts and scrapes covered his exposed back and all of his skin was a raw pink.

Taki collapsed on the floor. He was out cold.

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The dark room had been moved many times before. The first time was to the central desert. It had been the initial recruiting point for his army, and where he formed his alliance with the Bandits. Afterwards it was moved to the Adoba Plateau. There he had made countless decisions about who to move where. Now, for the first time in years, the room was to move again.

This was the first time that any of the projects had actually needed his supervision. The first time there was a need for his presence among the workers and soldiers. To the Bandits, especially the fanatic Westerners, he was akin to a god. They obeyed his every command with brutal efficiency, no matter what it was. He could tell them to skin one of themselves, and they would do it.

It wouldn't be too hard to convince them to make his weapon -- after all, it just took the parts they needed, and a few skilled workers to assemble it. Once he stole enough parts from Albatar, he would never have to raise a finger towards anyone again.

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When Taki awoke, he was on a bedroll in the main room. There were numerous bandages over his legs and upper body, with a blanket to cover the fact that he was nude.

The steady buzz of the sandstorm was still droning on.

Rafae walked into the room wearing an apron. Taki couldn't help but chuckle a little, but it caused him enough pain that he had to stop. Rafae indignantly retorted, "Least I'm not naked."