

The True Warrior

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A collaborative fic by me and my friend. I hope you enjoy it!

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1 - Chapter 1

Pawn floated silently in black stone chamber lit by blue lanterns, listening to her master speak. She glanced over to the side entrance and saw a remarkably voluptuous young woman with slightly blue skin, entrancing emerald eyes and lavish silver hair. She was dressed in a violet silken robe. So the whore does wear clothes, thought Pawn. And better ones than I. Pawn only wore tattered rags, the only finery a richly adorned wooden mask, a simple round thing with enormous eyes, but painted with many bright colors. A cold voice called out to her from a large iron mirror in front of her.

“Pawn! Are you listening to me?”

“Y-yes, Master Thanatos. I was just...”

“Silence. Have you done as I asked?” In the blackness of the mirror was a tall figure, dressed in black with his face shaded in the shadows, aside from two glowing white lights, his eyes.

“Yes, Lord Thanatos,” answered Pawn. “The Nine Points are all headed to meet in Kinetica as we speak.”

“Not all of the Points.” The eyes turned to regard the beautiful Nereid in the doorway, who was playfully caressing one of her many thralls. It sickened Pawn. She has all those servants, she thought. And not a care in the world. But I have all the cares anyone could have, and I have not one person under my command, not even myself.

“And whose fault is that?” said Thanatos, reading his possession’s thoughts. “Mine, or that of a foolish little farm girl who sold her soul to save her friends?” He did not wait for an answer. “Cerulea!”

A soft and seductive voice replied, although the Nereid was still preoccupied with the thrall, “Yes?” Pawn knew this behavior greatly angered Thanatos. He hated love or lust of any kind. He had told Pawn that it only brought acts that brought life, not took it, as was his duty as Death Incarnate. Without even a sound or slight flinch the thrall fell dead. Cerulea jumped back with a shout and let the body hit the ground. “Eww...”

“Fool. I told you not to do that here. Do my work first, then you shall have all the lovers you desire.”

Out of all his servants, only Pawn knew who Thanatos truly was, and what his true purpose was. If any of the others knew they would try to stop him, but Pawn knew because she could not. Many of his soldiers, the Hands of Death, knew as well, for they, like Pawn, had sold their souls to the Incarnation of Death. All the others had been brought in with false promises of power, wealth, the fulfillment of all their wildest dreams. One fool even believed that Thanatos was going to destroy the world only to cleanse it, and then inhabit it with new life, as a perfect world. Only Pawn saw the bleak future. The world was not ending. Only life was. At least that was a good thing. There was no Death after death, at least not of the kind Thanatos embodied. After that her soul would be her own, free, even though it would probably only be free to burn in some pit of Hell.

Cerulea had left, but Pawn suspected she had gone off to seek her pleasures in another place.

“Follow her,” commanded Thanatos. “Make sure she goes to where she should. You will also be going to the meeting, to tell them exactly what my will is. Now be gone.”

Pawn flew out of the room and after Cerulea. She always did her work, but never happily. Thanatos could not touch her thoughts and feelings, her desires; he could not dictate them. And for Pawn, that was worse than if it had been otherwise.

Six months later. Konno sighed from behind her desk in the captain’s quarters of her ship, the Baldur’s Eye. It had been nearly a month and a half since her last battle with one of the warring countries, Kinetica and Cellstar. Konno was part of a vast organization called The Order. The Order’s sole

purpose was to stop the seventy-year war between Kinetica and Cellstar at all costs. Konno was a captain in The Order's elite navy. Her ship, the Baldur's Eye, was one of the few nearly-indestructible "Invincible" class ships. It was outfitted with several cannons, two harpoon guns, and steel lining in the interior. Few ships matched up to it. Konno herself was wearing a simple white sleeveless tank top, capri denim pants, a red bandanna that covered a large quantity of sleek black hair that fell down her back in a tight braid, and at her side hung her katana. She closed her eyes, hiding the almost glowlike quality of her bright green eyes. The captain's quarters was simple: it had a few tapestries hanging from the wall, a desk full of paperwork, one candle, and, of course, Konno was a usual occupant as well.

"Captain?" said a voice from the other side of the door. It was one of her crewmembers, an Elf named Allendar.

"Yes, Allendar, what is it?" Konno said. Allendar opened the door and stepped into the cramped quarters. He was tall and muscular, but not overly muscular. He was an Elf, after all. He had scraggly black hair that fell down beneath his eyes, and he preferred to go shirtless, except for the spiked shoulder plates he wore on one shoulder. His enormous broadsword, which he had christened the "Gaia Blade" hung from his back. The most interesting thing he wore, by far, was his magic gauntlet, which seemed to have melded itself to his arm, for he was never seen without it. On his cheek was a tattoo of some unknown symbol. Only Allendar knew what it was, and he'd never told a soul what it meant. It was right underneath his dark brown eyes.

"We just received a message from headquarters. We're to report back immediately for our newest assignment."

Konno straightened up. A new assignment? That was good. She was longing for battle. Life was just plain dull without the sounds of battle raging around her. "Very good," she said. "Inform Mia to change direction towards headquarters."

Allendar snapped a salute and strode out to the navigational quarters. The sky was clear and the sun was bright that day, perfect sailing conditions. He climbed a set of stairs that sat right next to the entrance to the captain's quarters and walked to a small hut near the back of the ship. There he found Mia, the navigator on the Baldur's Eye. Even though she was only thirteen, she had exceptional navigating skills. She was able to steer the ship through raging storms and battles.

"Change of heading, Mia," Allendar said. "We're to report to HQ."

"Why?" Mia said without looking at Allendar. Her gaze was fixated on the instruments in front of her, giving her readings of every type; water temperature, water level, speed, distance, etc.

Allendar stole a moment to look Mia over. She was wearing her usual uniform of a short, long-sleeved red jacket, with a blue, short-cropped, skin-tight dress underneath. She wore a red beret on her head, from which protruded cascades of platinum blonde hair. She stared ahead with unusually colored eyes. One was blue, while the other was green.

"I asked you a question, Allendar," Mia said sternly. Allendar shook his head.

"Oh, yes, why...oh, we're getting a new assignment," he said. Mia nodded, satisfied, and adjusted the measures of the instruments to fit the new bearing. Allendar stepped back into the sunlight, shaking his head.

"Just been to see Mia, have you?" said a gruff voice from the railing. Allendar looked to his right to see Darius, a rather large Dwarf, standing there with a smug look on his face.

"I tell you, Darius, that girl can sober you up even if you've downed seven Orc Rums," Allendar replied, sighing.

Darius guffawed, striding to Allendar's side. He was actually quite large for a Dwarf, as he came up to tall Allendar's midsection. He wore the typical battle attire for his kind, a steel helm, chain mail, large leather gauntlets, and a large battle axe swung from his hip. His eyes were pitch black, giving him an almost hawklike quality. He clapped Allendar on the back.

“Not to worry, m’boy! She’ll get easier to handle as she grows. Now, let’s go see Silverfang about a drink.” As Allendar and Darius made their way down to the holds to see Silverfang, Konno emerged from the captain’s quarters. She almost immediately ran into the notoriously clumsy Kaya, another crewmember on the Baldur’s Eye.

“Oh, dear! I’m terribly sorry, Captain! Er...let me clean you up...” Kaya had been carrying a keg full of beer when she ran into Konno. Now Konno was soaked in it.

“No, really, Kaya, that’s all right. I’ll just go down to the kitchen and get a towel from Zion.” Konno said, looking up at Kaya. She was wearing a loose white t-shirt and khaki shorts, with a red bandanna tied around her head, which covered most of her brown hair, with the exception of a few chunks sticking out here and there, and two large braids protruding at either end. Kaya also had large, sapphire blue eyes.

“Oh, okay. Well, have fun...I guess...” Kaya said, as she hoisted her keg of beer. Almost instantaneously, she shrieked, toppled over, and spilled some of the beer on herself.

“By Baldur’s beard!!” she groaned.

Konno hurried away, wary of Kaya’s clumsiness. Konno made her way to the kitchen, buried deep in the holds. It was small, but Zion was able to work with it. Konno found him there, a Hawkman. He was shirtless, as always, because of two large black wings sticking out of his back. He wore a tall red band around his head, partially hiding his bright green eyes. His blonde hair stuck up and then glided down the back of his skull. His denim pants were also red.

“A towel? Sure thing, Captain,” Zion said, handing Konno a towel. “Was it Kaya?”

“Who else?” Konno replied.

Zion laughed. “Yeah, I saw her lave with that keg a couple minutes ago. Never told me what it was for...”

“Seemed like she already had some,” Konno said, sarcastically. She left the kitchen and headed for the artificery. There, she found the artificer Silverfang, a Wolfman, talking with Allendar and Darius. Silverfang did not wear much, but his fur was a deep shade of light blue in some areas, and dark sapphire in others. A large, intricately carved scimitar hung from his waist. His eyes were a piercing yellow. The artificery was a small room crowded with various whirring and whizzing silver instruments. On the table was lying Silverfang’s newest invention, the likes of which Konno had never seen before. It seemed to be a dark steel cattle prod, but it occasionally emitted a puff of smoke.

“Welcome, Captain,” Silverfang said without looking at Konno.

“How’d you know it was me?” Konno asked, placing her hands on her hips and cocking her head to one side.

“You should know by now, Captain, that my sense of smell exceeds that of any human,” Silverfang replied smugly, glancing sideways at Konno. She laughed and headed out the door. Once back on the deck, she spotted the ship’s two rope workers: Spark, a Stone Golem, and Grunt, a Half Orc. Also up on deck was the ship’s unofficial crewmember, Dominique. Dominique wore an ankle-length black cloak, with a longsword attached to the back. Her hair was medium-length, and black like Konno’s. Her eyes, however, were a burning red. Spark was a large creature. He wore no clothing except for the bags of various tools he wore around his waist. Grunt looked the most like a pirate of any of them. He had a scarred face, a ripped bandanna, and tattered clothes. He was truly a pirate at heart. His skin was a lighter shade of green than full-blooded Orcs, and although his face was strikingly Human, he had two large fangs that protruded from his bottom lip. In a very Orclike fashion, he had no hair, even on his eyebrows, and too many body piercings for his own good. Konno stole a glance at each of them before heading back to the captain’s quarters.

2 - Chapter 2

Soon enough, they reached the headquarters of The Order. They disembarked and watched the repairmen board her ship to check for any mishaps the others might have missed. Around the dry dock were several people talking and exchanging goods. The area around headquarters was very beautiful, with several acres of plant life and a large waterfall to its right. They were ushered through the large marble archway that led to the High Hall. Here, several doors broke off to the sides that led to corridors that plunged deeper into the headquarters. The Hall was made of fine marble, and the ceiling was made of red velvet. At the end of the Hall was the entrance to the Grand Hall, and further beyond that was the entrance to the Great Chamber. The crew quickly proceeded through the High Hall and entered the Grand Hall. Here, there were no doors, but several nooks, in which High Guards resided. The High Guards wore heavy cloaks that hid Elven chain mail underneath. They carried large black pikes as weapons. At the end of the Hall were two centaur longbowmen, poised and ready. The Hall was made of more marble, but this one was black and red, not white and black. The ceiling was made of black velvet. The Hall was very dark, there were only small windows at set intervals along each side. The crew plowed on, striding along the length of the Hall, until at last they reached the large oaken double-doors leading to the Great Chamber. The two centaurs crossed their longbows and barred the path of the crew.

“Please wait momentarily. The Supreme Chancellor will see you after he is done with another matter,” one of the centaurs said in their usual quiet, mystical voice. Konno nodded.

The crew waited for about twenty minutes before the door opened and a man emerged, looking furious. Konno paid him no heed, and walked into the Great Chamber, the rest of the crew at her heels. She stopped at the large circular rug depicting the symbol of The Order: a large broadsword held by a solitary masked man, standing in between an army holding the banner of Kinetica, and an army holding the banner of Cellstar. She kneeled momentarily and stood back up, gazing at the Supreme Chancellor. He was a very old Elf, probably born in the days of peace between Kinetica and Cellstar when some of the present-day countries hadn't been established yet. He wore a large, blue and yellow robe and had flowing white hair. His bright, piercing blue eyes stared out from behind his half-circle glasses.

“Welcome, Konno, and the crew of the Baldur's Eye. You are here to receive another assignment, as I'm sure you already know. What you are to do, is attack and capture a small Kinetican outpost that was established dangerously close to The Order's headquarters. It is on the small unnamed island to the northeast of the dry dock you arrived in. Now, this mission will require more than your standing crew number, I'm afraid, so I have taken the liberty of assigning you a very excellent bounty hunter and his partner who shall-” The Supreme Chancellor was cut short as the double doors were thrown open, and a lone figure stepped in, leaving the centaur guards behind him in a surprised state. Konno instinctively reached for her blade, but the man paid her no heed. He was wearing what might have once been a black military uniform, but was decorated and adorned with all manner of belts, bits of armor, and jewelry crafted of iron and precious stones. Over all he wore a large fur cloak with a thrown back hood. In a fancy leather sheath at his side he wore a broadsword, the blue hilt of which appeared to be of value, although it was not overly ornate. His shaggy silver-white hair nearly came down to his shoulders. The features of his face were rather handsome, though somewhat drawn, and were surprisingly smooth with no scars. His narrow yellow eyes darted about the room as he strode briskly across the room. The Chancellor smiled, “Ah, and here is our man. Allow me to introduce Masamune Garou, the infamous White Wolf of Zayin!”

The man's raspy voice had an obvious tone of anger in it. "Evander, what goeth on here? Who art all these people?"

The crew of the Baldur's Eye all turned to Supreme Chancellor Evander, an incredulous look in their faces. "Eh..." he began. "These good soldiers shall be accompanying you."

"What?" came a shout of fury. "This was not a part of the deal."

"I know, I know, but this mission for the capture of the entire fortress as well as the capture of Lord Kalven."

Garou turned to the crew, looking them over. He spoke to them, "I am Garou. Although it doth not matter what thou callest me. Thou may call me Garou. Thou may call me Masamune, Thou may call me a dirty bloody monster for all I care."

"Hmm...brisk fellow, isn't he?" Allendar muttered. Garou glared at him.

Suddenly the doors opened again as a pretty young girl in a loose blue tunic ran in. "Heya everyone."

"Mina, I thought I told thee to stay outside," said Garou.

"I know Wolfy, but I got bored. Those centaurs are the dullest creatures I've ever seen. They don't even have any money in their pockets."

The Supreme Chancellor smiled again, "Everyone, this is Minako Misamachi, Garou's partner. Minako, this is Captain Konno, and her crew."

The girl immediately ran up and shook Konno's hand. "So, you must be captain of the ship we're taking to that island. But I always thought we were sailing in the Bayonet." Konno simply stared at the girl, her mouth hanging, and a look of utter disbelief plastered on her face.

Garou scowled. "Apparently this is no longer a two person mission," he said, not hiding his contempt.

He turned towards the door, with Mina following with him. He turned his head and called back at them, "I shall be back as soon as thou art ready. Try and not take very long." The two were out of the room in short order.

Konno turned back to the Supreme Chancellor, and stared at him with a raised eyebrow.

"Well, you learn to like him..." the Chancellor said uneasily. Konno scoffed and turned to leave.

"Good luck, Captain," the Chancellor called. Konno waved a hand.

After three days, the crew was ready to depart. As if on command, the minute they began loading the boat, Garou and Mina appeared out of nowhere.

"It's about time!" Garou said scornfully. Konno threw him a dirty look and continued loading the boat.

"You know, we could use some help," Allendar called.

"Not my problem," Garou replied, but Mina immediately began helping the crew. "Oh, fine," he snarled, and began helping as well. Soon, they set off, towards the island the Supreme Chancellor had mentioned. Konno preferred to stay in her quarters as opposed to outside, where her crew constantly argued with Garou. Finally, when the fighting became unbearable, Konno flung open her door and shouted, "Will you give it a rest?" Everyone stopped and stared at her. Garou and Allendar stood glancing sideways at each other, looking murderous. Mina sat on the siderail, looking mildly interested. The rest of the crew, with the exception of Mia, were standing around them, either looking utterly bored, or annoyed.

"Honestly, two grown men acting as you two do. It makes me sick!" Konno shouted. "We're supposed to be allies in this. If we can't work together, how are we supposed to take the fortress?"

Garou growled, his hands clenching into fists. Allendar grunted and looked away, his arms crossed.

"What were you two fighting about anyway?" Konno asked.

Mina piped up from the siderail, "Wolfy was complaining about being led by a...a...well, it went along the lines of a Half Breed, and Allendar started yelling at him, and it escalated from there."

"Oh, Allendar, you should know by now that I don't mind being called a Half Breed," Konno said. Half

Breed was a racial slur referring to Half Elves, Half Orcs, and Half Dwarves. Only those that really prided themselves in their heritage took it to heart. The rest simply shrugged it off.

“Well, it’s common manners, Captain, and I for one despise that slur.”

“Oh, really? Why should you despise it? You’re a full-blooded Elf!” Garou muttered scathingly. Allendar threw him a look of deepest loathing, then turned and walked down into the holds. A few moments later, Silverfang stuck his furry head through the trapdoor.

“Is the fighting over? Thank Baldur...I was beginning to think I would never get any work done...”

“Oh, great! Now the wolf is complaining! Will it ever end?” Garou cried, throwing his arms up in frustration. Mina hopped down from the siderail and took Garou aside. The two began a conversation in hushed whispers. Konno looked the rest of her crew over.

“Anyone else have a complaint?” The crew murmured lowered nos and returned to work. Soon Garou exhaled loudly and stormed off to his makeshift quarters. Mina shook her head and headed down into the holds. Konno returned to her quarters as well.

After three days of sailing, with the added nonstop tension that existed whenever Allendar and Garou were in the same room, the crew was actually relieved when they disembarked on the secluded harbor that wound it’s way to the outpost. The crew took a few minutes to prep their weapons and check that everything was in working order. Satisfied, they began their trek to the hills surrounding the Kinetician outpost. Garou and Mina preferred to hang back, and walk silently a couple of yards behind the crew of the Baldur’s Eye. At last, when they reached a satisfactory cliff from which to observe the movements of the Kinetician dispatch garrison that had taken up post in the outpost, they unpacked, and awaited darkness.

3 - Chapter 3

The night fell, cloudless and breezy. Konno threw a cloak around her shoulders to shield herself from the cold. The rest of the crew were preparing their weapons. Silverfang was polishing his scimitar, and Allendar was sharpening the blade of his gigantic broadsword. Kaya was fitting poison tips to her arrows, and Dominique was standing silent, scanning the outpost with her keen Elven eyes. Konno swallowed. They would have to hit fast, but she was confident. She had glimpsed Garou training one night on the main deck of her ship. He moved with godlike speed, and even though the shabby practice dummy he had set up seemed unharmed, the minute Garou had sheathed his blade, the dummy fell into many pieces. Konno recognized this style of fighting. It was a secret style that was passed down only through select members of an ancient clan.

The style called tate.

Tate harnessed the power of time and slowed it so that the attacker could slash his opponent multiple times before the opponent felt a thing. Or the attacker could slash multiple opponents in a matter of milliseconds. Once the attacker was done, he sheathed his blade, and time sped up again. Konno was fascinated by the tate style of fighting, but she preferred her own weapon style of jeet kun do. It focused on reflexes and quick body movements that confused the opponent. After the opponent was bemused, the attacker would move to the second phase of jeet kun do.

This phase utilized a mixture of the attackers strength and flexibility. A swift backwards uppercut or reverse roundhouse would quickly do the trick. Konno simply drew on this, and added a blade. Thus was born the weapon style of jeet kun do. Konno looked over at Garou. He was leaning against a tree, listening to Mina. He glanced in Konno's direction, and she looked away quickly, blushing. Konno turned to Dominique, who stood still as a statue. She gestured to Konno without looking at her, and Konno obliged.

"Now is the time to strike," she said shortly. Konno nodded and got the attention of the rest of the crew. She made several quick hand movements and Silverfang, Allendar, Mia, Kaya, and Zion nodded and sped down the slope. Konno was left with Dominique, Darius, Grunt, Spark, Garou, and Mina. Konno suddenly remembered something she'd been meaning to ask Mina.

"Er...how do you fight?" she asked. Mina giggled.

"You mean without a weapon? I'm a master of kung fu."

Konno nodded. She'd heard of kung fu before. A no-weapons, graceful style that focused on claws and gouges. Mia used the same style.

"Let's go," Garou said. Konno nodded and the other half of the crew started down the slope. When they reached the bottom, they found Allendar looking through a small telescope and cursing under his breath.

"What is it?" Konno asked.

"Damn that Dunland," Allendar hissed.

"What!?" Konno whispered urgently.

"Here," Allendar replied. He handed the telescope to Konno and hoisted her onto the rock atop which he was perched. Konno looked through the telescope in the direction Allendar gestured. A small band of about twenty sailors wearing the colors of The Order were making their way through the brush. Konno recognized Dunland's unique weapon instantly.

"Dammit," she whispered. "Allendar, come with me. The rest of you, stay here until we return, clear?"

The crew nodded and Konno and Allendar set off. They reached Dunland's party with no incidents, and

hailed him down when they were close enough.

"Well, well, if it isn't little Konno," Dunland said in his thick accent.

"Dunland, what the hell are you doing here?" Allendar hissed. Dunland chuckled.

"We're here to help you take the fortress."

"What? Did the Supreme Chancellor order this?"

"Yup. He called us in right after you lot left."

Konno sighed. Garou wouldn't like this, but it was done and there wasn't any going back. She nodded and signaled Allendar to come with her. Dunland and his team continued on, while Konno and Allendar headed back to her crew.

"I don't know if you've noticed or not, but that madman is still heading for the outpost!" Garou hissed when Konno and Allendar returned.

"I know, but there's nothing we can do. It was ordered by the Supreme Chancellor."

"What!? This deal gets dirtier and dirtier by the second..." Garou cried.

"Keep your voice down!" Konno whispered urgently. She looked around at the outpost, and suddenly the gate erupted into flames.

"They've already started! Ugh...alright, guys let's go. No point in stealth now."

At those words, the sound of metal on leather rang out from behind her. The team had drawn their weapons. Silverfang held his scimitar, Darius was swinging his axe, Dominique was holding her broadsword limply, Grunt had his spiked club swung around his shoulder, Kaya had an arrow notched in her bow, Zion held his mace tightly, and Allendar had his broadsword resting across his back. Garou still hadn't drawn his sword. Konno drew her katana and held it in the air.

"CHARGE!!!!" she screamed. The crew erupted into warcries and surged forward. In a matter of seconds, they had reached the flimsy picket fence and overrode it. A soldier rushed to attack, but a throwing knife from Garou caught him in the side of the head. He clutched at it, screaming, as blood sprayed in a torrent. Konno flashed past him and gutted the nearest guard. She thrust her sword into his stomach and pushed down, then tore right, ripping out a chunk of the man's side. Silverfang cleaved a man's neck in two, but didn't stay to watch the head bounce away in the midst of a fountain of blood. Mia kicked a man in the jaw, then brought a knifehand into his neck, snapping it sideways. Zion launched himself into the air and brought his mace into a soldier's head, crushing it completely. Blood and other entrails splattered everywhere as the man fell lifeless to the ground. Darius brought the spiked end of his battle axe into a guard's stomach, then while the man was still in a state of shock, brought the broad edge into the man's head, cleaving it to the middle. Blood and entrails splattered on a nearby soldier, and the man vomited, just before being run through the back by Garou, blood spraying the dead body of his comrade. A soldier ran up behind Garou, but stopped dead at the sight of a large bolt lodged in his right eye, courtesy of Kaya. He clutched at it, screaming, until Garou sliced his head clean off in a torrent of blood. Garou wiped some out of his eyes. At one point in the battle, Konno glanced at the roof of the outpost to see a man standing there, surrounded by dancing flames. She recognized his face; he was a general in the Cellstarian army, but what would he be doing here, at a Kinetican outpost? Her thoughts were cut short by the arrival of fresh reinforcements. They were young, and just waiting to be killed.

After three hours, the outpost lay in smouldering ruin. Dead bodies littered the area, and the crew of the Baldur's Eye stood in the middle, drenched with gore and sweat. Dunland wearily made his way to them.

"Well," he said, "I lost about ten crewmembers in that battle. You?"

"We're all accounted for," Konno replied. Dunland nodded, not bothering to hide his contempt, and turned away at a strange gurgling sound. Garou had evidently gotten the information he needed out of the man called Lord Kalven, for he had thrust his blade down Kalven's throat, and blood was now

erupting from his mouth. Dunland turned to Konno,
“I still can’t believe the Supreme Chancellor trusted this nutter with a sword.”

4 - Chapter 4

Camp that night was quiet. The crew unanimously decided to spend the night on the island, and would leave at first light. Garou scowled at this notion, obviously wanting to leave right away, but he said nothing. Something was obviously on his mind. He sat by a dying fire with Mina by his side, as ever. "You know," observed Mia. "I don't think that Garou is such a bad guy. I think we should all give him a chance."

"He blew his chance with us the moment we met," replied Konno. "Some people are such like that." "Where does this Garou hail from?" asked Allendar.

"I'm not sure," answered Konno. "I recall the Chancellor mentioning Kyosha."

"I thought the Land of Monsters was only legend," said Mia. "A story to scare little children."

"It is no myth," said Allendar. "Although no outsider has ever set foot on that isle. The natives are extreme xenophobes, and their hatred to humans is unmatched, which is why I find the pairing of Mina and Garou quite odd."

Mia stood up. "I believe I shall go make friends." Mia walked over to where Garou and Mina were sitting. Both were silent. Mia thought they would be speaking with each other. "Hey guys!" she said cheerfully.

"What dost thou want, fool?" said Garou curtly.

"Hey, I was only trying to be friendly."

"Get thee hence," came the calm reply.

"Fine. Just be that way," said Mia angrily as she turned to walk away.

"Filthy Human."

Mia twitched, while Allendar jumped to his feet, growling, and turned around. "If you haven't noticed, you happen to be sitting next to one of us filthy humans!" When Garou made no response she turned away and muttered. "Hypocrite."

"Slut," muttered Garou.

Mia gasped and turned again, "What did you just call me?"

Allendar snarled and ran to Mia's side. Konno approached the two men and stood between them.

"Garou," began Konno. "If you are going to be a part of our team you will have to be a little more tactful. The Supreme Chancellor said-

"I care not a whit for Evander's whimsical ideas," snapped Garou. "And might I call attention to just how unnecessary thou art to my purpose? Alone I could have silently been in and out without the bloody battle. Then I would have waited here until I meeting my contacts. They should be here soon. Once they arrive I shall have no more use for the lot of thee."

Allendar could take no more. "You should really learn to be a little less like a complete bastard, wolf," he said sternly.

"Allendar, hush!" Konno whispered sternly.

"Oh, I am sorry. Did I injure thy pride, Elf? What shalt thou do about it? Fight me?"

"I would not waste my skills on one such as you," replied the Elf.

"Wise move. 'Twould truly be a shame to see one such as thee die."

Allendar scowled and walked away. Konno sighed and followed him. Both froze as a chill wind picked up, blowing out all the fires. Everyone immediately became alert, looking about to check if anything was afoot. Garou stood, his eyes narrowed. Mina stood and walked over toward him. "What is it?" she whispered.

Konno wondered as well, "Yes, what is it Garou?"

Garou only shook his head and looked up, his eyes wide. "It cannot be...they!" "They who?" pressed Allendar.

Just then two strange voices echoed in the night sky.

"Black of black and night of night," said one, dark and wise.

"The shadows creep beyond your sight," said the second, soft and light, but chilling.

"You do not know what lurks ahead."

"At this time when you lay down your head."

"And soon the time of doom shall come."

"When you face demise you dogs!"

The first voice spoke again, but in a hushed tone, and lacking in its mysterious quality. "You idiot. That didn't rhyme."

Allendar and Konno shot each other incredulous looks, and the rest of the crew gave mixed quizzical and suspicious expressions, although Garou still looked terrified as Mina held him, worry across her face.

"But it was cool."

"It made no sense!"

"It did too. You all talking about doom of night and such and such."

"You said 'you dogs'! That lacks a certain mood to it."

"Let's just do our entrance."

"Fine."

In a moment the fires burst alight again, but this time in flames of many dazzling colors. Sparks and lights flashed all about them. There was a puff of smoke that faded to reveal two silhouettes.

"Introducing," said the voice that had spoken first, this time with no enhancement.

"The amazing and incredible," continued the second, substantially less chilling.

"Redek Fhurael!" A man in luxurious crimson clothing and a rust overcoat leapt forth into a spotlight. He then said, "And the fantastic and spectacular..."

"Ozrik Dasherion!" Another man, clad all in black, with short silver hair and round red spectacles slid into another spotlight." The lights all went out and the fires relit as they were before.

"The Harbingers," said Garou hoarsely. "Flotsam and Jetsam."

The one called Ozrik turned, "Ah, someone who has seen our famous circus act."

Konno furrowed her brow. She had heard much of the pair of performers, and had even watched a little bit of one in passing at a festival long ago. But they were only street magicians...or were they?

Mia shook her head, "What a pair of clowns."

Garou's eyes widened even more. "Silence, child. These two have power beyond thine imagination."

Redek smiled, "Do not reprimand the girl. She is right. We are clowns." He laughed, "But aren't clowns being to be feared?"

"You're right there, Redek," said Ozrik. "We are to be feared, but not too much."

"Yes, Ozzie. Otherwise people might think us very mean and tyrannical."

Allendar stared in wide-eyed wonder at the pair of men. "They're completely insane...Why are you here?"

"Who are you to question me, Elf? I, Khan of all Kyosha!"

Mina was confused. "I thought Janus was Khan," she asked Garou.

"He is," he answered.

"What? What? What?" exclaimed Ozzie. "That usurper! First he steals my look, then he steals my style, and now my khanate?" He ran to his companion's side. "Aid me, Redek. I am having a tragic moment."

"I must apologize for my friend," said Redek. "He is not overly sane."

"It's true," agreed Ozzie.

"I think you're both mad," said Allendar. "What manner of creature are you? You appear human."

"Heavens no," cried Ozzie. "We are truly magnificent creatures."

"We are efreeti," said Redek. "The most powerful order of genies next of course to the great Marid."

"But there is but one great Marid," added Ozzie.

"Indeed," said Redek.

"Genies..." said Mia. "Like wish-granting genies?"

The two looked at each other and laughed. Redek answered her question, "We don't do that anymore.

We are freed genies you see. And only enslaved genies have the power to grant wishes."

"Although we could be enslaved again if someone discovered and activated my flask and his lamp," said Ozzie.

"And where do you keep those?" asked Mina, slyly.

"Wouldn't you like to know," murmured Redek. Louder, he said, "But down to business. We came searching for one Masamune Garou. Is the White Wolf about?"

Gathering up his courage, Garou stepped forth. "What wouldst thou have of me?"

"We are seekers, come searching for that which is hidden," said Ozzie.

Garou grinned, "Ah, so you are my contacts. Excellent. We can leave this accursed place." Casting a glance towards Konno and the others he continued, "And this accursed company."

"You killed Kalven. He will be missed," said Redek. "Did you take the necessary precautions?"

"Aye," answered Garou. "There will be no added trouble. Shall we be off?"

"Yes, but of course," said Redek. "You have the location of our destination?"

"Yes, I'll tell you as soon as we are," he glanced at the others again. "Alone." Garou turned and began to walk away. He turned to Konno and said, "Fare thee well, Tainted One. May we not meet again." The two genies followed him, as did Mina after giving a smile and quick wave.

It was quiet for a long moment after they left. Allendar broke the silence, "So what now, Captain?"

"We go back, of course," she answered. "The Chancellor might have something more for us to do."

Konno walked over to the fire and sat down. Allendar lingered and looked over at the place where Garou and his companions had melted into the shadows. He shook his head and joined the others.

5 - Chapter 5

In the morning, the crew gathered their weapons and supplies and returned to their ship, still anchored in the rocky harbor. Konno told Mia, who was still a bit shaken by the names she had been called by Garou the previous night, to set a course for headquarters. To the rest of the crew, she said to not bother her. Silently she took Allendar aside and told him that she wanted an hourly report of the ship's and the ship's crew's condition. Allendar nodded and set off for his quarters. Back in her own quarters, Konno sighed with her head in her hands. She had met many men that were considered 'scum' in her lifetime, but for Garou to call Mia, an innocent thirteen-year-old girl, a slut, well...that was unacceptable. She would make sure the Supreme Chancellor never gave her an assignment with an unknown contact ever again. She set to work filling out the paperwork needed to prove that she had completed her mission and would be expecting payment. She paused in her writing, quill in her mouth. Allendar should be reporting soon. Sure enough, a few moments later, he knocked on the door and let himself in.

"All appears normal, Captain. The waves are low, the sun is shining, and everyone is hard at work."

"How's Mia?"

"She's fine. She's a bit shaken from Garou's..." He paused to stifle a growl and shook his head.

"Er...his words last night, but she'll be able to get us to HQ."

"Good. Thank you, Allendar."

"Captain," Allendar said, bowing out of the room.

Soon, they reached headquarters again, and while the rest of the crew departed for the market, Konno headed for the Great Chamber. She passed through the familiar hallways leading to the Supreme Chancellor's dwelling. When she arrived at the great oaken double doors, they were opened instantly for her. She stepped through and strode to the middle of the room, not bothering to kneel this time.

"I see you've neglected to show proper respect," the Supreme Chancellor said.

"Stuff it, Evander. I'm sick of your out-of-the-blue scumbag partners. Do you know what that Garou bastard called Mia last night?"

"Probably something along the lines of a filthy Human and a slut," Supreme Chancellor Evander said, quite nonchalantly.

Konno stared at him incredulously. "And that doesn't bother you?"

"He's just a man, Konno. I'm sure Mia will recover without any major psychiatric damage."

"But she's only thirteen, Evander!"

"She joined The Order of her own free will. What other members call her is her problem. Now, have you filled out the necessary paperwork?"

Konno scowled but showed him the papers.

"Good, leave them with my assistant when you leave. Now, my next assignment for you will require time. I want you to go to Kinetica and scout the area for a possible Order invasion."

"Invasion?! Are you mad!?" Konno cried in disbelief.

"No, I'm quite sane. We have now gathered a large enough force to launch successful campaigns against both Kinetica and Cellstar. Spies in Silvermoon and Riverflow have reported that both countries are weakened, and a strike at this time will be beneficial to The Order. They say that we'd be able to take both countries with minor casualties."

Konno stared at the Supreme Chancellor. He sounded like a tyrant trying to take over the world. She swallowed and nodded.

“Good. You are dismissed. I want you in Kinetica by moonrise in ten days. Send back messengers every beginning of the month. We are now mobilizing our forces, but it will take at least a year to be fully prepared, and I want full knowledge of what happens in Kinetica and Cellstar.”

“May I ask, sir, who is in Cellstar?” Konno said.

“I have sent Dunland and his crew.”

“But they just lost ten members! Shouldn’t they have time to regroup and find new crewmembers?”

“They still have ten members. That is enough to run his ship.”

Konno scowled and gave a curt nod. She abruptly turned and quickly strode out of the room, dumping her papers in the assistant’s arms as she passed.

“Really? He didn’t care that Garou called Mia a...you know what?” Zion said, amazed. Konno had found her crew in a local tavern. Mia was already quite drunk. Kaya was slammed as well, and was sloppily trying to hold an intelligent conversation with a fellow sailor. Darius, Allendar, and Zion had been quietly talking in a corner, and Silverfang was undoubtedly back on the ship, tinkering with more gadgets. Grunt and Spark were hanging around Allendar, Darius, and Zion, saying nothing. Konno had ordered a pint of the tavern’s strongest drink, which turned out to be Riverflow ale, and sat with her crew. She hurriedly told them what had happened in the Great Chamber, and sat back to hear their reactions.

“Yeah, he just said that she’d probably be fine, and then he went on with our next assignment.”

“What an @\$\$.…” Allendar muttered. He took another sip of his drink and looked at Kaya darkly. She was silently giggling at nothing.

“Hee hee...*hic*...Allendar said @\$\$.…” she quietly said to Konno. Konno just stared at her for a moment then turned back to her crew. Mia’s head nodded and she began to snore.

“How much has she had to drink?” Konno asked, pointing at Mia.

“Six Riverflow ales...” Allendar muttered.

“Allendar! She’s thirteen! How can you expect her to drink six Riverflow ales successively!?” Konno exclaimed. Allendar shrugged and glared at Kaya, who was now laughing uncontrollably. Spark picked Mia up and carried her to the boat.

“I’ll tell you one thing, lass,” Darius said, “Mia won’t be doing any navigating tomorrow...” Konno glared at Allendar pointedly and he shrugged again.

“Hey, I tried to stop her, but she tried to bite me, so I just let her drink ‘em.” Konno sighed, exasperated. The past few days had been exhausting, what with the battle, Garou, and now Mia getting drunk beyond all reason. She said she was going to turn in and headed for the boat, but when she reached her quarters, decided not to go to sleep after all and just sat up thinking. What if Supreme Chancellor Evander had changed his aims for The Order? What if he had created his own personal army with which he would attempt to take over the world? Konno didn’t want to believe it, but the evidence was incontrovertible.

Evander had become a power-hungry tyrant.

6 - Chapter 6

It was almost dusk when the Baldur's Eye pulled into harbor at Kinetica City, one of the largest cities in the world. Their assignment this time was, of all things, relief guard duty to the capital. It was highly doubtful that they would need their help unless Cellstar launched a full-scale invasion, which was not likely. Perhaps Evander had given them an easier assignment in light of the last one, but Konno doubted that. This seemed more like an excuse to get rid of them while Evander went on with his mad schemes. Konno and the rest of the crew looked forward to having some free time on their hands. After clearing up some business with the harbor guards as to their identity, they were assigned a small barracks directly across the way from their dock, and sent off to enjoy the day while dockhands handled the unloading of their ship.

Dominique stayed behind to make sure of the competence of the dockhands, and to look after Spark. Silverfang and Zion volunteered to go notify the City Watch of their arrival, and to get to know the areas they would be guarding, while Grunt and Darius set off to find the nearest entertainment facility. That left Konno, Mia, Kaya, and Allendar on their own, so they decided to go see some of the sights, and examine the city. Not soon after they had left the docks, an old man in a brown hooded robe with a long white beard and kind grey eyes, carrying a staff, approached them.

"Ho there, child. Would you be willing to stay and chat with an old man for a spell?" he said.

"I guess," answered Konno. "If you wouldn't mind answering a few questions. We've just arrived."

"Yes, yes," he said. "I know that you are Order mercenaries, because that's an order ship. We get a lot of them that come through here, yet none of them stay. There hasn't been an attack on either capital in so long, interesting isn't it? My name is Kevalas, by the way."

"I'm Konno, Captain of the Baldur's Eye. This is Mia, Kaya, and Allendar. And we'll be staying for quite awhile. We're on relief duty."

"Then I daresay you'll die here," Kevalas laughed. "But not in battle, oh no. Unless you get reassigned, which is likely, although no mercenary has ever been hired to relief before."

Mia asked, "How is it in the city? Any strange happenings?"

Kevalas thought a moment. "Well, the Devil's Shadow, a local crime guild, has become more aggressive as of late, which may be the real reason you've been called here. I tell you, Sisera Kartaran, that's their leader, has gotten quite bold as of late, but no one can pin anything on him, and there seems to be a lack of bounty hunters and vigilantes this day in age. They've all become mercenaries or assassins. The great Nifl the Chill, now there was a hunter if ever I saw one. But he wandered off long ago, in some search for some Hall of Reflection, wherever that may be. He sailed to the Isle of Nidavellir..." He paused a moment, then continued. "He never returned."

"This, this Nifl. Was he a hero of some sort?" asked Mia.

"Of a sort," answered Kevalas. "He was very emotionless, and nobody really liked or disliked him. Most felt sorry for him. But I'm just reminiscing of old times. You want current events. There's not really that much more I can tell you of matters of the city, but there have been a few strange happenings."

"Like what?" inquired Allendar.

"Well, the Archduke of Kinetica has been acting strange as of late, probably the strain of the war, but I am sure that evil man Zephys is not helping."

"Who is Zephys?" asked Konno.

"Some blind man who claims to be a priest of some god named Seth. I do not know that god, but I recall hearing the name from some ancient texts from some far off land. I suspect the nature of this god is not

as holy as the blind priest says. It's so strange."

"How so?" pressed Allendar. This man may have some useful information.

"Just recently I hear the King of Cellstar got a new adviser, and has been acting out of sorts as well. Odd, in my opinion. And many more strange happenings around the area. Some are saying now that the woods are haunted by singing ghosts, and that in the black desert to the south that dead men are rising. Then there have been many a strange visitor in town, like that huge bear of a man, reminded me of a dwarf he did, but bigger, and that band of well, they were monsters, like the creatures of legendary lands across the seas." Kevalas sighed. "Thank you for your time Konno and crew. I hope we might meet again some time." With that he walked off into the crowd.

"Well," said Mia. "He was certainly a nice old man."

"And an informative one," observed Allendar.

"Hey, why don't we check out that tavern over there," suggested Konno, pointing to a sign that read the Briny Octopus. "It should be another good source of information."

They filed in through the door and were immediately greeted by a stocky man in spiked armor and a large black hammer. He looked every bit a dwarven warrior except for one thing. He was six feet tall.

"Greeting travelers, and welcome to Benton's Briny Octopus, the largest, not to mention best, inn and tavern in all Kinetica. I be the self appointed doorman, Caliph the Giant."

"You are tall sir," noted Mia. "But your stature is hardly giant. I've seen quite a few men taller than you."

Caliph laughed, "Aye, but have you met any taller dwarves? That's what I am, biggest dwarf on the face of this world. Go in and have some fun. We've some guests that just arrived and they are the life of the party, I'm sure you'll like all of them. They're scary folk, critters and such, but all good natured fellers." Caliph gave another hearty laugh and walked off to greet some other newcomers.

Konno had seen some odd characters in her life. She'd seen orcs, dark elves, trolls, and some other creatures, but never like some of those dancing in the main hall. Prancing about in the middle of the room was a huge creature with orange tinged skin and large round red eyes and a great big grin on his face. On his shoulder, drinking and singing some obscure song was a lanky green humanoid with a distinct reptilian quality about him. Dancing around the great beast was a creature who looked like a cross between a man and a weasel, and a bald man in red and brown robes. An orc in heavy armor with large shoulder pads and a greatsword strapped to his back was drinking at the bar, smiling at the festivities. There was also a blue clad girl with black hair and green eyes dancing with a man in black who wore red glasses. Konno thought there was something familiar about those two, and the man in the red robes. Then her eyes wandered over to the corner and saw a tall figure with white shaggy hair and yellow eyes, like the eyes of a demon. He had a mug in his hand and was laughing at the spectacle. He downed his ale, set it aside and draped his cloak over his chair before joining in.

"It's him," was all she could say.

"Who?" asked Allendar, but by that time he'd already seen him. "Hmm...he's...different." "Why, it's," began Mia. "It's that bastard Garou." Allendar's hand went to his sword, but Konno stopped it from being drawn. "We don't want trouble here. Let's just leave."

The large orc glanced over and spotted them. "Ho! More to join," he cried, and a cheer went up around the room. "Come on over and let Arkady buy you a round."

It would not be polite to turn down such an offer, especially from such a character. They walked over and took seats next to them.

"Grevon," said Arkady. "Come here old boy and give us a round of Elfshadow Gold Mead." He leaned over towards Konno and said, "The stuff is great. You can drink and drink and not get the least bit tipsy. Not good for getting slobbering drunk, but you don't strike me as the type to do that much."

Konno nodded as Grevon slid four meads down, and they began to drink quietly. The song drew to a

close and the group took a bow.

"Thank you all for coming tonight," said the weasel. "Remember, the Briny Octopus is the best, as well as Grevon Everale!" There were numerous cheers around the tavern as the eight companions made their way out of the tavern.

"See, they're leaving," said Konno.

They were leaving, but Garou paused, and looked at them. He continued on, ignoring them. Mina decided to stop for a chat. "Heya, look who it is. How've you all been?"

"Mina," said Garou. "We should get going." He obviously did not wish to stay in their presence.

"Well, we wouldn't have to if you would have been a bit nicer last time. Insulting Mia here like that."

"That was not an insult. It was a statement of the evil that is human. An evil that must be recognized for what it is and cleansed from the earth. Caliph would agree."

"Caliph only thinks that evil humans need cleansing," corrected Mia.

"Caliph does not understand that all humans are evil by nature. He claims to be enlightened in his quest, but for all the enlightenment he does have he does not perceive this."

"So I am evil by nature then?"

"You," sorrow came to Garou's eyes. "You are...different."

"Why cannot others be different?"

Garou scowled and with a swirl of his wolfskin cloak, was gone.

Mina turned to the four companions. "Don't let him trouble you. He's got a lot of anger inside. He grew up among humans, very wicked humans. They have colored his views. I hope I can still be your friend, though."

"I suppose," said Mia. "You were at least nice. "So what brings you to Kinetica, and who are your new friends?"

"Looking for someone. I'm not really supposed to talk about it. As for them, well, you know Ozzie and Redek, and you've met Arkady there. This big adorable fella is Garga, and his little friend is Tengu." The frog-like man on Garga's shoulder waved. "And this debonair gentleman is Captain Kirby of our ship, the Harbinger." The weasel-man walked up and bowed before Mia, kissing her hand. "A pleasure to meet you milady," he said.

Mina added, "We have two other crewmembers, Teufel and Maverick Daemonhand, but Teufel hardly ever leaves the ship, and Maverick always keeps to himself, usually at the local brothel." Mina made a face of disgust. "He's a womanizer of the worst kind, and a murderer two. I don't like him." She continued, "Well, I hope to see you around. I assume you're the new relief guards we heard about. Farewell." She smiled and turned to leave. Kirby gave one last sweeping bow and slipped out the door.

"Well, I wonder if they have anything to do with the strange happenings around town," said Allendar.

"Are you accusing them of being involved?" asked Konno.

"Not the cause, but perhaps they are investigating it, which we might be called to do as well. Something is up, and not just here, or back home, it's happening all over the world."

That night Konno had trouble sleeping, Allendar's chilling words spinning through her mind.

7 - Chapter 7

Konno awoke early the next morning to scout where they would be assuming guard duty. She donned a cloak to conceal herself and briskly walked down the wet, gray cobblestone street. A fine mist had begun to fall, and the cobblestones were slippery. Kinetica had at one time been a fine city, but now it was falling into disrepair due to the war. Several buildings had large chunks of rock missing, and a few were completely leveled. Konno passed a large, magnificent church on her way to the palace, and stopped momentarily to gaze sadly at the enormous stained glass window depicting the three gods of Numenroad, the ancient founder of Kinetica. The three were Kiro, god of fire, Moonrad, god of earth, and Lasdar, goddess of water. They circled Numenroad as he held a magnificent broadsword. Konno dropped her gaze back to the streets, and continued on. It was now raining quite heavily. People were taking shelter in nearby buildings. Konno broke into a run and stopped only when she reached the shelter of the palace's large stone archway. She lowered her hood and pushed open one of the large oaken double doors. It was moderately dark inside the High Chamber, and Konno had to wait for her eyes to adjust before moving on. There were three guards standing by the door to the guard lobby. Konno approached them and said in the language of Kinetica, "My name is Konno. My squad and I are here as Royal Guard reinforcements. I just want to inspect our patrol area." The guards nodded, satisfied and moved to let Konno inside. She entered and took a moment to look around before pressing on into the lobby. It was a simple room, with two windows on adjacent walls, a weapons locker, a table with several chairs set around it, and a few tapestries on the wall. Konno nodded to herself, content that there was little need for concern of any kind. She left the palace and walked back through the downpour to the inn the crew was staying at. She shook off her cloak and hung it on the coat rack next to the door. She saw Zion and Allendar at a nearby table, but no one else was around.

"Hey guys," Konno said, sitting. Allendar nodded to her, smiling.

"You look terrible," Zion said, laughing. Konno ran her hands through her soaking wet hair.

"It's a perfect gale outside, Zion," she replied. Zion nodded.

"I know. I can hear the rain from all the way in here." Konno sighed.

"If it keeps up like this, guard duty is gonna be hell..."

The next morning dawned bright and cloudless. Konno, Allendar, and Dominique started off for the palace wearing their guard uniforms.

"So do we know our routines yet?" Allendar asked.

"No, I figure we'll play it by ear," Konno replied. Allendar gave Konno an incredulous look but nodded and the trio walked in silence until they reached the palace.

"Names?" the head guard asked. Konno handed him three pieces of paper. Each piece had their name, a fake rank, and other tidbits of information. The guard nodded and allowed them inside. They immediately headed for the guard lobby. Inside, they took off their cloaks and grabbed three spears hanging on the weapons rack. They went into the High Chamber and approached the head guard. He saw them and pointed to the huge metal double doors straight in front of them. They continued through the doors and found themselves in a room of gigantic proportions. The ceiling was a fine marble with an enormous circular window set in the middle. A beam of light illuminated a huge rug on the ground, which depicted Numenroad and the three gods. At the center of the beam of light was the throne for the King of Kinetica. Along the walls were fine brass pillars with strange carvings on them Konno didn't recognize. The King was nowhere to be found, so the three took positions by the doorway. Not long after they

began their shift, the King, young and muscular, burst in the door looking like the happiest man on earth. He noticed Konno and the others only after he had taken a seat.

“Ho, there! Who are you?”

“Royal Guard reinforcements, my lord,” Konno replied. The King nodded, satisfied. Suddenly a second figure walked in. He was older than the king, and much dirtier. He wore a leather vest and cloth pants held up by a shabby belt. He had a bushy, grizzly beard, and his scraggly hair fell down to his shoulders. “My lord, may I speak with you?” he said in a scratchy voice. “In private?” he added, noticing Konno and the others.

“There’s no need for us to be alone, Crow. Just say what you need.”

“Well, m’lord, The Order is full and ready to assist you in your invasion of Cellstar.”

Konno stifled a cry. The Order? Assist Kinetica? It made no sense. She shot a glance at Allendar. He looked quite a confused as she, but Dominique looked only mildly surprised. The King waved a hand and Crow bowed. He briskly walked out of the room.

“You three may leave, I need to be alone right now,” the king said. Konno bowed and exited, followed by Allendar and Dominique. They sneaked out of the palace and followed Crow through the city streets. When he stopped to look at a piece of fruit, Allendar grabbed him and dragged him down a nearby alley. Allendar kicked him in the gut to quiet him, and Konno grabbed his collar.

“Who do you work for?” she asked.

“Why should I tell you?” he replied. Allendar punched him in the face and Crow cried out.

“Now, who do you work for?” Konno said again.

“Th-The Order...” he muttered. Konno looked at Allendar. He shrugged. Konno turned back to Crow.

“Who sent you?”

“The Supreme Chancellor.”

“What is this about The Order helping Kinetica?”

“I-it’s a scam...Evander sent someone else to Cellstar...they’re gonna attack each other...and The Order will be there to clean up whoever wins...”

Konno looked at Allendar again. He had a look of concern on his face.

“Good. Thank you for your time, Crow,” Konno said. She stepped back and Allendar beat Crow into unconsciousness. Konno led Allendar and Dominique back to the inn and held an emergency meeting in the back of the pub. She told the whole story to the rest of the crew and silence ensued. Finally Allendar asked, “So whom do we serve now, Captain?”

Konno looked out the window and back at Allendar. “Ourselves.”