

"Blood and Thunder"

A novella based in the world of, and preceding the events of, the novel "*Relic Lightning*" by Cypher F.

Chapter 1 - "Steps in the Steppe"

The bell chimes as a man, blonde as gold, pulls the shop door. The wind follows him inside, causing his trench coat to sway in the gusts that budge past. "I'll be right with you," a young women's voice sings from the back room. Leaning against the service counter, the man adjusts the strap holding his sheathed blade to his back. "Oh, Prophet! Right on time. I was just finishing up your order," a girl emerges from a back room holding a pair of leather pants. "You can try them on if you'd like."

"Knowing your work, Lilly, I'm sure they're perfect," he turns around to face her. "Excellent stitching," the swordsman inspects the clothing, "and the padding?"

"Internal. I figured its gross color would clash with the beautiful imp leather you brought me. It'd be a crime to put acid-stained bone over this crimson-red," the woman explains in a high pitch, "so I took the liberty to hide it! The protection is the same either way. You can take a sword stroke or low-powered bullet to the knees, shins, or groin and not feel a thing. " Lilly leans forward, "And because the padding is hidden, it'll take any enemy at least a few attacks to catch on," the blond beams.

"That's why you're the expert. The tactical implications never crossed my mind." Prophet compliments.

"Those are just a few of the benefits you get for your loyal patronage," she bounces on her heels, hands clasping hips.

"All that's left is the 'pay' in 'patronage,'" he drapes the leather over his arm and reaches into his trench coat pocket. "So, how much do I owe you?"

A cupped palm of aqua-tinted silver-like coins is pushed away by a small, vibrating hand. Lilly recedes as her once zealous smile withers. "I wanted to talk to you about that." Lilly sinks over the

counter across from him, her voice a meek drone that staggers the battle-hardened Blitz. "I have a problem. One that I can't afford to get help with." She looks up at the man. "I was thinking that maybe... well, because you kill monsters all the time," her bright eyes shimmer and gloss, "you might be able to help."

The brightest aura in Plinth sinking into heavy darkness leaves a pit in Prophet's stomach. Arms on the counter, he leans in. "Lilly, if you're in trouble-"

"You know my parents? They used to own this shop before they got involved in some bad financial ventures and moved down to the Mesa Slums in the Southern Reaches. I got a letter from them this morning," she wipes her eye with a sleeve, "apparently there's something killing people. MantiCorp and the Blitz Creed don't take contracts from that area often. There's just no money to be made there, I get it. But that doesn't change that my folks are in danger. Sure, they're tools but... they're the only family I have." Lilly stops as the tears start to flow faster. Prophet paces around the counter and embraces her. She leans into him, "I need a Blitz, Prophet, and you're the only one I know. This order is free and I can give you hefty discounts on any others in the future if you just please help me help them."

"Of course, I'll help." Prophet leans back and looks the young girl in her leaking eyes. "Like any job, however, we need to negotiate a proper reward."

Lilly tilts her head, confused by the comment. "Is the free order and discounts not enough? I'm sure I could get some coin together with some time but-"

"No," he interrupts with a smile, "a twenty percent discount on the pants and we're even."

Lilly snuffles, staring dumbfounded. "Whatever's going on, people are dying. I'm not asking you to stick your neck out to save two cold coins on a pair of pants!"

Prophet grins. "You're right, two would be stupid." He's met with a nod from the girl. "The pants were ten CCs, correct?" he places nine coins into her hand, closing her fingers over them with his other hand to prevent her from refusing. "Ten percent discount. Take it or leave it."

Lilly looks down at her hand and smiles, tearing up further at the gesture. "You're really bad at negotiating," she jumps up and wraps her arms around his neck.

Prophet puts a hand on her back, "What else can you tell me about the letter? Any clues on what the killer could be or want? Was property stolen or otherwise missing? Any recurring wounds or signs of struggle?"

"They just said people were dying, starting from the front of the town and moving back." Lilly sniffles. "We'll have to talk to them ourselves."

Prophet's eyes widen and he pushes the girl back, grabbing her shoulders. "'We'? There is no 'we.'"

"What do you mean? I'm coming too! They're my parents!"

"It's-"

"'It's dangerous,' I know," Lilly interrupts. "But think about it, you don't know how to find them. You don't know what they look like! I do! I can help!" she insists.

"Tom and Dorothy Choleric. I can ask around for them," he says. "Small communities like that are tight-knit, right? Someone will be able to point me in the right direction. Besides, your parents are likely not the only ones who have information on these killings." Prophet explains, hoping cold logic and reason will persuade the young girl to stay.

Lilly wipes her eyes and plays with the chilled metal in her hand. She looks up at him, summoning the best baby doll eyes she can muster, "Please? I'll stay with Ivory the entire time and won't get in your way."

Prophet stands up straight, turns, and paces over to the window that Ivory lies on the other side of. He sighs before meeting her pleading eyes one last time. Lilly's hands come together in front of her chest in prayer. "Leave Ivory's saddle for a single second and I'll have her fly you back faster than you can put those puppy eyes back on," he agrees reluctantly to her request. "Pack some essentials; anything you'll need for the next few days. And dress appropriately, the steppes are cold and windy this time of year."

"Of course, Prophet! I'll get right to that!" she lights up like the sun, running into the back room to slide drawers and pry cabinets.

Prophet crosses his arms and walks toward the exit, "Ivory and I'll go to MantiCorp HQ and grab

some supplies for the trek. Lock up and be ready to leave by the end of the hour or we leave without you."

Prophet turns the corner onto the flagstone-paved street lined with small shops. In front of one near the city's east gate is a young blond girl dressed from head to toe for autumn with boots, thick orange leather pants, and a manticore fur-lined pink parka. She eagerly scans the area as she bounces on her heels in anticipation. Prophet sighs, disappointed she hadn't changed her mind. He approaches the girl, his gryphon in tow, and she lights up. "Prophet!" Lilly waves, both hands wildly flailing in the air.

"It's been forever since I've left the shop, let alone left town!" Lilly skips over to the beast as it lowers. Two paper-furred hind legs resembling lions' let Ivory's hind end down, while mighty eagle talons fold upfront as the gryphon takes a dignified position of a sphinx. Lilly pets the body's fur as a white wing extends to wrap the girl, giggling as she's pulled into a purring, feathered head. "Heya again, girl! You're looking as beautiful as ever. I got something for you!" Lilly reaches into her parka and pulls out a thick pink scarf that she wraps snug around the gryphon's neck. Ivory nudges the girl with thankful squawks before Prophet pets the beak. Lilly climbs aboard the saddle, the bird hopping up and down as the girl laughs before lifting her wings for Prophet to deposit Lilly's belongings in the saddlebags.

"You're all ready to go then?"

"Mm-hmm!" The girl grabs the gryphon's bridle.

Prophet mounts behind her, she hands him the reins, and, with an order, Ivory tucks her wings to her sides and gallops off toward the gate.

The mid-day sun beams upon the three as they make their way south through the plains. The buzzing and singing of insects raises from the tall grass bordering the beaten road. Lilly leans back on the saddle having no spare layers left to remove. "I thought you said it was going to be cold."

Prophet snaps out of his thought, "It was last week. That imp leather I brought you," he pats on his new dark-crimson pants, "I killed that bugger just up ahead." He points toward one of the few clusters of deciduous trees that adorned the otherwise barren plains. "It hasn't rained since then, I'm sure the blood

stains-"

"Why are we taking the long way?" she whines.

"What do you mean?"

"It would be faster to take the western paths down through the steppes."

Prophet sighs. He reaches over and takes a canteen from Ivory's side, "Heads up," he tosses the bottle to Lilly who promptly chugs half of it without a breath. "The steppes are faster, yes, but much more dangerous. Assuming we don't run into common ghouls or imps which live in those nearby woods, smarter predators like chupacabras and wendigo know it as a trade route. There's a good chance we'd run into one. Hell, we'd be lucky if it were *only* one."

"I'm sure a few 'cobras' and 'wedighosts' aren't anything you couldn't handle."

Prophet chuckles. "Ivory could take one out herself, and I'm sure I could kill one in a few sword strokes no problem. And if I had to-" he stops talking, glancing down at his hands. "The point is," he resets his train of thought, "I don't have to. Take that risk, I mean. Those buggers won't just attack any warm meat like a wolf or big cat, they'll target the weakest link. I can't promise they won't try to snatch you right off Ivory's back." He looks up at her, one part to see if he's getting through, the other to make sure she's still safe on the gryphon.

"Ok, ok, fine. Point taken," her arms cross and face pout. "I guess I just kinda wanted to see Alberona woods."

"Trust me, kid," Prophet pets Ivory's head, ruffling the feathers as the beak opens to let out a long squawk, "you don't."

Ivory throws her master's hand off and lowers, eyes wide as they dart around the area. Lilly wobbles from the gryphon's change of stance and sits up straight when she hears metal sliding from its sheath. Ivory lets out a low rumbling growl and trains her gaze across the lake to their right, her knees bent slightly in preparation to either pounce or take flight. "What the hell is going on?" Lilly panics.

"Language."

"Are you fucking serious?"

"Grab onto Ivory," he orders, "Tight. Ivory, don't engage. Take off if things go south here, it can't touch you in the air. There's a pistol holstered on the right side of Ivory's saddle. Safety's off." Prophet, sword drawn, advances slowly forward. Booming screams like that of an eagle through a megaphone echo over the plains as they approach. Standing straight, Prophet points his sword up into the air. "Static," he thinks aloud, "there shouldn't be this much on a clear day..." Above the dark treeline beyond the lake emerges a dark, featherless bird that trumps even Ivory in size. "About a twenty-foot wingspan. Cone-shaped head. Booming cry and massive static discharge. A thunderbird, it has to be, but what would one be doing so far from the mountains?" he asks himself. *I have to choose between offense or defense.* The thunderbird leaves a wave in the water as it glides. *But if I choose wrong and something happens to Lilly...* Prophet takes a readied stance, sword outstretched before him. *This is why Blitz work in teams.*

The predator crosses the shore and swoops in toward the group. "Ivory, go!" With a squawk and a few powerful wing beats, Ivory carries the girl away from the swordsman. The gore-stained predator opens its mouth for a large bolt of electricity to snap into the man. Prophet doesn't blink at the thunderclap as his body leaps with striations of electric light.

Lilly looks back to see Prophet rolling aside to avoid descending bloody talons. Finding a footing, Prophet throws an overhead slash at the rebounding bird. Metal slits the leathery skin of a wing, causing a corkscrew of cries to crash into the ground behind him.

Booming bird-like screams emerge from the tall grass beside the path as the bird flails. Prophet, taking advantage of his foe's staggered state, rushes into the dry brush. A tattered wing splits the golden grain. With lightning reflexes, he heaves his sword through the limb, cleaving it off at the shoulder. Blood sprays from the stump as the bird topples onto its belly. Prophet advances once more, flourishing his sword into a backward grip. Static jumps from the bird's eyes as it once again condenses a charge. Too close to dodge, Prophet lifts the blade to plunge it down through the thunderbird's skull.

The built-up electricity discharges in a burst of crackling light. Prophet, panting, returns to the path while signaling to the sky. Ivory swoops down, the air filling with Lilly's dramatic coughing as the gryphon lands. "What's the matter? Smells just like a barbecue!" Prophet jokes, taking a deep breath for

the joke then trying not to gag.

"Smells like a burning corpse," Lilly complains, handing Prophet a rag from the saddlebags.

Prophet wipes the blood and gore from his blade. "Thunderbirds have very dry skin to better conduct electricity," he explains, "so the smell has more of a punch to it."

"Fun," Lilly pinches her nose shut. "How come those lightning bolts didn't hurt you? That first one looked like it hit you straight on."

Prophet inspects his sword and rolls his eyes after noticing a large crack in the upper region of the blade. "Trade secret," he brushes her off while sheathing his sword and jumping onto the saddle behind her.

"That kind of voltage? There's no way the Blitz Creed trains you to insulate yourself from a lightning strike," she interrogates further. Prophet pats Ivory's side and she sets off down the trail in a gallop.

"You'll understand when you're older."

"Oh really? How does that work?" Lilly asks sarcastically.

"If you know your opponent well enough, you can take them down with ease. Ever heard of 'knowing is half the battle?'" Prophet nods to himself, satisfied with his answer. *It may not be the answer she wanted, per se*, he thinks to himself, *but it's useful advice nonetheless*.

Prophet's proud smirk is slapped off his face with yet another question. "Do you go to some kind of like, I don't know," Lilly gestures wildly with her hands, "'monster school' or something?"

"Not quite," Prophet turns and pulls a large leather book from Ivory's side pouch and plops it in the girl's lap.

Lilly picks it up and reads out the large letters decorating the thick cover. "Beastuary Rein?"

"It's the official MantiCorp Beastuary. An encyclopedia of all officially registered cryptids in the Archipelago. Rein is the man in charge of MantiCorp. His name is on the book because he wrote it."

Prophet pauses and tilts his head, "Did you think 'Rein' was part of the title?"

Lilly shrugs, somewhat ashamed. "Well, I never really finished school. I can read and write and

do the basics and stuff but I guess I never read many books. I was right out of school and into the shop when my parents left. Didn't have time for both."

The tone of the girl's voice mellows the man. As the gryphon trots along the beaten path, Prophet can't help but think about how badly life shafted her. *With the right credentials, Lilly's career could skyrocket*, he thinks, *she could ditch the little shop in Plinth and move to Bright Port. Knowing her talent for the profession, she'd probably take the industry by storm. The little gremlin could be running the entire industry before her thirties.* Prophet sighs. *Her circumstances are the only things stopping her from being the next Drone Eden.*

"I could always talk to Rein about potential scholastic subsidizations for your shop." Prophet chirps up, remembering the different partnership flyers littered about Rein's office.

"Scholastic whats?"

"I never really paid attention to them before - never had a reason to - but from what I remember there are different funds through MantiCorp that give money to smaller businesses so their kids can go to school and get an education." Lilly's face droops as she struggles to understand. "Oftentimes, family-owned businesses depend on the work of their kids to keep enough money coming in. What the scholastic funds do is pay out the amount of money the business in question would be losing by their kids going to school instead of working. The idea is it keeps food on the table for struggling families while ensuring the future of the Archipeligo will have plenty of educated kids to further the economy," he finishes, surprised at how much from the waiting room pamphlets sunk in.

"But no one works at the shop except for me," Lilly sours the grapes, "would the funds still cover my shop even if I'd have to close it all together five days out of the week?"

"I'd imagine you'd have to work after school for a bit. I'd be tough sure but-"

"I want to do it!" Lilly turns around to beam at him. "I don't mind the work. Not if it means I get to have friends and learn different things for once. I love the shop, but I want to learn about the world and stuff, you know?"

Prophet smiles, the prospect of friends and a social life never having crossed his mind until now.

"I'll talk to Rein when we get back and see what we can arrange." He reaches in front of her and pats the cover of the Beastiary. "If you want to learn about the world a little more, you should read through this a bit. They don't have in-depth reads like this in schools. 'Might even give you a competitive edge in the classroom."

Chapter 2 - "Mesa Slums"

Deep clouds creep around the sun, blocking out the light to begin beckoning in the night. As Ivory trots across the weathered bridge, the river below casts a cool breeze over the three. Lilly shivers, putting the Beastiary down for the first time in hours to start scrambling for her pink parka. Ivory reaches the other side and takes a U-turn off the path. She lays down on the river's edge to drink. Prophet stares down at his hand. *Lightning*, he thinks, *it's been a while since I've felt the rush.*

A pink sleeve to the face brings him back to reality. Lilly is groaning, reaching behind her trying to get her arm into the other sleeve. Prophet grabs the side of the jacket and guides her wrist through the hole with his other hand before reaching around her waist to zip it up. "Thanks," Lilly pouts, grateful for the help in quantities insufficient to quash the embarrassment.

"No problem," Prophet abandons the saddle for the rocky steppe. "Hungry? Thirsty?" Prophet buttons up his double-breasted trench coat, "We've been on the road all day and you haven't eaten anything."

"I had a big breakfast. Besides, the smell of that lightning chicken killed my appetite." She melodramatically shudders at the thought of it. "Besides, you haven't eaten anything either."

"I don't need to," he pets Ivory's neck as she happily drinks, "I'm still fully charged from earlier."

"What do you mean? Did that big lightning attack sate your hunger?" she jokes with a mild laugh. Prophet grins, not so much at the joke, but the irony.

Ivory stands up and rapidly shakes her head like a wet dog. She arches her back into the air to

stretch which gets a few giggles out of a surprised Lilly. Prophet looks around to take in the calm scenery. The wet dew smell, the breeze through the grass, the babbling of the river that fades into a faint waterfall in the distance. He admires the evening lighting igniting the autumn trees in the distance as Ivory clacks over the rocky grounds and rubs her head against the back of his black coat. "You're right, girl, let's get going." He pats her feathery head then turns to mount.

"So, how much further is it?" Lilly scans the area. "I'd imagine we could at least see it by now. How elusive can a bunch of tents be?"

"See that giant crater in the ground up ahead?" he points to a large, almost rectangular opening in the ground that looks at first glance to be at least a mile deep and several times as long, "the Mesa slums are at the bottom of that old quarry. At the far end is the road leading down."

"Then," Lilly stutters, observing Ivory disobeying the road's turn, "why are we going this way? Is there another path I can't see?"

"Nope." Prophet smirks with an anticipatory tone.

As the edge of the quarry grows closer, Lilly can make out their inevitable drop. She grabs Ivory's reins and pulls for the gryphon to stop. Ivory yanks back in defiance. "Prophet, she's not listening! Stop her!"

Prophet takes the reins in one hand and pulls Lilly tightly into him with the other. He taps the gryphon's side with his boot and she takes off running full gallop toward the cliff. Lilly screams as Ivory leaps over the edge into a freefall. The wind howls past. The rocky ground and tents below race up toward them at Mach speed. Lilly grabs the arm wrapped around her waist for any inkling of stability. Onlookers below watch them fall, not with horror, but with grins.

With the sound of a deploying parachute, Ivory's wings unfurl from her sides. They catch the air and slow their descent as she glides down to an open stretch in the makeshift market square. The howling wind subsides along with Lilly's screaming as the cloud-white gryphon lands with a graceful canter before kneeling to let her passengers off.

"Why didn't you just tell me the plan ahead of time?" Lilly yells at him, scampering off the saddle

onto the ground. "I thought we were going to die!"

"You forgot she could fly?" Prophet asks, dismounting Ivory with a chuckle.

"Momentarily!"

"You were flying on her not even five hours ago," he reminds her, "you can't seriously think I was going to let you fall."

"Well, I did." Lilly crosses her arms, her face pink and body shaking.

"Well, I'm sorry," he shoots the drama queen a conciliatory smile, "okay?"

"Okay." She walks over to pet the laying gryphon. "You better not do anything like that again."

"You're the one who wanted to come along. But sure, I promise I won't throw you off any more cliffs without warning."

"So you'd throw me off one *with* warning?" she glares.

"Maybe, maybe not. I don't have any plans yet."

"*Yet*?"

"You'll understand when you're older," he shoots the steaming girl a cocky smile.

"Lilly?" a voice calls out to them. "Lilly!" a scruffy, older man in tattered clothing walks over to the girl with outstretched arms.

"Dad!" Lilly's eyes light up as she hops into the man's embrace. "I got your letter and brought help as soon as I could," she pulls back with a smile.

The man scans the swordsman before offering a hand, "Sword on your back, gryphon in tow, MantiCorp emblem on your coat and ring," he states with an impressed tone, "you must be a member of the Blitz Creed if my eyes don't deceive me, a high ranking one at that."

"You flatter me," Prophet shakes the man's hand, "your daughter is the only person I trust to fill custom orders. The only tailor worth her salt in the entire Archipelago as far as I'm concerned," Prophet compliments, winking at the red and receding Lilly beside them. "I'm only Sword Type: 3, but I'm sure I can figure out what's going on here."

"Well," the man rests his hands on his sides, "with the four of you on the case, I'm sure you'll get

it done in no time at all. Four Blitz in the Mesa Slums," he chuckles, "Irene must have an eye on us after all." The man smiles gleefully, pressing his palms together in prayer.

Prophet looks at Lilly with a puzzled face. *Four? Even if he's counting Lilly and Ivory, that only makes three.* Lilly shrugs, wondering and stumped by the same comment. "I'm sorry, son, I was caught in the moment and forgot to introduce myself. My name's Tom Choleric, and you must be-"

"Prophet Pawn," a familiar, vaguely-posh Bright Port coo turns him around, "I thought you only took 'big contracts.'" A woman dressed in tight jeans, a white undershirt, and a high-cut black leather jacket approaches the welcome party.

"I do," Prophet smiles, excepting the woman's embrace, "I'm here on a favor."

"I didn't pin you for the favor type," the chocolate-haired Blitz glides her hands down to his chest to trace the coat's embroidery, "still wearing the complementary trench coat, I see. There are much better jackets out there. I'm sure whoever made these pants could whip up something at least a tad better," she pats the side of his leg.

"I'm sure she could, she's a very talented young woman."

"Young women?" her traveling hands freeze.

"Mm-hmm," Prophet teases, "she gives me good discounts, too. I'm sure I could get one helluva price for it."

"I'm- I'm sure your could," her brow furrows.

Prophet turns to Lilly, who watches with uncomfortable eyes. "She's actually the friend I'm doing the favor for. Athena, meet Lilly."

Athena turns to the young girl with a relieved sigh, then cocks her head aside, "We've met before, haven't we?"

"There's a good chance," Lilly nods, "I own 'Choleric Clothing', a small shop by Plinth's east gate. I do lots of different custom orders for MantiCorp and the Blitz Creed, so you might have seen me dropping stuff off at MantiCorp HQ once or twice," she answers, glad the previous tension has faded.

"How do you know Prophet?"

"Athena showed me the ropes when I first joined MantiCorp. I did my first few contracts with her and her team," Prophet explains nostalgically.

"We talk so often, how has this never come up?" Lilly presses. "And if you had a team, why go solo?"

"Klaus," Prophet finds a scapegoat. "I wanted to stray from my old... 'fighting style' and focus on using the sword. Athena and Jed were fine with it, but their third member, Klaus, wasn't. 'Said he had 'dibs' on the vanguard role." Prophet looks down at his hand again, hoping the answer will suffice, "I could've pushed the matter but it wasn't my team, it wasn't my place to make demands."

"Jed and I are still fine with you using either, Prophet," Athena reminds him, "and the two of us outvote him. We'd still love to have you on the team." She places a hand on his shoulder. "Just remember it's an open offer. You'll always have a place with us."

"She's right, man," a scruffy guy with gumboots, camo pants, and a red leather jacket joins them. "The lot of us had some damn good coordination. Always did work together seamlessly," he hoists a sagging backpack over a shoulder, "even from day one."

"I always felt the comradery, Jed," the two bump fists. "You're looking as explosive as ever, I see," Prophet scans the clashing style of camo and crimson red.

"Hey, man," Jed laughs, pushing his tied headband to keep an unkempt rag from his eyes, "if being comfy is wrong, I don't wanna be right."

"Tom said there were four Blitz here," Prophet remembers, "I assume he meant the three of us and Klaus," he questions, hoping to be wrong.

"You got it, man," Jed confirms, drawing a groan from Prophet, "we were talking to Tom and Dorothy when we heard some screams. Tom went to check it out and Athena left soon after. 'Figured those two were taking a while so I came to see, myself. Honestly, I just wanted to get away from those hens, stunk something unholy there," Jed's face scrunches at the thought. "Long story short, Klaus should still be with Dorothy. I doubt we'll get much from her though, she ain't a big talker- not by any means."

"She has been shy of late," Tom jumps in, "I think she's just a little scared after all the people

dying."

"Dying?" Prophet cocks a brow. "Lilly told me people were being killed."

"Right, right, well," Tom scratches his head, "I may have stretched the truth a small bit. I wanted to create more urgency to not have it brushed off as some mere illness. Blitz don't take too many contracts from here."

Prophet takes a deep breath, pinching the bridge of his nose with a slow exhale. *This is the guy who left his child to fend for herself. The guy's a tool like Lilly said. I shouldn't be surprised that he'd lie to get people's attention. At the same time, I can see where he's coming from. A place of desperation,* Prophet relates. *The guy was in a bad way already, then people start dropping like flies all around him. He did what he had to with no options left. But still...* The swordsman opens his mouth to lay into the poor parental practice of worrying his daughter. Instead, he calms himself, *wringing the guy out won't alter his ways, let alone change the fact we're already here. At the end of the day, people are dying,* Prophet reminds himself, *and I have a promise to keep.*

"Jed, Athena, mind filling me in?" Prophet turns to his two old allies.

"Yeah, sure, if you're staying to help, we'd love to have you," Jed agrees, surprised Prophet would stay after the news, "not sure we can pay you all that much-"

"Don't worry about money," Prophet interrupts, "I was paid in advance."

"It was one CC," the girl chirps in, uncomfortable with the unearned praise.

"So," he changes the subject, "show me the bodies."

The group arrives at the slum's makeshift graveyard a few minutes walk from the nearest tents. Body after body lines the stories-tall quarry wall, all laid to rest in sleeping bags or wrapped blankets. Prophet kneels and unzips the first cotton body bag. What was once a middle-aged blond woman slumps.

"Her death is what started the panic," Athena relays, "the whole community was looking forward to her giving birth."

"It was going to be the first child born in the Mesa Slums," Tom elaborates, "and that prospect

gave these people hope that their little slice of paradise could be something more one day, that maybe people wouldn't just come here to die, but to give life too."

The woman's yellow and blue hoop skirt shows no obvious blood, and Prophet's eye further fails to find any notable wounds. *Fingernails intact and face looks calm*, Prophet examines, *it's unlikely there was a struggle*. A healthy, flat stomach shows no signs of starvation either. *On the way over, Jed and Athena said it was unlikely these people were killed*, and after inspecting two other bodies, an elderly woman with a gold-plated fox ring alongside a flannel-heavy lumberjack, Prophet can't help but agree with them. He scratches his chin, reluctant to give the assessment he knows won't be taken well. "Sorry, Tom. They certainly died, but they weren't killed," Prophet concludes. "Contaminated water, spoiled food, poor hygiene, I can't say for sure. But I can't honestly say a cryptid did this."

Dorothy hangs off Tom's arm, refusing to look at the dead. "That can't just be it! We get all our water from the Steppe Delta, always have, and there was never any problem before," Tom argues to which Prophet shrugs. "It can't be any sort of hygiene issue either. We gave Genine bathing priority to make sure she was healthy for the baby! We'd been doing it for weeks prior and there weren't any signs of sickness the whole time!" Tom's voice begins filling the quarry. "Not one sneeze or snuffle! No coughs, nothing! Do you really think she could just die out of the blue? Huh?" Everyone stays silent but Dorothy who weeps gently to herself, backing from her boisterous husband.

"Calm down, Tom, you're scaring your wife," Prophet's knuckles whiten as he watches the aggravated body language. *These people were losing loved ones, take away their scapegoat and they'll find another one.*

"I decide when I'm scaring my wife, you little prick! I know my family, so don't tell me how to deal with 'em!" Spit flies from Tom's lips as he fumes at the swordsman.

"You know your family, huh?" Prophet gapes, his glance bouncing to the fidgeting blond tucked under Ivory's wing. "I don't doubt it! What family man wouldn't? In fact, what family man wouldn't give up on life and flee to the slums? What upstanding father wouldn't abandon his not-even-teenage-at-the-time daughter to fend for herself! You screwed up so many times in your horrible little life then just threw

in the towel! But who cares, right? It's never *your* fault! It's the bank's fault that you ran yourself into unpayable debt. It's society's fault you never fell ass-first into a six-figure job!" Fleeting resolve fills the space between hand and hilt as Prophet steps to the man. Everyone stares. Lilly leaks like her mother.

"Prophet-" Athena fingers a sidearm strapped to her thigh.

"Now all you have left in life is to live vicariously through someone else's!" Prophet's voice echoes off the old stone walls. "Then when your filthy way of living starts preying on the most vulnerable, it's obviously not your fault for bringing in bad water or feeding them rotten food, no, it's a monster at fault! A monster that leaves no trace whatsoever! And you have the gull- the nerve to tell trained professionals that they're wrong? Face it, asshole, you're a cascade of failures more deadly than anything in the Beastiary! It's more likely you just failed Genine's child like you did your own!"

"You have no right to speak her name, motherfucker!" Tom clenches his fists, obviously ready for a fight. "I'll kill you!"

"Big man with his death threats, huh? Don't make promises you can't keep, shit fiend." Prophet parts his stance and grips his sword, finger firm on the nerve. "You don't have the right to act like you gave two fucks about Genine and her child when you couldn't even support your own! Or, wait, is that why you cared so much? Were you invested in her child to prove to yourself that you aren't a useless pinworm on society's ass? Or were you planning to see how she raised a child so you could take notes?" Prophet stops for a second to think. Prophet readies himself for the inevitable fist and then looks the old man dead in the eye. "Or maybe *you* poisoned her because you love watching kids rot."

"Enough!" Athena steps between the two. "I think you've crossed more than enough lines for one day."

"You are barred from ever entering our town again, scum," Tom spits at the Blitz's boots, tear-filled eye contact unbroken as he drags his weeping wife back toward the tents.

"No skin off my back. I'll consider that my payment for all my time you wasted," Prophet gets the last word in before turning back to a scowling Athena. "Also, 'town' is a strong word," he grumbles to himself.

"Wow, Proph," the denim-clad Klaus pats his shoulder, "you sure showed him. You always pick fights with scrawny old men?" he struts away chuckling before the swordsman can respond.

"Come," Athena arrests his hand with a huff before continuing in a comforting tone, "you boys set up some shelter, it looks like a bad front's moving in."

"You're not mad?" Prophet asks.

Athena shakes her head. "You were overzealous, yes. But I know your past, Prophet, so I can see why Tom's treatment of Lilly hits home for you. Just like I said when you first joined MantiCorp," Athena comes in closer and strokes his neck, "I'm always here if you need someone to lean on. That will never change."

Prophet's shoulders drop and breath stills. Athena attempts to hold eye contact, but Prophet can't help but return the stare of Klaus down the quarry behind her. *Right*, Prophet recalls, *it was never my fighting style he had a problem with. Not really.*

Tuning out the audience, Prophet looks to the women before him. "Being duped into coming here wasn't all bad, you know."

"Oh?"

"Running into you made it worth the trip." His hands hesitate to take her hips.

Athena smiles, using her free hand to help him commit, "I was hoping to run into you one of these days, you know. We had some 'unfinished business' to attend to."

Does she know who I was glaring at? Prophet drapes his head. "You trying to piss him off?" he whispers.

Her fingers interlock behind his neck, thumbs gracing his cheeks. Boosting on her toes, she whispers in his ear. "Of course. It's rude to stare," Athena giggles to herself. "He's just overprotective of me," she explains, "it's the same with every guy I talk to, no matter the context. Even Jed gets it from time to time. He's just worse with you given how," she hums, "*close* you and I got."

"You sure that's all it is?"

"We've been Blitz partners for years. I'm very sure." Athena pulls back and puts on her best

longing stare. "We can stop if you're uncomfortable."

"No," he leans, "that's actually," their noses brush, "the last thing I'd want." The two meet in the middle. Athena guides her hands to the back of his head to pull him in, nails finding roots in his scalp. Klaus is forgotten. As their lips part, Prophet questions his past decision to leave.

"I missed those sparks," Athena breaks his train of thought. The two share a gentle gaze before the clatter of metal assaults the senses. They look over to see Jed and Lilly holding various parts to a canopy tent, the large frame bars of which roll away from them in all directions.

"Sorry, we..." Jed takes note of the two holding each other, "didn't mean to interrupt your special moment. Don't mind us lowly workers," he turns away to mouth a curse to Lilly. She giggles and the two start hunting down the scattered bars.

"You should help them," Athena pecks his cheek before breaking the embrace. "I'll cook up some meat we killed on the way here. We were planning to sell it but now I feel like having a small celebration for some reason," she offers a dramatic shrug. "Remember to put your sword away before dinner." Prophet reaches up to grab the hilt - firmly sheathed. He looks back to the chocolate-haired woman to catch her eyes darting back up from his lower half. Athena chuckles, winking as she turns.

Sunlight fades to memory as the dim ambiance of night floods the old quarry. The odd cricket chirps and collectively the few form an echo against the slick stone walls. A cool breeze funnels down from the steppes above. The smell of cooked stake fills the stagnant air as Athena works the group's dinner over a portable barbecue. Lilly rests her head, passed out into the leather book of monsters. Ivory lays with her, a wing draped lightly over the young girl as the two sleep.

Guilt increasing over his altercation with Tom, Prophet admires the sight of the calm and sleeping Lilly. *She's worked so hard the last few years to make peace with her family's state*, Prophet thinks to himself, *it's not my place to come along and dig it all up again*.

Prophet lets go of the canopy tent's frame as Jed latches the last part into position. "It's a good thing you had this, man. Those rain clouds and the way they just rolled in," Jed looks up at them with a

puzzled expression, "somethin' just don't feel natural about 'em."

"Almost didn't get the thing up in time, thanks for *pitchin'* in," Prophet pushes his laments aside for a joke.

"Ah, I see what you did there," Jed scoffs, "but I'm gonna pre-*tent* you didn't."

"Not too comfortable with puns, I see. A bit *tentative*."

"I don't mean to *rain* on your parade, boys," Athena calls over to them, "but it would be a *mistake* to make the food wait any longer."

"*Sea*, she gets it," Prophet nudges.

"Quit *grillin'* me." The two share a quick chuckle before sitting down to eat.

"I thought humanity collectively agreed a long time ago that puns aren't funny," Klaus appears and offers his two cents.

"You're just mad because you could never string a cohesive one together," Prophet chastises between bites.

"Should we wake the little one?" Athena cuts off the inevitable argument.

"Let her sleep," Prophet glances over to the sleeping girl nestled into Ivory. "She knows there's food in the saddlebags if need be. Right now she needs rest. It was a long day on the road, plus way more excitement than she's used to." He focuses back on his meal. "So, I guess this whole ordeal was nothing after all, huh?"

"Not sure what else it could be," Athena answers as she stabs at the meat, "There's just not much to go off of. Contaminated supplies or an isolated epidemic seems most likely with what we've seen." She taps her plate a few times in thought. "Still, though, Tom's right. It all just seems to perfect."

A gust of wind leads in the first of the impending storm's gifts. The lantern flame flickers in the breeze as the quiet night turns to the rapid patter of rain. The group finishes eating in virtual silence. They contemplate the deaths, occasionally pitching different far-fetched theories that don't pan out. As the blustering storm thickens around them, they decide to pack it in for the night.

Prophet stares up at the top of the canopy tent watching the indentations each drop makes as they

fall in the thousands. "Hey," a tired and shivering Athena kneels next to him holding a folded blanket.

"Room for one more?"

"Klaus not available?" he whispers in jest.

The woman rolls her eyes before taking her jacket off and unbuttoning Prophet's to reveal a more suitable pillow. She lays down and arranges the blanket over them. "You're okay with me intruding on you like this, right?" she nestles her head into his chest.

"I've never complained before. Almost missed it." Prophet strokes her back.

"'Almost,' huh?" she punctuates with an amused exhalation. "'Almost' works for me."

The rain crashes harder on the plastic canopy above them as the storm rages on, echoing through the wider canyon. A slight whistle from Ivory emanates from each peaceful breath. Jed's occasional and abrupt snoring from meters away forces a smile out of Prophet as he flashes back to past camps. As he recalls the memories of Klaus slapping the heavy sleeper every time he started sawing logs, a large thump from Klaus' direction followed by cursing from Jed's causes Prophet to suppress a chuckle. He feels the warm presence in his arms sink deeper as she passes into unconsciousness. Within minutes he clocks out as well.

Chapter 3 - "Keep the Tip"

Panicked and sweaty, Prophet is torn out of sleep. His breath races in and out of raked lungs. An odd sense of fatigue settles, prompting him to test his limbs. The chaos wakes Athena who scooches away to allow him space. He rubs his eyes with a thumb and index while a blanket is pulled over his shoulders.

"Guess I screwed us both out of sleep," he wipes the sweat from his face. "Sorry."

"You know I don't mind," she slips a hand under his shirt to rub his back. Looking up through the wet tarp above them, she notices the silence. A lack of clouds allows the sky to ripen into an early orange.

"At least it waited until morning."

He pulls his face out of his hands to admire the calm, wet stone all around absorbing the sky's orange hue. "Silver linings."

"How 'bout we go for a stroll?" Athena stands, grabbing her jacket. "We should get that blood flowing a bit."

Prophet nods and the two scramble for suitable clothing. Prophet slings his sword over the back of his trench coat and Athena straps a pistol and knife to her thigh before hiking up the sloped quarry exit.

Beams flood from the edges of the sun's orbiting front of clouds, lighting the world around them as they exit the canyon. The air proves thick with the earthy smell of rain. The creek ahead babbles and splatters, offering rhythm to the choir of songbirds cheering from the bordering woods.

The orange grass around them comes alive with a fleet of mosquitoes as the couple approaches the arching river bend. Athena closes the gap between them and grabs onto his arm. One after another, mosquitoes fall from the air with a small pop and burst of light as if hitting an invisible electric barrier. "For the love of Irene," Athena watches them fall, "I've missed that trick of yours." Out of the corner of her eye, she notices a fly buzzing closer to them than the others. "Looks like one little guy's immune to the static."

Prophet follows the woman's gaze to the fly. "Yeah, he's been following since the slums." He furrows his brow in confusion. "That's odd, at this voltage any fly should be incinerated." Prophet splays his fingers at his side and tenses his arm. Small electric arcs jump between his fingers. The incoming mosquitoes explode with a tiny flame and audible pop. The fly, however, continues to zip around them at increasing speeds.

"It's fine, Prophet," Athena grabs and squeezes his tensed arm, "you're probably just a little out of practice. Besides, it's not like it's *bugging* us," she winks.

"Fine," he calms down, relenting the tension. "I guess I've been neglecting my powers a bit too much."

The two approach the side of the babbling creek elbow at last. The white waves piledrive rough

rocks in the turn, causing a sputtering mist that freezes to fog in the cold.

"So you really don't use your powers anymore, huh?" Athena turns to him. "They were always so stunning to watch," she reminisces, "and you always looked so natural using them." Athena looks down at his hand as she plays with the MantiCorp-issued Blitz Creed ring on his finger. "They were a part of you."

"I'll use them from time to time," he responds with audible distaste, "but I'm learning to use them as a last resort. I'd rather rely on my sword skills- a skill set I learn. I can be proud of that, not some inborn power."

"Sounds like excuses to me," Athena states rashly, catching Prophet off guard. "I saw the skill in those powers when you fought, Prophet, you wielded them masterfully. You controlled them, not the other way around. That takes skill." She pauses, color washing from her drooping face. "I know firsthand that thaums don't always get that far..."

Prophet wraps his arm around the woman and pulls her closer. "What happened to your sister-"

"No," she rubs the glaze from her eyes, "forget it. It's not the point. All I'm saying is that maybe the memories attached to your powers are what make you hesitant. Like 'outgrowing' your powers is your way of 'outgrowing' your past. But the two aren't connected - not really.

"Yes, they came to you during some dark times. And yes, those dark times need to be put behind you. But your powers are a part of you. Putting them behind you, like that's even possible, in an attempt to purge everything from your past- well, it's throwing the baby out with the bathwater."

"That semester of psychology's getting a run for its money," Prophet guards.

"Am I wrong?" she sighs. He doesn't budge. "They may be sparks formed in darkness, but I think they could light the way to a brighter future."

"Dusting off the poetry classes now too?" he says, taking a swift smack to the chest. "Lighting the future - pretty broad idea," Prophet scoffs, "I wouldn't even know where to start."

Athena shrugs. "Use your powers more often, and let Irene take care of the rest."

"You have a lot of faith in them, huh?" Prophet takes pause.

"I have a lot of faith in you," Athena specifies. "One day, your sword may fail you. If that

happens, your lightning might just be needed to save a life. If nothing else, that'd be one future brighter because of-"

"Do you smell that?" Prophet cuts in.

Athena sniffs the air. "Rot?"

"Decay." He points into the shaded forest to their left as a bat flies over the trees in the same direction. "That way."

"Shall we?"

"I'll lead." Prophet dismounts from the path into the golden, dewy grass with Athena in tow. The pebble floor beneath the duo's boots scrapes and crunches as they wade toward the woods. The breeze blows through the deciduous trees and inspires the gentle clattering of branches and flutter of leaves.

As the two approach the wall of tunks, stone faces of practiced professionals rise to the forefront. "You were right. Decay."

"It's pungent," Prophet sniffs, "but varies."

"It's not plant rot, that's clear. A corpse?" Athena analyses the wafting stench. "More than one source, though."

"Right." Prophet snaps his hand to his sheathed sword as the bat from before swoops overhead at him. It dives multiple times. He swipes at the bat with every assault until he finally connects, smacking the pest out of the air and into the brush. "Since when do bats attack people?"

"Probably just a mother with children nearby."

"Bats get territorial?"

Athena reaches around from behind to cover his mouth. Seconds pass before she taps his ear and points into a cluster of trunks not too far away. The woods whistle with the wind. Nothing else. Failing to hear anything, his partner's hint clicks. *It's too quiet.* Athena slides her hand from Prophet's mouth down to her holster. A lull in the wind allows an irregular sound to find their ears. *Thuds*, Prophet thinks to himself. *Not just any thuds- footfalls. Lazy ones.* The sound draws closer though still out of sight. The dry autumn leaves crunch and scrape as the thumps draw closer. *Hard footfalls and... something dragging?*

The stench grows closer. Athena draws and trains her sidearm on the forest. *Human footfalls and a smell of decay*, Prophet flips mentally through the Beastiary, *a zombie?* "Don't shoot," he reaches aside and lowers the woman's pistol. "A gunshot would attract any other zombies, which is a problem if we're right about the multiple rotting smells."

"Zombies?" Athena assesses, "Good call."

"I'll go in and dice them up quietly," Prophet draws his sword.

"I'll watch your back." Athena nods and Prophet advances inward.

A tattered, half-rotted corpse emerges from behind a tree and begins charging at the swordsman, tripping over itself as it stumbles forward. Blood-soaked overalls keep the shriveled intestines from spilling out of the torso's monstrous gash. The monster's eyes sway back and forth, held by nothing but the optical cord. It reaches, each hand showing missing or festering digits. The flies surrounding the corpse are engulfed in flame before popping as they enter Prophet's proximity.

The zombie pounces, Prophet ducks the arms and thrusts his blade through the corpse's gut. The sword cleaves through the rotting flesh like jelly, and the body collapses into two pieces where Prophet once stood. Before the top half can begin to crawl, Prophet takes his sword with a backward grip and plunges it into the skull.

Athena advances past him into the forest, her gun held taut with both hands in front of her. "Prophet," Athena freezes, "we might have a problem." Prophet pulls his sword from the corpse and rushes to her side. Through the deep forest before them creeps a small army of zombies. "We should go."

"And lead them back to the slums?"

"Where Jed and Klaus can assist us, Prophet." She watches the swordsman taking inventory of the lucid graveyard straining through the trees like mist.

"If shit hits the fan, then fine," he grunts, "but I'm not leading them to Lilly if it can be helped. Give me some time to at least thin the herd."

"Looks like going solo has honed instincts of your own," she sighs, "though I miss the times you'd trust my judgment..." Athena backs out of melee range and readies her weapon. "I'll stay behind and

make sure they don't surround us. If I feel things are getting out of hand, I *will* open fire."

"Understood." Prophet advances, simple strikes initiating his assault. He focuses on the weak, shredding the count until a larger corpse demands his attention. The lumbering giant lunges. Prophet evades to the right where another attacker is waiting. He swings his sword out, clipping its skull. The momentum follows around and Prophet stabs to the left behind his back, impaling the large zombie. Prophet ducks beneath its groping reach, causing the bloated beast to stumble and fall. Like an axe, Prophet brings down his sword to sever the head.

The next two try their hand. Prophet slides beneath their arms. He spins around and cuts their legs off at the knees. Athena follows up and impales their skulls with a hunting knife as Prophet continues to hack and slash into the hoard.

Long minutes of strategic strikes leave Prophet panting as the two scan the area. "I think that's the last of them," Athena takes a relieved breath, "That was clean and quiet. Commander Rein taught you well."

Prophet pulls a rag from his coat, "Quiet for sure but clean might be an overstatement," he wipes the congealed crimson from his hands and sword. The steel clean, he runs his finger down the growing crack in the blade before tossing the rank and bloody cloth aside. Sheathing his sword, he follows Athena into a small clearing.

The forest remains silent with nothing standing out to them but the whistling wind carrying the continued scent of decomposition. Advancing to the clearing's center, the Blitz find a hole. The two share a glance before Prophet inches closer. The rot is palpable as he leans over the edge. A dramatic, disgusted look sweeps over his face. "Oh, shit."

"What? What's in there?" Athena walks forward in a slight panic. She looks over to be greeted by a pile of human bodies.

"I'm not sure what's worse," Prophet lets his hand off his sword, "these people being dead or that butt-munch Tom being right." Athena rolls her eyes and chuckles at Prophet's misplaced priorities.

"They've been torn apart by the looks of it," Athena examines, "I'd say by ghouls."

"That would explain the zombies. Bastards didn't damage them enough - chewed the bodies, infecting them, and left them to reanimate and crawl out," he points to the scratch marks on the walls of the hole. Then he leans closer. "The bodies are all pale. Even with these ghoul wounds, there's no way they would have bled out completely," Prophet squints, "so they must have been drained."

"Check out their necks."

"Two surgical holes right in the jugulars."

Athena nods and steps back, "A vampire did this." She fights back an inappropriate smirk as she turns to Prophet, "this sure is *bloody* unfortunate."

"*Sucks* to be them," Prophet follows suit.

"*Chews* your words carefully, Prophet, these people were murdered!"

"I'm sorry, I was only *teething*."

"That's the best you've got? You're really *sucking* the life out of this," she crosses her arms.

"*Bite* me."

"It wouldn't be the first time," she winks at him.

Prophet's smile fades as he takes a closer look down at the dozen-or-so bodies piled in the mass grave. Atop the pile is a sight that catches Prophet's attention; a stocky man covered head to toe in flannel. *Why is that so familiar?* he continues to scan. His eyes don't travel far before a wrinkled arm deeper in the pile gives him pause, its gold fox head-embroidered ring reinforcing the itch in the back of his mind. *I've seen these people before*, Prophet squints at every detail of every body as he moves down. Upon reaching the bottom, he finds vindication.

Legs caught under the mass, a torso juts out to lean against the sloped dirt wall. *A blonde woman. Young, but adult*, he postulates. She lies still, a mat of scattered feathers guarding her torn yellow and blue hoop skirt against the mud. *Genine*, Prophet realizes, the answer breeding a horrible confusion. *These people-*, he steps back from the pit as the realization sets in, *what are the corpses from the slums doing in the middle of the woods?* Witnessing the impossible, Prophet glances over to Athena for counsel. Athena's shocked face, however, shows she has no more answers than him.

"Why do they look like copies from the slums?" her shivering voice falls on deaf ears.

Did the people transport the bodies here overnight? He looks around to evaluate the surrounding woods. *No, no one is stupid enough to carry corpses through a forest at night; especially not without an armed escort. You'd be begging for ghouls to attack - it's suicide.*

Prophet eyes the state of decomposition. *The ones in the slums were relatively fresh. These are weeks old, over a month even. Not only are there copies, but they died at different times.* Then he glances back at Genine's stomach. *Drained- deflated, like the fetus and amniotic fluids were sucked out.* He thinks back to his analysis of Genine's body; *there were no signs of a struggle or any significant wounds.* His eyes light up as he remembers checking for signs of starvation. *She had a flat, healthy stomach.* Prophet gapes. *The one in the slums wasn't pregnant.* "These aren't the copies."

Squeaking splits between them as a bat travels to roost on the other side of the hole. Prophet and Athena watch as the animal cracks and squeals as it begins growing rapidly. It twitches and flails periodically on its new three-toed legs. Its bat wings are shoved behind forming shoulders as two clawed arms emerge. The creature's skin fades to grey as its eyes go red and they sink into the skull. The demon-like being reaches up to pinch its ears before stretching them back until they're long and pointy. Standing from its crouch, the monster matches Athena in height.

Prophet stares at the emaciated, pale humanoid with confusion. "What the hell is that?" The swordsman reaches for the blade on his back which prompts the grey figure to outstretch an unsettling finger toward him. *A warning?* Prophet hesitates as the beast parts its thin, dry lips to reveal two rows of yellow teeth. Prophet squints to make out the creature's canines that, with the sounds of crunching cartilage, begin to jut out from its mouth. "Oh," he raises his voice across the hole, eyes hopping between it and the bite marks on the deceased necks, "so you're the vampire that-"

The bloodsucker leaps forward with a screech, clearing the hole in a singular bound. Its claws and teeth bare as it hits the ground running. Prophet draws his blade in time to put the metal between him and the creature. It grips Prophet and begins to climb, digging into the thick leather of his trench coat with its clawed limbs. It headbutts, stunning the man, then leans back with a wide mouth. Quick reflexes

manifest, and Prophet gags the beast with a sharp, metal edge. He pushes the blade deeper into the vampire's mouth, causing it to lean back and lose grip. "Yeah, you like that?" Prophet continues to pry the creature until he can fit a knee up into the vampire's gut, forcing it to release its grip. With a beat of its frail wings, the beast jumps off Prophet and into the hole.

Athena, now with a clear shot, opens fire on the creature. The shots clap corpses, scaring the winged demon into the air where she can poke holes into the thin appendages. The handgun clicks and Athena reaches for a new magazine. The incoming fire ceased and with wings struggling to maintain altitude, the vampire dives toward the vulnerable markswoman. Prophet, too far to close the gap in time, takes his sword in a backhand grip, "What did the leper say to the prostitute?" he pulls the sword back across his body like a nocked arrow, "Keep the tip." Like a bolt of lightning tearing through the air, the sword plunges into the beast's torso.

It tumbles to the ground just beside the markswomen with a splitting, shrill squeal. Athena turns to unload a full magazine's worth of fresh bullets into the beast's wings; rendering them useless. With one pale hand, the sword is ripped from the monster's side.

The vampire, bleeding and squealing as it heaves pained breaths, drags itself away from the Blitz. Prophet bends over and picks his sword from the trail of blood. "Are you okay?"

"Fine." Athena scans Prophet's torn coat, "I'm more worried about-"

"Don't be," Prophet fingers the scraped leather, unable to find a hole. "This complementary Blitz Creed coat is quality armor, despite what *some people* might have you believe."

Athena raises her arms in surrender before the shrill beast demands their attention. "Care to do the honors, swordsman?"

One glance at the pile of innocent bodies has him clenching the blade, "I'd love to." He walks over to the pitiful excuse for a foe, once more with his sword raised above his head. It screeches one more shrill, desperate scream before rolling over to dodge the sword as it plunges into the gore-coated dirt. Using what energy it has left, the creature pulls itself to all fours and tears off across the clearing at alarming speeds. Before Athena can even raise her gun, the beast has already reached and broken the

treeline, having disappeared into the bushes that wave rapidly from the impact.

"Shit," Prophet exclaims. "Any chance it'll just bleed out?"

"Vampires have a way of not dying when you want them to," she admits, "we should get back."

"Yeah," Prophet agrees half-heartedly.

The two share a moment of relaxed silence as they look around at the pile of bodies in the hole, the blood streaks on the ground, and back to the bush it disappeared into.

"What did the leper say to the prostitute?" Athena holds her hips, judging with a raised brow.

"I think you mean, 'thank you, Prophet, for saving me from that ever-so-scary blood-sucking demon,'" he mocks with a dramatized posh accent.

"No, no," she tosses her hands up in surrender, "don't get me wrong, the line was funny, just inaccurate."

"Inaccurate? You were there, right?"

"You still have your sword," she points. "Thus, the aforementioned *tip* was not kept," she finishes tucking away her empty magazines, reloading and cocking her gun before looking up at the swordsman, arms crossed and head shaking with a pout. "Come, now, I'm only joking. It's what you get for making fun of my voice." Prophet doesn't budge, face scrunching to a glare. Athena rolls her eyes. "Thank you, Prophet, for saving me from that ever-so-scary blood-sucking demon."

"Oh please, it was nothing," he snaps out of his act and swings his sword up to rest on his shoulder. "Now, let's get going before something else comes looking for the meal behind those gunshots."

Noon beats down as they escape the forest. The grass rustles in the warm breeze and mosquitoes make themselves known with the occasional pop of flame. The two walk back toward the Mesa quarry in silence. Prophet's mind runs with the mystery posed before him, and the occasional glance at Athena tells she's engaged in the same thoughts. Prophet pulls his sword up from his side and wipes off some congealed blood to reveal the now-concerning crack across the blade. His analysis of the damage, however, is cut short as a concerning sound finds his ear. Prophet's abrupt stop catches the attention of his

absent-minded partner. She turns to him and opens her mouth only to be met with an outstretched finger. Focusing through the whistling wind and chattering grass, Prophet makes out the rhythmic beating of powerful wings. They grow closer from the right canopy. Without moving his head to look, the swordsman clutches his blade and tracks the beats. The sound grows closer, not straying an inch left or right. *Whatever it is is coming straight for us.* "Draw your gun," Prophet orders, "there are thunderbirds in the area." The threatening flaps grow stronger as Prophet waits for a large, grey bird to come booming overhead. *Booming*, Prophet's eyes widen.

Athena tenses her finger on the trigger. The leaves of the tree tops are sent into a frenzy as the creature emerges from beyond their sightline. Prophet swings his blade out toward his partner and knocks the gun out of her hand. Athena looks to Prophet in shock as the creature descends upon them. The surrounding grass spasms as a white-feathered gryphon lands on the path between them, headbutting her master with a small squawk. Prophet pats the gryphon's head before walking over to retrieve his partner's discarded sidearm.

He wipes the dirt off and holsters it on her leg. "If you knew it was Ivory, why didn't you tell me?" Athena grabs and rubs the gryphon's head with both arms.

"By the time I realized it, it was too late for words. Sorry."

"Do your damn apologies later," Jed yells at them from the gryphon's saddle, "it's hot as balls out here." The two squeeze onto the bird and Ivory takes off with a gallop down the rocky path. "So what were you guys doing way out here? We heard gunshots while packin' up camp and Ivory damn-near threw me on her saddle. 'Been circling over the woods for almost an hour."

"No need to pack camp just yet," Prophet looks at the drying blood on his sword, "we'll be staying the night again."

"We ran into a vampire and its stash of bodies back in the woods," Athena explains.

"Did you kill it? With the bloody blade and all those gunshots," Jed interjects, "I find it hard to believe anything'd walk away from that."

"Well, believe it. The thing didn't just walk, it ran. Fast."

"Damn, man. So it was a chupacabra?"

"No," Prophet says, "it wasn't a dog. Whatever it was could shapeshift and make near-perfect duplicates of the victims it killed."

"Near?" Athena questions. "They were exact."

"Very close, but not exact. Genine in the slums had a flat stomach."

"Impossible, man, she was long pregnant by the time she died. Babies don't just evaporate when the mama croaks."

"They're not usually sucked out either, but the Genine we saw in the woods had a deflated stomach. Something took the baby out of the womb, then made a copy forgetting that detail."

"So," Jed counts on his fingers, "we're dealing with a vampire that moves fast, likes the unborn, and makes clones to cover its tracks?"

"Don't forget shapeshifting," Athena adds to the list. "The thing we fought started as a bat. It changed right in front of us." She pauses. "In hindsight, that bat was likely the same one harassing us when we tried entering the woods. It may have even been that fly that followed us from the quarry."

Prophet's eyes widen. "That would explain why it wouldn't die from my electric field even when I amped the voltage."

"Any fly that survived your mosquito field would have to have some serious tricks up its sleeve," Jed takes the thought further, "not being a real fly would explain its resistance to your-" Jed pauses, "Ivory, stop!" The gryphon obeys, stopping dead in her tracks. Jed turns back to his partners with a serious look that startles the two. "Did you say the vampire fly followed you from the quarry?"

"The vampire is someone from the slums," Prophet catches on. "It's probably been around us and keeping tabs since the moment we got here." Prophet thinks for a second before continuing. "Tom was the first to greet me when Lilly and I arrived."

"Same for us," the two lock eyes in consensus.

"No," Athena cuts them off, "the whole time we were there he was pushing for us to investigate. If you were committing murders and trained professionals were about to let you get away with it, would

you push them to take a closer look?"

Prophet grunts. "As much as I'd like for him to be the vampire, that part doesn't click." Prophet clenches his jaw in frustration. "We need to get back to camp and look through the bestiary."

"Right, man," Jed agrees. "What we know should weed out a specific breed of vampire."

"Then we'll know how to kill it."

Chapter 4 - "Aswang"

With the patter of talons on stone, the group arrives at the slums. The first to greet them is Lilly, who tumbles over with heavy breaths. "You were gone so long! I got worried, especially after the gunshots!"

"We're fine, just ran into a little," Prophet glances down at the gore on his sword, "trouble." The girl attacks, arresting the shaky Blitz in a sturdy embrace. "Lilly," he hesitates then kneels to look her in the eye, "about yesterday- I'm sorry I-"

"No." Lilly cuts him off. "Don't apologize for that. You said everything that I couldn't. You stood up for me. You had my back," Lilly's voice begins to stutter as her hands fidget. "Don't be sorry. It feels like when it comes to that stuff you're the only one who gets me. Thank you for that," her lips show the inkling of a smile, "and thank you for standing up for me," she fumbles, "and... for coming to see me all the time at my shop and-" she pulls back to wipe her tears before putting on a smile that beams like the sun. "Thanks for being my friend."

"You're the best damn friend a guy could ask for." The two share a moment of contentedness before Jed interjects.

He walks over from the canopy tent flipping through the leather book. "So," his voice quiet as to ensure no one can eavesdrop, "wanna put up that mosquito field there, bud?"

"On it." Prophet steps back from Lilly and holds his hand out between the group. Tensing his

fingers, arcs of light jump frantically over his hand and a heavy static fills the air.

"Well that sucks ass," Klaus, sitting against a leg of the canopy tent sharpening a hunting knife, complains.

"No one asked, numb-nuts," Prophet rebuts.

"Forgot how strong that can be," Athena ties her hair into a ponytail to prevent volume, "it's palpable."

"Like a million little needles," Jed pats his body with his free hand.

"It may not feel the best but it'll keep any vampire fly from eavesdropping," Prophet says. "This voltage should prevent even its bat form from getting too close. If we keep our voices down, they should fall short of the static's range."

Athena takes the bestiary from Jed and starts flipping through it. "So we're looking for a vampire that can shapeshift, has some association with pregnancies, and can make near-identical clones of its victims, correct?" she asks, receiving nods from all parties.

"Ass Fang!" Lilly shouts out abruptly before covering her mouth, realizing her volume.

The group turns to her, confused. Jed pats her on the head, "Bless you."

"No!" she giggles, "Ass Fang, or something like that, it was one of the first cryptids in the bestiary. I read about it on the trip here. What you just said sounded similar to the entry."

Athena's eyes widen as she flips to the first pages and traces the words with a finger. "Lilly's right, 'Aswang.'" Everyone looks back up to Athena. Lilly places her hands on her hips and puffs out her chest. "'These vampires have the ability to shapeshift,'" the markswoman reads, "'Often the disguise of their choosing is a pig or dog but *bats* and *flies* are known to be used forms as well.'" Athena skips a few lines, moving her lips as she reads but not speaking until she finds another relevant part. "'Aswang vampires will also devour the flesh of children and consume fetuses of pregnant women. Their proboscis-like tongue meant for draining blood can suck an unborn child from the mother's womb.'"

"Fucking eww," Klaus tosses in his much-needed opinion. Prophet snorts, and the two smirk.

"And here's the cherry on the cake," Athena continues. "Typically, one of these vampires will

transform plant matter into a perfect doppelganger of one of their recently hunted victims. This doppelganger will return to the victim's home where they will feign sickness and die soon after. This is how aswangs avoid people suspecting foul play." Athena looks at Prophet. "Plant matter?"

"We *did* find them in a forest," Prophet rationalizes. "That would explain the random clearing in an otherwise thickly-wooded area." Prophet gestures toward the book, "any clues on who it could be?"

"Right." She skims back through the cryptid entry. "'Aswang vampires look like normal humans with shy and reclusive tendencies,'" her lips move fast as she skims, "'Aswangs are almost always women.' Well, that lowers our search pool a bit."

"It said 'almost always,' so we can't rule out the men completely," Prophet reminds. "But, yeah, we know who to focus on."

"Something else to look out for, 'Aswang vampires need verbal permission to enter a person's home, and will often play word games and twist language to acquire such permission,'" she reads.

Jed nods his head at the book, "how do we kill it? Any glaring weaknesses?"

"'An Aswang vampire is repelled by garlic. A whip made from a stingray's tail will prove to be fatal. Decapitation is the only way to permanently end this cryptid,' If only you made a head joke instead of that stupid 'keep the tip' line back there," Athena jests, "you might just have killed it."

Prophet shrugs, "Live and learn." The two smile.

"Right, so, we're not going to make it to the Stem Sea and back by nightfall," Jed analyzes, "so a stingray tail is out of the question. That means we'll need garlic. And a blade. Maybe smear some garlic on said blade," he spitballs ideas.

"Okay." Prophet gets the group's attention. "We need information about the people, namely women, here. Who's gonna know the most about the slum populace and will still be willing to talk to us after-" he scratches his head, "after my little blowout yesterday."

Withholding for a moment, Lilly speaks up with an idea she knows Prophet won't like. "My dad knows the women. He helped Genine a lot during her pregnancy and so he got to know the women who helped her as well. Most, or all, the girls here did based on what my parents told me in their letters. I think

he and mom are the only people I'd be able to talk to and convince to help us."

Prophet bites his tongue, then considers. "I'll go with her," Athena closes the bestiary and hands it to the swordsman, "if this vampire followed us, we can assume it knows who our allies are. It would make sense to pick us off one by one."

"Then Jed and I will go to the central market and pick up some garlic," Prophet volunteers.

Jed pats his fellow Blitz on the shoulder. "No offense, man, but after yesterday I'm surprised they're not running us out of the quarry altogether."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying maybe you stepping into their town right now isn't the best idea."

"Town' is a strong word," he mutters under his breath before taking a deep one. "No, no, you're right. Take Ivory, she'll help you carry it all."

"How much garlic do you expect me to buy? Everything here is one CC, buying more than I can carry would bankrupt my ass." Jed says, hesitant about the plan.

"Clean 'em out. We may need a lot. Just fill a bag with garlic, then you can buy it for one CC." Prophet rationalizes.

"Isn't that cheating?"

"A dumb system like this *should* be abused. Maybe people will smarten up." Prophet looks down at his sword drenched in dried gore. "While you're out I'll try to scrape a sample of this blood. If we can't identify the culprit ourselves, we can bring the blood back to MantiCorp HQ for DNA testing. I'd say we do that first but the odds of them having these bum's DNA on record is low at-"

"I'll do it," Klaus says, open palm outstretched, "take the sample, I mean."

Prophet looks to the sword and back. "Why? Don't think I can manage?"

"We all have our strengths, and lab stuff is one of mine," Klaus explains, free of the smug tone Prophet braced for. "Hand her over."

"If," Prophet stammers, "if you're sure. Thanks, Klaus."

"No problem, Prop." Klaus accepts the blade, turning back to the tent as he examines the crimson

coat.

Oddly nice of him, Prophet ponders. *Maybe seeing I'm not a threat to Athena convinced him to cut me some-*

"Damn," Klaus pivots, finger on the sword's fracture, "you really *do* suck."

There it is.

Thick cloud cover rolls over the quarry, dulling the tone as the Blitz reconvene. Beneath the canopy tent, Prophet, Jed, and Klaus sit and count garlic from two large potato sacks. "What're we even using all this for, man? We wanna attract the vampire, not scare it away," Jed inquires.

"Yeah," Klaus scoffs, "are you planning to stick a head of garlic into every tent to smoke the thing out?"

"Hey, man, that's actually not a half-bad plan," Jed nods, and the two high-five.

"Not exactly what I was thinking, but we can call that plan B," Prophet grins at the idea. "I figured we could set boards around the canopy tent and leave an opening to resemble a door. If we set up a table and lantern inside, it should count as a home in the eyes of the vampire."

"Pretty shitty home if you ask me," Klaus scoffs.

"I guess it's a good thing I *didn't* ask you." Prophet shakes his head. "These people live in tents all year round. I think anything with four walls will suffice." Prophet looks back up at Klaus to make sure he's done before continuing to explain. "We can then one-by-one wave the people of the slums in and have them bite a garlic."

"Fucking, eww."

"With their lives on the line, I think most people would be willing to bite into a damn garlic to weed out a murderer," he says. "Aswangs are repelled by garlic and need verbal permission to enter a home. Anyone who asks for verbal permission to enter will be taken aside along with anyone who doesn't bite into the garlic." Prophet finishes counting his share of the garlic and leans back. "I figure we'll have plenty more garlic to spare after putting one aside for each resident of the slums. If its beast form is

anything like how a lycan works, its senses should be increased several-fold. If we find an area we want to fight it in, we can surround it with garlic to keep the vampire from leaving."

"Why don't we just have them all bite the same garlic until it's gone before starting on a new one? They're slum dwellers, I doubt they'll care too much." Klaus chimes in again. "Hell, earlier I saw three dudes passing an apple around like a cigarette."

"That would leave more to use as barriers," Prophet begrudgingly admits. "Fine, yeah, we'll do that." Klaus is caught off guard, not expecting Prophet to actually like, let alone act on, his idea. "From there, the only direction it can run is up. I'm assuming its wings are rebuilt every time it shapeshifts, so they probably won't have the bullet holes Athena poked earlier. We'll place her outside the garlic borders so she can fire at it unimpeded should it choose flight over fight."

"Very cool," Klaus moves along, "we've tricked it and trapped it so now we just gotta do the easy part: kill the super powerful, bloodthirsty, shapeshifting, nearly-unkillable maniac that you already let slip away once." Jed sinks as the light in the tunnel fades. "Super simple."

"That's not your problem. All you have to worry about is the tricking and trapping. Leave the 'easy' part to me," the swordsman states with battle-hardened resolve.

As the guys finish up their counting and unanimously agree that Jed got way more than they had first imagined, Athena and Lilly stroll in with Tom in tow. "What in the hell is this Irene-forsaken bastard still doing here?" the grouchy old man yells out to any ears that will listen. "Screw this, I'll be back with weapons and numbers to run you fuckers out'a this hole." Tom storms around to take off only to be stopped by Athena who grips his arm and shoves him toward the group.

Prophet tilts his head and shoots the woman an impressed glance. He receives a pleased smile back. Her face hardens again as she looks back to the now-placated Tom. "Yes, Prophet's still here. We lied. But you should be thankful he is," Athena crosses her arms and stares into his soul. "Without him, the rest of us would have left by now believing the deaths were natural."

"That part's true, then?" Tom's eyes widen. "I was right about the monster? Genuine's death- it wasn't-"

"You're fault. Yeah." Prophet steps up, swallowing his pride. "I-"

"Was wrong," Tom finishes his sentence.

Prophet glares at him before continuing. "And you-"

"Was right."

"I think you mean 'were right,'" Prophet corrects pettily, "but go apeshit, I guess."

"I told you what we found in the woods and why we think the killer is someone from the slums. What I didn't tell you-" Athena gestures to Prophet's hand. Prophet crosses his arms. "You two can bicker later. Prophet, would you please?" she gestures again. Light flickers out from Prophet's clenched fists as the same heavy, palpable static fills the air. "Keeping things at a need-to-know basis," she continues explaining, telling Tom of the vampire's abilities to shapeshift, clone victims, and taste for the unborn. As she tells how they found Genine and the others dead in the woods, Tom softens, eventually tearing up.

The group discusses for a long while before the inevitable question is asked. "How do we kill it?" Tom wipes the tears from his eyes, clearing the way for vengeful fire to burn. The man turns to Prophet in a show of comradery. "I'm still not too fond of you, boy, but I hate this vampire more. So, the enemy of my enemy is my friend?"

Prophet grins and nods. "I can live with a truce." Prophet extends an open palm which Tom takes with a firm grip. Lilly puts her hands together, smiling at the sight. "Tom, we understand that you know a lot of the women here through working with Genine. Did any of them have or develop shy or reclusive tendencies?"

"Most? I met 'em all. Had to. We worked as a community for her- all of us. Never did any of 'em shy away or hide." Tom scratches his stubble. "I kinda fell out'a touch with a lotta folks after the killings started. Most of us keep to ourselves now. Can't blame anyone though, we're all just scared. Irene knows this whole thing hit Dorothy pretty hard. Poor girl. She's been pretty closed to the world since around when all this started." Tom rambles more before reading everyone's wide eyes. Catching on to the consensus, he interjects. "There is no way you people can be thinking Dorothy has a hand in this. She's just as much a victim as any of us! I-"

"You said she was acting strange even before the killings," Prophet cuts him off with a regretful tone.

"No, no. Now I know that sounds bad but her chickens started keeling over in the months before the first killing. She loved those birds like no other. Of course, she grew sad!" Tom gestures, desperate to get some backup.

"It's not uncommon for new vampires to hunt livestock before moving on to more complex prey," Athena counters with the same sorry tone as Prophet.

"I said they died, not-"

"Died like the human doppelgangers?" Prophet says, giving Tom pause. "There were feathers scattered under the pile in the clearing. I'd bet the real chickens are under the bodies."

Tom blinks. Swapping anger for desperation, he continues on a crusade to build Dorothy a case. "But they were her friends. Everyone. All of 'em. They were family."

"Animalistic instincts are strong motivators. It's possible she didn't want to kill them but was driven to despite it." Athena informs, tone as sensitive as she can muster. "You see it often with lycanthropy victims."

"Say she is," Tom engages in hypotheticals, "how would we cure her?" The Blitz look between each other. "You could cure her, right? I know for a fact she wasn't a vampire all these years, so if she is the culprit, she's been afflicted recently. Can you undo whatever happened to her?"

"You're right, it's unlikely she was always this way," Athena agrees, "if she is the aswang, she likely turned shortly before the chickens 'died.' As for how," she shrugs, "vampires come about by many means. Chupacabras are born that way, strigoi are the result of a curse, and penanggalans are believed by some to be the product of divine intervention."

"And aswangs?"

"The bestiary doesn't say," she informs with regret. "We don't know how they start, but we do know how to end one."

"Then it can't be her," Tom stands, indignant. Pleading eyes jump between the professionals for a

second opinion - an indisputable counterpoint to prove her innocence. With every second that passes and every argument dismissed, Tom begins to believe himself less and less.

Lilly tugs on the swordsman's trenchcoat. She stares up at him with pleading, wet eyes as quivering lips shake the tears from her chin. "Tell me," she orders. "Tell me now!" Prophet closes his eyes. "Tell me it can't be mom! Now, Prophet! You're the Blitz! You do this for a living! Prove it's not her! Now! Tell them!" she falls silent. She tugs on his jacket again. Prophet squats down as she runs pale. "You've been wrong before. You're wrong now."

Prophet pulls her head into his shoulder and her arms wrap around his neck. He looks up at his companions all with nothing to say. Jed stares at the ground with a blank expression. Athena covers her mouth with the side of her hand. Klaus faces away in avoidance. Tom takes a seat on the stone floor, weak legs unable to hold him.

Prophet lowers his head. *Dorothy being the vampire just makes too much sense*, he sinks. *Why does it have to be her?*

Prophet takes a long, deep breath. "I have been wrong recently, which is why I won't jump to any conclusions." Without any magic solution, he turns to the one thing that will decide it once and for all. "Tom."

"Yes? What is it?" the man's face lights up.

Prophet pauses, hesitant to make the call. *It could exonerate her, but if it doesn't...* "Go home," he orders. "Spend your night with her. Treat it like your last together, just in case." Prophet gently pushes Lilly away as he stands, head hanging low. "Bring her to our tent at midnight. We'll run two tests that will prove her either innocent or guilty beyond a shadow of a doubt."

"But she'll be fine right? The odds are in her favor, right Proph?" Tom fishes one last time for reassurance. Prophet doesn't react.

"Midnight. Not a minute later. Got it?"

Tom peels away, waving for Lilly to follow him. She obeys, trudging off before a tug on her parka stops her. She turns to see Prophet clutching. Lilly darts back to her dad as he walks away then

back to Prophet, holding her tight.

"I have to go," the girl states, more a plea than an order. She reaches up and tugs forward to resist his grip.

Prophet, avoiding eye contact, squats down once more. "You understand why I just can't let you go."

Lilly looks down at the ground as her tears begin to rain from her eyes like a spring waterfall. The man tries to pull her into an embrace but is shoved back. He releases his grip on the jacket and the girl tears off toward the tent, engulfing herself in the gryphon's feathers.

"Prophet?" Athena holds his shoulder.

Prophet rises. Breath shaky, he steps away. "We have work to do."

Chapter 5 - "Blood and Thunder"

Raindrops shatter on the stone floor intermittently as the man dressed in an old, dusty tuxedo from simpler days guides his wife forward. Tom holds his hand on her's as she clings tight to his arm. Approaching the canopy tent, they notice its different appearance. Boards have been leaned close together on every side to create walls. The front face is the only one to omit a few, creating an entrance. The tent roof glows and the gaps between the boards spill light from the small lantern within. The doorway projects a long, vibrant rectangle onto the ground before the couple, ominous in its beckoning silence.

Tom takes a deep breath as he brings the semi-reluctant woman up to the doorway. "P- Prophet?" Tom calls out, half hoping they ran off to chase the real culprit.

"In the house," a familiar voice calls out from the boarded shack. Tom gulps, causing an already jumpy Dorothy to flinch. He ushers the woman to the threshold where they stop, peering in to see a man with a bandana and red coat sitting with his hands clasped on an old, beat-up table. Dorothy gropes the space with wide eyes, unbudging from her husband's side. The inside looks just like the exterior, only the

small lantern on the table's corner emphasizes the rot and grime of the surrounding boards. The occasional raindrop beats the tarp roof, echoing in the cobbled room. The man inside reclines on an old stool. Staring at the couple, he offers a smile.

"Jed, right? What's with the creepy theatrics?" Tom demands, spooked by the setting and lack of familiar faces.

Jed pushes the cardboard box in front of him to the table's side before raising an open palm. "Prophet told you he had a couple'a tests," he speaks soft and slow, "I'm gonna help walk you through 'em. Now-" Jed turns his palm around and begins bringing his fingers back and forth.

Tom grows impatient and, leaving his wife at the door, approaches the table. "Look, pal, tell us what's going on. I came here as you asked. I trusted you despite your buddy's behavior yesterday and you repay me with a creepy shack?"

"The shack is well lit and I'm remaining calm and patient as to make this short session between us as non-nerve-racking as humanly possible," Jed explains. "All I need from you two's to follow my instructions in a non-hostile manner." Jed begins gesturing for Dorothy to join them.

Dorothy, fear painting her face, backs away. "A- are you sure it's alright?" she speaks, her voice as delicate as her shivering frame. Jed makes eye contact with the woman before closing his eyes and nodding. "I just- this is all so strange-"

"You're scaring her," Tom scowls at the Blitz. "Come, dear, the sooner we start, the sooner we can go home," he promises, arms held out for her. Dorothy doesn't budge. "Jed, you wouldn't harm us, would you?" he turns to the table.

"I most certainly would not," Jed assures.

"See, Dorothy? Nothing to worry about." The woman crosses her hands at her waist and lowers her head. Tom grows impatient, whispering a quick prayer to Irene for his wife to step forward.

Dorothy glances back to the village, and Tom looks to Jed who offers grim eyes.

"Jed," Tom states at a volume that catches his wife's attention, "she may enter, yes?" Tom pleads. Jed says nothing, just nods once again.

"Why is it you're so hesitant to enter, Dorothy?" Jed inquires to the uncomfortable woman outside. "We talked a bit yesterday, remember? The activities I have planned won't be any harder or scarier than those questions I asked you then."

"No, no, you seem like a nice young man," she insists, "I just- I grew up in a household with strong social etiquette-" she stares at Jed, hoping he'll get the hint. She waits a moment and Jed gives nothing but an understanding smile. "I just find it rather rude to waltz into one's home without proper invitation." Dorothy shows a nervous grin.

Jed shakes his head with a smile. "Of course, how rude'a me. I, too, had an upper-class upbringing. 'Grew up in one of the better neighborhoods Bright Port had to offer. Unlike you, though, It appears my manners didn't stick," he relents. "You'll freeze to death out there, come right on in."

Dorothy, still cautious, steps through the opening and takes her place beside Tom who stares wide-eyed at the stone floor. "Now I'm gonna ask you two to perform an odd task," Jed lifts the cardboard box out to the couple. "Oh, but before I do," the man behind the table interrupts himself, "That tarp rolled up above the doorway. Mind lettin' it down, Tom?"

Tom turns to see an old roll of plastic tied to the canopy tent frame above the door. His head jolts back and forth before eventually reaching out and pulling the string. The wrinkled tarp unravels like an old rug, covering the entrance of the shack. Jed smiles and nods before shaking the outstretched box, causing the contents to rattle. Dorothy's face turns white and she takes a half-step back before bumping into Tom.

"Take a bite, chew, then swallow," Jed instructs. "As soon as you can show me an empty mouth, you'll be free to go."

The room stands still for a few long, tense moments before Tom breaks the ice, reaching into the box and grabbing an onion. He takes a bite. His wife pulls away. "Nothing wrong with it," he talks with his mouth full, his face cringing from the flavor, "just a normal run-of-the-mill onion." He takes a second to swallow every piece before turning to Jed with a stuck-out tongue. Jed quickly examines before nodding.

Tom turns to Dorothy with an outstretched onion and a pleading expression. Dorothy glances over to the tarp door as the sounds of footsteps resonate from beyond it. "What's going on out there?" Dorothy asks.

"Ol' Prop and them-" Jed is interrupted by the rapid pattering of something falling onto the stone floor of the quarry. The sound moved past the canopy tent and takes off to the other canyon wall. "They probably just got back from their- their hunting trip." Jed nods, not nearly as rehearsed and fluid as his other responses. "We didn't pack food for this many nights, so they went out to hunt something while I did-" the pattering starts on the other side of the tent before stretching out to the far wall again, "while I did this session with you two."

Dorothy reaches for the tarp and is blocked by a stressed and impatient Tom. He shoves the onion at her face. Dorothy backs up with her hands blocking the vegetable from reaching her. "Tom, no!" the meek woman cries. "I'm not biting into any onion! Have you lost your mind?" She falls back onto the table.

Tom approaches and leans over her, forcing the onion closer to his wife with both hands. "You don't understand, Dorothy! I know eating an onion isn't great but you just gotta do it to get it over with!"

"Tom, this isn't what we talked about-" Jed stands, toppling the chair against the back wall.

"Get that thing away from me!" Dorothy screams, shoving Tom's hands away with all her might.

"Tom!" Jed hesitates to intervene.

"Just one little bite and we can go home, darling!" The onion grows closer.

"Get the-" She turns her head to the side as the onion presses into her cheek.

"Dorothy!"

"Stop assultin' your wife with a damn onion, man!" Jed grabs Tom's hands and yanks on the onion.

"Get the f-" Dorothy gags at the scent.

Tom sucker-punches Jed, forcing him to stumble back, before reestablishing grip on the onion pressed into his wife's face. "Eat it!" He barks at the woman pinned between an onion and a hard place.

"Shit, man, it's just an onion. Calm the hell down!" Jed staggers to a footing.

Dorothy's body begins cracking. Her skin fades into a pale grey as her ears stretch. Stubs poke out from her back and expand, pushing the couple off the table. "Get the fuck off of me!" the morphing woman bellows in a low, raspy rendition of what her voice once was. She shoves the man off. Tom stumbles back, frozen in fear as the woman he's known for decades shifts into a demon. Her body compresses as her skin fades into a deep grey. The claws on her toes split her shoes to dig into the stone floor. The stubs on her back fly out to show thin, bat-like wings. Thin arms raise into the air to threaten sharp, scalpel-like claws extending from the fingers. Tom falls back against the tarp, all the while staring up at the beast as it smiles. Its lips part to reveal canines as they grow longer and sharper.

"Irene, save me!" Tom tries to scramble to his feet. He throws his hands down and turns to the doorway. As he tries to thrust himself forward, he trips on the discarded onion and falls into the tarp. The beast sees the opening and lunges. Its sharp claws pass through Tom's back with ease and the two come rolling out of the shack onto the cold stone outside. With a few flailing swings of the aswang's arms, the tarp is torn to shreds in a tornado of blood, gore, and blood-curdling screams. As the red rain settles, the vampire stands in the lantern light, covered from head to toe in tarp fragments and chunks of the shredded corpse beneath. The sound of metal draws its attention forward.

"Tom..." A blond man in a black trench coat brings his sword down to his side, staring in horror at the crimson carnage. *You deserved to suffer... but not like this.* Prophet's gaze rises to the snarling beast. The two lock in one dismal, murderous glare as they stand in the subtle carpet of light projected from the doorway.

The aswang recognizes Prophet at a glance. Its back straightens. Its face scrunches at the smell of onions that wafts through the quarry. It glances left then right at the two lines of the tangy vegetables stretching from wall to wall. *If the smell is palpable from here,* he thinks to himself, *getting too close should feel like crashing into a wall. She- it isn't going anywhere.* Before Prophet can raise his sword, the demon throws its wings out and begins beating the air. Prophet doesn't move as the creature raises from the floor. It looks down at the swordsman with a twisted impression of a grin.

With piercing bangs, holes begin appearing in the wings, causing it to panic and lose altitude. Prophet turns to his left, tossing a thumbs-up to the woman beyond the onion line. She continues to train the rifle on the falling demon but doesn't shoot. "All yours, Prophet," the woman's mild Bright Port accent fills the battlefield, "put her down this time."

The man looks back at the demon as he raises his sword above his head. The aswang, just like before, decides to lunge forward with what altitude it has left. It soars through the cool, night air with claws and teeth outstretched. Prophet swings his sword forward as the vampire passes overhead. The vampire's claws tear through the leather jacket as the swordsman's blade cuts a clean gash across the monster's chest. The vampire hits the ground behind Prophet with a splash of blood and a terrible shriek. It claws at the ground to pull itself forward, running on all fours at the man's back. Prophet pivots, meeting the attacking claws with unrelenting backhanded swings. A downward cut breaks the pattern, catching the vampire off guard. The monster guards and the steel is locked in the vampire's claws.

The two dig in, each trying to push their strike through. A creaking fills the air as Prophet watches the crack in his blade slowly expand under the pressure. The aswang commanding greater raw strength, Prophet is forced to retreat. He pulls his sword from the lock allowing the vampire's daggers to draw more tears in his jacket. He stumbles back a step. The vampire lunges, claws aimed at the armor's breaches. With inhuman reflexes, Prophet throws out his off-hand, locking his fingers between the vampire's. The move staggers the monster, and Prophet acts. In one succinct arc, he swings his sword down onto the bloodsucker's trapped arm.

Blood spews from the stump as it stumbles, shrieking in ear-splitting pain. Prophet tosses the arm up, catching it by the wrist and waving it with a taunting smile at the monster. "Last time we fought, you were something of a one-man *army*." The beast snarls and Prophet tosses the severed appendage aside. "Let's see how you fight now that you're *disarmed*."

It charges, swinging wildly back and forth. Prophet steps backward, dodging every sloppy strike with ease. "You're not looking too good," the man taunts as the beast advances again and again to no avail, "Wanna call a truce?" Prophet smirks to himself, "An *armistice*?"

The twisted shadow of Dorothy swings its remaining claws in an uppercut as it jumps onto the swordsman. As it makes contact, Prophet feels the beast's grip dig into his stomach and shoulders. Sharp teeth bare down. Reacting the same as before, Prophet rams his sword into the vampire's bite. It pushes forward despite the razor gag. The corners of its mouth split as it leans. Slowly, the teeth approach Prophet's neck, blood and spit pouring from its maw.

The pain of burrowing claws strengthens as the monster splits its cheeks on his blade. He stares into the vampire's unrelenting eyes as it descends. "If you're trying to correct mistakes from our last battle," Prophet holds the beast at bay, "I may as well take a *stab* at it too." The bloodthirsty gaze in the monster's eyes turns to shock as the swordsman grips the tip of the blade with his free hand and pushes the sharpened edge through to the back of its neck. The vampire is pried away from the man as the blade creaks and begins to bend under the pressure.

Prophet rushes to remove the beast as the crack reaches across the blade. The tip peels. The beast screeches. Prophet leans back and rams the vampire with a headbutt. The force knocks it from the blade. It recoils. With a scream, the vampire swats. Prophet shields. The hand connects, splitting through the cracked blade once and for all before following through the rend the Blitz's coat.

Grunting through the pain, Prophet clenches the sword parts in either hand. The beast bares down on his bare neck. The broken blade juts up in retaliation. A gnarled hand arrests the shortened sword. The teeth find his neck.

The Blitz cries out as fangs dig deep into his jugular. He cocks back his arm. "Keep the tip!" The sword shard like a dagger, Prophet impales the side of the monster's neck.

The aswang relents its bite, pulling away with a horrid howl. It lets go of the sword to grab helplessly at the tip of its neck. Prophet slashes at the shower of blood. The aswang leaps off the swordsman, leaving the strike to cut air.

The vampire hits the stone with a slap and patter of claws. Prophet stumbles back, groping his bleeding neck before bringing the hand forward to admire the crimson liquid dripping off his palm. Standing straight and wiping the sweat from his brow, he sheathes what remains of his sword. Sliding his

hand from the hilt, he unbuckles the sheath strap across his chest. His scabbard clatters to the ground and, one shoulder at a time, he shrugs the bloodied and tattered trench coat from his back.

Prophet pants through the pain. Two surgical holes in his neck leak blood onto his undershirt, the bottom of which is already long soaked around the tears made by the beast's perching talons. He looks down at his hand. Small arcs of light crack between his fingers. Clenching his fist, he shakes his head.

"Stop it, mom!" a small voice splashes against the stone walls.

Prophet looks up, eyes gaping and heart still at the sight of Lilly standing behind the mewling cryptid. "Lilly," he booms with all the authority he commands, "get the hell away from it!"

"Her!" she corrects as the monster turns to her. "I know my mother is still in there!" The demonic form lets out a low rumble as its hand parts from the shard in its spitting neck. Its bloody claws find the stone. "Right, mom?" the girl begs her mother, the beast devouring her confidence with hungry eyes.

"Lilly!" Prophet barks, sparks flashing around clenched fists. The beast ignores the cries from behind.

Lilly steps back, face crumpled at the realization, "You're not my mom."

The rumbling erupts into a screech as it lunges into a gallop. The girl screams. The three limbs flail as the distance is closed.

Muscle memory kicks in - a skill immune to atrophy - and Prophet discharges a bolt of lightning that leaps into the creature with a reverberating snap. The flash fills the quarry. The thunder rocks the stone. The smoking beast convulses, its momentum carrying it past the frozen child as it ragdolls into the canyon wall.

Prophet's electrified arm is held out toward the demon. The dark battlefield around Prophet strobes as arcs of electricity bounce and crack around his body. Holding his arm before him, he admires the snapping current. Glancing at the twitching vampiric form, a smirk sharpens, and he nods to the power as it recedes into his body.

Lilly races over, gripping the arm which Prophet uses to guide the girl behind him. "I'm so sorry!" she melts down, burrowing into him.

"You're safe. That's all that matters," he says, watching the smoking beast regain its faculties. "Athena," he points to the markswoman who watches through a rifle scope beyond the left onion line, "run to her. Now."

"But what about you?" she snuffles. "Your sword-"

"Doesn't matter anymore," he cuts in. "I have all I need to finish this. Now run, Lilly."

The girl obeys. Peeling from the Blitz, she sprints across the stone to Athena. With a whine, the blood-soaked monster climbs to its limbs and once again attempts to catch the girl. "Hey, ugly!" Stone-faced, Prophet releases a dissuasive bolt. The aswang keeps running. Light fills the air repeatedly as he shocks the charging beast who stumbles with each bolt. Lilly leaps over the onions and collapses into Athena's arms. Prey lost, the vampire halts a safe distance from the toxic smell. Clicking gurgles from deep in its throat as its head cranks around to the strobing man.

"That's right," he taunts the beast as it digs into the floor on all threes. It lunges once more into a gallop. As it draws closer, Prophet alters his stance. "This is getting *long in the tooth*." Planting a foot behind him and cocking back an arm glistening with living light, he jerks his body around, ripping his fist through the air and planting it into the vampire. An explosion of blood and thunder fills the carved canyon as the electrified form is whipped back at breakneck speeds, spearing into the sheer stone wall with tremor-inducing force.

Athena pulls back from her scope to see a large cloud of stone dust fall over the battlefield. Her jaw drops open as the man flickering with electricity is consumed by the cloud. Silence covers the area. After a few moments, the dust settles to reveal a crater in the wall - the aswang firmly planted at its center. Clacking echos as pebbles and other hunks of rock fall from around the twitching beast. Fine dust covers the monster, adhering to the blood spots splashed across its body. Jed pokes his head out of the shack, judging by the silence that the fight is over. The team watches as what was once a shy woman turned homicidal demon now struggles to pull itself out of a wall. Enough twitching frees it, hitting the smooth floor with a wet thud. The mess of torn flesh and broken bones crawls forward with a trail of blood.

The snapped bones in the aswang's wings jut out of the skin in several places. With its claws shattered, knees bent the wrong way, skull caving in from an eye socket, and ribcage singed and shattered into dust, it crawls. Tossing its mangled wings up and projecting its demolished legs out, the flailing bag of flesh flies out toward him. He snags it by the neck.

Prophet takes a moment to pity the pathetic thing as it struggles. *Someone's wife. Someone's mother. It was a person. Now it's nothing. Nothing but a blubbering pile of pain and wasted potential.* Prophet watches the dripping humanoid killer spasm in his grip. Its jaw snaps repeatedly, and its eyes glare as if trying to telepathically force his neck to its mouth.

"I'm sorry it came to this," he stares into its eyes. Eyes that, for a moment, seem to well up. Prophet reaches under his wrist to grip the sword tip still lodged in Dorothy's neck. He hesitates. *Killing monsters... Does it have to be so weighty?* the lament throbs in his heart, *is this why the others don't go it alone?* As a tear escapes his thawing exterior, he bows his head in remorse.

A soft squeak escapes the beaten creature and Prophet looks up to find a faint smile. Its lips part as Prophet stares and what escapes her mouth isn't the screeching or whining of the aswang but the voice of a person - a human woman. "T-take," Dorothy stammers through bloody lips, "care of h- her."

"I will," he chokes up, "I promise."

Steadying herself, she looks at Prophet, savoring what she knows to be her last breaths. "She is a gift. I was a fool for not seeing it sooner." The beaten and broken beast looks up at the sky free of worldly corruption. A content smile washes over before her eyes close for good. "Goodnight, Prophet." And Dorothy's chest stands still.

Prophet squeezes the blade tip in his hand. "Goodnight, Dorothy," he looks down and presses his eyes closed, "sweet dreams." In one quick motion, the improvised dagger is pulled across the thin neck. Prophet doesn't move as her body falls to the ground with a thud. He stands as the world falls silent. The only sound to be heard is the gentle dripping of blood to the cold stone floor of the old mesa quarry.

Chapter 6 - "Aftermath"

The bell chimes as a man, blonde as gold, pulls the shop door. The wind follows him inside, causing his trench coat to sway in the gusts that budge past. "So, umm," Prophet places her luggage on the waiting area table, "I'll check in tomorrow if you want. We can grab some breakfast."

Lilly closes the door behind them before trudging toward the back room. "No thanks. I have work to catch up on." Prophet hunches over, ill at the young woman's voice, dull and purged of life.

He walks over to her, careful with each step as she stands in the doorway with her fists clenched. "We can talk if you want." He waits a moment and receives no response. "I understand if you don't want to talk to *me*. But if you want to talk to someone then there are always people at MantiCorp who will listen. Rein would, he loves you," Prophet grasps for anything helpful, "and he runs an organization based around this kind of stuff so I know he'd understand. You could always get a hold of Athena or Jed if you needed any questions answered. A- and if you wanted to see Ivory, she'd always-"

"If I was going to talk to anyone it'd be you," the girl squeaks. "I just don't know what to say yet. I guess I need time."

"I just... You shouldn't be alone right now."

"Neither should you," she says.

Prophet staggers, unable to disagree. "Just say the word and I'll be here."

"I'll probably take you up on that offer... if no other reason than to see Ivory. Maybe the breakfast too if you don't mind waiting." Prophet catches a glimpse of a tiny smile.

"Whenever and wherever you want."

Lilly nods and steps into the back room, grabbing the door. "I don't blame you, Prophet. You're still my best friend." She looks up at him. "Goodnight, Prophet."

"Goodnight, Lilly." Prophet turns away as the back room door clicks behind him. He glances over to a pen and paper by the cash register. He walks back to the gryphon outside and grabs a thick, leather book before delivering it to the counter. He reaches into his shredded jacket and pulls out a handful of

cold, silver coins. He arranges them on the leather cover to form a smiley face before grabbing the pen and a slip of paper to leave a note.

Lilly,

I don't know if you ever want to look at this book again, but I wanted to leave it here in case you still do. Don't worry about getting it back to me, it's yours now, so do with it as you please. If nothing else, it could look nice on a bookshelf, be sold for a high price, or be used as an oversized coaster.

I left you some money too. I know how grief can be but make sure you eat. It should be enough to treat yourself to whatever you want for a few days. Maybe grab a cake or four from that bakery you love down the street.

If you need to blow off some steam, go beat on a punching bag down at MantiCorp. Work on the wide stance I showed you, and make sure to bend your knees. Other than that, your form is excellent so just keep in mind what I said about punching through the bag. You'll turn some heads, I'm sure.

Above all else, make sure you're ok. If you find that too difficult, then find someone to help. Remember, I'm always here if you need that help.

~~Sincerely,~~ Love, Prophet

He gently tucks the card into the top of the book then pulls his head up to take a breath. He looks to the back room door with a peaceful smile. "Sweet dreams."

Prophet closes the front door, slow and quiet, behind him and checks to make sure it latches. "How is she?" Athena sneaks up behind, Jed and Klaus in tow.

"She just needs time, I think." He gives the women a conciliatory smile before waving at the others to keep walking.

"And how are you?"

Prophet thinks for a moment before answering. "I killed her parents," his words shake, "it doesn't matter how *I* feel."

"Pretend it does," she insists, "how do you feel?"

"Alone."

Athena takes his hands. Her emerald eyes glimmer as she looks up into his. "Do you remember the open offer?"

"Choleric Clothing' will be subsidized monthly the amount equivalent to one 'Lilly Choleric's' average monthly earnings of the last year. This funding will be provided so long as two conditions are met. One, she misses less than three days of school per month, and two, one 'Prophet Pawn' continues to provide fifteen percent of said subsidy each month without fail. If these conditions are not met, funding will be halted. Additionally, in the event Miss Choleric fails a class, the funding will be halted. In the event Mr. Pawn misses a payment deadline, the funding will be halted.

"Are these workable terms, Prophet?" The muscular, older blond man behind the cluttered oak desk looks up from the document to ask.

"Everything sounds perfect. I can't thank you enough for setting her up with this, Rein." Prophet leans back in the hard chair, relieved. He looks around the room, admiring the various swords and shields mounted on the walls above the potted plants and bookshelves ornately filling the room. "A kid like this needs to be in school. It's a waste for her brain to rot away behind a sewing machine."

"You can't speak too highly of her, can you?" the man leans back, crossing his hands on the desk's edge in front of him.

"Some people are just like that, you know?"

"That, I do. I think the same about you." Rein smirks across the table to Prophet. "You're a damn good young man, Prophet. You mastered your powers and you're a natural with the sword. I always thought it a shame you didn't have anything to apply those skills to. Anything to fight for. A sword makes a boy a man but it's a cause that makes a man a warrior."

"Well I have you, and you alone to thank for honing my sword skills, Commander. Hopefully one day I'll have a cause to fight for. A war of my own." Prophet stares into space.

"It's one hell of a feeling, putting a dent in the world. Having a place in history. I know you'll find your way to the hall of fame somehow." Rein smacks the table, shocking Prophet out of his peaceful

haze. "So lighten up!" the man stands abruptly and holds out his hand. "The past is in the past so there's no use brooding about it. I'll finish up the paperwork and bring it over to her in a day or two." Prophet stands, gripping firm the Commander's hand. "This is one hell of a present. She's lucky to have someone like you looking out for her."

Prophet feigns a smile, Tom's unrecognizable corpse and Dorothy's tortured form gnawing at his mind's eye. *Lilly asked me to check out the alleged killings specifically to make sure her parents were ok. Not only would they have been fine if I never took the job, but it was my shitty plan that got Tom killed... my hands that killed Dorothy.* Prophet turns and opens the door to leave before he pauses. "One more favor? Don't tell Lilly about my financial involvement in this. The kid has a strong sense of debt so I don't want her worrying about or even thinking that she owes me a thing. Irene forbid she turns the deal down for my financial sake. It's better she thinks this is solely coming from MantiCorp and Kingdom reserves."

Rein crosses his arms with a smug smile, "Sounds like she's better with money than Jed." The two share a chuckle before Rein begins organizing papers on his desk. "I'll keep that from her if you want. But you won't get any credit if she doesn't know."

Prophet smiles. *Finally, consequences I can live with.* "I don't need any," he says, waving and shutting the door behind him.

Prophet walks down the hall to the cafeteria where Athena, Jed, and Klaus sit at a table, talking. "Well, well, well, those papers sure kept you a while," Jed gestures with a full mug, sloshing beer out everywhere as he flails.

Prophet takes a seat in the booth beside Athena who slides an extra mug over to him. "So," she rests her elbows on the table and lays her head down in her hands, "did you think about what I asked?"

Prophet looks around the table to see Athena and Jed anxiously awaiting his answer. He looks over at Klaus who, after a moment of eye contact, shrugs. "I'd be *shocked* if you turned her down."

"Was that a pun?" Prophet's jaw drops. "I thought you hated wordplay."

"I do," Klaus shrugs, "but if you can't beat 'em." He holds his mug out to the swordsman. "You don't have to be alone, Prophet."

Killing monsters... It doesn't have to be so weighty. Prophet raises his mug. "Is there room on the ship for one more?"

"Blood and Thunder" written by Cypher F.