

Broken Blades Sample

Blades of the Goddess Book 2

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Broken Blades

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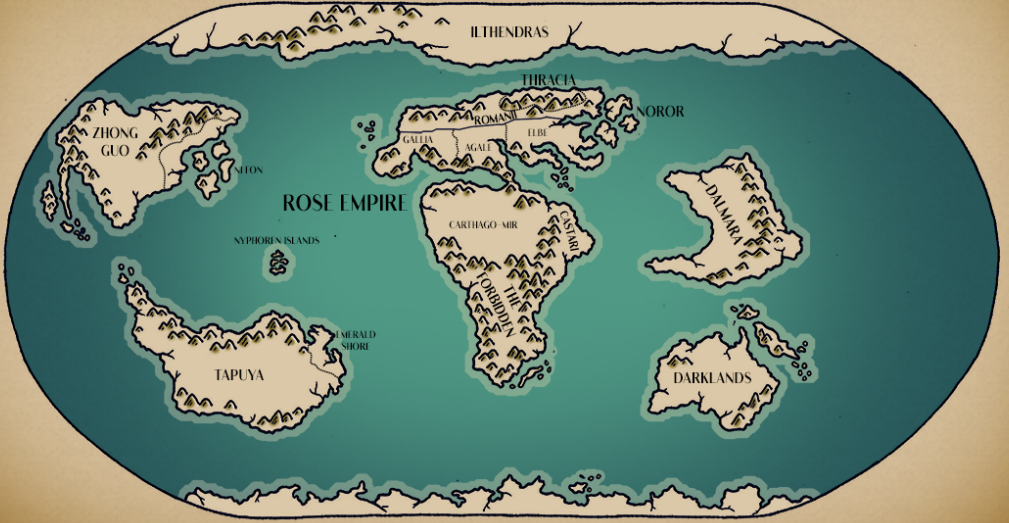
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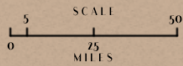
To Jessy and Jen.

WORLD MAP
GAIA
COUNTRIES - 2026 AG



293 2344
0 1072
SCALE - MILES

Nyphoren Islands



November 21, 2026

A.G.

Final Notes – Corpse of Abomination

Magic is life.

Life, and a will. The ability to affect and change the world around us. Even those who do not have what we consider to be magic ability are, technically, magical; they just lack the more dramatic application of their will that “magical” people are capable of. The terminology we use is quite imprecise, but this is a digression.

Why then does *technology* affect magic so? What about tech prevents or impedes that application of will? I imagine that if I knew the answer to that many more things would become clear to me. If the gods know they do not speak of it, but by their very nature they are perhaps incapable of understanding the interaction in the first place. All living things are magical, but they *are* magic. Magic, and a will. Thus are Hades and Her siblings.

Another digression.

I have dissected the specimen of Abomination that delivered itself to us.

*Note: I shall have to come up with a better system of classification for them; demons are also Abomination, but these are certainly not demons. Jamirh calls them “bionics,” but I’m not sure that is as precise as it could be either.

Cyborgs?

Anathema of Reality?

No, that doesn't roll off the tongue. Doesn't roll on it, either.

*Workshop later.

Tech has been integrated into an Avari's nervous system in a way I would not have thought possible had I not seen the results. The Avari had magic potential at one point, but the channels by which they might have manifested their will on the world have all been burnt out. Because of the integration of the tech, or was it something necessary to get the tech to integrate? Or did it happen before – a requirement of being chosen as a subject in the first place?

I can state this was definitely done to the Avari. There is not enough of their original body left for them to have done it to themselves.

Remaining organic matter: the brain, most of the head, left eye, nerves in the spinal column, upper chest, right shoulder and upper arm.

Everything else has been replaced by metal and tech. Even the spine itself has been replaced around the nerves with a metal casing (see notes from Nov 20).

I'm not familiar with the metal. It is very strong, and it is resistant to magic on its own. Perhaps a specially crafted alloy – steel and... I shall have to do more research.

*Note: Research magic-resistant alloys.

*Note: Come up with a better name.

A thought – did the subject still have any of its own will remaining by the time the transformation was complete? If not, why use a living being at all? It seems the most important part to save was the nervous system. In some ways, the brain of a person is like a very complex computer. Perhaps they were unable to build an actual computer complex enough to run the programming they wanted the end result to run on, and so co-opted an Avari brain to somehow run it instead?

Does the species matter? If so, why? Could the process be replicated on a Human? What about a dog? Or a Lorn? Is it just easy for them to acquire Avari subjects? How important is it that the subject have magic potential?

Magic is life, and a will. Every living thing is magical. Technically, the specimen lived when it attacked Jamirh in the palace. But I'm not sure it had a will anymore. Perhaps that is what makes it "Abomination" – the fundamental denial of a law

BROKEN BLADES SAMPLE

of the universe, a sin against the world itself. The rare case of a mortal losing their will usually results in their death soon after, righting the sin done to them or by them. This is Hades' gift to mortals. But if She cannot reach these constructs, then the sin persists. And the world starts to warp as a result?

~~*Note: Ask Hades about the~~

Fact: Hades confirms She cannot reach the Avari who have become Abomination, and She struggles to perceive them. Ostensibly this is due to interference from the tech. Above hypothesis seems likely as a result.

They gave it an extra pair of arms. How necessary was that? The end result is still mostly Avari in form, even if most parts were replaced, but does it have to be? Could they build a casing for the nervous system with the shape of a vehicle or an animal? Is there a size restriction?

Many questions are still outstanding, far more than have been covered here. I will be unable to answer them without more data.

-Ander 11/21/26

Chapter One

“Jamirh! Are you okay?!”

Jamirh looked up from the white warg whose ears he was scratching to see Jeri practically fly into the courtyard, her dark uniform and long pale braid a sight he had sorely missed the past few days. He was surprised by how tired and frazzled she looked, as though she had rushed straight here from Pitesh as soon as she heard the news.

“I’m fine,” he reassured, his long, pointed ears twitching upward. He gave the warg one last scratch before straightening up. “Welcome back. How was your trip?”

“What happened?” she exclaimed, stopping short and looking him up and down, clearly trying to determine if he had been injured. He guessed that was fair; she had spent quite some time and effort to ensure his safety in Tarvishte only for him to be attacked as soon as she was gone. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

He ran a hand over his head self-consciously, checking that his ruby-colored hair was still in its ponytail. “Well... a lot happened, actually,” he began, considering how best to explain in a way that wouldn’t panic her more.

The warg whined, trying to push its head under his other hand for more attention as it ignored his attempt to straighten his vest.

“Things have changed a little around here since you left,” he added, waving a hand at Frir, who was lounging on the other side of the courtyard on a marble bench. Frir waved back.

Jeri’s green eyes narrowed as she took in the other Vampire. “Yes, I was told the Black Watch has been keeping a close eye on you,” she said, her voice cooling.

Jamirh wondered if she was remembering how Frir had accidentally revealed to Jamirh the Vampire belief that he was Ebryn Stormlight, the famous Avari hero reborn.

Jamirh still didn't know what he thought of that. It was complicated. On one hand, they had good reasons to think what they did – he shared looks and abilities with the long-dead Avari, and their goddess had told them he was Ebryn reborn. On the other hand, he hated Ebryn and everything he stood for. But then, there was also the other thing...

“We need to move, or we die. Again.”

Jamirh repressed a shudder at the memory and a voice that was his, but also not. Had it been Ebryn, or his imagination kicking into overdrive as a result of stress? He wasn't sure. No one seemed one hundred percent sure, not even the goddess herself. He still, after everything, had more questions than answers.

He could leave that part out.

“I was attacked by an Abomination, which turned out to be one of the super-secret bionics the Empire has been rumored to be creating, but Ander and Vlad killed it pretty handily after I spent several minutes flailing about in the dark with it. Then I found out Hel is Hades – and that was a surprise, let me tell you – and then we had a conversation and I currently have possession of the Crystal Light Blade because of it. Everything has been in a sort of lockdown since, and there is always a member of the Black Watch in visual range of me.” The warg made a quiet woof. “And I've been hanging around the wargs more, on Ander's recommendation.”

Jeri stared at him like he had grown a second head. “What?”

Had he cut too much out of that explanation? Maybe, though he thought that covered all the high points. It had been a rough couple of days. Jamirh had thought about the attack so much that everything was starting to blur together. He really needed to stop thinking about it for a while, but how could he?

The warg gave a slightly annoyed huff and pushed its head under his hand again. He automatically started scratching behind its ears.

“The Abominations are being manufactured by the Empire, from what we can tell. They are combining Avari with tech.” Jamirh sighed. “Avari have been going missing for years. I guess we sort of found them. Or... what’s left of them. Ander could probably tell you more; he’s been studying the corpse.”

Jeri winced. “And it was the Abomination that somehow knocked out power in Pitesh and Tarvishte? I found evidence of one being in Pitesh, but not what it did.”

Jamirh nodded. “According to Ander, yes, though he’s not sure how yet. Apparently Hel saw something similar happen shortly before she lost her avatar. She says it also disrupts magic at short range, and they use a UV weapon against Vampires so there’s a whole bunch of problems they can cause.”

“It would have been too much to hope that they would be easily dealt with.” Jeri turned another glare on Frir that Jamirh wasn’t sure he deserved. The other Vampire wilted, then disappeared into a shadow. “Why the wargs, though?”

Jamirh shrugged. “Ander thinks they’ll act as extra protection, or at least a warning. They were all very agitated while the Abomination was on the grounds; it’s possible they sensed it before it revealed itself.”

The warg blinked up at him in contentment as it leaned into him, its considerable weight almost knocking him over.

“Interesting,” Jeri responded slowly, eyeing the warg with a frown.

The warg wagged its ridiculously large tail.

She grinned suddenly. “Remember when you were terrified of them?”

His ears flicked down in annoyance. “You mean when you showed up as a four-foot-tall wolf-creature after spending the previous couple of nights howling at us? You’re right, I have no idea why *that* would have been terrifying.”

Her grin turned sheepish. “I was howling *for* you, not at you, for what it’s worth.”

An even larger gray warg wandered into the courtyard. It padded over, sitting next to Jamirh and looking at him hopefully.

Jeri shook her head. “They are attention hogs, that’s for sure,” she drawled as Jamirh shifted so he could pet both at once.

“They kind of remind me of the pigeons in Lyndiniam. I mean, they’re a lot bigger, and furrer, and more interested in people than the stuff they find on the ground, but they’re everywhere to the point where you just get used to their presence,” Jamirh explained. “And sometimes they look at people the way the pigeons looked at the shiny things they found,” he added with a laugh.

Jeri rolled her eyes. “They can also be very interested in shiny things on the ground, so I wouldn’t discount that as a similarity.”

Suddenly, both wargs looked off into the distance for a moment before getting up and trotting away without so much as a single glance back.

“And there they go.” Jeri sighed. “They definitely have minds of their own. Very appropriate creatures to be associated with the Lady.” Her eyes slid towards him. “You said Hel lost her avatar?”

Jamirh gazed after the wargs as they wandered off. “Yeah.”

Several moments passed.

Jeri coughed. “You said *Hel* lost *Her* avatar?” she tried again. “I thought you said—”

“Yeah, but I’m still calling her Hel,” he interrupted. “She said it was okay.”

Jeri’s mouth formed a small “o.” There was another minute of silence as she processed that. “How did you find out? Did She tell you? She wanted it to come from Her.”

“Yeah, no, it didn’t quite work out that way.” He looked down, trying to brush the warg fur off his clothes.

The Vampire winced. “And you said you have the Blade now, too?” she asked hesitantly.

“Yup,” he drawled, popping the “p.” “Like I said, things have happened around here.” He turned, beginning to walk back to the palace. “Though I have to say I’m impressed that the government didn’t lie to the citizens about what happened.”

“Why would it?” Jeri asked, sounding baffled as she followed.

Jamirh shrugged. “If something like that attack happened in the Empire, there is no way the truth would be reported. They would release some cover story, like ‘a

gas line exploded' or 'this very important part failed and exploded'. Reassurances that it won't happen again would be given, and that would be the end of it."

Jeri stared. "People died."

"And?" he asked wryly as they entered the Palace of Dusk. The grand entryway and architecture of the building always made him feel small. "That wouldn't stop them. 'Those people died when the gas line exploded.' See? Logical conclusion."

The look of horror on her face was almost funny. "And people would believe that?"

Jamirh snorted. "Oh hell no. We'd know it was a coverup; we just wouldn't know what for. I don't know how much gas lines are even used in the Empire anymore." He considered that for a minute. "Actually, theories about bionic super-soldiers were pretty popular when we left Lyndiniam; it's very possible that the real explanation would have accidentally been floated around. People really like their conspiracy theories." He hummed. "I actually thought Hel was bionic when I first met her. Her magic was easier to accept as very advanced tech instead of, well, magic."

"That's a little ironic, all things considered," Jeri snorted. "She is so, so very terrible when it comes to anything even remotely tech-based. She doesn't seem to understand it at all, and it doesn't seem to like Her, either."

"I also had no idea that they looked like the monstrosity that attacked me, or I would have never made that mistake," Jamirh added with a shudder as they approached the quarters he had been staying in since Jeri had brought him to Tarvishte. "There was so little of the original Avari left. So much metal, and just... the strangest feeling of wrongness."

"Demons can cause that feeling too," Jeri mused. "I wonder why, if these Abominations are artificially made, they have the same effect, or something very similar. At least it makes it easier to determine if they've been through a place recently."

Jamirh blinked. "That's what you were tracking, when you went to Pitesh? You were looking for that... feeling, specifically?"

Jeri nodded. “The Lady and I both sensed it on the border of the Wastes when we were coming north, so I know what the current problem ‘feels’ like. Such things can sometimes leave a residue of sorts in places it has been, if you know what you are looking for. So I was sent to Pitesh to look for it.”

“I thought you were...” He stopped, thinking about it. “Never mind, I have no idea what I thought you were doing. Something magical, I guess, but that doesn’t really make sense, does it? You don’t have that kind of magic.”

“No, I do not,” she laughed. “Just a Vampire’s better sense of the metaphysical. And occasionally the senses of a warg.” She paused. “Very occasionally the senses of a cloud of bats.”

“A cloud of bats?” Jamirh hadn’t seen that one yet. “As in a whole group of bats? One person becoming multiple... how does that work?”

“It’s hard to explain, but it does make perfect sense when you are a cloud of bats,” Jeri said thoughtfully. “It’s not a form I choose very often, but it is popular among some of the other Vampires.”

“But are you controlling each bat separately? Or collectively? Does your mind become many minds that all sort of work together?” They came to a stop by his door.

“Sometimes, it is best not to think too hard about how something works,” she suggested gently. “Especially when magic is concerned.”

“Don’t *you* need to know how it works?”

She shook her head. “No. In fact, sometimes things will... sort of break, if you think about them too hard.”

Jamirh rolled his eyes as he opened the door. “Tech is simpler to understand than magic. At least it works the way it’s supposed to.”

Jeri hummed softly. “Does it, though?” She stopped as she entered the room, staring. “That’s new.”

“Like I said, there have been some changes around here.” He walked over to stand next to the new television. Though it wasn’t nearly as sleek as the vid screens he was used to seeing in Lyndiniam, it still got the job done. “Vlad basically declared that since I am going to be here for a while, my rooms might as well be

set up for it, so I got a few new things. Apparently Vlad and a few other people around here like to be able to get news and other programs from the Empire, so they set mine up to be able to do the same, which is cool. And I somehow got a whole small kitchen, which I can only assume was through palace shenanigans since that doorway wasn't there before." He gestured to the small space visible through the new opening. "I don't know that I'll ever really use it, but it's nice I guess."

"Uh huh." Jeri poked her head into the new room before turning back to Jamirh. "This feels more like an apartment now. Anything else new?"

"A few random things..." He trailed off, seeing her gaze land on the object on the long side table. "And yeah, that."

"So you did take it," she murmured, eyes glued to the Blade. "I wasn't sure anything would convince you to do so."

He shrugged awkwardly, eyeing it with distaste. "I don't know how helpful me having it will be, but..."

"Yes, a weapon, a sword? We are good with swords."

"...after having been trapped in a hallway with one of those things and *no* weapon, I figure any help I can get will be good, and Hel said the Blade will even destroy them on contact," he finished, shaking off the memory of the voice that was almost his. "Even if I don't know how to use it, I should at least be able to make contact, right?"

Jeri was silent for a long time, eyes never moving. "It is more than that," she finally began. "It's symbolic in ways I don't quite think you understand. Whether or not you believe you are the Hero reborn, others will, and seeing the Hero with the Crystal Light Blade sends a message. What that message is will be interpreted differently by different people." Her mouth twisted into a grimace. "Some will see it as a message of hope, since they will see you as their defender, and others of despair, because there must be something awful for you to defend them from. The Empire will certainly see it as a threat when they find out, and they will probably try even harder to kill you. Other political powers may start trying to position

themselves to aid you or impede you, depending on what they think will benefit them the most.”

“You paint such a pretty picture,” Jamirh muttered, his ears drooping.

She shrugged. “What is done is done; it will be what it will be at this point. As far as actually wielding the Blade goes, however, I don’t think we need to worry too much – if Miravu is right, we just need to show you how to use it, and as a Master of Blades you should be able to pick it up fairly quickly.”

Jamirh fought back a wince, since the one thing he had not done in her absence was practice. “I still need to figure out how to use that ability properly. It helped keep me alive against that bionic monstrosity, but I don’t think I’m using it in any way like how Miravu described.”

“Thinking about it as ‘using it properly’ is probably not going to help you do so.” Jeri laughed. “It is an innate magic; this is one of those things thinking too hard about doesn’t help with.”

“Well, I can’t just *not* think about it,” he protested. “That’s not going to get me anywhere either.”

Jeri’s lips twitched. “And yet... well, we’ll work on it.”

“You can help me learn how to use it, right?” Jamirh asked. “Since you use swords?”

Her eyebrows raised. “You really want to learn how to use it? Properly, I mean?”

“I think I kind of have to at this point,” he admitted, picking the thing up. It was heavier than it looked. “I still don’t like Ebryn, and I definitely don’t like being associated with him, but...” His stomach twisted, the words tasting like ash.

“I understand,” Jeri said, sparing him from having to continue the thought.

“And definitely not Ander,” he inserted quickly, remembering the one bout between the two of them. It hadn’t been a fun experience, and he didn’t much feel like revisiting it.

“Well, Ander could teach you, in that he does know how to use a longsword, but I think he is a poor choice for a teacher in general.” Jeri winced slightly. “As we saw.”

“Yeah, I’d like to try to avoid that.” At least he had managed to get the better of the priest in the last exchange. “What *is* his deal, anyway? Sometimes he seems like he’s trying to be helpful, and then...”

Jeri settled herself down on one of the couches with a sigh. “Ander is... well, something of a mystery, for all that he’s been here for three hundred years. He never talks about himself. He’s one of the Lady’s own, so he’s trusted, but... he’s weird. We’ve never quite figured him out. And he never goes far from the Temple.”

Jamirh blinked, not sure what to think of that.

The Vampire shook her head. “But on the topic of training, of course I’ll help you. If the Abomination can reach you here, then we should try to give you every possible advantage you can get.” She tilted her head as she studied the Blade in Jamirh’s hands. “If Ebryn was also a Master of Blades, then what a waste of potential. He did have a reputation for being extremely stubborn though, so it seems pretty in character for him to pick one weapon and then refuse to try anything else. Try to think of it that way – you’ll be *better* than Ebryn by the time we’re done.”

“Extremely stubborn” did sound like Ebryn from the little he had heard about the long-dead Avari from people who had known him. It didn’t sound like the voice he had heard while trying to survive his encounter with the bionic Abomination. That voice had been trying to be helpful, had sounded like it cared about his survival. Ebryn didn’t fit that picture. Jamirh wasn’t even sure Ebryn had cared about his *own* survival. And he thought he’d seen an image of something very much like the bionic attacking him, but Ebryn had never fought bionics. Ebryn had fought demons.

So then, what was it? Who was it? Had it just been his imagination? The more time that passed, the more difficult it was to remember.

Jamirh hated not knowing things. But if even a goddess wasn’t sure, how was he going to find out? He had no interest in putting himself in that sort of situation again, Blade or no Blade. If he had to face the Abominations again, it would be

on his terms, and he wouldn't need a voice in his mind to save him. He would save himself.

"Everything okay?" Jeri's voice was concerned as she studied him. He realized he had just been standing there, staring off into space, for probably longer than was normal.

"Yeah, fine," he responded quickly, trying to hide his embarrassment. "Just spaced out for a minute, sorry." He returned the Blade to its new home on his side table.

She eyed him for a moment longer before turning to the television. "Have you found anything fun to watch yet? Does it also get our channels, or just the Empire's?"

"Both." Jamirh turned on the television and sat down in one of the chairs. A pair of Human women were sitting behind a news desk, images of a mostly destroyed compound of sorts cycling to the side of them. He was about to change the channel to find something more entertaining when he saw the ticker at the bottom read "Aftermath of the Charve Military Base Explosion."

Jamirh blinked. "Hey, that's where Ander said Hel was being held, isn't it?"

Jeri studied the images. "That sounds correct. Wow, She did *not* go down quietly."

"You think she did all that?" Jamirh asked, aghast as he stared at the damage. Multiple buildings had been condemned, whole sections of them having been destroyed. "It looks like there were multiple explosions all across the base."

"Well, She *is* a goddess," Jeri said slowly as the anchors discussed rescue efforts. "And destruction is one of Her domains, so I wouldn't say it's beyond Her abilities, even if She was in a form that limited what She could do." Her voice sounded troubled, almost as though she were trying to convince both of them that that was the case.

"I guess we could ask Ander?" Jamirh suggested hesitantly. "Would he be able to ask her?"

"Anyone can ask Her; Ander's just more likely to hear the answer." She shrugged. "And then he might or might not relay that answer. It honestly might

be better to go to the Temple and try to ask Her yourself. He doesn't like to be treated like a phone."

"Maybe that Human did some of it," he theorized, looking at the debris. "Wasn't he supposed to be helping her escape?"

"True," she agreed. "I guess we would have to ask to be sure, though."

"I wonder what happened to him," Jamirh mused. "Did he die with Hel's body? Or did he escape? I didn't think to ask her when we talked about it."

Jeri hesitated. "It doesn't look good from these pictures, but maybe he made it out?"

"...and hundreds of people found themselves trying to get onto the base just after the explosion, but when questioned, none seem to remember why," one of the anchors was saying. "The military is still looking into the strange phenomenon."

Jamirh looked at Jeri, who shrugged. "Could be any number of things, honestly, though it sounds like a Queen's Challenge."

He cocked his head to the side. "That shriek-thing she did to the door when we broke out of jail?"

Jeri winced. "Yes. Please don't remind me."

"I would say when you have a hammer, everything looks like a nail, but as a goddess, isn't she technically the hammer?" he mused thoughtfully.

The Vampire twitched. "There's no excuse for using that sort of magic on a door."

The first anchor cut herself off mid-sentence, looking as though she were listening to something through her earpiece. "This is breaking news; we have just been informed that the massive amount of destruction at the Charve Military Base was caused by a gas line explosion," she explained. "One of the old lines runs under the base and exploded at various points due to corrosion..."

Jeri turned very slowly to look at Jamirh, who just shrugged. "What can I say? A lot of our gas lines are apparently faulty."

Chapter Two

Takeshi looked up at the large stone tower lit by the waxing moon above. Magic traveled across its surface, powerful enough that it was visible to the naked eye, lines of power fading in and out of the gray brick. The Wall stretched in either direction as far as the eye could see, its smooth surface unbroken, a testament to the ultimate defense – an aegis cast over a whole country.

It was extremely impressive. Based on the colors threading through the stone he guessed nine people had been involved in the casting, which was an amazing display of skill and coordination. An aegis was the most difficult defense magic to cast that he knew of, though he had never heard of it being tied to an actual wall before. Unfortunately he had no idea how to get past it. He had found one of the towers but it lacked any sort of entrance, and an aegis was notoriously impossible to break through without the caster's permission. He could throw everything he had at it and he would be drained of strength long before the aegis even noticed. No wonder no one had heard from Romanii in centuries.

The shinobi stepped back to consider, shivering as the wind cut through him. The temperature had done nothing but drop the farther north he got, and the utter desolation of the Waste hadn't provided any sort of cover or break from the weather. He was also exhausted; by his best estimate it had been around twenty-eight hours since he had last truly slept, though he wasn't completely sure. Time seemed to be jumping in strange spurts.

That was almost certainly a bad sign.

“Agreed.”

And the memories of the voices of the women he had failed continued to follow him, adding to a steadily growing list of things that were tipping the mission inevitably towards failure. Taken in aggregate, everything that had happened since he had left Ni Fon indicated that he was not going to succeed, either through design or circumstance. Too many things had failed to add up, and he was losing hope. Where did that leave him?

No, he couldn't abandon his mission. He had to keep going.

"Do you?"

He tried to shut out the voices of doubt that were creeping in, Hel's and Hotaru's voices blending together in his mind until he could no longer tell who had said what. This was all he had left; he was not going to turn his back on it. They had both died for it. He had to believe his goal was still achievable.

He just needed to break it down into achievable steps. The Wall was problem number one. He turned his entire focus to solving that, going back over the few things Hel had managed to impart as she lay dying.

"You need to take this north. Present it to any of the towers along the Warcross Wall; it will grant you passage into Romanii."

He pulled the violet spell crystal shaped like a hound out from his pocket, studying it. It was a strange shape for a spell crystal, one very difficult to create. A key, maybe? She had clearly expected to be able to return through the Wall. It also didn't quite feel like a spell crystal somehow. Then again, he'd felt not quite right himself since that strange attack from the construct. His magic felt much better and hadn't even taken all that long to recover, but something still felt wrong. Actually, if he was being honest with himself, he'd been a little out of sorts since the trial. He'd attributed it to the drugs, but the feeling still lingered.

Another thing to add to the list.

He wrenched his thoughts back to the problem at hand. He had to somehow present the spell crystal to the Wall. What did that mean, exactly? Was there something he had to do to activate it, or was merely having it enough? *"It will grant you passage"* – was the "it" the spell crystal, or the tower? None of the magics visible in the aegis were violet or any other purple color, and even if Hel

had been involved somehow in the casting of it her death would have dispelled her influence. No magic of hers should be able to win him entry. Not quite sure what else to do, he held it up towards the Wall.

Nothing happened.

“Sorry. I was... rush.”

After a few minutes of standing there, he lowered his arm, studying the crystal a little more carefully. He sent a small pulse of magic through it, curious to see if he could discern its exact purpose. The crystal flashed violet briefly, then returned to its original state, but now he could feel the presence of magic stored in it.

It was a storage crystal! Meant to hold extra power for a caster, they could be fairly tricky to make, and those with larger reservoirs even more so. He wondered how much this one could hold. However, while that was useful, he wasn't sure how it was supposed to gain him entry to the tower.

“...walk up and... Titus...”

Takeshi closed his eyes for a moment. He was so tired. He just wanted to lie down and sleep.

“WALL.”

He jumped, head jerking up as he took a step back. He had almost drifted off standing up. He needed to find a place to rest, and soon. Food would help in the meantime; he forced fingers nearly numb with cold to open his pack and pull out some jerky. Absently, he checked that his katana was still in its place on his hip.

He chewed mechanically as he turned his attention back to the Wall. He approached the tower slowly as he considered the magics visible through the surface. Cautiously, he reached out to touch the stone. It was curiously warm.

Suddenly Takeshi froze, finding himself inside a large stone room. Had he somehow lost time again? Where was he? How had he gotten here?

“Safe, now.”

Lines of magic in a warm blue spread across the walls, before fading back to the colorful mix he had just been looking at, and Takeshi realized that he had somehow gotten into the tower. Alarm shot through him. How had he managed that? Why couldn't he remember? Gods, what was happening to him?

“Safe! ... Titus brought...”

The walls flared blue again as he fought back panic. The situation was rapidly spiraling out of his control in a way that for any other mission would be a sign to abort. But what could he do now? What would aborting even look like? He had somehow gotten past an aegis and he had no idea how. Could he go back? Where would he even go? The nature of his mission was such that it was succeed or die.

“Ander!”

Some part of him distantly recognized that this was not unlike some of the symptoms Hotaru had suffered. Though this wasn't nearly as bad, thankfully; he could deal with this. He wrapped his arms tightly around himself as he squeezed his eyes shut, praying that he might share in the strength she had shown through even worse attacks. At least it didn't seem like a migraine was imminent.

“Breathe.”

What was he going to do?

“It's not so bad, Takeshi. People always find a way forward.”

He had to go forward at this point. There was no way back. Hel had mentioned finding someone named Ander who could help him. Takeshi was fairly certain she hadn't meant help him with... whatever this was, but it was the only thing he had to go on right now. Desperately, he tried to force himself to focus. He had managed step one... somehow. Step two was to find Ander. Ander was in Tarvishte, where Hel had said they should go. So slight revision – step two was to get to Tarvishte, and step three was to find Ander.

Small steps. He could do this.

He forced himself to take one deep breath, then another. When he felt more in control, he opened his eyes and checked that he still had his bag and katana. Both were present. Then he looked around. The inside of the tower was bare except for the lines of power, which were now flashing blue at an alarming rate, and a circle of glyphs in the center of the floor. He studied them intently for a moment, realizing they formed a gate pattern. He wondered where the gate led.

As he watched, the glyphs began to glow with the same warm blue light that the walls had been flashing a moment ago. A quick glance up revealed that the walls

had returned to the multi-color mix of the exterior. He wondered why the colors kept changing. Shinobi often worked together to combine their spell weaves, but he had never seen anything like this before. Regardless, the glyphs in the floor were certainly being powered now. Where was the mage?

“The passage... safe.”

He shook his head, wishing the voices would be silent. He needed to focus. He knelt down to get a better read of the glyphs to see if he could figure out where they were linked to, but the exhaustion was catching up to him and the symbols swam in front of his eyes. He hesitated; being forced to take one route like this made him uncomfortable, but there was literally nowhere else to go. At least he was mostly certain Hel had wanted him to come this way, and there didn't seem to be anything malevolent in the glyphs. He stepped into the pattern, which activated in a brilliant display of light.

As the brightness faded, Takeshi found himself standing on a slightly raised platform, sister-glyphs to the ones he had just left etched into the stone. Now he was in a small courtyard of brick and ivy, ornamental ironwork decorating the tops of the walls. There was a green-painted door under a small trellis against one side. It was the only way out.

Well, almost the only way out. He eyed the top of the nearest wall and scaled it quickly, dropping down on the other side onto a cobbled sidewalk, gaining a few curious glances from passersby. He looked around the wide tree-lined street, taking in the charming brick buildings and copper pipes that made up the majority of the area. He had lost time, whether it was when he somehow passed through the aegis or at some other point; it was mid-morning now. He picked a direction and began walking, hoping to blend into the general population. Takeshi was pleased to see that a number of people walking around were armed; hopefully that meant his katana would not stick out as much here. He didn't feel up to keeping an illusion going for an indeterminate amount of time right now. There was also magic in the air. High above, he could see the tell-tale shimmer of power, though he couldn't discern its purpose. Overall, this place reminded him far more of home than the cities south of the Wall.

“Just like magic, I believe tech also needs to be bridged and balanced.”

He paused for a moment, considering what to do. He hadn't expected to be teleported into the heart of a city. He wasn't even sure which city this was. He could guess based on the size of the gate pattern that it wasn't more than fifty miles from the Wall, and the presence of visible magic told him he wasn't in the Rose Empire anymore, but he needed more information than that.

So then, step two, part A: figure out current location. He just needed to keep focusing on one goal at a time.

Takeshi continued wandering. Unlike Charve and Bariza, this city was not laid out in a grid pattern. Mostly bare vegetation was everywhere – it probably looked beautiful in warmer weather – and the shops and houses followed no discernible pattern. He passed several statues, but most were covered with black or white fabric. Strange. He didn't look too closely; they reminded him of how Hel had appeared to him in the mirror. Luckily, he seemed to have arrived in a central area with many people out and about, Humans and Avari both. He was able to ask a pair of women lounging near a storefront where the nearest train station was. They helpfully pointed him in the right direction, and before too long he found himself staring up at a large structure made of stone and marble, heavily engraved with decorative motifs. Above the entrance, “Braila Train Station” was deeply etched into the marble.

Well, now he knew the name of the city, though not where it was. He strode through the large doors and glanced around, disappointed at the cool temperature of the building. He was pleased to see a large map crossed with brightly colored lines for the train routes against one wall. He headed in that direction, noting that there weren't very many people in the building. He would have thought a train station would have been busier.

“It... affect you.”

Tiredly, trying to push the memories aside and reminding himself yet again to focus, he studied the map, looking for Braila and Tarvishte. He found the city he was in fairly easily – it was close to the Wall, as he had suspected – but his heart sank when he found Tarvishte almost two thousand miles away. That was

a significant distance. Did he even have the money to go that far? It would take weeks, maybe months if he had to go on foot. If he was at his best it wouldn't be a problem, but he wasn't sure he could afford the time that would take right now. Something was wrong, and he just knew he needed to get there as quickly as possible.

Perhaps he could go as far as his money could take him by train, and then finish the journey on foot. It wouldn't be ideal, but then nothing about this mission had been, and he didn't see why it would start now.

"The pressure and expectations we put on shinobi is dangerous. We rely on them for so much, and yet..."

"It's... mission."

He mentally shushed them both as he walked over to the ticket counter, manned by a young Avari teenager with bright-pink hair and pale-blue eyes. She looked incredibly bored, flipping the pages of a book lying on the counter with one hand, chin resting on the other.

"Excuse me, but how much would a ticket be from here to Tarvishte?" he asked, hoping against all hope it was a figure lower than what he had left.

The girl blinked at him, almost seeming surprised she was being addressed, before straightening up. "Oh, um, I can look that up for you," she said, grabbing at a sheet on her desk and scanning it quickly. "That would be one hundred and forty notes."

Takeshi abruptly realized he had no money. The currency here was different. Because of course it was; this was a different country. How had he completely failed to consider that? What was wrong with him?

"But none of the trains are running right now anyway," the girl continued apologetically. "Everything has been shut down since the attack in Tarvishte. I'm sorry."

"When it rains..."

It really was just going to get worse and worse, wasn't it?

"Hey, kid."

Takeshi glanced behind him at the interruption to see an older Human man frowning at him. He was tall, with very short salt-and-pepper hair, wearing a black vest over a white shirt. A silver chain for a pocket watch stood out sharply against the dark fabric, from which hung a violet crystal hound.

Takeshi stared at it. It was the same as the one Hel had given him.

“Drop that illusion before you kill yourself,” the man continued, seeing that he had the shinobi’s attention.

“What?” Takeshi asked, confused. He glanced back at the Avari girl, surprised to see her sketching a quick but respectful bow in the man’s direction.

He didn’t so much as glance her way. “The illusion. Drop it. Before I drop it for you.” He gestured towards Takeshi’s left hand.

He looked down, realizing belatedly that he was still feeding the illusion sewn into the glove. Had he walked the entire thirty miles through the Waste with it still active? He couldn’t remember. He must have, though; he hadn’t reactivated it when he reached Braila. He would remember that.

Wouldn’t he?

Takeshi flinched as the persistent drain on his magic suddenly ceased, power snapping back weakly like a rubber band stretched for too long as his connection to the pattern was severed. Violet shards of a pattern Takeshi hadn’t seen woven dissolved into the ether as the echo of the man’s snap faded. The same violet of the spell crystal in his pocket, and of Hel’s magic. How was the color the same? Not just close, but the exact shade?

“Focus!”

Well, his ghosts were trying to keep him on track now too. At least they were making themselves useful.

He looked again at the hound crystal. “Ander?” he tried, vaguely hopeful that if he had the same crystal, then maybe this was the person he was supposed to find.

The man’s eyebrows rose to his hairline. “No,” came the drawled response. “My name is Jak, but good try. Ander is...” – he trailed off for a moment, eyes flicking to the side – “...still in Tarvishte,” he finished confidently.

Takeshi fought down a wave of disappointment. "I'm supposed to find Ander," he said slowly, though at least it seemed like he had found someone who knew Ander. A step in the right direction. "Where did you get your pendant?" he asked suddenly.

Jak eyed him with an unreadable expression. "Yup, I know, and the same place you got yours." He ignored the sharp intake of breath from the girl. "When was the last time you ate?"

Takeshi felt very off balance talking to this man. How did he even know Takeshi had a matching spell crystal? How many of these things had Hel made? "At the Wall?" he hazarded, fairly certain that was correct.

"Okay, great, but *when* was the last time you ate?" the man repeated carefully. "You know what, I think the answer is probably 'too long ago.' You're coming with me." He turned to the girl. "Thank you!" he stage whispered in an over-exaggerated manner, causing her to smile shyly, even if she still seemed a bit confused. "Come on, kid. Let's get out of here."

"Excuse me?" Takeshi had lost control of the situation. "I need to get to—"

"Tarvishte, yes, but quick stop first," Jak interrupted him, grabbing his wrist.

Takeshi yanked away, refusing to be dragged anywhere without more of an explanation, but they were no longer at the train station. Instead, he and the man were now standing in a fairly large sitting room, modestly decorated in neutral colors. One wall had three floor-to-ceiling windows, allowing for a breathtaking view of the city below them. He looked around, confused. He hadn't even noticed any casting, but there clearly had been if he had been teleported here. "Where...?"

Jak glanced at a large mirror hanging nearby. "*You* can stop shrieking now. He's fine, I'm fine, everyone's in one piece. Relax." He turned his attention back towards Takeshi after that utterly bizarre outburst. "And you, sit down and eat," he all but ordered, indicating a table already covered in various platters on the other side of the room. "After you've eaten and slept, we are absolutely going to go to Ander, I promise. She's already told me everything."

Takeshi faltered. "She... Hel?" he tried to clarify.

"*Me.*"

Jak grimaced. “Yeah, and we are going to have that conversation too, but food. Now.” He gestured towards the table again. “For right this second, this,” he held up the spell crystal, “is a marker – we call it a *crystallus canis*, a ‘crystal hound.’ It signals to other people that you have her protection, and that they should give you whatever help you require, as well as a bunch of other stuff we can get into later. So you have one, I have one, and I’m helping you. It’s not that weird.”

Privately, Takeshi disagreed with that. It *was* weird, even if he finally had an explanation as to why she had given him the crystal. It made sense that they were fairly unique because of the complexity of the shape. He was worried that he was the bearer of bad news, since Jak didn’t seem to think she was dead. But the delicious smells wafting off the table were reminding him that not only had it been some time since he last ate, but he had also been casting non-stop for over a day. He was ravenous.

“Then... eat.”

Jak sauntered past him and plucked a roll from a tray, taking a large bite as he just stared at Takeshi silently.

He gingerly stepped towards the table, feeling very off-kilter. Keeping his eyes on Jak, who seemed content to merely watch him and chew, he slowly took a seat and one of the rolls and began to eat.

“I hate these formal dinners. They can be so... stuffy, and awkward.”

“Alrighty then,” Jak declared after an uncomfortable amount of deafening silence. “You continue eating, and I will start explaining some things. Fun things. And not fun things.”

Takeshi was almost certainly too tired for this, but he was also tired of not knowing. He nodded.

“So, from my understanding, you were trying to help Hel rescue herself from a military base in Charve, right?” He didn’t wait for Takeshi to respond before continuing. “And then she went and got stabbed, causing her to explode out of existence, so you think you failed. Which is, by that metric, technically true. But – and here’s a big ‘but’ – there’s a lot of information you’ve been missing, since her

ability to communicate with you was pretty hit or miss at best. The good news is, that body was a magical construct, and not actually *her*, so to speak.”

Takeshi’s eyes widened. “A construct? That perfectly mimicked an Avari form *and* channeled magic? How was she controlling it?” He realized that the cracks he had seen on her arm were likely the first sign of the construct breaking down.

“You are eating right now, not talking.” Jak’s voice was firm. “And I have no idea how it worked; that is not my area of expertise. So the good news is, she is still... well, ‘alive’ is sort of a weird term for it. She exists. Is definitely still around.”

That was excellent news. Possibly the first really good news Takeshi had received since coming to this blasted continent. “But then why didn’t she contact me? Tell me—” He cut himself off, suddenly having a sinking feeling.

:For what it’s... understand.:

Takeshi wanted to bash his head against a wall. What in the names of all the gods was wrong with him? How had he not noticed?

:Jak... explain!:

At least she didn’t seem angry with him.

“Yeah,” Jak said with a wince. “She tried. But, to be fair to you, it does make sense why you thought you couldn’t hear her.”

“It does?” Takeshi asked, feeling utterly confused by all of this.

“And this is where it gets a little bit complicated.” Jak paused, glancing again towards the mirror. Takeshi wasn’t at the right angle, but he realized she was probably appearing to the other man in the mirror the way she had to him in Charve. “You see, it takes a very special sort of person to hear her at all, usually.” He looked back at Takeshi, who vaguely remembered her saying something along those lines. “Because while Hel is a name she goes by, the more common one is Hades.”

Takeshi blinked at him. “She was named after the Silent Goddess?” He could understand why she might choose to go by a different name. Who would do that to their child? And what did that have to do with his ability to hear her?

“No,” Jak said after a moment, as the shadowy figure in black veils Takeshi remembered from Charve coalesced behind the other man, draping herself over his shoulders. “She *is* the goddess.”

Takeshi felt himself freeze as he stared at her, his face going pale. Suddenly, a number of things made much more sense, such as her strange method of communication that seemed to work better in the temple, why all the statues in this place were dressed like her, Jak having the same color magic – he was probably channeling *her* power, not his own – and her complete lack of concern over her own death. A god couldn’t die. And if anyone could create such an amazing construct, it would be a deity. He tried desperately to go back over their interactions to see if he had done anything that would be offensive to her.

He felt a growing sensation of dread as he realized there were a lot of things he would not have said had he known he was speaking to a god.

Gods – *she was a god.*

:It’s okay... stand on ceremony...: She sounded reassuring, head tilting to the side.

Jak shook his head. “Yeah, don’t do that to yourself. We yell at Her all the time. She’s not really into the whole ‘holier than thou’ thing, even if She literally is. Kind of.”

Faintly, Takeshi managed to ask, “Why me?” He couldn’t think of a good reason he would be singled out by a god. In fact, he had been very content with his distant relationship with the divine. Gods only tended to meddle in the stories when things were about to go catastrophically bad in ways he preferred not to be a part of; he hadn’t thought the political situation Ni Fon found itself in was something that they would care about at all.

“Okay, this is going to get more complicated. So, if we want to be really technical, everyone has the ability to hear any god. But they have to believe, truly *believe*, that they can hear that god. Any doubt at all renders them deaf to divine communication.” Hades was nodding as Jak explained. “But sometimes there are certain people who sort of... align to that deity. For whatever reason, they’re more receptive to that god. Can hear them, talk to them, even use their power to a greater or lesser degree.”

“You are describing a... a saint, or a priest,” Takeshi protested in baffled panic. “I am not a member of Hades’ clergy. Or any clergy.” That he absolutely would remember happening, he was certain. If nothing else, he was confident he had not joined a religious sect at any point in his life.

“Both those points can be true simultaneously?” Jak offered, though it sounded more like a question. “I think you may be thinking of it a bit backward, though. You don’t hear the god because you’re a priest; you’re a priest because you can hear the god.”

Takeshi slowly put the fork he was holding down as he tried to make this information make sense. How had this mission come to this sort of spectacular... was it even a failure, at this point? He didn’t know. He was so, so very tired, and it was making it difficult to think. Everything was spinning around in his head, words almost devoid of meaning.

And he was still cold, which wasn’t helping him concentrate either.

...still cold?:

:Please don’t right now,: he whispered, still trying to reconcile what she was. He felt her pull back.

She was a *god*.

“Hades says it’s been over forty hours since you last properly slept, though you stretched it a bit with meditation. I think the best thing to do right now is get some sleep,” Jak suggested firmly. “Gives you some time to rest and think all this over. We’ll all still be here when you wake up, and then we can go to Tarvishte. There’s more, a lot more really, but it can wait until then.”

Sleep sounded wonderful. Had it really been over forty hours? That could explain why it was so difficult to concentrate. “Yes, I think sleep is a good idea,” he agreed.

Jak nodded as the goddess’s form dispersed into wisps of shadow. “This way.”

The conversation kept playing itself over and over in his mind, an out-of-sync jumble of voices that made comprehension an impossibility as Jak showed Takeshi to a bedroom. Takeshi all but collapsed into the bed, desperately wishing for silence in his head.

He was asleep almost instantly.