

EDEN: BOOK ONE - RACE FOR THE RELICS

CHAPTER 1: VILLAGE IN PERIL

In the small, insignificant town of Genisi, imperial forces litter the streets. A platoon of soldiers stand watch over the Governor's manor while cloaked figures watch from the shadows. Within the manor, Governor Montaron sits behind his desk while two men tower over him:

Captain Matthias, a brutish legionnaire, and **Grand Vizier Varrak Lancaster**, a slender, snobbish magician. They both persistently interrogate the Governor asking for a map. Both are equally unsuccessful in their actions. The room goes silent as another man enters: **Emperor Alexander Arinia**. Varrak insists that they handle this, but Alexander, tired of waiting, declares that he will handle it from here.

Alexander pulls out a tattered paper from his coat and shows it to the Governor, asking the uneasy man if he knows what it is. Once the Governor replies that he does not, Alexander explains that the paper in his hand is a poem depicting a map that guides the way to the ancient Mar, a world deep below the frozen sea. The Emperor explains that there are six maps, all giving similar, cryptic clues, and his spies have informed him that one of the maps is in the Governor's possession. Alexander continues, "Well I am inclined to believe you, Governor. However, I'm afraid my contacts are telling me another story entirely. Your nephew Tobias was seen in the company of known terrorist and enemy of the state Jinx Moore, as well as other nefarious figures." The Governor's face goes pale. Alexander recounts the conversation between Jinx and Tobias word for word discussing the map and once more asks the Governor where it is. The Governor continues to feign ignorance.

Alexander stands, looming over the fearful Governor. He threatens that if Governor Montaron were to refuse him one more time, he would officially charge him and the town with aiding and abetting terrorists, as well as conspiracy against the realm. After which, the army would overturn the town in their search of the map. For the final time, Alexander demands to know where the map is. The Governor regretfully gives in to the Emperor's command. He pulls out the map that leads to the monastery at the core of the Mar. Alexander hands the map to Varrak, and the vizier analyzes it to confirm its legitimacy. Once Varrak does so, Alexander turns to leave. Before he leaves the room, he looks back. He tells the Governor that he forgot to mention something, "The conversation Jinx and Tobias had...it was about the map to the Cathedral, not the Mar." Governor Montaron freezes in terror; realizing the fatal mistake he has just made. He begins to plead for the Emperor to spare him. Alexander commands Varrak to execute him, and with a single firebolt, the Governor's heart is incinerated and he falls limp onto his desk. With smoke billowing from his torso, the singed corpse hisses as Governor Montaron lies without breath. Varrak feels nothing as he lowers his hand from casting the spell, only the feeling of pride that it was him that got to do it and not Matthias. Afterwards, Alexander commands Matthias and Varrak to forcefully search the entire village for the map to the Cathedral.

As the Emperor and his men disperse from the manor, the figures observing from the shadows flee the scene and rendezvous in an alley. They take off their hoods and are revealed to be **Jinx Moore**, the rebel previously mentioned by Alexander, and their associates **Marley**

Weylin, a burly rebel bandit fidgeting out of impatience, **Aym Morningstar**, a sheepish mage who elects to keep the hood over his head, and **Alpheus Mocovoy**, a strange humanoid with pale green skin that keeps watch for the rest of his crew. Jinx paces as they decipher what to do now that Governor Montaron has been both exposed and executed, but Marley has grievances with the rebel leader's meandering. The bandit argues with Jinx about letting the Emperor get the map to the Mar, and it is likely the rebels will lose the other map too. Jinx reassures him that Tobias still has the map, and if they can find him before the empire does they might still have hope. The rebels try to keep a low profile as they move through the imperial-infested town.

Eventually after a few hours of searching, the rebels find **Tobias** hiding in a local tavern and then confirm that he has the map to the Cathedral on his person. Jinx informs everyone that to get the map out of Genisi, they will have to work covertly due to the imperial presence. Aym, stressing over how dire the mission has become, asks what this map will lead to. Jinx refuses to answer. However, the cynical Marley pesters Jinx for more information, "You know, we could abandon the mission and regroup back at base, but you insisted on having us stay here to look for this damn thing. Why are you actively risking all of our lives for something that you won't tell us about?" Jinx insists that now is not the time to discuss this, as talking about what the map leads to could garner unwanted attention.

Before they continue, a pair of soldiers led by Captain Matthias enters the tavern. The rebels sit silently as the imperials uproariously banter about the search. Matthias's attention turns toward Alpheus, who is of a species known as the sea-farers. Sea-farers are pale-skinned humanoids with dorsal fins and gills, and very notable protruding tentacles from the crown of the head that resembles hair. But they are unable to speak when they are above water due to their biology. Matthias and the soldiers walk over and begin to harass Alpheus. Jinx opts to not interfere, as stepping in could endanger the mission. Marley promptly ignores that fact, and against Jinx's wishes starts a fistfight with Matthias and the soldiers. Matthias's strength proves too much for the rebel however, and the soldiers then detain Marley and Alpheus for unruly behavior.

Jinx, Aym, and Tobias are left to concoct a plan to rescue the pair. They have the map they were promised, but they cannot abandon Alpheus or Marley despite the latter's foolish decision. The problem is Matthias is a hulking beast, and if Marley was unable to best him in combat then it is unlikely either Jinx or Aym can. Aym, however, has an ace up his sleeve: magic. He's only apprentice level, however he is convinced that it is enough to take Matthias down regardless of his brute strength. Jinx has reservations with Aym's plan, but seeing as how they are down two heads they make the choice to trust him.

The imperials congregate at the manor, and the captured rebels are taken in for interrogation. Matthias and his men stand guard outside, whilst Jinx, Aym, and Tobias overlook the area from afar. To begin the plan, Tobias approaches the soldiers and shows them the map. As he gains their attention, Jinx and Aym slip inside. They pin down the room Marley and Alpheus are being held in, but they hide as Alexander passes by and goes to the outside area. Jinx is visibly disturbed, and almost in a panic saying over and over, "I didn't know he would be here!" Aym holds their hand and helps them calm down, and after a moment of Jinx regaining their composure, the two enter the room.

The pair discover Marley and Alpheus, however as they free them from their restraints, Varrak reveals himself from behind the open door. Now with the rebels all in one place, he

demands that the rebels hand over the map. They stand in silence. Varrak explains that he knew the map Tobias had would be a fake, and that he saw through the facade almost immediately. When the rebels refuse to surrender it, Varrak raises his hand for a firebolt. But as he shoots, Aym matches it with a firebolt of his own. The resulting explosion grabs the attention of the imperial forces outside, and Alexander realizes what's happening. The Emperor rushes in while Matthias stays outside with Tobias.

Alexander runs in to discover Varrak unconscious and the rebel prisoners gone. He is livid. Tightening his clawed fists, the fuming Emperor makes haste outdoors. Meanwhile, the rebels make a daring escape to the outside only to be met with Captain Matthias and an entire platoon of imperial soldiers. The rebels have no other option: they must fight. Jinx and Aym engage the hulking Matthias while Marley and Alpheus engage the other soldiers. Jinx is skilled with the sword, and Aym poses a sizeable threat with his notable but limited knowledge in the magic arts. However neither skill nor mind can outclass the brute strength Matthias bears, and before the rebel pair knew it they found themselves knocked to the ground. Marley notices the rebel leader in peril, and he surmises that he must act quickly if he is to save them.

Grasping the hilt of a mace, Matthias pivots himself for a deadly swing to Jinx's skull. But before he is able to do so, Marley lunges at the captain with a sword picked up from one of the soldiers. Marley delivers a swift and powerful slash that cuts open Matthias's neck. With blood pouring from the towering captain's throat, the giant topples over to the ground. Jinx and Aym pull themselves onto their feet. With Matthias and a good number of soldiers defeated, the rebels now must make their escape. But one more challenger begins to approach in order to prevent that.

Pursuing the fleeing rebels on horseback, Alexander readies a crossbow in order to shoot them down. The Emperor fires at the fleeing rebels, and one bolt hits Tobias in the shoulder. The injury brings them to a screeching halt. They cannot leave him behind, but Alexander is closing in fast. The gate to freedom is so close, but if they run now the Emperor will very likely catch them. Aym, gathering what little courage he has, decides to stand his ground and charge a low-level firebolt spell. As he lets loose the magic strike, the projectile unfortunately arcs too low. The bolt will fall short in hitting the Emperor. However, the impact of the fireball causes an explosion right in front of the stallion Alexander rides, frightening the animal into a standstill. This was the rebels' chance. With the horse immobilized, the rebels are able to make it out of the gate with Tobias in tow and disappear out of view before Alexander can recuperate. The battle is over.

In a secluded grotto, Tobias's wound is tended to while the other rebels look over the map. Jinx shutters at opening the parchment, as what they seek to find here could prove to change the course of the entire war. Swallowing their hesitation, the rebel leader opens the map. It shows a path into the vast Arinian Desert, and at the end a rustic cathedral. Meanwhile, Varrak is examining the map they acquired from the Governor while Alexander is looking over the carnage the rebels have caused. Alexander looks down at the bloodied corpse of Matthias with a scowl of disappointment. Varrak could not care less about his associate's demise, but his humiliation suffered at the hands of the rebel mage leaves him in an uncharacteristic silence. As the quiet vizier opens the ancient map, it shows a path leading to the Northern Sea, with a dark gate laying at its destination. When Varrak asks what this map will lead to, Alexander fiercely answers: "The power to become a god."

CHAPTER 2: THE LEGEND OF THE RELICS

The town of Jarhaa, a scorching village built on the ruins of a mighty battle, bustles with the crooked and conniving populous of the Arinian Empire. It lays at the edge of the mighty Arinian Desert, an orange landscape forever glistened by the hostile sun and winds of the Juruh Province. Amid this arid city, the figureheads of the rebellion saunter their way through the streets. Only Jinx, Aym, and Marley are present however, as their aquatic companion Alpheus cannot survive in the dry wasteland. The rebel leader leads the cloaked rebels to a local inn.

Within the humble hotel, Jinx approaches the clerk and asks him to reserve them and their compatriots some rooms. As the attendant inquires how many rooms the rebel leader would like to rent, Jinx speaks with a sudden whisper: "We would like two, for the nights in the sand can freeze to the bone." The clerk's demeanor shifts immediately. He slowly closes the book on the counter and looks up to the rebels with a serious stare. He pushes the door behind the desk open to a private hallway, and instructs the rebels to enter.

At the end of the mysterious hall lies a closed door to a private suite. As the rebels approach this door, Marley asks Jinx what this errand could possibly be for. Jinx states that there is someone they needed to see, and unfortunately Marley would not like who it is. Marley squints toward the rebel leader and crosses their arms. As they creak open the door, they see a figure in shadow drinking ale from a tin mug. As he finishes his swig, the man stands into the light with a smarmy grin on his face. This was **Jormund Eldenson**, a black market smuggler standing proudly with a rough complexion, a sharp black hairline, and an evergreen trenchcoat with a sword belt wrapped around his soil-ridden torso. With a sordid laugh, he extends a friendly greeting to the rebels with a hand covered in rings and tattoos: "Hello there...Jinx."

The look of shock on Marley's face is quick to disappear. The bandit's next instinct is to immediately lunge out of rage at the sleazy smuggler. Jormund cackles as the other rebels have to hold him back from tearing the man to shreds. He soon abandons the pursuit of violence before forcefully pushing Jinx away from his arm. He skulks in the corner as Jormund and Jinx begin to converse.

Jinx asks if Jormund acquired the information they paid for. With an excited smile, Jormund nods. He recalls journeying to the Juruh Province after receiving Jinx's letter and gold, and after asking around the cities he visited on his journey he divulges the ever eager rebel leader. He details a legend passed on through the old wives' tales and bedtime stories of the local populous; a holy monastery built by sacred beings from a world beyond, built at the heart of the great desert, where it may bask in the warmth of the sun for eternity: "I believe they called it...Maelbad Anuri." Jormund questions the request of asking the locals of fabled cathedrals and requests to know why the rebel leader was adamant about this task. Jinx pulls out the map they fought to acquire in Genesi and shows the parchment to Jormund. The rebel leader is sure this legendary temple is real, and awaits them in the hostile sands.

Jormund, seeing the ever-familiar look of resolve on Jinx's face, yields to the rebel leader's eagerness and accepts the explanation. He also proudly declares he would be happy to accompany the rebels on their journey. The silent Marley shoots up from his lonely corner at the very mention of Jormund's proposal and strongly protests the idea: "Oh no you don't, we would be damned if we were having you tag along on this mission." Jinx shuts down the rebel bandit's objection, and says that the resourcefulness and knowledge that Jormund has will be crucial to

the expedition's success. Jinx concludes that Jormund will, in fact, be "tagging along." Before the group can bicker any further, the clerk barges into the suite and insists the rebels should conclude their business and leave, as a platoon of imperial soldiers have just checked into the inn. The rebels make their way out of the hotel through a back exit, as to avoid running into the Arinian soldiers.

In a stable at the edge of town, the rebels are preparing a pair of camels with supplies and water for the expedition into the wasteland. Jormund, Marley, and Jinx are hard at work preparing the animals, but Marley stands away from the group folding his arms and leaning on a post. Jinx decides to calmly approach the bandit and attempt to make conversation. They ask Marley if he's sure he wants to stay in Jarhaa, to which the bandit reasserts he will not journey with them so long as Jormund is among the group. Marley also points out that Jinx intentionally omitted his involvement with the mission in order to deceive the rebel bandit, and as such his desire to journey with them has greatly diminished. Jinx tries to convince Marley that Jormund has been nothing but helpful towards the rebellion, but the bandit growls "that's not going to help fix any trust I have for him...or for you." Jinx is on the verge of abandoning the request altogether, but to their surprise, Marley concedes and decides to resume the mission with them...albiet with no pleasure. Aym informs the two rebels that the preparations for departure are complete.

The rebels trek into the vast Arinian Desert, with Aym and Marley atop one camel and Jormund and Jinx riding another. They journey through massive sand dunes casting great shadows into the sandy landscape as well as titanic cliffs and stone orifices jutting out of the soft earth into rocky passageways. The hostile winds pelt the rebels with breezes of sand and dust, but only Jinx and Aym are shielding their eyes from it while Jormund and Marley, attuned to arid environments, are unbothered. Their journey takes them far into the wasteland before twilight falls and darkness envelopes the land. The rebels decide to make camp and continue their journey tomorrow.

As the campfire crackles into the empty night sky, Marley and Jormund awkwardly stare into it as Jinx and Aym have fallen into slumber. Jormund cuts the tension by apologizing to Marley for an incident in their past. He details how Marley's original bandit clan abandoned him in an ambush set by Jormund, however admits it was his own deception that fooled the rebel to begin with. Marley laments what happened between him and his clan, but the rough waters between him and Jormund are not quelled. The smuggler insists that regardless of what happened this was a long time ago, and he is more than willing to help out Marley and the rebellion at the drop of a hat. "Or at the drop of some quick coin" the bandit coyly retorts. Jormund chuckles and admits the bandit's got him there. He wistfully looks into the dancing flame of the campfire and confesses they both have lived old lives...and perhaps it's time to move on with their new ones. Marley looks down and exhaustedly chuckles: "Yeah."

As daybreak arrives on the arid wasteland, the rebels continue their journey into the heart of the desert. Hours of travel finally bear fruit as they arrive where the map details the temple's location. Much to their dismay, however, they see no monastery of any kind for miles around. Jormund mutters that the cathedral is extremely ancient, and thousands of years of shifting sands have most likely buried the building. Marley angrily groans as Jinx declares they must begin an excavation effort to uncover the temple. Aym catches a glimpse at an object

protruding from the dunes. He informs the group that such an effort may not be necessary. The rebels walk toward the object in question.

The group discovers an old, dried up well. It's rather large, and the inside leads a fair ways into the earth before the dried up floor. The rebels are quick to dismiss the structure, but the ever inquisitive mage begins to investigate it and detail strange aspects. For one, the well is square rather than round, and the winch seems too unwieldy to support a simple bucket. Moreover, the roof of the well is large, albeit collapsed, and the stonework is decorated with strange markings. Jormund chews on the mage's words and concludes they have found the most peculiar well in the world, but Aym doubts the smuggler's words and theorizes "I don't think this is a well at all."

Marley startles the group by leaping directly into the well, and stopping himself on the wall short of the ground. He begins to investigate the bottom and reels back from what he finds beneath the sand: a trapdoor. He opens the latch to a large, pitch-black room. He asks one of the rebels to drop down a torch for him. Jormund tosses him a torch, and after lighting it Marley lets the torch fall into the darkness. The falling light illuminates the room to reveal magnificent marble pillars and rustic pews. Marley shouts back the sights he sees, and excitedly proclaims Aym's hunch was true: "This isn't a well! It's a bell tower!" The rebels have found their monastery. They lower some ropes to join Marley at the bottom, and begin to make their way down into the dark chapel.

The group all light torches of their own to begin their exploration into the church. As they look around, murals and old carvings tell fantastic ancient tales, though sadly they cannot translate them. At the end of the altar is something that piques the curiosity of the collective group: a large mural made of stained glass. The mural depicts six figures presenting objects to a seventh figure at the very center. Around this display, the figures depict a seraph, a demon, a dragon, a sea-farer, an elegant priestess, and a mighty warrior all facing the center figure, a white figure with large angelic wings that both seems holy and unholy. For some reason, the center figure holds such a presence within the depiction that its very sight disturbs everyone present. Mysteriously, Aym is unable to take his eyes off of the demon at the bottom left corner of the mural.

The rebels continue downward as they discover a cellar leading further into the temple. They journey into the catacombs laying under the chapel, where Marley eagerly marches along while the remainder of the rebels elect to tread carefully. Jinx advises the rebel bandit exercise caution, to which he decides to exercise defiance. The bandit comes to a sudden halt as the group are caught off guard by a tremor. Jormund is quick to identify the danger, and dashes to tackle the bandit forward. A cave-in quickly occurs as Jinx and Aym fall back. The collapse causes Marley and Jormund to be separated by Jinx and Aym via a large wall of rubble. Marley curses the situation, but Jormund offers assurance to the panicked bandit by stating the catacombs were likely built complex and nonlinear: "We'll run into them again, just...have some patience." Marley scowls that he can have many things, but patience is not one of them.

Aym makes an attempt to blast through the rock wall with magic, however his firebolts are nowhere near powerful enough to clear the rubble. Jinx orders that the mage abandon the effort, and suggests they journey elsewhere to find a way around. Aym dejectedly affirms, and accompanies Jinx as they tread onwards. Not long after, they stumble into a hidden study within the catacombs, a dimly lit room aligned with bookshelves to every corner. The very sight of it

sends Aym into an excited joy. Jinx amusedly witnesses their rebel friend tear through the various books and tomes the study has to offer like a giddy child. As Aym looks through every book and record, he points out that all of them have the exact same preface: a poem written in an ancient language. Jinx is unable to decipher the ancient text, but Aym strangely admits he is able to do so. The rebel leader is unsettled at the mage's spontaneous talent for philology, but quickly overrides their feelings with the eagerness to find out what the text says. Aym begins to translate the ancient scribe:

"By the power of the sea, By the power of heaven, By the power of the earth, By the power of hell, By the power of the stars, By the power of darkness, O One Before! Give us this prayer! Against the powers of evil, bless us the Seventh by the Relics of Power...To the one who is pure...who will collect the Relics to reform the body, to reform the soul, so that he may be a god! O One Before! For those we have lost, to hide the Relics in the seven kingdoms, Bless the six mortals who guard them and hide the temples all over the world. Only to the one who proves their worth, that they might join us to preside over the universe...and the king of men will reign!"

Jinx is taken aback by the mighty words of the passage, and admits they were moved by the poem. Aym mutters that he believes it is not a poem, rather it is in actuality a song. Jinx becomes even more puzzled. When they ask why Aym has come to such a conclusion, the mage strangely confesses "I don't quite know...a feeling, I suppose."

As Marley and Jormund continue to trudge through the catacombs, they further reminisce about their past. Jormund recalls how the Bandits' Guild, the clan Marley was a member of before the rebellion, initially offered a membership to Jormund after he became close with Marley. Jormund asserts his past declination of the induction, and states he has no desire to be tied down by a collective. Marley argues that this lone-wolf attitude won't get him anywhere. Jormund coyly responds "Well clearly it has...and didn't they abandon you anyway?" Marley stops in stunned silence. Jormund begins to guffaw and says that he is only saying it in a jesting manner. As Marley scowls at the snarky smuggler, a sudden rustle halts the jovial conversation. As Jormund slowly looks around for the origin of the sound, Marley screams as he turns to a black, bony hand reaching out from a hole in the wall.

Jormund quickly pulls out a flintlock pistol and shoots the hand back into the crevice. An air of tension holds the pair before more hands begin to reach out from the stone gaps. Jormund and Marley begin to run away, but the hisses of the undead stop them in their tracks. Skeletal familiars, blackened from millenia of rot, rise from their stone tombs and begin to surround the bandit and smuggler. Jormund and Marley arm themselves with swords and begin to fight off the familiars.

After Aym and Jinx leave the study, they enter a hallway leading to a set of doors. The doorway leads into another chapel, however this one is far different from the previous. The chapel is well-illuminated by light coming from behind the stained glass windows surrounding the room, and the chapel is circular in shape with nothing in the room save for one singular statue at its center: a figure in armor, kneeling with a war hammer held hilt-up. The statue is bathed in a warm, holy light from the windows expanding every wall of the chamber. As Jinx and Aym approach the statue, they are shocked into a halt as a powerful, elden voice begins to echo within the chamber: "I am no figment of stone and steel...I am...**Hakuu**...the Guardian of Light." The rebel pair tremble with expressions of fear as what they thought to be a lifeless statue

begins to rise from their kneeled position. The armored guardian explains that within this temple, they are tasked with guarding a treasure of immense power gifted by the gods themselves. As they raise the war hammer in their grasp, Hakuu declares they must protect it from the sinful mortal realm by any means. Jinx and Aym prepare themselves to engage the guardian in battle.

Meanwhile, Jormund and Marley ferociously fight off the familiars within the catacombs. Through sword and flintlock, the pair prove to be an excellent duo in combat, however the sheer numbers of undead begin to wear them down. As Jormund and Marley stand back-to-back in heavy breathing, Jormund feigns a jovial smirk as he jokes, "Suppose that Jinx and Aym aren't exactly gonna be rendezvousing with us, eh?" Marley rolls his eyes and inquires that perhaps their final moments should be spent a little more wisely. Jormund agrees, and surprises the bandit with a sudden confession: "That offer you gave me back then...I would take it now. I wish I took it then." Marley is surprised by this outpouring. Marley gives Jormund an assuring nod as he admits in turn: "Well...if I was still with those bastards...I would ask you again." Jormund chuckles with joy and turns against the undead soldiers.

The battle in the chapel rages on as Jinx engages Hakuu in close quarters combat while Aym supports them with projectile magic from a distance. The magic, however, is completely ineffective against the armored guardian as they seem to deflect the bolts and spells with ease. Jinx is not proving to be anymore effective in their efforts; their sword strikes fail to make any penetration within Hakuu's heavy armor. The guardian knocks the rebel leader back several feet with their immense strength. The pair conclude the obvious; the guardian is far too powerful. Aym confesses that they may be able to unleash a more powerful firebolt attack that will expend his energy, but it could be enough to hurt Hakuu. Destitute of other options, Jinx provides cover for the mage as he begins to charge the attack.

Jinx gives the armored guardian everything they have in sword and steel. As Hakuu repeatedly attacks the rebel with swing after swing of the war hammer, Jinx brings the fight to a position where Aym can land a critical shot into Hakuu's body. Jinx shouts at Aym to unleash the attack, and with every fiber of might the rebel mage unleashes the firebolt to head directly into Hakuu's chest. The armored guardian is quick to react to this magic attack, and as easily as the others deflects the spell with ease. However, as the firebolt ricochets off of Hakuu, it turns trajectory back towards Aym. Jinx reacts quickly and puts themselves directly in the way of the spell and their rebel friend. The firebolt makes contact and lands a devastating blow onto Jinx's torso. The rebel leader crashes into the floor. The battle halts.

Aym stops in horror as they soon rush to the rebel leader without hesitation. The mage tries their best to tend to the injury, however the damage appears to be fatal. Hakuu turns towards the rebel pair and begins to approach. Aym tearfully shakes Jinx to stay awake as the armored guardian paces closer. Soon the guardian looms over the pair, and as Jinx nears their demise Aym embraces their rebel leader as he awaits his. However, as Hakuu raises their hand to seemingly land a final attack, he curiously unleashes a healing spell onto Jinx's person.

The spell works wondrously. In no time at all, Jinx's injury is fully healed. Aym celebrates in relief, however Jinx is soon curious as to the actions of Hakuu. The armored guardian lowers their war hammer and explains there is no further need for them to fight. Their battle was to test both the might and the hearts of the rebel pair, and though their might was challenged, their hearts have passed Hakuu's test. The guardian declares that "In your final moments, you have demonstrated who you really are. You are not acting selfishly, you are acting selflessly. You

have nothing more to prove to me.” Suddenly, Hakuu swings the war hammer into the air and strikes the floor with its hilt. Behind the guardian, a wall opens up a new passageway leading to a secret chamber. Hakuu returns to the center of the chapel and falls to their knees. They call to the rebels: “The Relic awaits you...please...protect it from the hands of evil.” Their grasp becomes too weak to hold the war hammer, and soon only their hands prevent their body from completely collapsing onto the ground. Faintly, the guardian utters, “Asteria, officium meum impletum est.” Hakuu disintegrates into ash within their armor.

Before the undead familiars can overtake Jormund and Marley, they too begin to disintegrate en masse. The pair witness as the horde surrounding them quickly collapse into dust. They are both relieved they survived the seemingly dire situation, however they are understandably confused as to why. Behind the remains of soot, they discover a door to the chapel, where they are reunited with Jinx and Aym. With the four now together, they journey into the hidden corridor as per the late Hakuu’s instructions.

The hallway is lined with carvings and decorations in a pure marble white, leading to a mesmerizing water feature located at the end of the hall. The fountain depicts a statue of two young girls, embracing each other with warm smiles. Beneath them lies a glass display, with its contents leading everyone into an entranced silence. The object within the display was a mystical gemstone, floating with a bright orange hue and echoing with a melodic hum. Jinx gently removes the stone from the display, and lets the magic gem levitate in the palm of their hands.

Aym remembers the poem and the words of Hakuu. This must be it: the Relic of Power. Within the vast desert, housed inside a mighty cathedral, and guarded with tooth and nail, this must of been the treasure foretold in the poems. Marley and Jormund are eager to know more about the mystical artifact. As Jinx stares into the entrancing beauty of the Relic, they reutter the words Hakuu spoke to them: “Protect it from the hands of evil.” They soon awaken themselves from their trance and turn toward their rebel compatriots. Jinx declares that their journey has concluded, and it is time to return home.

CHAPTER 3: BENEATH THE FROZEN SEA

An imperial caravan arrives in the northern city of Levgavan, the most northern port city in the world. A rather befuddled Varrak arrives before the harbor where Alexander and his guards await him. Alexander asks Varrak if he has assembled his new “legionnaires.” Varrak affirms. Alexander tells him that before he entrusts him with this mission, he asks Varrak if he can be trusted to accomplish it. Displeased by the events of losing the map to the rebels, Varrak assures the Emperor that what happened in that town will not happen again. Alexander cautiously accepts the statement and asks Varrak to introduce his newly assembled legionnaires.

Varrak first introduces **Captain Keondra Caddel**, a recently promoted captain of the Arinian army who had originally pursued the position Captain Matthias took as the number three. She is extremely formal when addressing the Emperor, and makes it known that she will always play by the book. Next is **Arch-Magician Jason Whitlock**, a mage from Varrak’s homeland whom Varrak had political connections with. He is respectful towards the Emperor, however, he is not too keen on the Grand Vizier as the two exchange petty insults. Moving right along is **Lieutenant Grimsley Lightfoot**, a slender fellow of ghastly complexion that puts the Emperor off. He is incredibly skilled with projectile weapons, but he always articulates with a sneer and does not come off as amiable in social settings. Lastly, Varrak introduces **Apprentice Lucille De La Rue**, who upon introduction to both the Emperor and the Vizier she is very suggestive with the both of them. Visible disgust is shown on Varrak’s face, while annoyance with both of them is shown on Alexander’s. It is likely her flirtations are aimed at men or women in positions of power, as she studied magic in defensive and healing studies to ascend the ranks of the Arinian army.

Having the major commanders of the legionnaires assembled, Alexander introduces Captain Boris, a local sailor who is well acquainted with the Northern Sea. The Emperor has hired the captain to take the legionnaires to where the ancient map leads, and from that point on he will lay the ship in irons and leave the rest to them. He instructs them that they must locate a gateway somewhere on the seafloor, and through there must locate the Relic of Water and return to him immediately. He makes clear that the Relic must be put into his hands immediately upon acquisition with no deviation. He also makes clear that every soldier lost on this expedition is a point against Varrak, and failure will not be tolerated. Varrak begrudgingly confirms. Alexander sees the legionnaires off as Boris’s ship departs, and makes his exit.

Varrak walks over to Whitlock on the ship’s stern. The two recall their time together in the Academy, and Varrak specifically recounts how the Emperor recruited him as his Grand Vizier. He describes how after a demonstration of destruction magic Alexander inquired about merging magic users within his country’s military. As Varrak drones on, Whitlock is visibly getting annoyed. He recalls how Varrak left “the academy” behind in some pointless pursuit for political power, and puts it forcefully: “Because of this dreadful chase, you have lost your ambition. You’ve lost everything that you had when you started going to the academy in the first place.” Varrak becomes angered by this and asserts that Whitlock can say whatever he wants about him, but to never doubt his ambition.

The ship reaches the point on the map, and Captain Boris lays anchor. Varrak gathers the legionnaires and tells them to gather together. As they do, Varrak and Whitlock form a

magical barrier around the group, with the diameter of the barrier using Varrak as its center point. Varrak informs the group that with this, they will sink to the seafloor and will be able to move around as if on land. Whitlock, however, warns them that they have one hour to find the Relic of Water. When Keondra asks what happens when the hour expires, Whitlock nonchalantly says “we will either be crushed by the weight of the sea or we’ll simply drown...whichever happens first anyway.” With that offputting word of caution, the legionnaires gather within the barrier and descend into the sea.

The legionnaires float down to the seafloor, where they witness gargantuan icebergs reflect shimmering sunlight on the rocky subaquatic valleys. Schools of cod dance above the legionnaires, as several larger fish dash into the school, hoping to snatch food. As the group witness this, they are startled by the sound of Grimsley sniping a bolt into the school and hooking a cod from it. The impaled fish floats down into the barrier and drops before his feet. As Grimsley begins munching on it, Whitlock berates the man for his recklessness. Varrak assures that “the action is harmless and there isn’t anything here that we would be exposed to...unless you suggest that the fish army may lay ambush upon us.” As the group carries on, two unidentifiable figures stalk them behind a rock formation.

The group approaches a vortex leading into a glistening crevice on the seafloor. As Varrak examines the map, he informs the legionnaires that this must be the entrance to the Mar. Keondra is quick to object, as she suspects the crevice could very well be a regular maelstrom eager to consume them all. As the group bicker, the dark figures charge into the barrier and begin to attack. The quick-thinking Grimsley blocks the strikes with his bow, and the other legionnaires are allowed a moment to retaliate. Before Varrak can raise an attack, Whitlock secures his kill. The other attacker is repeatedly impaled by Grimsley’s arrow.

Lucille asks in a panic what had just occurred. Grimsley pulls the hood off of his prey, and identifies them as “sea-farers.” Grimsley sneeringly describes an encounter with a group of sea-farers during his time in the navy: “These disgusting vermin are native to the deep sea. I wager these nautical maggots saw us get too close to their prize.” Varrak orders the group to trudge forward as they descend into the gateway.

The legionnaires arrive at the Mar, which is decisively darker than the normal seafloor. Only bioluminescent algae paves the way for the land-based imperials. As they follow the algae, Keondra warns the group that more sea-farers are incoming. Faintly in the darkness, hundreds of sea-farers menacingly watch over the legionnaires. Varrak orders them to start running as the sea-farers begin firing arrows into the barrier. As the group runs, Grimsley repeatedly taunts the sea-farers and returns fire, seemingly gaining a sadistic rush from provoking them. They begin to see the algae illuminate a grand stairway, and they rush upward and enter a large passageway. As they do, the sea-farers abandon the pursuit. They converse in an unidentifiable language: “It is up to Bahari to stop them now.”

The legionnaires follow the stairs up to a reemergence into a temple. The temple is massive, as a stone bridge leads across a titanic pool into the next room. As Whitlock closes the barrier, the group realizes that they can breathe. As they walk forward, they admire the architecture as they hear low rumbles. Keondra is the only one that remains cautious, as the rest of the group is lax in their pursuit forward. Lucille begins flattering Varrak for his ingenuity in discovering the temple, to which Varrak only reaffirms his superiority. Whitlock chimes in with his contributions, which go unrecognized by the pair.

As the group continues forward, the tremors and rumbles become much more noticeable. Keondra is the only one that acquires a sense of urgency, as Grimsley assures her that it is most likely the “vermin” attempting to storm in and stop them. The thought does not offer comfort in the slightest. As the group paces forward, a very large shadow begins to move towards them in the pool below the ground.

The rumble begins to form into a growl. The nonchalant group turns stiff. “We are not alone here...are we?” Keondra nervously asks. Varrak assures them that whatever beast lurks here, he is more than capable of handling it. Keondra severely doubts that. As the group continues to argue, a large tentacle emerges from the water and slams the stone bridge in twain. The path behind the group has been cut off and from the water below...**Bahari** rises. The large kraken raises eight large tentacles in anticipation of striking, and a deafening roar is shouted from its beak. The group begins to engage Bahari in battle.

Lucille uses barriers to repeatedly block the whipping tentacles, as Grimsley, Varrak, and Whitlock begin to pelt the leviathan cephalopod with projectiles. This only serves to further anger the kraken, as it begins to make impact waves in an attempt to knock the legionnaires into the water. Varrak and Whitlock cease their bolts in an attempt to gain balance, but Grimsley only furthers his fire. Eventually, Grimsley and Keondra are knocked into the pool.

The completely helpless soldiers are snatched by Bahari’s tentacles. The beast begins to violently shake the pair as they use sword strikes and arrow jabs in an attempt to break free. Whitlock curses the situation, saying that nothing they do is working. Varrak restates his point and tells him that he is perfectly able to kill the beast but he’ll need “the right opportunity.” He instructs Whitlock and Lucille to help Keondra and Grimsley while he prepares a charged attack. Whitlock uses a timed ice spike to critically damage the tentacle holding Keondra. Lucille rushes to help Keondra out of the water.

Varrak says his attack is nearly ready. Whitlock looks at him and sees that his magic attack will be lightning-based. Putting two and two together, Whitlock shouts to Varrak: “You fool! It still has Grimsley! If you unleash it now, it-” but as Whitlock shouts “Unleash it now” Varrak unleashes it now. He uses both hands to strike the pool of water, severely electrocuting the beast and its prey. Grimsley screams as he too is taking the force of Varrak’s voltage. Bahari roars in unimaginable pain, as the electrocution claims its life. The beast falls back against the wall and sinks into the pool below. As the group witnesses this, Grimsley’s limp corpse floats to the surface backside up.

Keondra and Whitlock scorn Varrak for this, but Varrak does not seem to care. He refers to the late Grimsley as a liability, and the ever-eager to suck up Lucille echoes his words. Keondra restates the Emperor’s words, and says that losing Grimsley will cost him. Varrak, now having lost his patience with her, tells her that her inferior mind cannot comprehend what the reprimands truly will be: “so long as His Majesty has the Relic of Water, Grimsley will be a mere drop in the pond compared to the ocean of his desires.” Keondra scowls as the vizier leads the group forward.

At the end of the vast temple, the legionnaires find an altar housed under the statue of a great dragon. Within its center, a glass display houses a deep-blue sapphire with a melodic chime. As it floats into Varrak’s grasp, Varrak shows his eagerness in acquiring the Relic of Water. He entertains the idea of giving it a small test before Keondra quickly swipes it from the Vizier’s grasp. She echoes the Emperor’s orders and says if anyone is to give the relic a test it

will be him. Varrak scoffs at the captain's belligerence. Varrak claims victory before the group, and orders that they begin to make their way back.

The group trudges their way out of the gateway and to the anchor of Captain Boris's ship. They begin climbing the chains to the surface and are pulled safely aboard by Boris's crew. Varrak orders the captain to begin sailing south. As they do, Whitlock begins conversing with his old friend once more. He says that he now sees what Varrak meant about not doubting his ambition, to which the Vizier gives a flowery "I told you so" to the Arch-Magician. Whitlock sees that Varrak has not lost his pride...but unfortunately, his ego has not been lost either.

At the now-warm shores of the empire, Emperor Alexander and a platoon of soldiers welcome the legionnaires as they row from Boris's ship to shore. Alexander asks for the Relic, to which Keondra quickly steps forward before Varrak makes another long-winded speech. Bestowing the Relic to Alexander, he examines it in great awe. After a moment of admiration, Alexander quickly makes a striking motion toward the water. In that instant, a gargantuan geyser of exploding seawater emerges from the sea creating a line towards the open ocean. Everyone is startled by the Emperor's demonstration of power. As they watch the exploding water descend and cover the area in a slight mist, Keondra, Lucille, and the rest of the soldiers look toward it with amazement. The only exceptions are Varrak and Whitlock, who look towards it with a more opposing emotion: fear.

CHAPTER 4: TO THE DEPTHS OF HELL - PART I

Within the depths of an abandoned mine, blasts can be heard. Aym is seen ferociously attacking with a round of fire bolts. He collapses to the ground in exhaustion, and when he looks at the enemy before him...it's a training dummy. Aym asks Alpheus, the mute, if his aim could improve. Alpheus only looks back at him as he shyly eats an apple in the corner. Aym lays back down on the ground and stares at the cave ceiling. He asks Alpheus if he ever feels like he lives two different lives, as if there's a part of him deep down he has tried to bury, and thus never allow to see the light of day. Alpheus awkwardly stares at his existential friend before resuming his chewing.

The two exit the room to reveal that the abandoned mineshaft is bustling with life, with torches lighting the passageways and rebel soldiers meandering about in the halls. This is the rebel base. They enter a large, circular chasm area and take a wooden pulley elevator down a level. They arrive at a room brimming with treasure and at its center two items: the Relic of Light, and a pitch-black gemstone with a slight purple glint. Jinx is staring deeply into the dark stone, which they refer to as a "Stone." Only when Aym asks for their attention are they taken out of the trance.

Aym asks what would be the purpose of their calling here. Jinx shows Aym a parchment with a diagram drawn upon it. It heavily resembles the mural they found at the Light Temple. Jinx asks Aym to direct his attention to the bottom of the picture. Specifically, the god fires a beam into the center that looks like a wrathful monster. The god in question is surrounded by fire. Jinx says that "it's a well-known rumor that Emperor Alexander crawled from the depths of Hell as an act of defiance to the Gods," but I wonder if that old wives' tale is metaphorical...or literal." Jinx cuts to the chase and asks Aym this question: "Is there a way for a mortal to enter the land of the dead...other than death?"

Aym is astounded by the question and wonders why Jinx is asking him of all people. They admit that as the magic expert of the rebellion they just thought Aym might have any ideas. To the rebel leader's disappointment...he doesn't. But he does know where they can find some. He says, however, that they will need a lot of hands on deck. Jinx gives the order to call an assembly.

In a sizable mess hall, a large group of rebel soldiers are conversing with one another. At the front, Marley is looking impatiently at the rebel leader while sitting next to Tobias, who still has a cast from the injury he sustained from Alexander. Alpheus offers the man an apple to snack on, which Tobias awkwardly accepts in order not to be rude. Jinx is asking Aym if he's sure he doesn't want to present, to which the sheepish man assures them that public speaking is NOT his strong suit. Reluctantly, Jinx steps up and commands everyone's attention.

They explain the current Relics of Power that are up for grabs and their lead on where one could possibly be: Hell. They say that they will need information, and there is only one place in the entire Arinian Empire where it could be: Lancaster Athenaeum, located in the capital of the Arcania province, Antamond. Within this great library may lie the key to accessing the underworld, and therefore allow the rebels to find the Relic of Fire. Marley interrupts, saying that what Jinx has described is a glorified study session and assembling the whole rebellion was entirely unnecessary.

That is where Jinx proves him wrong: the city of Antamond is the home of Grand Vizier Varrak, who frequently visits enough to warrant concern. His presence alone will swell the town with imperial soldiers, and as such can make this “study session” extremely dangerous. Marley scoffs at the sound of their humiliation. Jinx has called the rebels here to assemble their team so that they can find the information they need and make themselves scarce before trouble arises. Jinx elects Aym, Tobias, and **Victoria Ainsley**, a rather stuck-up rebel consort who is obsessed with hygiene. Marley objects to this, saying that he should be included in the mission. Jinx reminds Marley of what happened back in the town with Captain Matthias, and that if he were to tag along “Varrak and his men would spot you from a mile away due to the impression you left on everyone back at that village.” Marley marches off in a huff.

Jinx is found at the gate hurriedly preparing for the trip. Victoria is helping out while Tobias is examining a map. Aym asks Jinx why they disregarded Marley so blatantly, to which Jinx replies that Marley is too much of a loose cannon for a covert operation. Victoria chimes in stating that “if we went into the library with that buffoon on our coattails, we’d be gunned down before we could even reach the front door.” Aym shows only the slightest of scowls at the snobbish rebel. Aym pleads with Jinx that he may be roguish, but he is still a valued member of the rebellion regardless. Jinx sighs and tells Aym that of course he is, he’s just not fit for the mission at hand. The rebels depart as a solemn Marley watches them exit.

The rebels gaze in awe as they arrive at Antamond, a bustling metropolis with breathtaking architecture and a cosmopolitan populace. The city is among the most populated in all of the Empire, rivaled only by the likes of the capital city. Aym is more astounded by the city’s more well-known element of status: magic. Antamond is known as the “sorcerer capital of the world,” and all upcoming magic users would come here to study and learn from the best. The rebels’ carriage stops as they arrive at the Lancaster Athenaeum.

Victoria and Aym show visible excitement at the vastness of the library; it was the most diverse and expansive collection of knowledge in the whole empire. Jinx brings the wanderers back down to earth and reminds them that they are on a mission. Tobias walks over to an attendant and begins to converse with her. After a moment of quiet chatter, he walks back to deliver the news. It is just as Jinx feared: Varrak is here in the library. And even worse, he has the cartography section closed to the public. Jinx urges the group to not lose faith yet, they can search the section on mythology for any leads and save the cartography section for when they truly need it. Victoria coyly says that “Well what with this Relic of Power business I suppose it’s just the ‘history’ section now.” Jinx tells her to keep it down.

Lucille stands guard as Varrak toils through the maps of the cartography section. Scroll after scroll, atlas after atlas, the vizier becomes increasingly frustrated. He tells Lucille that he is going to get some air, but not to allow anyone to enter the section of this library. She graciously accepts the task. The rebels pass by the now empty section and take it into account.

Within the mythology section, the rebels rummage through various documents and compendiums. Aym is particularly fascinated with one book: *The Demon King*. Tobias takes notice of Aym’s trance, and upon inquiry, Aym is uncharacteristically dismissive about the contents. He skips through many pages in a peculiar act of defiance to look at the book’s main content. Jinx finds an ancient scripture detailing an immense wyvern of shadows and looks around before pocketing the document for himself. Aym asks for everyone’s attention, as he believes he may have found something.

Within the book, he details a passage about Freyja, the guide to the realm of Hell. She is tasked with ferrying lost souls to the underworld, and spirits that are left to wander the world of the living as ghosts would be brought before her by "the Speaker." But most importantly of all, she captains a vessel that could allow the living to travel to Hell. Having found their key, the rebels now must find the lock: in aliis verbis, where can they find Freyja?

This is where Victoria begins to inquire. Before her time in the rebellion, she was a student at the Arinian Academy of the Arts and did many studies into ancient Arinian mythology. She also took classes in geography and navigation. When Jinx asks if this means she knows where to go, Victoria disappointingly says no. However, she asks Aym if there are any verses about where to find her: "Even a rhyme or a metaphor, anything will help." Aym mutters that "there is only one verse to that effect: 'Through the river of darkness.'" Victoria thinks for a long moment and says that something rings a faint bell. But she'll need more information.

Jinx says that it might be time to try the cartography section. They say that Varrak might still be hoarding the section for himself, but perhaps Victoria can convince the guard to pass, as she is not as recognizable as Aym or Jinx are. Victoria rudely agrees and swears that if she finds this "river of darkness," she will inform them immediately. Victoria takes Tobias to leave for the cartography section, while Jinx and Aym stay put.

Aym asks Jinx a rather odd question: "Are...are you sure the Relic of Fire is in Hell?" Jinx assures their friend that it's the only place it could be. The scriptures they've studied, the mural in the Light Temple, and what they're finding here all point to that fact. Aym begins to become more uneasy. He confesses to Jinx that they have a horrible feeling about this. When Jinx asks why, Aym is cryptic in answer: "I'm afraid we're going to find something I don't want to find."

Victoria and Tobias arrive at the cartography section, to which Lucille de la Rue stops them in their tracks. Victoria asks for a brief entry, to which Lucille says that it is strictly off-limits under the orders of the Grand Vizier. After Victoria tries every appealing tactic in her arsenal, she exhausts her options. Tobias, however, catches the attention of the apprentice mage. When she asks for his name, he obliges: "Tobias...Montaron. My father was a governor for one of the towns in the Lumia region." The mention of the governor begins to tickle the mage's fancy, and she allows the pair entry in exchange for conversing more with the chap.

As Victoria begins to hastily search through the various maps and atlases available, she eventually finds her golden prize: "Ancient River Systems of Arinia." As she looks through the codex, revelation begins to swell within her. A river that leads from the Vakinian mountain range is known as "Penumbra River." This was it. As Lucille continues to flirt with the lad, Victoria bids the mage adieu as they rush to bring Jinx the information.

After the two depart, Varrak returns to his studies. He asks if anyone has tried to gain entry, to which Lucille tells a half fib in saying that "I don't believe anyone has entered but a handsome lad with a cast did strike my attention." Varrak begins to piece it together. He asks for the name, to which Lucille tells him. Varrak's demeanor shifts entirely; he berates the lascivious apprentice before ordering her to chase after them immediately.

As Victoria and Tobias return to Jinx and Aym, they share the name of the river they must traverse before they notice the stir among the library's imperial presence. Before Jinx can ask what in the Gods' names did they do, Varrak and Lucille detect the rebels. They give chase

through firebolt and cutlass as the rebels run with all of their might to escape. As the alarm is raised, the rebels are pinned down at the front desk before they can make it outside.

As Jinx and Aym engage Lucille and Varrak in a shootout (the former with a crossbow while the latter with projectile magic), Victoria begins to panic. As Tobias urges her to keep a level head, the rebel decides to desert the group by making a break for the front door. An imperial barrier meets her there, however, and Victoria is gunned down by a line of muskets. Jinx is annoyed by their current situation and struggles to think of a solution as Varrak and the imperials close in.

Suddenly, a commotion is raised in the imperial battlement as screams erupt from it. A carriage rams through the soldiers, with Marley at the helm. He yells at the rebels to get on. Aym, Tobias, and Jinx rush into the carriage as Varrak and Lucille attempt to stop them. They are unsuccessful, and they race out of the library and away to the city gate before the imperials can regroup and respond. Once their getaway is ensured, Marley looks back at the exhausted rebel leader: "So I assume your 'covert mission' went swimmingly, didn't it?"

Varrak furiously berates Lucille for allowing the rebels to slip by, though the lustful mage does not seem to mind his scolding. As he prattles on, an imperial messenger arrives asking for the Grand Vizier. Varrak does not give the messenger much thought as he mutters "You. Run back to Eretria and tell His Majesty naught of what has occurred in Antamond." The messenger informs him that he cannot do that. When Varrak asks why, he responds straightforwardly: "The Emperor has left the capital on his own."

CHAPTER 5: TO THE DEPTHS OF HELL - PART II

Within the rolling greens of the fields of Arinia, the rebels arrive at Penumbra River. They look east towards the leviathan Vakinian mountain range. "Wherever this river leads...Hell awaits." Upon those words, the rebels exit the carriage and prepare to journey upstream. Before they do, Tobias requests permission to head back to base. He says that it would be strategically wise if someone were to return to base in case something happened, but mostly since it would be strategically unwise to journey into the underworld with a broken shoulder. Jinx agrees and allows Tobias one of the horses from the carriage to ride back to base. Aym requests to do the same, but Jinx states that only Tobias should be fine. Not to mention the fact that Aym is vital for the mission. As honored as Aym is by their words, he is still disappointed.

The rebels journey into the Vakinian mountains, where the river shrinks into a stream. This stream leads into a cave lined with stalactites and stalagmites as if the cave were the jaws of a horrid monster. Torches and lamps alight, the rebels venture into the dark abyss, with Aym being the only member of the trio reasonably afraid. Eventually, the stream leads to its source: another river, where the waters are as still as death. The only source of light in this dark stillwater den is a small dock with a green fire lantern illuminating the area. Harbored at this dock was a singular canoe, with a dark hooded figure at its helm. The rebels cautiously approach the figure. As they get a closer look, they discover a woman in dark, hooded attire with a complexion of mystique and pose, but whose eyes are colorless and empty indicating blindness. This must be her...**Freyja**.

Against Jinx's wishes, Marley asks her if she can see them. She replies "When one works their eternity in the shadows, sight is a sense that will be of no use. But yes...I know you are there." Jinx scoldingly hits Marley on the shoulder. She asks the rebels if any of them are "the Speaker." Jinx looks around at their confused colleagues and admits no. But before they can explain their business, Freyja brushes them off. Jinx attempts to convince her to bring them to the realm of Hell, but Freyja only states that her business is with "the Speaker," and that "I am under strict orders to forbid the living from entering Hell...unless you wish to die." Marley becomes hostile to her, but Jinx demands that he back down.

Freyja once again makes it clear that she will not allow the living aboard her vessel. That is until Aym speaks. Aym tries to tell Jinx to abandon the cause, but upon hearing his voice, Freyja changes her mind. "So that's what this is about..." she mutters. She tells Jinx that she will allow them to board. But as they begin to, Aym becomes far more apprehensive. Jinx has no choice but to directly address his fears. When they ask what's wrong, Aym simply says "I don't want to go! Please don't make me go!" Jinx hears it in his voice: fear. They try to reassure him, telling him that they will protect him from whatever happens. They are his leader, and above all else, "I will protect my soldiers. But most of all...I will protect my friend." Upon seeing their reassuring smile, Aym throws his hood above his head and sheepishly boards the vessel. Freyja inserts two coins into her eyes, and with a dim glow of the doubloons, she begins to row.

As the group row down the dark river, Marley and Jinx ask many questions about Hell. Freyja answers briefly the inquiries, even the more foolish ones from the former. Jinx looks down and asks Freyja a more serious question: "They say that Emperor Alexander, the ruler of our world, broke free of Hell. Is that...I mean, did something like that happen? Can something like that happen?" Freyja drops her head down in deep thought. She says no. But after a

pause..."No, it shouldn't be possible. And yet...it happened." Jinx is horrified at the response. Marley asks her to elaborate.

Freyja details an event in the history of Hell, one that was only decades old: the revolt. It is said that Alexander Arinia, banished to the bowels of Hell for his past transgressions, turned populous souls against the ruling class of the underworld. It was chaos beyond control, mayhem beyond reason, and within that disorder, Alexander found a way to escape. The Demon King Haborym swore to hunt him down, for this was the first soul to ever break free of Hell in thousands of years. After a pause, Marley asks "...and then what?" Freyja cannot answer. No one has heard from him since he departed on his search. As she finishes her tale, she tells them that they will arrive. A dark red gate faintly glows at the end of the river. As they approach it, they are transported to a sky of smoke and ash.

As the rebels look down, they see before them a gothic megalopolis above seas of molten rock, surrounded by mountains of spewing fire and pyroclastic flow. This was Hell. The canoe, now suspended in the air, flies above the expansive kingdom. As Aym smells the soot, sees the burning fires, and hears the sounds of bubbling magma, he begins to black out. Jinx notices this and rushes to his side. As Aym is briefly knocked unconscious, Freyja stops the boat. Jinx shakes Aym, as not too long of time passes before he awakens. But upon awakening...he has changed. His posture is more composed, his expression more serious, and his eyes are far less welcoming or unsure than that before. Jinx and Marley took a good look at him...this was not their friend.

Aym, or what they thought was Aym, begins to ask many questions. "Where am I? What are these garbs? Who are you?!" The restless man is disturbing the rebels. He looks at Freyja, and talks to her by name: "Freyja...why have you taken me back? What happened?" Now the rebels are disturbed and confused. Freyja turns toward him "Welcome back, Your Majesty." Freyja bows in place. Marley is still dumbfounded, but Jinx begins to put it together. They ask him for his name, to which he is abrasive in answer: "**Haborym Morningstar**. I am the King of this land and its people." Jinx was stunned into silence. Marley, however, does not fully grasp the situation at hand, and still addresses him as "Aym." Haborym demands that he not be addressed as so, for he firmly states that he is Haborym. After arguing in circles, Haborym asks Freyja to make a berth at the "6th circle." Freyja drives the airborne vessel into the city.

The rebels exit the boat and look around in awe. Humans and demons alike roam the busy metropolis, completely in recognition of a normal mortal city. Marley is curious about the resemblance: "We are in...Hell...right? Why is everything here so normal and not...torture-y?" Haborym explains that Hell's reputation among humans is exaggerated; Hell does host the wicked and sinful in large prisons where they suffer eternal punishment, however, ghosts that are left abandoned and astray that have done nothing wrong are also hosted here "not as prisoners, but as citizens. They are given homes, chances for a life beyond aimless wander in a world of emptiness." Marley is fascinated by his explanation, but Jinx is still left bewildered, as they swear Haborym was their rebel friend Aym until they entered this realm. That is when Haborym becomes silent.

He asks for more information about Aym, requesting that despite Jinx's insistence that they "describe him as if I've never met the man in my entire life." Jinx describes meeting their friend without recollection or coin in a village, unaware of their surroundings and unsheltered by anywhere or anyone. But ever since taking him in, Aym was an invaluable friend and ally who is

enamored with studying magic. Haborym is surprised at the rebel. He mutters to himself “..another alter. There is another alter.” Even he seems to be in disbelief at his words. He explains to the rebels that he has a rather complex condition; he has alters, different souls and different minds all in one singular body. They live different lives and have different feelings. But until moments ago, he has never known one called “Aym”. After he confesses this, he tells the rebels he must leave, for he has urgent matters to tend to.

Jinx begs him to stay. They say that they were on a mission: to obtain the Relic of Fire. Haborym stops dead in his tracks. He grabs Jinx by the shoulders and demands to know how they know of it. Jinx says that the rebellion has been looking for the Relics of Power and that they must succeed in not allowing Emperor Alexander to obtain them. He lets them go. The stoic king is now in utter shock. He looks back at the attentive Freyja and orders her to take him and the rebels to the Fire Temple at once. They board the vessel and fly away.

They arrive at the Fire Temple, a monastery orbiting a great statue of a calm demon holding down a sword. The temple is built above a vast sea of lava, and only a bridge of stone leads back to the main city. As they get off and enter the temple, Haborym explains that they had known of Alexander’s escape and actively left the realm of Hell to hunt him down. He recalls nothing after that point in time, however, and assumes that because of reasons he can’t explain, “Aym” took over. When Jinx asks why, Haborym looks back with only the slightest of sorrowful expressions, but turns away in order not to show it. He explains that he cannot allow Alexander to acquire the Relics of Power, and he must make sure the Fire Relic is secure.

As they enter the temple, they pass by memorial after memorial before approaching the foot of the gargantuan statue. Haborym presses upon a hidden switch, and a passageway leading downward opens. The rebels journey down this stairway, and the temple around them begins to change. As they reach the bottom of the stairs, Haborym begins to become uneasy. “Something’s not right.” He examines the room around him: torches are lit and passageways have been opened. As the rebels stroll through the halls of the temple, Marley admits that the Light Temple was far more dangerous than this, and finds entertainment in the irony there. Haborym says that it’s not supposed to be this easy, and they believe something...or someone made this easier for them. He says the room where the Guardian rests is up ahead.

They arrive at a large, dark chamber illuminated by the dark orange glows of lava crevices and the embers in the air. As the rebels are uneasy about these surroundings, Haborym begins to call out: “Miako! Show yourself! It is your king! I must see the Relic of Fire at once!” No response. As Haborym continues to call out, the rebels doubt that whoever Haborym is asking for will show up. Eventually, a voice answers back...but it is not Miako’s. “Oh, I would not waste your breath, Demon King. Your Guardian will not be answering your calls.” From an opening wall passageway, the rebels stood in complete horror...it was Emperor Alexander Arinia.

Alexander tosses a trident against the ground. He says that Miako fought well. However, against the power of the Gods, even he stood no chance. Haborym’s anger begins to slowly swell, he commands that Miako may have fallen, but he shall not allow Alexander to acquire the Relic. Without warning, Haborym hurls a great fire bolt toward the Emperor. It was far different from Aym’s typical firebolts: accurate, rapid, and powerful. And yet...Alexander swats it away. Like a bug. The fire bolt hits an adjacent wall.

Alexander says that he knew of the Fire Temple's existence for a long time, or rather he knew of this place having some sort of significance for a long time. When he learned that the Relics were real, he knew he would have to come here. He was surprised, however, that the rebels were in league with the Demon King. He sees it as fitting. The rebels are servants of the depths of Hell. But, he tells them that they are too late; the Relic of Fire is in his possession, and now he has them right where he wants them. Against their expressions of disbelief, he displays a levitating ruby of an eerie hum, with a burning bright core within the gem. It could not be denied, this was the Relic of Fire. Haborym orders Alexander to hand it to him. Now. The Emperor laughs. He says "if you want the Relic so badly then by all means...come and get it."

The rebels engage Alexander in battle. Marley and Jinx muster every slash and shot they can on him, but Alexander is too nimble for every one of their strikes. Haborym attacks with sprouts of flame in full force, but Alexander responds in equal to the Demon King. The Relic of Fire is giving him every counter imaginable against Haborym's attacks, and thus the battle becomes mainly between the two titans. After a ruthless clash, the challengers become exhausted. Haborym says that Alexander is still human, and he does not have the energy to challenge the Demon King. Alexander begins to give a sinister chuckle: "If that's what you believe, Demon King." With every shred of vicious might, he raises the Relic of Fire into the air, and the temple around them begins to shake.

Meanwhile, the lava around the temple becomes restless. Freyja notices this and readies her vessel for departure. As the chamber around the rebels begins to tremble, Haborym demands to know what the wicked Emperor has just wrought. He bolsters that he has doomed the very ground beneath their feet, "within minutes, this infernal monastery shall be consumed by the great sea of fire! You can attempt to engage me again, but your chances of escaping this place alive will be NAUGHT!" As the Emperor begins to cackle, Haborym looks to the frightened rebels and realizes that he must get them out of there. In a flash of smoke, Alexander disappears, and Haborym rushes Marley and Jinx out of the chamber and towards the entrance as fast as he possibly can.

The walls around them begin to leak magma as Haborym realizes that their time is shortening. As the link between the bridge and the temple severs, the rebels rush outside. Freyja beckons them to jump as the temple begins to collapse. Haborym hurls the terrified mortals across the gap and onto the bridge, and he makes a great leap across. As the rebels finally manage to secure their safety, they look back as the massive temple crumbles into the sea of lava in horror. Haborym falls to his knees, and Marley and Jinx are left in complete terror at the carnage before them. Only Marley can muster words into speech: "...what just happened?"

CHAPTER 6: A FRACTURED MIND

A rather nettled Varrak rides through the capital city of the Arinian Empire, where he arrives at the gates of the Ebony Keep. Dismounting his horse, he is greeted by **Jonah Desdemonia**, a constable for the castle. He quickly picks up on the vizier's attitude, however, and drops the welcoming demeanor once Varrak speaks: "Where is he? Tell me. Now." Jonah nervously tells the vizier that he is in the studies, to which Varrak marches off.

Within the study, a large room aligned with bookshelves, Alexander is engaging himself with maps and mythological texts next to a singular lamp. As he does this, he pulls out the two Relics of Power in his possession and stares as the two artifacts dance in his hands with a symphonious yet incomplete melody. The trance is broken as Varrak storms into the study. He is demanding to know why he was not informed of the excursion that Alexander made to Hell. Alexander calmly states that "it was on a need-to-know basis, to which the realm saw fit that the Grand Vizier...did not need to know." Varrak insists that he is unable to do his job properly if Alexander will not keep him informed and that he should have been made aware of the Fire Relic so that he could retrieve it. As Varrak continues to caterwaul, he stops himself as he notices the flame in the lamp becomes more agitated.

Alexander turns to the vizier and tells him that if he needed Varrak for that mission, he would have informed him: "But the truth of the matter is you were not needed. Your grievances are duly noted, Varrak, however it is the opinion of the throne that the mission would have not only been completely unaffected by your involvement, but it could have perhaps been jeopardized by your recklessness." Alexander tells Varrak that he was told of the vizier's blunder at the Lancaster Athenaeum. Varrak tries to defend his position by pinning the mistake on Lucille, but Alexander is not interested. He commands that Varrak ensure a "tighter leash" on the Imperial Legionnaires if he is to be trusted with the mission of collecting the Relics. With no more ground to stand on for argument, Varrak ashamedly accepts and apologizes. Alexander commands the vizier to get out.

Meanwhile, the rebels are once again in the dark stream from whence they rowed previously, only this time in the opposite direction. Freyja continues her trek as Jinx examines Marley's wounds from the battle. Haborym is silently sulking while looking down at the dark water below. Freyja asks if Haborym is sure he is not to remain in Hell: "Your Majesty, it's been a long time since your absence, and while the Sins have been running things properly some major changes have-" but Haborym cuts her off. He proclaims that he must return to his mission: with Alexander having two Relics in his possession he is now a threat to not only the Empire but all of the Seven Realms. He looks to the boatswoman with an assured expression: "I will not return until Alexander is properly returned to his prison."

As Haborym turns around, an awkward silence claims the air before Jinx speaks up. They ask about Haborym's life, as they are more convinced that Haborym is truly a different being from their rebel friend. Haborym explains that since the dawn of life itself, he has ruled over the domain of Hell, punishing those of wicked hearts and providing shelter for lost souls. He iterates that his condition was brought upon early in his life when "the war" came about. He is however disinclined to share details. Marley asks a rather offhanded question after the hell king's solemn statement: "Are there any more alter egos we should know about?"

Jinx is ready to scold the rebel for the indelicate wording, however, Haborym takes no offense and is willing to elaborate: there is another alter that goes by the name of Sammael Morningstar, of whom is the alter that primarily switches with him. He also explains that Sammael had not switched since Alexander's escape, which he wagers that could change if he is successful in his mission. When Jinx asks why that is, Haborym looks down in a slight pitiful sorrow. He admits that Sammael was conscious when Alexander broke free, and as a result, felt a great amount of guilt because of it. Haborym hopes to succeed in stopping the Emperor in his stead. As he finishes, he looks down again, with the sorrow on his expression becoming far more apparent.

The boat comes to a stop. Freyja sees the group off as they make their way out of the cavern and into the outside world again. Marley is elated to see sunlight again, while Jinx plots their journey back by getting to the carriage they left at the Vakinian river bank. Haborym is not engaging with them. He stares east and stands in complete silence. Without warning, the hell king flies off into the sky in a burst of flame and soars in that direction. Jinx calls out to him but Marley stops them from running after him: "Listen! We gotta get back to base. And besides, if he can do...that then he's more than capable of being by himself." Jinx worries that they might not come back, to which Marley says that they will turn up, they just need to give him time. A reluctant Jinx secedes, and the two begin making their way downstream.

Haborym soars through the clouds with a pained expression on his face, though it is not from the flight. He descends upon a large farm with expansive fields of grain. As he lands, the fire around him extinguishes. He feels the crops around him and closes his eyes. Sounds of sword clashes and screams begin to echo in his mind. He attempts to control his expression, but more and more he begins to fail. Suddenly, a singular blood-curdling scream cries out, and he begins to well up. He buries his head into his hands before falling to his knees...and then collapsing entirely. Haborym blacks out.

Only sounds are heard as an unintelligible voice begins speaking to him. As he begins to open his eyes, his expression is far more insecure and wary. The alter Aym has taken over. As he awakens, he sees a man standing over him: a farmer. The farmer introduces himself as **Joseph Everson**, and tells him that he discovered his unconscious body lying in the middle of his field. Aym asks if he knows where he is, to which the farmer laughs: "Well my good fellow, where do you think?! I am a man of harvest and you have found yourself in the middle of a wheat field! I think the answer to your question should be obvious, no?" Aym is perplexed at the farmer's amiable attitude. Joseph tells him that he has awoken at the Everson Farm, and that he is among the first visitors he's had for a while.

Aym asks if there is somewhere less awkward they can continue the conversation. The farmer jovially invites him to his household across the farmstead. Aym accepts, and the two stroll towards the homely building in the distance. Aym looks around at the quaint environment; roosters perched on the humble fences overlooking a group of grazing hens, a playful pair of sheepdogs chasing each other around in a clearing, and a peaceful woman gently sewing on a shaded porch. The woman darts up as she notices the two approaching the household. She asks Joseph where this stranger appeared from, to which Joseph tells her not to be too overbearing. The two engage in banter as the woman introduces herself as Margaret Everson, the wife of Joseph and the co-owner of the farm. Aym formally bows and introduces himself to the two. They are entertained by his formality, to which the awkward rebel becomes bashful.

The group moves inside as Joseph runs out to fetch a flask for Aym. Margaret begins to ask the rebel about his life, to which Aym is careful to answer so as not to expose his status as a rebel. He offhandedly tells her that he is a “patrolman” for the capital city. Margaret is fascinated by the answer and becomes more inquisitive about his life. Aym sorely regrets the statement and struggles to fib through the conversation by recalling a false livelihood. Fortunately for him, Joseph returns inside with the flask of water and asks Aym what he’s in this region for. Aym says that he doesn’t know, to which Joseph joking replies: “I suppose that explains you having found yourself out cold in the middle of a farm?” Aym admits that this place is strangely familiar to him, which piques the interest of the curious farmer family.

After a brief silence, Aym asks if there is anything he could do to help out around the farm, to which Joseph tells him that he appreciates the enthusiasm but he’s not looking to hire any extra hands at this time. Aym immediately tells him that he’ll do any work for free, which leaves Joseph and Margaret stunned. Seeing that Aym is very serious about the offer, he says that he could use some help with harvesting the potato field. Aym thoroughly thanks the two and asks where it is. After Margaret tells him the directions, Aym eagerly rushes off. Joseph turns to his wife and wears the same expression of confusion that she has: “...did this man just thank us for giving him free work?”

Aym tends to the potato field as he merrily plucks each crop and waters the plant after harvesting the potatoes from it. His face reads an expression of content, rather than exuberant joy it falls closer to a sense of inner peace. After a good amount of potato plucking, a curious little girl walks up to the calmed Aym. The girl says that she’s never seen him around here before, and begins pestering him with questions. Aym is delighted to answer them all and asks if the girl is the farmer’s daughter. The girl replies with “no.” Puzzled, Aym asks who the girl is. She introduces herself as **Charlotte Everson**. Aym inquires as to why she has the last name “Everson” if she isn’t Joseph’s daughter. Before she can reply, a voice begins to shout at the pair: “Charlotte! Come to the barn! Tell the stranger to come along too!”

The girl begins to show excitement, which only leaves Aym even more confused. Charlotte tells him “Violet is about to have her baby!” They run to the barn, to which an attentive Joseph beckons the two to enter. They walk into a pen where Margaret is tending to a cow lying on the ground taking deep breaths. Joseph begins to stroke the cow's head as Margaret lowers herself towards the other end helping along the birth process. Aym is bewildered at what is unfolding before him, as not before long an audible rustle in the hay bale is heard from where Margaret is sitting. A newborn calf is now visible as the mother cow starts to get up. Joseph tells her “Easy” as the bovine stands up, turns around, and begins to lick the placenta off of the calf. Margaret is touched by the scene, as she happily watches Violet celebrate the birth of her baby. Aym begins to well up as well as he sees the miracle of life unveiled before him. The group all sit as they take in the moment.

Twilight begins to glisten on the farmstead, as the Eversons begin to gather in the farmhouse for dinner. Aym, Joseph, and Charlotte all converse about Violet’s newborn as Margaret puts the finishing touches on dinner. Aym absorbs the scene around him as he witnesses the Eversons living their lives, the sight warms his heart...but it also saddens it. He asks Joseph if he could get some fresh air, to which the farmer obliges. Aym walks outside as Joseph looks at him with an expression of concern.

Aym looks over the farmstead as nightfall approaches. The sounds of cicadas and crickets echo through the fields as Aym sits down and looks at the night sky. A door opens behind him; Joseph comes out and asks if he can join him. As the two look out into the twilight fields, Joseph asks if there is anything on his mind. Aym simply says that he “misses his family.” When Joseph asks, Aym only replies with this: “They’re um...we have a complicated relationship. We’re different, exceedingly so, but we all care about each other. It’s just with my time away...I haven’t gotten to see them a lot anymore.” The farmer sighs. He says that Aym is right to miss his family and that the heartache he bears from it is just a sign that his love for them is still strong. Aym is grateful for the farmer’s wisdom, and once again thanks him for allowing him to help with the potato patch. Joseph asks why he was so willing to do it without coin, to which Aym says that he just wanted to. It made him feel happy.

Joseph tells Aym that they should probably head inside as dinner is about to be finished, to which Aym stops him. He tells him about the interaction he had with Charlotte and asks if it’s true that she isn’t their daughter. Joseph pauses. He says that he is right: she is not their daughter. Rather, she is their niece. He says that his brother died of sickness several years ago, and since then they have treated Charlotte like she was their own. Joseph says that he’s proud of how she turned out, and that “despite how much it still hurts...seeing her smile reminds me that my brother is still alive with her. With me.” Having now poured their hearts out to each other, Aym informs Joseph that he will have to leave tomorrow as he has duties to return to. Joseph says that is fine, but that in the meantime, he shall have dinner with his family.

The following day, Aym is seen off by the Everson family as he takes a public carriage to travel away. He looks back upon the field and closes his eyes. After a long journey, Aym finds his way back to the rebel base. Upon his arrival, he is ecstatically welcomed by Jinx and they embrace him upon his return. Marley is jovial upon the man’s return and asks him if he’s alright. Aym smiles at his rebel friends: “Yeah...I suppose I am alright.”

CHAPTER 7: HEART OF STONE

A group of miners are exchanging stories around a lantern. The stories are all ghostly in nature, as one worker attempts to frighten the others, the rest of the group mocks whoever the storyteller may be. A canary perched in a bird cage chirps excessively while the miners exchange barbs...to the miners' annoyance. Frederick, the last one to go, foretells a rather topical horror story: the Dwellers. He explains that there was once a bustling race of dwarves that lived within vast subterranean cities and became exceedingly wealthy due to the abundance of gold and silver they could harvest from the Deep Earth. However, a great calamity wiped out their race, and the vengeful souls of these Dwellers now attack any who venture too deep below the surface.

The story is met with silence...and then uproarious laughter. The miners all tell Frederick that they have never met dwarves in their entire lives working in the mines and that Frederick is too much of a greenhorn for exchanging horror stories. The younger miner hangs his head down in shame. As the miners begin to ready their things to resume their shift, they all begin to take a whiff. A foul odor plagues the air, to which only Frederick reacts abruptly toward. The miners are not bothered by it due to their experience and say that this stench is typical. The group is stopped, however, by a low hissing noise followed by a loud series of clicks. This was not typical. As the miners are becoming more wary, the hissing becomes more deafening. They suspect that there may be a gas leak, and they should inform the foreman. Frederick beckons the attention of the group...the canary has died. In a stunned silence, the lantern light starts dimming, as the clicking noise becomes more audible. It goes out, and through an indiscernible darkness, the only sound that can be heard are the sounds of screaming.

Within the Ebony Keep, the Imperial Legionnaires meander impatiently within the council chambers. They are only brought to attention when Varrak storms inside. Taking a seat at the end of the table, he informs the legionnaires that they now have confirmed suspicions about a possible Relic location. Jason Whitlock asks where this Relic is, to which Varrak sneers at the magician and tells him he will get to it. As Jonah serves wine to the legionnaires, Varrak explains a report from Lord Gulliver Patanga of the Kingdom of Entomia about an incident that occurred within the Anthill Mines. He elaborates on a group of workers who were found dead after the uncovering of a particular crevice with wind protruding out of it. Keondra Caddel says that it was probably a gas leak, to which Varrak retorts that if it was, the miners would not have died in the fashion that they did.

Whitlock intrudes stating that Varrak still has not explained what this has to do with the Relics. Irritated, Varrak reminds everyone of the gateway to the Mar. The description of this crevice is similar to the gateway they found during the Relic of Water mission. Varrak surmises that if they explore what this fracture within the earth holds, they could feasibly acquire another Relic of Power. Keondra raises another question on the previous topic: she asks what exactly did kill those miners if it wasn't a gas leak. Varrak contemplates for a moment. He recalls the sea-farers that attacked them during their journey for the Relic of Water. He wagers that like them, these attackers most likely did so to defend the Relic. He beckons the legionnaires to make preparations for departure immediately.

The battalion of imperials rides into the tropical rainforests of Entomia. They make camp before the Anthill Mines, a large quarry with hundreds of miners hustling about through the

many mine shafts of the area. A mine boss by the name of Willis Scarab welcomes the Grand Vizier and the legionnaires. Like all of the miners, his appearance is rough and unsightly, with the notable exception of a poncho with patterns of beetles all over it. Scarab is also rather short compared to the other miners. Lucille de la Rue comments on the strange appearance of the miners here, to which Whitlock mentions that insect imagery is a major part of Entomian culture. He tours the imperial soldiers down a mineshaft to where they unearthed the crevice in question.

As they make their way through the mine, they stumble across a room covered in slash marks and blood with the deceased, caged canary still inside. Lucille is revolted by the sight, to which Scarab explains that this is the scene where the miners were killed. When Varrak asks what killed them, Scarab cannot say. Whitlock examines the claw marks closely while Keondra and Lucille reel back from the rather gruesome scene. After a moment of looking around, Varrak asks Scarab where the crevice is. Scarab leads them deeper into the mine, stating that it is not too far ahead.

When the group arrives at the crevice, they find more strange markings littered amongst the cave walls. A slight breeze expels from the fracture, with an assembled pulley elevator stationed above it. Scarab elaborates that he and the miners have constructed it as per Varrak's orders, but only a group of about 10 can board it at one time. Varrak, Whitlock, Lucille, Keondra, and six other Imperial soldiers all board as Scarab and his men lower the imperials into the dark abyss. They all light their torches as they descend within the crevice.

The area around the imperials is completely dark, but from the sounds and breeze, it can be implied that they have descended into a massive cavern. When the elevator makes contact with the cave floor, Varrak orders Lucille to cast an illuminatory spell upward, as it's abundantly clear torchlight will not be enough. As she does, the true scale of the cavern becomes clear: the subterranean world is a vast ruin, with empty structures of stone dotting the underground landscape. The illuminatory spell does not offer much light to the whole landscape but makes it visible enough for the legionnaires to navigate.

The imperials journey through the massive underground land and stumble across a large mural. Whitlock studies it closely, and examines the text on the large gateway leading further into the cavern: "DEIS RELICTIS." Keondra asks what it means, which leads Whitlock to look down in contemplation. Whitlock says that he may know where they are: the Deep Earth. Varrak freezes in revelation. He asks Whitlock if he's sure of this, to which Whitlock nods. Varrak orders everyone to march on double time. Lucille becomes curious about the magicians' change of demeanor.

She asks Whitlock what the Deep Earth is. The magician is hesitant to answer, but the neurotic Keondra demands to know as well. He explains that it is an ancient realm hidden deep below the Earth's surface, where it once bustled with a race of Dwellers it is now nothing more than a barren ruin. However, there are mutterings among miners and excavators that the Dwellers survived this ancient armageddon and now roam the darkness as predators. As he explains this, a horrid stench begins to take notice within the group.

Keondra asks Varrak if he can cast the protective barrier again to spare them the foul odor. Varrak states that it would be pointless; he would just trap everyone with the putrid stench. A series of clicks stops everyone in their tracks. Varrak immediately turns toward the group: "Do. Not. Move." He gently tells Whitlock to loosen a fireball behind the group. Whitlock becomes

abrasive, but the quiet request soon becomes a stern order. As Whitlock unleashes the fire bolt behind the group, the flame briefly illuminates the trail behind them...a swarm of pitch black, humanoid figures without eyes are prowling directly towards them. Varrak screams at everyone to run.

The imperials sprint with all of their might as the Dweller swarm pursues the group. Varrak tells them to keep every torch lit: "If our torches extinguish, so do our lives! DO NOT LET THEM BURN OUT!" Keondra and Lucille struggle to keep up with the group as they try to keep their torches lit. One of the Dwellers closes in toward Lucille, but Keondra shoots the monster with a crossbow that nearly hits Lucille. Whitlock notices a large gate and beckons everyone to follow him. As they arrive, Keondra and Whitlock heave to get it open as the imperials brace for the impending Dwellers. Three soldiers are viciously mauled and dragged into the darkness while Varrak and Lucille ferociously keep the predators at bay. He roars at Whitlock to get the gate open now. As they finally crack open the doorway, the imperials scurry in and shut the large door behind them.

Several soldiers hold the gate closed before the Dwellers cease their barrage. They take a moment to recuperate before Keondra explodes on the magicians: "Did you not think it wise to tell us about those...things?!" Whitlock is at a loss for words, but Varrak is quick to defend his position stating that he had everything under control. Keondra tells him that they have just lost three soldiers and that she would hardly classify that as "under control." The vizier gets stern with the captain, and after reiterating his point he commands that "It was on a need-to-know basis, and I saw fit that the captain did not need to know." Keondra grumbles as the group carries on deeper into the hall.

As they move forward, they notice that the walls are completely covered in ancient scriptures. Lucille asks if Whitlock can translate those, to which Whitlock retorts: "There's nothing to translate. These are all names." The names are in the tens of thousands; the entire building is covered with them. Eventually, they reach a central chamber that extends out into several other hallways. As the magicians examine the area, Keondra laments that this will take forever. Whitlock examines the mural at the heart of the chamber and presses on the crystal lying at the center. A large, circular stone stairway opens up around them, to which the imperials proceed.

They arrive at a massive temple chamber littered with an army of statues. At the end of the hall, statues of four cavalymen watch over a glass display. Within it, a bright green emerald levitates with a low, eerie hum. Varrak is in disbelief. There was no doubt about it, that was the Relic of Earth. But just like that? He is cautious in approaching the haunting gemstone, and slowly removes the glass around it. The imperials are tense as Varrak slowly reaches for the Relic. After a slow, careful reach...he grasps the gemstone in his hands. Nothing happens. After a moment, however, he begins to hear a low rumbling. Within his peripheral view, the horsemen statues begin to look directly at him.

Varrak jumps back as one of the horsemen strikes him with a trident. The imperials quickly run up the stairs as **the Shujah Riders** begin their attack. Varrak and Whitlock strike back with a series of bolts, but one of the horsemen returns fire with a longbow. As the imperials make their way back into the hall, they come to a quick realization: they are trapped. The Riders are hot on their trail, but the Dwellers await them outside the temple. Varrak commands that their only option is to charge the Dwellers, as they need to escape. As they hear the sound of

heavy galloping, the group sprint for the gateway that they recently closed to the outside. Varrak commands everyone to pull open the gates as he begins to charge an attack. As the gate is pulled open, the unsuspecting Dwellers are hit with a massive firebolt attack from Varrak. He screams at everyone to charge outside. As they do, the Shujah Riders emerge from the temple and begin to pursue the Imperials.

As they run with every fiber of their might, the Riders make rounds shooting and slashing at the fleeing imperials. One of the soldiers is caught by a spray of poisonous gas from one of the horsemen, and as he writhes in agony he is claimed by the impending horde of Dwellers. They catch a glimpse of the pulley ahead, but the Dwellers and the Riders are closing in. Varrak commands Lucille to cast "grand barrier," and trusting the vizier Lucille turns and conjures a great wall of light between the imperials and the pursuing foes. The Shujah Riders crash into the barrier, breaking into stone pieces. Many Dwellers are also killed in the impact, however, the hoard continues to remain restless. Varrak orders everyone to get on the pulley immediately.

Keondra pleads with them to hold, as Lucille is still holding the barrier. Whitlock agrees, however, Varrak begins to furiously tug the pulley rope. "What are you doing?!" Whitlock cries out. As the pulley begins to lift, they witness Lucille running towards them begging them to stop. The imperials can only watch in horror as a desperate Lucille calls out to them before ultimately being overtaken by the horde of Dwellers. Keondra is unable to hold back tears as she witnesses her fellow legionnaire being slain.

As the imperials are safely returned to the Anthill Mines, Keondra immediately punches Varrak in the face. The imperial soldiers have to hold her back as she screams at the vizier: "GODDAMN YOU, LANCASTER! You left Lucille to die! You treacherous bastard! How could you?!" As Keondra continues to wail, Whitlock chops her at the base of her neck, knocking her out. The imperials ask if she should be put under arrest for assaulting the vizier, to which Varrak replies "No." He surmises that Alexander will not be pleased if he finds out he incarcerated one of his legionnaires. Whitlock asks what Varrak shall speak of Lucille, to which the vizier threateningly looks at everyone in the room: "We shall not speak of it." Varrak stares at the Relic of Earth finally within his grasp and says that they will need to rest before they can return to the capital.

CHAPTER 8: A DESPERATE GAMBIT

Jinx is seen slashing away at a training dummy within the rebel base. Their attacks are ferocious, but it is clear they are losing breath. As they collapse on the ground from exhaustion, they slam their fist onto the ground in frustration. As they look up to the mineshaft ceiling in anger, a slow clap is audible as Jinx turns to see Marley at the doorway. Jinx says that they are not in the mood for his sass at the moment, to which Marley replies that he's simply checking up on them out of worry. He says that Jinx has been in the training room for hours, and they should perhaps take a break. Jinx refuses, as they declare the more breaks they take are more minutes given to the Emperor. Marley begins to realize the source of their frustration.

As Jinx gets up to attempt more mindless swinging, Marley halts them. He says that there wasn't anything they could've done at the Fire Temple. Jinx frustratedly answers: "I know that! It's just...I shouldn't have been outclassed like that! I can't afford to be outclassed like that! I have the whole rebellion on my shoulders, and if I fall for another stupid ploy like that then-!" Marley tells them to pipe it down. While Jinx takes it aggressively, Marley calmly tells them that if anything they were lucky to have survived. Alexander would have gotten the Relic of Fire no matter what, and the fact that they lived to fight another day is the best-case scenario. Jinx says that this fact doesn't help them out much, to which Marley admits that comfort isn't his forte. He nods to his rebel leader, however, and says "We'll get another chance."

Suddenly, a rebel soldier rushes to the scene, telling the two that an intruder was found in the base. Alarmed, the two rebels rush out of the scene. Within the war room, Jormund Eldenson is lounging on Jinx's chair, with Alpheus having the swindler at trident point. As Jinx arrives, they become furious. Jormund asks "Could you please have fish-lips here stop poking at me with the pitchfork?" Jinx says they'll consider it if he tells him what the hell he is doing in the rebel base. Jormund says that he's come to offer a trade: a lion's share of gold in exchange for some vital information. Jinx asks why he couldn't just contact them normally, to which Jormund explains that said information is rather "time-sensitive." As Jinx becomes more unwavering in accepting the deal, Jormund pulls out the trump card: "So I'm going to assume you don't want to steal a Relic of Power from the empire then?" Everyone becomes dead silent.

Jinx demands to know what he's talking about, to which the black market dealer becomes coy. He demands that Jinx accept the terms and not have Alpheus holding him at weapon's length. As Jormund's smug expression conveys, Jinx sighs in annoyance at the reality of their lack of choice. They accept the deal, to which Alpheus spins the trident away and sheathes it behind him. Jormund adjusts himself as he begins to divulge the details: according to associates from across the empire, a caravan of Imperial Legionnaires was spied on heading to the Kingdom of Entomia. Marley retorts "Well there's nothing notable about that, the Legionnaires took a holiday to Entomia, so what? Unless they found the Relic of Flies." As Marley arrogantly chuckles, Jormund carries forth that what's precisely notable about that is they were seen leaving with several soldiers down, tattered, and short on supplies.

Jinx still isn't buying it, saying that could easily have been some terrorist ambush or unforeseen weather. Jormund says that he still hasn't mentioned the most interesting part: they were seen heading into the Anthill Mines. Jinx demands to know where he's going with this. Jormund firmly states that there's only one explanation that has all of these factors make sense: Varrak and the Imperial Legionnaires went to find a Relic of Power, and their departure indicates

that they have it already. Jinx asks what the time sensitivity is for, to which Jormund replies that the imperials are projected to find board in the town of Durban, the black market's main base of operations. He states that if he didn't tell the rebels now, they wouldn't have time to intercept the imperials there and this information would be useless.

Marley is ecstatic at the news, to which Jinx stumbles back in contemplation. Marley says that this is their chance to even the score with the Relics of Power. Jinx, however, is still skeptical. They ask how many imperials they would be dealing with. After juggling the numbers in his head, Jormund estimates that their caravan combined with Durban police would land them comfortably in the hundreds. Jinx is far more abrasive at the plan, but Marley is adamant about the opportunity. Jormund becomes sincere with the rebel leader and admits that after seeing what they did to get the Relic of Light, he wants to do anything and everything he can to help them out. Jinx pauses for a long moment. They accept the offer. With no time to waste, the rebel group ventures off.

They look upon the town of Durban, a rough hive of scum and villainy in what appears to be a dried-out valley of a former lake. The streets are littered with peasant markets and street hustlers looking to make a quick buck. Trudging through the unpleasant streets, the legionnaires gather at a large inn. Whitlock asks Varrak if he's absolutely sure boarding for the night here is a good idea, to which the Grand Vizier replies "If any of these lowlifes so much as tried to make a gamble for the 'cache', they would be incinerated on the spot." Whitlock still voices his concerns about the area, to which Varrak assures the magician that he has his "contingencies."

From a hut adjacent to the hotel, Jormund and Marley are spying on the building while Aym and Alpheus are looking over books. Jormund says that the headcount is looking a tad sizable for his tastes, to which Marley says that "can't matter," as they won't get another chance like this. Jormund steps away from the window and thinks for a moment. He asks Aym if he's ever heard of a "mage herring" before. When Aym turns his head in confusion, Jormund explains: "It's a classic setup: imperial army protocol prioritizes threats of magic nature, so if any ruffian wanted to say...draw troops away from somewhere, they would cause a scene with some magic spells to draw the soldiers toward them." Aym nervously admits that will likely set him up as live bait for the imperials. Jormund says that it might be their only way of getting inside that hotel otherwise. Upon hearing those words, Aym accepts the task.

Meanwhile, Keondra sits alone in a room in the inn. Whitlock asks if he may enter, to which she accepts. Whitlock tries to engage in a light conversation with the dismayed captain, but she makes it abundantly clear she is not interested. He admits that he was not happy with what happened to Lucille either, but there isn't anything either of them could've done about it: "What matters now is the Emperor's mission. We have the Relic of Earth, and by command, we shall bring it to him. Lucille will not have died in vain. I promise." Her expression makes it clear that the last sentence rubbed her very wrong. She asks if it will be her or him. When Whitlock admits he doesn't understand, Keondra asserts: "Will it be me or you that gets stabbed in the back next? How stupid are you, Whitlock? How unbelievably dull are you to not realize the nefarious methodologies of the vizier?! He will kill us, Jason." Whitlock is stunned into silence. She has no place speaking such things of someone high standing in the imperial food chain...and yet Whitlock cannot deny the truth in her words. With no argument to continue, he leaves.

The rebels gather in the market concealed. Jormund asks Aym and Alpheus if they are ready to do this. Aym nods more assuredly this time, stating that whatever the risk, he will do anything for the rebellion. Jinx embraces the mage, saying that despite that..."please be careful." Jormund, Marley, and Jinx scurry off as they part ways with Aym and Alpheus. Marley asks Jormund if he thinks they will be able to pull this off. Jormund says that "It will all depend on how big of a splash your friends can make."

In the main market square, the crowded bustle of street life comes to a pause as Aym begins shouting "Thief! Stop thief!" Alpheus runs with an assorted bag of items as Aym feigns lightning strikes and fire bolts in his direction. Two imperial guards take notice and command Aym to cease the magic use in the crowded area. He responds by shooting a far more powerful lightning bolt towards them. As the crowd begins to panic, Aym looks at Alpheus. Alpheus gives him a thumbs up.

The large bolt is noticed by Varrak from the hotel balcony. He sees the other soldiers take notice and head for the market square. When he attempts to follow suit, Whitlock stops him. He says that going outside with the Relic is too risky, to which the vizier throws it at him. Stunned, the magician lets him make his exit. As Jormund, Marley, and Jinx witness the imperial crowd towards the market, they begin their move to infiltrate the building.

Meanwhile, Aym's commotion becomes more chaotic as he and Alpheus fight off more incoming soldiers. When Varrak arrives at the scene, he screams at the soldiers to cease their assault. He recognizes the two men standing before him: "You're that sea-farer whelp Matthias arrested back then...and YOU! You're that upstart novice who liberated him and stole the map!" His finger points squarely towards the magician. He commands that not a single soldier interfere in this bout...they are his. Aym and Alpheus ready themselves as they begin their battle with the Grand Vizier.

The other rebels slip into a window and dispose of the imperial guards stationed in the room. Jinx orders the two to split up and search for the Relic. As they break off to scour the building, Jinx runs into Whitlock. He asks for their identification, as the rebel is not identifiable to the magician. They claim to be one of the attendants. Whitlock becomes suspicious and stares at them in a contemplative silence. As the room is silent, however, the eerie humming of the Relic of Earth can be heard. It's coming from Whitlock. The rebel grunts "Oh to hell with this" before charging the magician.

Back at the market, Aym and Alpheus engage in a ferocious duel with Varrak. Alpheus is on the defensive, as his trident cannot get close enough to counter Varrak's projectile magic. Aym attempts to match the vizier's offense, but his apprentice-level spells pale in comparison to the vizier's elite skill level. "You see?! Your previous victory was a FLUKE! Your power is nothing compared to the greatest magician alive!!!" The vizier cackles maniacally as he has Alpheus and Aym driven into a corner.

Jormund and Marley run into imperial soldiers in an attempt to rendezvous with Jinx. Marley employs his superior strength against the weaker soldiers, while a much more menacing legionnaire approaches the black market criminal, armed to the teeth and bolstering a frighteningly large mace. Jormund proceeds to shoot the soldier in the head with a flintlock pistol. As Marley and Jormund reinforce Jinx in the fight against Whitlock, Keondra joins the fray. Jinx turns to their rebel friends during the bout: "It's the magician! He has the Relic!" All eyes turn towards Whitlock as the rebels realize where the target is.

The battle is chaotic and rapid. Marley charge tackles the magician and knocks the Relic of Earth out of his possession. Jinx picks up the Relic, but Keondra grabs it just as they grasp it. The two fight over it as Jormund shoots the Relic out of both of their grips. Whitlock grabs it again, only for Jinx to charge at them once more. The Relic falls again, and Keondra is the only one able to acquire it. She flees the scene with the Relic in her possession. "JORMUND!" Jinx desperately screams out. "On it." the swindler responds. Jormund and Marley pursue the imperial captain while Jinx and Whitlock are still in a lock. They proceed to grab Whitlock's arms and strong-toss them into a pile of crates. With him subdued, Jinx follows suit.

Jormund eventually runs into Keondra. After the impact, she begins to slash at the dodging dealer. Marley tries to interfere, but he is knocked back by the captain. As Jormund is pushed against the wall, the ferocious captain sneers. Jormund...proceeds to run away. A confused Marley follows suit, to which the captain is left bewildered. She reaches for the Relic, but an expression of worry and then sudden realization conveys the rebels' true intentions. As Marley and Jinx catch up with him demanding to know the reason for his desertion, he pulls out the Relic of Earth and grins: "Light fingers." As the three make it to the exit, they are met with a swarm of imperial soldiers. In a spur-of-the-moment rush, Jormund looks at the powerful artifact in his hands. He knows that there's only one way out of this. Harnessing the Relic's power...a massive stone pillar sprouts from the ground and crashes through the building.

The sound of the pillar's burst is heard throughout the entirety of Durban, including at the market square. As Varrak sees the massive tower of rock protruding from the direction of the inn, a look of horrific realization washes over him. He abandons Aym and Alpheus and sprints for the hotel immediately. The pair quickly scurry away, as the vizier has handed them an opportunity of escape. As the exhausted rebels converge in an alleyway, they are elated at their reunion. When Aym asks if they got it, Jormund pulls out the shimmering gemstone with a look of sadistic satisfaction: "Consider the score...even."

CHAPTER 9: VARRAK'S AMBITION

The imperial legionnaires trudge into the capital in shame. Their march is slow and humiliated, with the exception of the Grand Vizier who is trotting onward as proudly as ever. As they enter the Ebony Keep, they begin to hear a pipe organ being played faintly in the castle. The constable Jonah greets the legionnaires and informs them that the Emperor has been briefed on what occurred in Durban. When Varrak asks how indignant the Emperor is, Jonah looks down awkwardly: "...very." Varrak says that he and the legionnaires will have a word with him. When Jonah attempts to give directions, Varrak stops the constable and tells him "I know where he is." Jonah stiffly follows the legionnaires.

They open to a large chapel where the pipe organ becomes far louder. Alexander is seen playing vigorously on the organ, seeming to not acknowledge the legionnaires' presence. Varrak attempts to get his attention. No answer. As the imperials approach the Emperor, his playing becomes far more energetic and melodious. Varrak attempts to call to him again as Alexander moves on to presto. In a final attempt to get the Emperor's attention, Alexander ends his symphony by slamming on a discordant, violent note. The chapel falls silent as Alexander stares down at the console.

Varrak scrambles his words to explain the events that transpired at Durban. He claims to have acted dutifully, and the mistake of losing the Relic of Earth is the burden of the magician Whitlock. He swears that if it were not for his blunder, the Relic would be in his hands. Alexander turns around and begins to approach the imperials. He recalls the report that Jonah had delivered to him in detail: "Now if I'm mistaken, Varrak, I was led to believe that you were the one that entrusted the Relic of Power to him. You, who had a Relic of Power in your grasp, had so irresponsibly entrusted it to your colleague because why? Oh yes, because you wanted to fulfill some childish vendetta with one of the rebels. Instead of letting my soldiers take care of them, you insisted on dealing with them yourself in what I can only assume is some inane rush of bravado or pride. Am I correct, vizier?" Alexander is now face-to-face with the Grand Vizier.

Varrak says that despite this setback, there are still two Relics of Power unclaimed: "Sire, I can say with great assurance that a setback like this will not occur. The remaining Relics shall be yours if you would trust me-" At that moment, Alexander grabs the vizier by the throat and begins to choke him. The vizier is lifted as he struggles to breathe. Alexander's expression is holding back an anger on the verge of erupting: "Trust you? And why, Vizier, would I make the absurd decision of doing that? Time and time again you have failed me. Your hubris is becoming a hazard I can no longer afford to work around. Even one of these relics in the hands of the rebels jeopardizes everything I strive to achieve. Does that ring true in a man whom I can trust, VARRAK?!" The terrified vizier strains to shake his head as he gasps for air. Alexander throws him toward the ground. Varrak breathes heavily as he struggles to regain his balance. Jonah, Keondra, and Whitlock are frozen stiff out of fear.

Alexander commands the other legionnaires that if one more Relic falls into the hands of the rebellion, the legionnaires will be dissolved as an organization and they will all be held accountable for their failure. When he asks if he has made himself crystal clear, no one in the room hesitates to affirm. He commands that they all dismiss. When the imperials leave, Alexander stops Jonah. He motions for the constable to come closer. When he does, Alexander tells him to gather the empire's top minds in the fields of archeology, mythology, and magistry.

When Jonah accepts the order, Alexander tells him one more thing: "I would like tabs to be kept on the legionnaires from this point forward. I do not want the vizier to so much as blink without my knowing. Oh, and I believe this should be obvious but, do make sure to not let anyone know this." When Jonah affirms the order, Alexander dismisses him.

In the city of Antamond, Varrak visits a cathedral with a large stained glass window of a graceful woman before a great star. Within it, he waits in a small line to enter a confessional. He shuts the door and asks if Whitlock is there. Whitlock confirms and jokingly asks if Varrak has come to confess his sins, and if so whether he should get comfortable. Varrak explains that this is the only way that they can discuss without worrying about prying ears. Whitlock worries about what subject matter would warrant such secrecy and his worries are realized when Varrak utters the words: "I'm beginning to realize that our mission to collect the Relics is writing the song of our deaths." Whitlock asks what he plans to do.

Varrak confesses that he is fearful that the Emperor will kill them once he obtains the Relics of Power. Whitlock begins to laugh, which makes the awaiting churchgoers outside the confessional more hesitant to enter. When Varrak asks what is so funny, Whitlock tells the vizier "You are a gifted magician but you have a poor sense of irony." Unable to understand the meaning of his words, Varrak carries on telling him that they must speak with Headmaster Cornera. Whitlock asks Varrak if he has finally gone mad. Varrak insists on it, however, as he states that at this rate "it is a race. And we are going to need a boost if we are to keep ahead of our adversaries." Whitlock sighs in defeat.

The two arrive at the Antamond Academy, a prestigious college where all who wish to learn the magic arts seek to gather. The architecture is a pure, heavenly white with a style reminiscent of Gothic buildings. In the administrative building, they arrive before the desk of **Headmaster Cornera**, who comments on the irony of Varrak and Whitlock being in the same room together not trying to kill each other. Varrak asks the Headmaster for a list of the university's top post-grads of the previous year, to which the Headmaster scrambles through her documents to find. She reminisces about the two's past during his search: "It's a peculiar thing. Jason was valedictorian of the Mages' School and yet YOU reap the benefits of being second to the Emperor! I suppose that guild was...mildly successful." Varrak rudely retorts: "If 'mildly' were to be the colloquial term for a 'financial travesty,' then I suppose Whitlock has found mild success." The magician glares at him before the Headmaster finds the document.

She bestows the lists of names to the vizier, but after a brief moment, he begins to become confused. He asks why the list is shorter. The Headmaster replies that since Varrak and Whitlock graduated, the standards of the Academy have been raised and not many students are "worthy" enough to make the honors as they have. Whitlock says that it should not be necessary, to which the Headmaster boasts: "Why it should be ENTIRELY necessary! We have here the most successful alumni in the college's long-standing history, and yet you ask us not to encourage our students to rise to that same level?!" Varrak says that the Headmaster's pipe dreaming is charming but that does not help their issue: they do not have enough people. The Headmaster thinks for a moment.

She remembers a group of students that did not make top of the class but have made a name for themselves in a mages' guild of their own: The Cyprus Collective. Varrak asks for their information. The Headmaster points them to the town of Enteté in the Kingdom of Abondé. With the information in their grasp, the pair begin to head off before Whitlock stops him. He asks

Varrak a question: "Why didn't you join my Guild?" Varrak freezes in disbelief. He asks him to repeat the question as if he could not believe he uttered the words. When he does, Varrak begins to give a feigned chuckle: "Whitlock. Would you like to know the truth? Your pitiful little group of high-strung coxcombs was too beneath me. The thought of asking for a membership never occurred to me because it was as if I was a lion being asked to lead termites." Whitlock begins to berate the vizier, but Varrak makes it clear that as much as they hate each other's guts..."we are the only ones not stupid enough to turn a blind eye to the Emperor's madness."

The pair ride into the Abondé region as Varrak whines about how desolate and rural the country is. Whitlock tries his best to tune out the vizier's griping. They arrive at Enteté, a sizable town with stylistic buildings made primarily out of stone. They enter a bar, where they take a seat. Whitlock asks what Varrak plans to do once he can actually find the Cyprus Collective, to which Varrak keenly asserts that he is working on it. He calls for the barkeep and asks where he and his friends could find the Collective. The bar goes silent, and every eye in the vicinity turns to stare at the pair. Whitlock facepalms. The barkeep leans in and tells them that if they know what's good for them they should leave. Varrak stands his ground: "Oh I'm sorry, did I not make myself clear? Allow me to repeat myself: tell me where I can meet this collective before I gut you like a stuck pig and wear your entrails for fashion." As Varrak pointlessly threatens the barkeep, the eyes turn toward the entrance as someone else enters the tavern.

A bearded gentleman followed by two acolytes enters as the patrons of the bar awkwardly look around. He asks the barkeep who the man in his seat is. Varrak turns around and promptly asks who he is first. The two glare at each other for a time before the stranger gives ground: "Since you are obviously new here, allow me to make myself known: I am **Arch-Magician Lucien Dupont**, master of the Cyprus Collective." The arrogant vizier snaps back: "Excellent. I was looking to rendezvous with your merry band, magician." Dupont asks if the vizier was seeking to become a member, of which he makes clear the answer would be "no" if he did. Varrak however states that is not the case. With his interest now piqued, Dupont asks what he wants. Varrak proclaims that he would like to be the leader of the Collective.

The entire bar erupts in laughter. Varrak remains proudly before the magician, but Whitlock is burying his face from the second-hand embarrassment. After barely surviving the wrath of his own laughing fit, Dupont begs to know how Varrak came to request something like this. Varrak explains the discovery of the Collective's existence through Headmaster Cornera and tracking them to this town. He also establishes himself as the Grand Vizier of Emperor Alexander Arinia, and his "request" is in reality an "order." Dupont beseeches him to stop in fear of hysterically giggling once more. Once composed, Dupont makes a very clear statement to the vizier: "I do not care if you are the literal right hand of the Emperor himself, an arrogant goose without his flock is not recognized here." After being told no, Varrak asks if he were to bet that in a duel. Dupont is once again baffled at the words...but his curiosity is piqued.

Varrak explains that if Dupont can win in a duel, he and Whitlock will never show their faces in Enteté and they will pay the Collective whatever price they demand. But if he loses, he must resign himself as leader and make Varrak the new master. Dupont names the price: an exuberant amount of 500,000. Whitlock is abrasive at the number, but Varrak accepts. Whitlock pulls aside the magician: "Have you gone insane?! We are already treading on thin ice with the Emperor and you desire to gamble five hundred thousand in a pissing contest with some scoundrel?!" Varrak says that it's not his contest..."it's yours." With Whitlock too stunned to

speak, Varrak turns toward Dupont and commands that Whitlock shall be his challenger. The sinister magician accepts.

A crowd gathers in the square adjacent to the tavern. Dupont stands proudly to await his opponent. Whitlock however stands cautiously. The two magicians glare at each other in perfect stillness as Varrak watches the duel with a malicious grin. After a tense staredown, the magicians engage in battle. Dupont specializes in frost spikes while Whitlock responds with fire. The magicians are on even footing with each other before Whitlock begins to lose ground. As Whitlock begins to charge another fire bolt, Varrak begins to covertly charge a magic attack of his own. As Whitlock loosens it, Varrak snipes an orb of ice to intercept it. In a quick flash, the entire area is covered in steam.

As the crowd looks around nervously, so too does Dupont. Appearing from the fog before him is Varrak, who gives the magician a malicious grin before shooting a fire bolt point blank into his stomach. He disappears into the steam. Eventually, the area becomes clear as the crowd witnesses Whitlock standing and Dupont on the ground. An acolyte runs up to examine his superior, and stumbles back in astonishment: "By the Gods...it was a fire bolt that fell him! He has lost the duel!" The crowd does not cheer, rather they mutter in disbelief as Varrak enters the center of the area.

Varrak proclaims his title as the new master of the Cyprus Collective. He commands that every member of the Guild, including one Lucien Dupont once he recovers from his injury, gather their resources and follow him back to the capital. He makes it clear that the mages are loyal to him and him alone. He smirks as the mages look back in bewilderment: "Now...bow before your master." One by one, the mages kneel to the ground as Varrak takes in the scene with a sinister chuckle. Within the crowd...a hooded Keondra watches the vizier with contempt.

CHAPTER 10: THE DRAGON'S STONE

It is nighttime. In a small cottage overseeing a humble Arinian town, two children are running around hyper as ever playing “dragon slayer.” A grumpy old blacksmith named **Oliver Moore** is trying to put a lid on the lively children: “**Cicerox** for the Gods’ sakes stop clubbing your sibling with a broom!” As the grouch raises his voice, the juveniles cease their antics and hop into their respective beds. As Oliver begins to tuck them in, Cicerox begs him to read a bedtime story. He becomes standoffish, but as the two youths pester him he gives in to the griping. Reaching under one of their beds, he pulls out a book titled “Ancient Tales of Vakinera” and begins to flip through them.

As he mutters through the various anthologies the book has to offer, he finally settles on one to read to the children: “The Mighty Dragon of the Night”. With the children nestled under their covers, Oliver begins to read the novel to them: “Upon the darkest evenings, Great Vakari flies to protect life from death, to protect benign from wicked, to protect harmony from destruction. Great Vakari, whose wings dwarfs even the mightiest of beasts. Great Vakari, whose roar echoed louder than the cries of Hell. Great Vakari, whose wisdom and power shall defend the night!” As the blacksmith prattles on, he notices the children have already passed out. Exhausted, the blacksmith closes the book of fables and puts the book back where he found it.

A modern-day Jinx awakens. It is barely dawn outside, and they proceed to the treasure room of the rebel base. Ignoring the two Relics of Power, Jinx immediately goes towards the dark stone at the heart of the room and begins to look into it. They slowly reach their hands for the stone, but as their fingers make contact they begin to hear a slight whisper. They flinch. As Jinx looks around the room, they confirm that they are alone. As they grasp the stone once more, the whispering becomes far more audible: “Ultor! Tuum tempus venit!” They drop the stone onto the ground. As they nervously look around, they quickly return the stone to its display. As they look upon the crystal, they begin to contemplate. After a moment, they leave.

As the morning progresses, the other rebels begin to awaken. Marley seems to search for Jinx, but upon entering the treasure room in hopes of finding them, he finds the dark stone missing with a note on its pedestal. Panicked, Marley picks up the note and examines it closely. He brings the note to Aym, Alpheus, and Tobias. Aym is curious as to what the meaning of this is as Marley reads it out: “I took the Stone. I need to find answers. I’ll be back before long. -Jinx.” Tobias is lost on what is so important about the “Stone.” Marley explains that it was some rock Jinx became very fascinated with but has no idea when they got it or how long it’s been in there. In fact, none of the rebels can say either. All of them joined after the Stone was in Jinx’s possession. Aym wonders why the Stone holds so much meaning for them. Marley shrugs: “Your guess is as good as mine.”

In the town of Durban, Jinx enters a dark cellar where Jormund is shuffling through papers. Jormund welcomes the rebel leader, and informs them that “I am doing everything I can to locate another one of your Relics but the truth is I am just swamped beyond belief.” Jinx says that they are not here concerning the hunt for the Relics. Intrigued, Jormund sits down with full attention. Jinx asks if there is anyone who can tell them what the Stone is. After a coy response from the black market dealer, Jinx pulls out the Stone and repeats their question. He looks at the glistening, shadowy stone and reaches to touch it, but Jinx pulls it away: “I wouldn’t.” The

disappointed criminal turns around to think. He turns to the rebel leader after a moment of contemplation: "I know someone in the Alexandria region that might help you out. But that is a one-of-a-kind trinket you got there, I can make no guarantees she'll be able to tell you something useful." Jinx asks for their information anyway.

In the forested region of Alexandria, Jinx rides their horse Scourge into the dense woods with a slow, careful march. They are under cloak and are keeping the Stone close to their chest. They arrive at a small hut with a purple light emanating from the inside. They dismount Scourge and nervously approach the door. It opens before they can reach it, however, and a witch stands in the doorway looking back at the rebel. She glares at the rebel and demands that they state their business, whilst reaching back supposedly for a weapon. Swallowing their nervousness, Jinx asks the enchantress: "Are you the one they call Selene? Selene Gadriel?" The witch becomes less concerned: "I haven't the foggiest idea where you got such antiquated information. Nor how it still led you to me."

She introduces herself properly as **Selene Galion**. The witch allows the rebel leader entry into her home when she is convinced they mean no harm. Jinx is in awe of the witch's abode: the home is illuminated by a gentle violet light, with trinkets and bottles lining the shelves of the humble cottage. Jinx compliments the witch for her gorgeous home, to which she jovially retorts that her husband works in a castle, so this is a rather modest residence in comparison. Eager to get down to business, Jinx shows her the Stone and asks her if there's anything she can discern from it. Selene is fascinated with the dark stone, and despite Jinx's warnings not to do so, she picks up the Stone.

To their surprise, the witch is seldom bothered by touching the stone. She places the stone down on a workspace: "I hope you know that my studies are mainly in alchemy, yes? There is not much I can tell you about this peculiar amethyst you've found." Jinx scorns Jormund for giving them faulty information under their breath. They tell Selene that whatever she can tell them will help. Selene begins to run experiments on the stone by pouring concoctions from a cauldron onto the stone. After each action, she writes something down in a detailed journal. She asks what the rebel thought would warrant a witch's consultation about the stone. Jinx explains to her what happened in the treasure room, and what the whispering voice said.

She stops for a moment. She says that what they heard was "ancient tongue." Jinx is perplexed. Selene immediately begins shuffling through a bookshelf and pulls out a codex. She asks them to repeat the words, and Jinx does so: "Ultor. Tuum tempus venit." Flipping through several pages, she looks at the rebel leader in awe: "I may have reason to believe that you have spoken to one of the gods." As Jinx becomes more intrigued, Selene theorizes that one of the six gods of the universe may have tried to communicate with them through the Stone. As Jinx asks for more information, Selene says that is all she can surmise. Jinx deduces that they will need to ask for "special assistance" for talking to a god. They thank Selene for her help and ride off into the forest.

They arrive at a town in the Vakinian Mountains: Folia. Jinx looks around the small town as the humble onlookers stare right back at them. They look away to not show their face under their hood. They approach a forge, where an adult Cicerox is tending to an anvil. They stop as they see Jinx arrive. Jinx pulls their hood off, and all Cicerox can offer is a judgemental squint: "Haven. You're back." The two go to their home cottage and sit at a lonely table next to a

window looking at the small mountain village outside. They sit in silence, as neither know what to say. Cicerox asks what brought them back to Folia. Jinx says that it's research. Cicerox is suspicious of the answer and inquires if said research is concerning the war. Jinx swears that it isn't, to which the blacksmith scoffs "As you say."

Jinx asks if Cicerox kept the book. He says "It's right where Father left it." As Jinx gets up, he stops them before they can leave. He stands up to meet Jinx's eye level: "Haven, you ride into town after years without a word explaining what you're doing here or why. You swear it isn't because of your war. What are you planning to do?" Jinx argues that it isn't their war. Cicerox begins to become derisive. Jinx asserts "I will not repeat this argument again." They just want to see the book. He sighs and leads the rebel leader upstairs.

He reaches under the bed for the dusty book and hands it to Jinx. They reminisce of the fairy tales that Oliver used to tell them before bed, to which Cicerox depressingly smirks at the recollection. It disappears when he once again asks Jinx what they plan to do. Jinx begins to scan through the pages, stating that they need to find answers about the Stone. Cicerox has no idea what his sibling is going on about. Jinx stops at the title page "The Mighty Dragon of the Night." Jinx asks if Cicerox still knows where the old rune is. He says that he knows the way, but he hasn't been one for religion since Oliver passed. Jinx asks if he can accompany them there. He hesitates, but Jinx gives him a sad look that encourages him to accept.

They begin to hike up a mountain trail, where Jinx and Cicerox discuss their going-ons since their separation. Jinx talks about their time in the Arinian Army, and how they started the rebellion after what happened at the "Burning Valley." Cicerox vainly responds with his tales: he forged. He forged some more. And once in a blue moon, he wouldn't forge. Jinx does not understand the animosity Cicerox holds for their departure, to which Cicerox states: "It's just...the town is quiet enough. Our own home has been so quiet. After father died...it's just been so quiet. But once you left, it was dead silence. I just can't understand why you wanted to pursue a life of war." Jinx admits that sometimes...they don't know if it's something they've ever actually wanted.

They arrive at an old altar looking over the valley on a cliffside. The view is breathtaking: they can see the entire town of Folia and several mountains beyond that. On the altar, a stone shrine stands proudly with a pattern of a dragon carved into it. Cicerox asks how they plan to proceed. Jinx pulls out the Stone and places it on the rune. They take a breath and reach to touch the dark stone. A moment passes by. When Cicerox asks if anything is supposed to happen, Jinx shushes them. Another moment of silence. However, as Jinx begins to turn away, they begin to feel strange. Cicerox becomes more concerned, and not before long Jinx begins to fall. He rushes to catch his sibling and calls to the unconscious rebel leader.

Jinx opens their eyes but finds themselves in a pitch-black abyss. They look around as a powerful voice begins to speak to them: "You have made a great effort to contact me, Haven Valentine." Jinx asks how the voice knows their real name. The voice responds that such a mortal concealment cannot fool the eyes of a god. Jinx asks who they are, to which the voice gives the name **Vakari** and replies: "I am a spectator of your quest; one who cannot interfere with the Legend of the Relics but one who has great stake in its conclusion. The Stone chose you for good reason, I would hope." Jinx is completely dumbfounded: "Chose? Me?" The voice explains that the dark stone they have carried with them is no ordinary rock. It is described as a "last stand" to the forces of evil. Jinx asks how a stone can be the key to defeating the Emperor.

The voice begins to roar at the rebel leader: "You DARE ask how? How could a lowly human knowing not but fairy tales be destined for this calling? How could one soldier be the catalyst for the rebellion against the tyrannical emperor?! You believe in destiny and yet you have not the belief to make it a reality! How can THAT be so?!" Jinx is left speechless. They look down and think about the voice's words. They ask what they must do. The voice responds: "Believe. Believe in my words. Believe in your rebellion. Believe in the stone. When the time is right, you will know. You are the only hope in defeating the emperor. Believe in that. That is all I ask of you." As the rebel takes in the voice's words, they awaken again in Cicero's arms.

He asks if they are alright, to which Jinx alleviates their brother's worries. They look upon the Stone still perched upon the altar and pick it up once more. Grasping the stone in their hands, Jinx turns toward their brother. They say that they must leave, but there is one more place they would like to go. The siblings exchange a look as if they know exactly what their next destination is.

They arrive at a cemetery overlooking the valley beyond the town. Before them lies a headstone with the following inscription: "Oliver Moore. 52 years of age. Beloved father and master craftsman." Jinx says that they still think about him, even during their time in the army and to this day in the rebellion. Cicero questions if Oliver would have supported Jinx's decision. They do not know the answer. Jinx responds to their brother: "What I do know is that the old man would've beaten me senseless if I did what I did without the conviction of seeing it through. I will not make the same mistake again. I am done not believing in myself. I might have been a Valentine before...but I am a Moore first." Jinx turns to ready Scourge for departure, and Cicero turns to see his sibling off. Before allowing them to leave, Cicero commands that Jinx remember these parting words: "Win the war."

CHAPTER 11: TO THE SKIES

The city of Shimonomachi is glazed with a gentle frost on a glistening morning sky. The feudal city is illuminated with lanterns and covered in eastern architecture reminiscent of Minka. The city lies in the shadow of a gargantuan volcano: Mount Tenmado. The volcano's crest is concealed with an eternal fog, so only the body of the mountain is visible. Within a covered wagon, the rebels Jinx, Aym, Alpheus, Marley, and Tobias all look aghast at the beauty of the snow-covered city.

As the rebels exit the carriage, Marley is eager to ask for the whereabouts of Jormund. Jinx tells the rebel to stay his eagerness as they need to make sure they've arrived at the correct location. Tobias and Aym are reeling back from the cold temperatures as Aym conjures a small flame to keep himself warm. Tobias huddles next to the mage and asks if he can make it bigger. As Jinx examines a document, they order the rebels to follow. They traverse the city in disguise as they approach a park.

They arrive at the Statue of Two Lovers, a statue of two women holding each other in an embrace. In the statue's shadow, Jormund is flipping a coin up and down in boredom. Jinx asks why he summoned the rebel group to the faraway city, to which the scoundrel replies "Well obviously I've come to confess my feelings for you all, what the bloody hell do you THINK I summoned you here for?" The rebels don't seem to be too amused at the dealer's joke...save for Marley. Jormund says that he has a contact within the city that might have a lead on another Relic of Power. When Jinx asks who, Jormund makes it clear that "I do not share the names of clients." He beckons the rebels to follow him, to which they are eager to do so despite Jinx's reluctance.

Marley asks Jormund what he knows about the town. Jormund says that Shimonomachi is a city known for folklore and ancient studies, which is why he first expected that someone here could lead to a Relic. His suspicions were confirmed when his contact told him about the Legend of Mount Tenmado. Aym is curious as to what the legend is, to which Jormund shrugs: "I am just as eager to learn about it as you are!" They arrive at a temple where an elder greets them. She introduces herself as **Noriko Fujiwara**, the chief priest of the Shimonomachi Shrine. As the elder warmly welcomes the rebels into her temple, Jinx is completely dumbfounded that Jormund's black market "contact" was a kind old lady.

Within a great hall, the group is brought to a balcony with a view of Mount Tenmado. Noriko admits that despite the blistering cold of this time of year, the snow-capped beauty of the volcano never ceases to amaze her. Jormund asks her if she would like to share with the rebels the legend. The elder becomes very chipper. She is ecstatic to share it, and the ever-curious rebels take a seat as she foretells the story.

Mount Tenmado is said to have been built in ancient times by the gods as a way for humans to traverse to Heaven. However, the goddess of the sky Izanami proclaimed that only a pure soul can enter the domain, and thus had designed the slopes of Mount Tenmado to test those that desired entry. To the present day, it is surmised that those who journey the volcano either return with cleansed souls or have entered the realm of Heaven never to return. She says that if the rebels wish to make this trek, they must enter the Torii gate at the base of the volcano on the outskirts of the city.

Jinx becomes inspired to make the journey. They ask Noriko if there is a Relic of Power at the top of Mount Tenmado. She pauses to think. After a moment, she tells the rebel leader "I'm not familiar with the Legend of the Relics. However, I believe if you all are to take the journey to purify your hearts and minds on the slopes of Mount Tenmado, you shall find what you seek." The rebels prepare for their pilgrimage, however, Jormund takes his leave from the journey saying "There is a tad too much to clean off. I'll make the expedition another time." He elects to return to Durban as the rebels head off for the volcano.

The rebels arrive at the Torii gate before Mount Tenmado, and the group's eagerness quickly turns into a slight apprehensiveness. The gate is staggering; as if it is the entrance to another world. Marley musters the courage to approach the gate first. As he steps through, he holds his breath anticipating something to happen. Nothing occurs. The rebels follow suit, and after they pass through the gate Jinx leads them to the path trailing to the top of the volcano.

Marley asks Aym why he's continuing on the ground along with them. Aym is confused by the question, to which Marley cites his ability to fly as demonstrated with Haborym. Aym admits that he cannot even if he wanted to, as the power of flight is magic on the most elite of levels and he is barely an intermediate. Marley asks why he was able to do it as Haborym. Jinx chimes in stating that magic is an ability that comes from the mind, not the body. Haborym knows spells that Aym doesn't, and as a result, Aym cannot cast them. Aym looks down dejectedly: "There are a lot of things he can do that I can't."

The rebels stop as a lone figure stands in their path. The figure pulls down their hood and looks back at the rebels. They are no more than a person, armed only with a bow and arrow and in the normal fashion of the region. They state that they mean the rebels no harm, to which the rebels cautiously accept their words. They introduce themselves as **Kuruka**, a humble traveler who seeks purification of their soul. The traveler is very cryptic in sharing their intentions with the group, however, the rebels see no reason as to why said intentions would be malicious. Regardless, they do not share the objective of their mission.

As the group carries forth, a thick fog begins to consume the area. The rebels can barely see the path ahead of them. Eventually, they begin to panic as they become separated: Jinx, Aym, and Marley are all alone with the rest of the group's whereabouts unknown. The fog slightly clears, but each rebel finds themselves in seclusion. As Jinx calls out to the rebels, their cries begin to become desperate. They reach a shrine facing away from a cliff. Candles surround the shrine, as if seeming to mark it as a memorial. The inscriptions are all in kanji, save for one: "HAVEN VALENTINE." The sight terrifies them. As they turn, they are startled by Kuruka, who is kneeling next to them praying.

Jinx asks what in the Gods' names they are doing. Kuruka simply states that they are praying. Jinx says that they are praying at an empty grave, to which the confused traveler says "I am? Is the one called Haven Valentine not dead?" Jinx pauses. They ask if Haven is dead, when and how did they die. Jinx says that Haven's family was in debt to the world of crime, and the cruel world had left their own in shambles. Jinx proclaims that Haven died alone after the tragedy. Kuruka asks "...but did they? Did they not find a new family? Did they not find a new chance?" Jinx begins to think about Oliver and Cicero. They admit that perhaps they have. Kuruka chuckles, and stands up to match Jinx's eye level "Well you've convinced me! I have been praying at an empty grave and I feel like a fool!" They point the way for the rebel leader through the fog, and Jinx carries on.

Meanwhile, Marley is marching through the dense cliffside. He becomes increasingly agitated at the repetitive scenery before stumbling upon a temizuya. Marley is perplexed at the pavilion; its water is perfectly running and clean despite the remote location of the shrine. The rebel grabs a ladle. He looks down to fill the ladle with water, but before he can take a sip he is startled by the sudden appearance of Kuruka. The traveler says that it is unwise to drink from an unfamiliar spring without washing your hands. The rebel is confused. Kuruka tells him to follow their lead.

They wash their left hand with the water from their ladle, and once they are done they do the same with their right. They then pour some water into a cupped hand and sip from their hand. The remaining water in the ladle is poured down the handle. They do not swallow the water, however; rather they spit it onto the ground as if they were cleaning their mouth. Marley begins to follow the routine step-by-step, and as he does so Kuruka asks if the rebel trusts them. Marley is confused by the question: "Didn't we just meet?" Kuruka jovially says that is very much true. They ask if he trusts his rebel friends. Marley pauses before moving on to step 3: "I didn't. At first. After I got abandoned by the Bandits' Guild I really knew the meaning of the phrase 'No honor amongst thieves.' I found a new home with the rebellion though. Even though the leader can be a bit of an ass." Marley completes the ritual by spitting the water onto the ground. Kuruka points the rebel in the right direction after telling him "You are blessed to have found your people even after your trust has been betrayed."

Aym is frightened at the isolation from the group. He's looking around in a panic for any sign of his rebel friends. Eventually, he finds a moss spring with a gentle stream of water flowing from it. As he looks into the stillwater surface, he stumbles back as the reflection is not his own...it is Haborym looking back at him. He sees the reflection of Kuruka appear beside him, and the traveler's sudden appearance frightens the rebel mage. Kuruka asks if he knows what the nature of this spring is. Aym is confused. Kuruka questions the perplexed rebel: "You know the ways of magic, yes? It's said that this spring is magic; you see someone else in your own reflection." Aym looks back at the Haborym in the water. He says that Haborym is someone else, but at the same time, he is not.

Kuruka asks if that is true. Aym says it is so, as despite not having his memories he is still a mere creation from his mind. The traveler turns their head and asks him why he sees the reflection: "The reflection is supposed to be someone else. Very literally. This other one...Haborym was it? He is his own man, and yet you are as well. I don't believe you were made by him; perhaps you both are a shard of someone else?" Aym falls silent as if the words cleared his mind. He asks the traveler if they know the way, to which Kuruka points in the direction of the path.

The rebels all converge at the caldera of the volcano. Within its center lies a sculpture of a graceful woman. They are all elated at the reunion, although after a headcount they discover one to be missing: where is Kuruka? The traveler shouts at the rebels atop the large statue, and they ask the group if they know who the statue is depicting. Aym asks if it is the goddess that created the mountain, which the traveler says is incorrect. They state that Mount Tenmado is a memorial of Izanami's human lover, Hiromi. They proclaim that in ancient times a great war took the lives of countless loved ones that the gods held dear, and in their grief, the song of the Relics was sung. Their intrigue soon becomes a shocking realization as Kuruka confirms their

epiphanies: “Yes...Mount Tenmado is the temple that holds the Relic of the Sky, and I am its guardian. Allow me to grace you with the sky goddess’s final test.”

The traveler unleashes a flurry of arrows on the unsuspecting rebel group. Alpheus shields Tobias with his trident while the rest of the group finds cover. Aym responds with fire bolts as Marley and Jinx figure out how to proceed. Kuruka has the high ground, and their storm of arrows is keeping the group at bay. Jinx says that they will need to draw Kuruka’s fire, but Marley insists that they must do the same. They trust the words of their rebel friend and tell Aym to get a closer shot while they draw Kuruka’s fire. As the warrior pelts Jinx and Marley with endless arrows, Aym works his way to the archer and strikes them with a well-timed firebolt. The resulting blast knocks the archer from atop the statue, and the guardian falls to the rebel’s feet.

The rebels reel back from the strike. Kuruka assures them, however, saying that they have passed the final trial. They state that they were destined to die at the hands of those worthy of collecting the Relics. They pull themselves off the ground and limp their way to the foot of the statue. Pressing their hand against it, the statue opens up a display of a heavenly levitating diamond, with a choral hum emanating from it. They proclaim that the Relic of the Sky is theirs, and that if they are to fulfill the legend they must remember: “Your souls must be pure to fulfill it.” With the solemn parting words, Kuruka kneels down as they fade into dust. The rebels are all silent as they look upon their prize, and wonder if it was truly worth procuring it.

The rebels return to the city of Shimonomachi and back to the shrine to greet Noriko once more. They discuss their individual journeys and how the mountain tested every one of them. Jinx says that despite what Kuruka had told them, they have no intention of fulfilling the legend, rather they hope they can defend the Relics’ power from falling into the hands of evil. The group spots Noriko and is initially excited to greet her and tell her about their journey, but they soon freeze in horror. “I would watch your words and actions. You are on sacred grounds.” Standing at the side of the elder armed with a sword...is Emperor Alexander Arinia.

CHAPTER 12: IMPRISONED

The rebels stand at the ready as their greatest enemy lurks before them. The sinister Emperor holds his sword blade down as he addresses the rebel group. He thanks them for making the journey up Mount Tenmado for him, but it is now time to relinquish the Sky Relic to him. Marley proclaims that they would never surrender a Relic of Power to him, and after the rebels give each other a look of assurance, they all arm themselves for a fight. The sight amuses Alexander. He restates his earlier comment that they are on sacred grounds: "I would be beside myself if I allowed blood to spill within Madame Noriko's lovely temple. But if this is the shrine you choose to die on..." Emperor Alexander proceeds to snap his fingers.

The cocking of several bayonets is heard as several Arinian soldiers appear in the chambers. The rebels find themselves at the barrels of countless rifles. Emperor Alexander commands that upon the first intention of battle, all gunpowder and cutlass will not be spared at the rebels' expense: "So if you wish to save yourselves and I the trouble, I would think very carefully about your next move. The Relic. Now." The rebels' gusto disappears as the grim situation before them comes to fruition. Aym looks to Jinx to ask what they must do. The rebel leader is trembling. Not looking back at their rebel compatriots, they proceed to pull out the Sky Relic and walk towards Alexander. The rebels are baffled.

As Haven apprehensively bestows the Relic to Alexander, he grins as he grasps the levitating stone in his hand. He thanks Jinx for their cooperation and looks to the Rebels who are still armed to the teeth. He uses the Relic to command a gust of wind at them, forcing them on the floor as well as disarming them of their weapons. The soldiers proceed to apprehend the rebels. Alexander praises the rebels' efforts in collecting the Relics thus far but states that they are no longer required to find the remaining one. As the soldiers aim the bayonets directly toward the rebels, they brace themselves for the end. However...Alexander stops them.

He states that it is not yet wise to kill the rebels here. When the commanding officer of the soldiers asks why, Alexander simply states "...as I said, we are on sacred grounds." He commands the officer to transport the rebels to Kowaretaishi Prison, as he will figure out what to do with them there. The rebels are escorted out of the temple. Noriko Fujiwara stands apprehensive at the scene as the Emperor turns toward her. The priest is fearful, but is surprised to see the sight of Alexander bowing toward her: "I apologize for the intrusion." Without another word, Alexander and his troops depart the shrine.

The snowbound land lies before a platoon of cavalymen as Alexander leads the troops through the winter trail. In the middle of the troupe is a prison carriage where the rebels sit dejectedly in chains. As they struggle to keep themselves warm, Marley asks Jinx why the hell would they give the Relic to the Emperor. Tobias defends Jinx's decision as if they tried to fight they would all be dead. Marley growls that they are going to perish regardless of what happened, to which a somber Aym says otherwise: "No. He would have killed us after getting the Relic if that was the case. He still needs us for something." The grouchy bandit asks what the Emperor could need them for, to which a horrified Jinx gasps: "The other Relics...oh Gods. He wants to know where they are." The rebels fall silent as they comprehend what the imperials have in store.

The platoon arrives at Kowaretaishi Prison, a fortress resting on the edge of an ice cliff, where the sun only peeks through clouds of torrenting snow. The stockade is only illuminated by

blue fire. The gates open as Alexander and his army enter the prison. The rebels are thrown into cells where they are completely isolated from one another. The cold is bitter; not enough to kill them but just enough to cause great discomfort. But most of all, the cells are dark and unwelcome as each sets a tone of misery for the individual rebels. Jinx lays against a wall with their head in their knees. Marley yells profanities at the guards. Aym however is uncharacteristically calm in his solitary room.

As Marley continues to hurl insults at the guards, he falls silent at the entrance of Alexander. He tells the rebel bandit that continuing to caterwaul will only strain his breath, so he is better off reserving himself if anything. The rebel tells him to go to hell. Alexander chuckles, "I already have." He asks the rebel if he were to know the locations of the Relic of Light and the Relic of Earth. The rebel tells him nothing. Alexander states that if the bandit were to disclose the information he seeks, he shall grant him full leniency and legal immunity along with the obvious release from the icy penitentiary. Marley growls at the Emperor, "I don't partake in the business of stabbing backs. That is more up your alley." Alexander is not amused. He tells the rebel that his gusto is admirable, but that he cannot prolong the inevitable.

Meanwhile, Varrak rides to the entrance of the prison along with Whitlock. They ask one of the officers the reason for their summons. The officer tells them that Emperor Alexander has captured the main figureheads of the rebellion and as they speak is extracting information as to where the other Relics are. "He WHAT?!" the vizier furiously interrogates. He pulls aside Whitlock as the guard confirms his previous statement. He asks the magician what their best course of action is. Whitlock is confused and asks if Alexander capturing the rebels isn't a good thing. Varrak sneeringly retorts: "Of course it isn't a good thing! Those infernal insurgents are the only thing keeping the Emperor's warring eyes toward the conflict and away from us! If the rebels surrender the other Relics we're done for!" Whitlock fully grasps the vizier's words. Varrak turns towards the officer and demands entry to the prison.

Aym's cell is noticeably different from the others; the barred window illuminates the room with the small ray of sunlight peeking through the snow storm clouds. The area outside of the cell bars is still shrouded in darkness. Alexander enters from this darkness and glares at the meditating mage. He bashes the bars to startle Aym out of his trance: "So tell me, Demon King, how long have you been in leagues with this rebellion? And why do you insist on concealing yourself?" Aym is puzzled at the Emperor's question, to which he impatiently replies that they both know the truth: he is the king of Hell, Haborym.

Aym insists that he is not Haborym, they share the same body but in mind and spirit, they are completely different beings. Alexander quickly picks up on the meaning: "So you're some alternate personality of him, is that it? Inconsequential, rebel scum is still rebel scum." Aym looks up at the Emperor. Alexander demands to know where Jinx has hidden the Relics of Power. Aym shakes his head after a moment of contemplation: "They won't be of any use to you." Alexander pauses. He is interested to know why that is. Aym explains that he has read the scriptures in the Light Temple, as well as studied thoroughly the books and poems related to the legend. He states clearly to the Emperor: "A soul must be pure to realize the legend. You'll never be able to get them to work."

The emperor turns around and slams the door to the room shut. Visibly frustrated, he marches up to the confined mage: "What do you know of purity? Morality is a laughable construct in our time, you could not even properly discern me when I was banished to your

infernal realm. You don't even know who you are." Aym says that he does know. Alexander becomes more angered. Aym looks back at the furious tyrant: "I am Aym Morningstar. And I know who you are, too. You want the Relics of Power, but you already have an empire spanning the entire map. You risked yourself going back to Hell to get the Relic of Fire. What I know is you need the Relics of Power for something. Perhaps to...right a wrong?"

Alexander grabs Aym by the scruff of his hood and pulls him toward the bars. The seething Emperor glares into the mage's eyes: "You listen to me, slime. You know NOTHING of my mission. You know NOTHING of my soul. I know who I am. You will never deter me from my mission, no matter what words spill from that accursed gob of yours. I will wipe the pain and suffering of this world from existence, and no force of heaven or hell will stop me." The final sentence of the Emperor's speech was pronounced with a slight shake in his voice as if there was a buried sadness within his words. Alexander marches out of the room.

The door to Marley's confinement opens once more, but this time it is Varrak who enters. Marley is less than pleased to see the vizier, to which the dubious vizier looks around to confirm a lack of guards. He tells the bandit to silence himself. At first, he refuses, but once he sees what is in the vizier's hands he falls quiet: a set of keys. Varrak looks at the rebel as he fidgets with the lock: "Listen very carefully. In precisely ten minutes, the guards will rotate positions. The closest way out is through the eastern door towards the cliffside. You must disappear quickly if you do not want the Emperor to find you. We never spoke." He cracks the door open and tosses the keys to the rebel. Closing the cell door, he quickly makes his way out of the room. Before he does, Marley asks why he's doing this. The conniving vizier retorts: "The Emperor has his plan, but I have mine."

Among the cells within the frozen stockade, Jinx's is the darkest and most isolated. Their attention is drawn towards the open door where Alexander enters. They become more anxious, as their fear begins to set in at the Emperor's presence. Alexander reiterates the same question, to which the same answer is given: nothing. He notices the uneasiness of the rebel leader, and tells them to get a grip: "How can the leader of the rebellion be such a coward? You falter at the slightest hint of trouble, and yet these fools look to you as their leader. You have not changed since Burning Valley...you are just as weak now as you were then." Jinx's eyes widen as they recall the day.

A chaotic scene unfolds before a small Lumian village: several homes are up in flames as the area is blanketed with black ash and orange fire. Screams are constant as Arinian soldiers march against attacking insurgents. Before Jinx's eyes, one of these insurgents is grabbed by the throat by Alexander and strangled to death before them. Behind the insurgent however is his family, who wail in horror as Alexander drops the corpse before them. Jinx is in a state of frozen terror. As they look upon the distant scene, Alexander slowly turns to look back at them. The image is seared within their very mind: a murderous monster against the vast destruction left in his wake. A present-day Alexander looks upon the fearful expression of the rebel leader: "Yes...now you remember. The day you deserted us. The day you betrayed your empire."

Alexander enters the cell as Jinx is backed against the wall. He grasps the hilt of his sheathed blade. The Emperor glares at the rebel leader: "You are unfit for the mantle you hold. You do not believe in your own cause, nor do you have the courage to die for it. Behind all of that insufferable self-righteousness, you lack the conviction of your own battlecry. Perhaps a

weakling such as yourself should do what is right. Perhaps you should submit, and abandon your worthless cause. Now...obey your Emperor and answer my question. Where are the Relics of Power?" As the emperor roars the question, Jinx is helpless but to answer them. They slowly try to find the words "I...the Relics...I hid them...they're..." but as they utter them...

A blast erupts from the back wall of the cell, knocking away the Emperor and shocking Jinx. From the great aperture made from the icy wall, Aym stands as the origin of the blast. Delighted to see their rebel friend, Jinx sees the remainder of the group and surmises the situation at hand: "We need to move! Now!" The rubble behind them is broken as a furious Alexander rises from it. Along the outside wall, the rebels move quickly as they intercept the Arinian soldiers trying to stop them and rush towards the outer woods of the prison. However, a blast of fire separates Jinx from the rest of the rebellion. "I'll be right behind you! GO!"

With their back turned against the steep cliffside, Jinx stands against the Emperor. Alexander strikes the rebels with blasts of flame as Jinx dodges and weaves from each strike. With a spear procured from one of the guards, Jinx attempts to strike back against the Emperor. After a rapid clash, Alexander knocks the rebel leader to the ground and begins to charge a greater attack. Jinx quickly looks down the cliff and turns back toward Alexander. Bracing themselves, Jinx rolls back as Alexander unleashes a gargantuan roar of flame forward, searing the very ground of the area and illuminating the icy prison in a flash of orange light. As the smoke clears, Alexander sees that Jinx is gone.

Looking around the area, Alexander scans the view from the cliffside before walking away. A terrified Jinx dangles beneath him on the cliff below but remains unnoticed. Alexander orders the soldiers to follow him and lead a search party for the escaped rebels. Jinx's trembling breath slows as they hear the Emperor and his soldiers vacate the area, leaving the surviving rebel leader alone.

CHAPTER 13: INTO THE DARKNESS

Within a sparsely populated arena in the capital of Eretria, a large group of soldiers watch two troops fighting ferociously: a younger Keondra Caddel and Captain Matthias. Among the crowd, Emperor Alexander is watching the duel intently. Keondra is fighting in perfect formation while Matthias is on the attack. She gets a few cuts in before Matthias ultimately uses his free fist to blindside Keondra and send her to the ground. The ugly move sends a large commotion of ridicule amongst the crowd, but it soon ceases as Alexander motions the soldiers to settle down. Arising from his seat, he approaches the duelists.

He congratulates Matthias for seizing victory in the duel, however as the captain celebrates Alexander halts him for criticism; he states that he left no room for parries or response to any of Keondra's counters, and as a result, was solely offensive with no defense. Captain Matthias tries to explain his methodologies as a "good offense being the best defense," to which the Emperor strictly scolds him: "Don't ever say that. I could not think of a more stupid expression. Only arrogant fools who are destined to be cannon fodder say that idiotic phrase." Having thoroughly scolded the captain, he turns to Keondra.

Alexander expresses disappointment in her for losing the duel and says that if she is to rise to the ranks of captain she will need to learn more. Keondra defends her position by proclaiming Matthias's dishonorable tactics, to which the Emperor silences her. He agrees that Matthias was dishonorable, but explains plainly to Keondra that "in our campaign to unite the map under our colors we will face enemies without a shred of honor. You are not yet prepared to don the rank of captain and face these deceitful foes. A tree that falls before a wind is not fit for the future of the forest." Keondra digests the Emperor's words as he exits the battleground.

A present-day Keondra awakens in the cabin of a galley. She hears the echoes of gulls as she looks out the porthole to see the island of Kiota in the Kingdom of Huchoma. Slender, rocky mountains tower in the backdrop of the port city with a thick jungle covering the ground level of this range. Keondra exits the ship and approaches a harbor-side building with tall, square orifices dotting the tower above the building. From these windows, several albatrosses fly in and out with scrolls and documents ribboned on their napes. She enters the post office and meets with the postmaster **Jirani Caddel**, a jolly fellow who greets his daughter with open arms.

In Jirani's office, Keondra asks the postmaster if the Grand Vizier has arrived in the Huchoman Archipelago. Jirani says that he has obtained several documents confirming so and that a few days ago he left the capital of Mjimoto for the town of Chawi. When she asks why Jirani cannot say, but he wagers that venturing across the Fire Fields for a town as rural as that must mean he is after something important there. Keondra thanks her father for the information and tells him that she will return with more updates.

Taking a horse, she rides through the jungle road and into the scorched Fire Fields, as the foliage becomes sparser and smaller to shift into a landscape of basalt and smoke. For hours on end, she trudges through the volcanic field before she reaches Chawi. As she docks her steed, she notices a suspicious lack of imperial presence in the town. She surmises that it can mean two things: Varrak is not here, or Varrak does not want to be seen here.

In a local inn, Varrak sips on a cup of chamomile while Whitlock looks restlessly out the window. He states that it was unwise to stray so far from the capital, as their absence will be multiple weeks at the very least and the Emperor will take notice of it. Varrak reassures the

magician that he has taken several absences in the past and the Emperor paid it no heed and adds that “even if this excursion brought risk to our devices, it would be a necessary gamble to take. Our success here will greatly assist our chances at the ultimate game.” Whitlock says that he would admire Varrak’s unyielding confidence if it were not weighed down by his irrational hubris. The magician is then startled by a knock on the room door, to which Varrak answers and receives a message. After examining the letter, he asks Whitlock how many Cyprus mages would they need before they “looked like they were overdoing it.” Whitlock groans.

As Varrak, Whitlock, and the Collective gather their horses and ride off from Chawi, Keondra lurks in the shadows waiting to pursue them. The group rides into the Fire Fields in a far more inhospitable region: toxic gas vents begin to dot the landscape with slow rivers of molten lava snaking their way across the gray landscape. At the heart of this volcanic wasteland is a small encampment where a menacing figure awaits the arriving vizier. The man towers over both Varrak and Whitlock and arms himself with dual battle axes. Varrak asks if the man is one **Hasaan Imamu**. The silent soldier nods and shows the vizier and the magician into his encampment. From a distant outcropping of rock, Keondra spies on the group with a telescope.

She jumps a stray Cyprus mage and dons her apprentice robes. Making her way into the encampment disguised, she scans the area and sees the encampment littered with a mixture of Cyprus mages and Hasaan’s men; of which are cloaked warriors that are as intimidating as their leader. She makes her way to the forge where Varrak, Whitlock, and Hasaan are conversing.

Varrak asks Hasaan about his history with Huchoma before it was annexed by the Arinian Empire. The blacksmith explains that he and the Huchomans basked in times of harmony before the Great Conquest, and it wasn’t until the now-reigning lord of the kingdom Edana Omari sought to unite the archipelago under a single government that things took a turn for the worse. Her effort was halted by mass resistance from the other islands, but when Emperor Alexander assisted the war effort it was the venomous strike that solidified the Omari regime’s attainment of power. Because of this, Hasaan and his guild of infantry fighters and smiths have grown a deep hatred for Lady Omari and by extension the Emperor.

Whitlock attempts to convey sympathy to the smith, but Hasaan argues that mages such as themselves could not sympathize with what he and his people have lost. Their country was practically married to the empire while Hasaan’s bled in a failed effort to stay away from it. Varrak states that Hasaan is right and that mages such as themselves won’t truly understand the suffering of the Huchomans: “However that is precisely why I request your assistance. If we are to undermine the tyrant and organize a resistance with true diversity in combat and strategy, we shall succeed where Jinx Moore’s rebellion will fail.” Varrak argues that Hasaan’s men can serve as the physical backbone of Varrak’s resistance, as having just mages won’t be enough to oppose the empire’s best. Hasaan asks how Varrak is so sure of this strategy, to which the vizier replies “not to be too gelastic but...call it ‘fighting fire with fire.’”

Outside of the forge, Keondra stumbles back in dismay. She never held trust for the Grand Vizier, but her fears have now been fully realized. As she looks around the encampment, she decides that she must find a way back to Kiota harbor and send a messenger albatross to Emperor Alexander at once. As she begins to make her leave, however, a Cyprus mage stops her.

The mage asks her what she’s doing eavesdropping on the “master,” to which Keondra plays it off as being curious. The mage is not buying it and demands to know her name. At that

moment, Keondra knows she must make a break to flee but the mage responds by readying a fireball. Keondra quickly catches the charging arm, and as the mage unleashes the blast she turns his arm towards the middle of the encampment. As the blast knocks everyone back she delivers a swift backhand to the mage and sprints for the exit. Varrak and Whitlock peer outside, and discover quickly who the perpetrator is. When Hasaan demands to know what's going on, Varrak roars "That inconceivable HARRIDAN! She will expose the entirety of our plans to the Emperor! Pursue her at once!"

As she flees into the Fire Fields on horseback, a swarm of calvary of both Hasaan's men and the Cyprus Collective pursues behind her. She serpentine her way around the mages' long-range fire bolts. In an act of quick thinking, she charges a lava river and imposes her steed to leap over the river. A pursuing firebolt explodes on the river bank, and a large spray of exploding lava sears the pursuers and terrifies their horses. Varrak, Whitlock, and Hasaan catch up to the agonized troops and unleash a large ice blast on the lava river. It acts as a bridge for the trio to cross and continue the chase.

She eventually makes it to the wasteland foliage, where the trio begins to close in. She sees the forest groves ahead and looks back at the enclosing mages. She sighs, and quickly leaps off her horse and lands on the ground behind it. She yells at the horse to scare it off and turns to meet the approaching mages. They are caught off guard as she takes her sword and charges the trio. They scramble to dismount the steeds and engage Keondra in battle. Her focus is on Hasaan and meeting his close-quarters strikes while Varrak and Whitlock keep their distance with magic projectiles.

She senses an impending lightning bolt as the air around her begins to feel static. She rapidly grabs Hasaan by the arms and swings him around to put him between her and Varrak. In an instant, Varrak unleashes a lightning bolt catered for Keondra that electrocutes Hasaan instead. The bolt is powerful, and with one blood-curdling scream, Hasaan collapses to the ground. Now it is just Keondra, Whitlock, and Varrak. Keondra taunts the vizier in a bid to fuel his hubris, stating that a proud magician such as himself has yet again jeopardized his goals by killing another ally. The enraged Varrak unleashes several fire bolts which Keondra evades. Seeing an opening to retaliate, she charges Varrak with a killing blow. Exhausted of his energy, Varrak can only watch as Keondra approaches to end his ambitions once and for all. But as she is about to land the killing strike...

An ice spike strikes through her torso. She looks to see Whitlock having conjured the spell, standing with full resolution. She falls to her knees as blood begins to seep from her chest and out of her mouth. Varrak and Whitlock look down at the writhing Keondra. Varrak insults the fallen captain: "Was it worth it, Ms. Caddel? Having pursued me to the ends of the earth in some pitiful attempt at avenging your fallen friend? Or just some insignificant loyalty to the Emperor? Either way...it seems that it was but for naught, my lady. You could not withstand the wind of the ensuing storm." At that moment, Keondra begins to strain a slow laugh. Whitlock and Varrak exchange glances before the fatally wounded soldier glares up at them: "At least I'm not a disreputable, arrogant bastard like you, Lancaster. The Emperor was right about you. Your hubris will destroy EVERYTHING you are working to achieve. I cannot wait for Emperor Arinia to eradicate you once he has the Relics. And you, Whitlock. You are just another corpse. The moment you realize that your cause is suicide is the moment you discover the dagger that Varrak has drilled into your back."

As Keondra looks up with a fearless grin, Varrak strikes down with another slash of ice to end the captain. Varrak is disgusted by the sight before him, but Whitlock is aghast. He watches as Varrak's murderous eyes fade before composing back into his snobbish persona. He uses two fire bolts to immolate the corpses and begins to walk back. He turns to Whitlock with a commanding glare: "Let's go. Now." Whitlock does not hesitate to follow.

At the city of Mjimoto, the Cyprus Collective and Hasaan's men begin to load onto a luxurious galleon. Varrak and Whitlock board the vessel and watch as the city of fire disappears behind the horizon. Looking upon the orange hue of a twilit sea, Whitlock asks Varrak if he may inquire about something. When Varrak affirms, Whitlock asks "Although we have the men and resources, there is one thing that is bothering me. Alexander still has the Relics of Power. How in the Gods' names are we going to oppose that?" As Whitlock looks at Varrak, he becomes more disturbed as an insidious smile begins to form over the Grand Vizier's face: "Oh...I have a plan for that."

CHAPTER 14: A WORLD OF SHADOWS

In Antamond Academy, a younger Whitlock is enjoying himself in the luxuries of a fraternity party, as several high-ranking students consume wine and pleasurable company. It seems to be a special celebration as the upperclassmen are giving cheers and toasts for Whitlock. As Whitlock thanks his fellow students for putting together the occasion, a younger Varrak marches into the scene.

Whitlock seems to be very welcoming to the young Lancaster, but Varrak's expression does not share the same sentiment. He is visibly angered at the upperclassmen and pulls out a parchment. He demands to know what it is, to which Whitlock chuckles and says that it's the conjure study that was published in the official Antamond Almanac. Varrak surmises that having his report published in a high-standing journal is the reason for the party, to which Varrak confirms. Varrak pulls out another parchment, and begins to read: "Conjuring Sense: A Report on the Intricacies of Familiar Summoning and its Expansion...by Varrak Lancaster." As the other partygoers begin to murmur, Varrak glares at Whitlock as he begins to realize what the purpose of this display is.

Varrak accuses Whitlock of plagiarizing the report that was published in the newspaper, to which Whitlock begins to whisper to his fellow upperclassmen. Varrak commands that Whitlock admit to the blatant theft, or he will take it to Headmaster Cornera and have Whitlock expelled from the academy. At that moment, Whitlock snaps his fingers. One of the members casts a flame spell directly at Varrak, but the ensuing fire does not damage him. Rather, it incinerates the report with his name on it. Whitlock gets up and approaches him as Varrak scrambles to save the evidence. He commands that he did no such thing, and that "any accusation made by my good friend here is from an internal sense of envy and nothing more." Varrak scowls, and says that it won't change that he is a better magician. Whitlock chortles, and states "I believe that has already been decided with our duel. You lost, Lancaster. And as for the report...call it an unfortunate shortcoming on your part." An ambivalently emotional Varrak rushes out as the partygoers mock him.

A present-day Varrak arrives with Whitlock at a remote shipwreck with several smaller patrol ships encircling it. The Wreckage of *St. Ferguson*, what was once the ruins of a mighty vessel, has now been remodeled into an imposing sea fortress. As the two magicians arrive, Whitlock becomes apprehensive at what the vizier has awaiting them at this nautical garrison. They walk through the hallways of worn oak boards and sea spray patrolled by Cyprus mages and Hasaan's troops alike. They enter a chamber where what was once the captain's chambers. When Whitlock enters the room, his hesitance shifts into fear.

An unlit furnace sits idle in the middle of a room of candles, engraved incantations, and bustling mages preparing the scene. Whitlock identifies this as a ritual. He sees Varrak's nonchalant attitude as concerning, as he grabs the vizier by the shoulder and interrogates him: "Please...please do not tell me you plan to use the dark arts against the Emperor." Varrak remains silent. Varrak states that it was Whitlock who brought up the point of needing to oppose the Relics of Power. He argues this is their only avenue of doing so. Whitlock says Varrak has gone mad.

As Whitlock attempts to leave, Varrak paces behind him beckoning the magician to stay. He demands that if they are going to oppose the Relics they need to harness the chaos of the

dark arts. Whitlock retorts that there is a reason why all established organizations of mages, witches, and users of the arcane have made the use of the dark arts forbidden. He argues that “the chaos has potential for power greater than the Relics, but it is far more likely to endanger us and this entire operation. The risk of complete failure to control this forbidden magic is too vast for the option to be on the table.” Varrak states that despite its pandemonium “it is not the best option on the table but it’s the only one on the bloody thing.” Whitlock goes quiet.

He asks if there are any other magic abilities they could look into, any Grand level spells or particular arts of the highest expertise. Varrak proudly reiterates his title of the greatest magician in the empire and says that as such he knows very well there is no such magic that can stand a chance like the dark arts. Varrak implores that he cannot go down this road alone and that he will need Whitlock if he is to harness the power. Whitlock hesitates but knows that Varrak is right. He ignores his better sense of judgment and reluctantly agrees to perform the ritual with Varrak.

An eerie fog sets over the *St. Ferguson* as Varrak and Whitlock stare into the clouded ocean. Whitlock asks what they’ve been able to accomplish so far. Varrak explains that up until now they have had to rely on existing gates in the world to travel to the other realms of the universe, but they are on the brink of making a breakthrough in interrealm travel. He explains that the ritual they have set up in the chamber will allow a magic user to travel the seven realms at will without the need for gates. Remembering the treacherous ventures of getting to the Mar and the Deep Earth, Whitlock concurs that this would be an excellent tool to have. He asks how the ritual is going to work.

The room is darkened, as Varrak stands before the furnace with Whitlock and four Cyprus mages surrounding him in a pentagram formation. Varrak lights the furnace with a pure red flame, and the mages surrounding Varrak approach the fire with various items in their hands. One brings a war hammer, another brings a dagger, another brings a flintlock pistol, another brings a mace, and another brings a bottle of poison. All of the items are cast into the fire, as Varrak begins to recite the incantation: “aashirvaadn ddaatu mm svtntrtaan srvdaa yen mm shringkhlaaah aiah naivedyaiah nstaaah bhveyuah.” A sudden gust extinguishes the candles and suffocates the furnace’s flame. The room is completely pitch black. After a moment, a low-tone bellowing can be heard from the center of the room.

The origin is an unidentified creature from where the furnace should be. The only thing visible are two small white dots indicating its eyes. One of the mages cast a light spell to illuminate the chamber, but the light provokes the beast and attacks the user. Varrak, Whitlock, and the other three mages are aghast as the creature is revealed to be a bipedal reptile with ebony scales and sickle-like claws. The mages all attack the beast with magic to no avail, to which Varrak and Whitlock proceed to escape the chamber.

The beast gives pursuit, but Varrak blasts the door to the outside open. As they approach the main deck, Varrak orders Whitlock to cast a wind spell to blow away the fog. Whitlock asks why, but the beast emerges from the hull to approach the magicians giving no time for Varrak to answer. As the monster is ready to pounce, the two magicians cast Grand Gale towards the foggy sky, and the resulting spell lifts the fog from above the *St. Ferguson* and exposes the ship to the sun. The beast hisses as the harsh sunlight sears his skin. Before Whitlock can collect himself from his last spell, Varrak unleashes a flurry of bolts to give the beast no time to retaliate. It dies to the vizier’s barrage of magic attacks.

As the henchmen sweep up the scenes, Varrak and Whitlock reel back from the bedlam that had just occurred. Whitlock tells Varrak that he was warned of the consequences and that they might as well abandon the idea of conducting any further experiments from the dark arts. Varrak coyly retorts "Now who ever said that ritual was a failure?" Whitlock refuses to accept that the beast was purposefully summoned by the vizier, to which he admits that the monster was indeed an unexpected happenstance. But the vizier explains: "The creature must have come from somewhere. It was not of our world, I could summon every anatomist in the Empire to confirm that. I believe that my attempt to access one of the seven realms...succeeded." Whitlock scoffs at the vizier's bravado as he summons all present underlings.

Whitlock, the Cyprus Collective, and Hasaan's troops all stand to attention as Varrak speaks to them from the helm. He orders that they will journey into the realm where the beast emerged from and bring back anything they can discover. He says that the realm is most likely darkened, and its inhabitants can be warded off with harsh light. He concludes the speech by stating "Should any of you show fear in the face of this expedition, I shall demonstrate swiftly that the monsters in the dark are not your greatest threat. There is no haven for cowards in my army. Mark my words." The crew all prepare themselves as Varrak concludes this speech.

Varrak stands alone in the hall before the chamber. He stares intently at the closed door as Whitlock approaches him. Whitlock tells him that his commanders have all expressed their readiness to depart. Varrak replies with confidence in the commanders' loyalty and thanks him for telling him. Whitlock turns around but does not depart. When Varrak asks if he will leave to gather the troops already, Whitlock states that he must ask him a question first. Varrak impatiently groans and asks for the magician's inquiry. Whitlock asks "...why did you enlist me to be one of your legionnaires?" The question takes Varrak by surprise. The vizier asks if Whitlock is dissatisfied with the opportunity, to which he admits that he is not. He just wonders why it had to be him of all people. Varrak brushes it off as a "safe bet." Before Whitlock can ask for more, Varrak commands him to leave.

Varrak is followed by his troops as they re-enter the chamber. A shadowy rift in space-time lies before them, and as they walk through the rift they are amazed at the world they step into: the sky is a sea of sangria and black with pitch-black islands suspended in the air. The magicians all carry small light conjures as they carry onward to a dark monastery before them. The temple is enormous; it boasts a Corinthian design of pillars primarily being the content of the temple, but each pillar is as wide as a building and as tall as a castle. The temple made the expedition group feel very miniscule. Whitlock is on cautious alert, as he suspects that "the gargantuan design of this place may be for something greater than us. We must tread lightly."

As the group carries onward, a faint flapping noise can be heard. Varrak orders the group to stop and remain quiet. The flapping becomes increasingly audible, to which a roar follows. The expedition party arms themselves. Varrak stands at the ready, but fear is quickly taking over Whitlock. As the group looks up, a great dragon soars above the group and brings a harsh gust from the apparent wind. The dragon, a long-necked beast with a jagged complexion, lowers her head to face the group directly. She begins to speak: "Humans...the first ones to enter Nightfall in millennia. It is a shame you will not return to relish that glory." Varrak attempts to bargain with the dragon, stating that he can become a humble servant in exchange for mercy, but the dragon roars the vizier into silence.

She states that she has observed the human world in the shadows, and knows of the vizier, "Varrak Lancaster...your ambition is a wildfire that destroys and consumes without satisfaction, as does the ambition of your king." Varrak sneers that Alexander is not his king. The dragon says that the vizier does not fool her, and says "I am the eternity dragon **Kirai**, and my years have given me all there is to know about mankind. Your desires, your greed, your malice. You do not deserve to breathe a second longer in the realm of the dragons!" Kirai begins her assault on the party, as all manner of magic and arrows merely pelt the powerful dragon.

After a brief struggle, Whitlock commands Kirai's attention while Varrak aims for the base of her neck. A large ice spike is used to decapitate the dragon. The battle comes to a sudden halt. The body falls limp, and the party stumbles back from the ceased conflict. However, as Whitlock takes a closer look at Kirai's disembodied head, the conjured light he holds in his hand reveals something alarming to the magician: "Is...is she...smiling?" The limp body begins to show life once more, and the soldiers step back as they realize the fight is far from over. Two identical heads sprout from the wound Varrak left, and with one commanding roar, the battle resumes and takes a turn for the worse for the expedition party.

The dual heads begin to crush and devour the soldiers. As Varrak desperately tried to destroy one head, it would only worsen as more and more would appear and further lay waste to his men. The battle eventually came down to just Varrak, Whitlock, and Kirai with nine gnashing heads. Whitlock exclaims that they cannot allow more heads to grow, to which Varrak commands Whitlock "Then don't allow them to!" As Varrak charges another spell, Whitlock implores Varrak to not go for the neck, to which the vizier yells "There is an opening to the dragon's weak heart! I need to keep it open! ATTACK THE WOUND!" As Varrak decapitates another head, Whitlock blasts it with an expulsion of flames. Varrak fights off the remaining heads as Whitlock unleashes his fire. Once he ceases, Varrak charges towards the seared wound as Whitlock distracts the other heads. As he reaches his arms into Kirai's flesh, he screams as he unleashes a devastating combustion of fire magic within the dragon's body. Kirai screeches as the explosion decimates her torso and leaves the heads nowhere to regrow. The dragon is slain.

The mages collapse to the ground out of exhaustion. After a long catching of breath from the tiring conflict, Varrak pulls himself off the ground and begins to slowly trudge forward. Whitlock groans that Varrak seriously could not yearn to go further after all of that to which Varrak explains that the dragon was keeping something from them and he intends to find out what it is. Whitlock grumbles as he follows suit. The two mages eventually reach the center of the colossal temple, where a whole ensemble of dragon statues nurse a displaying altar between them. Varrak could not believe his eyes. Glowing with a dark purple hue and a sinister, screeching hum...it was the Relic of Darkness.

As Whitlock catches up to Varrak, his amazement is soon shared with the vizier. He removes the Relic from the display and looks at him with a sense of accomplishment. Whitlock says that they have found a Relic without the Emperor's knowledge, and asks Varrak if Alexander were to expect them to have found it now. Varrak replies "No." Whitlock states that this gives them a chance. When Varrak asks for him to explain, Whitlock says "Our chances were nil long ago but with this...with this, we can truly oppose the Emperor!" He says that if they can secure the Relics from the rebellion, they will have no need for the dark arts to fight back

against Alexander. He rejoices at the triumph they have just achieved. As Whitlock looks intently into the Relic with elation...

A sudden jab freezes the magician in place. Whitlock faintly gasps as he turns to realize Varrak has impaled him in the spine with a dagger. The magician gasps as he looks at the vizier with a gaze of confused betrayal. Varrak kicks the magician to the ground and procures the Relic from his grasp. Varrak explains that the discovery of the Relic has complicated his own agenda, but it does not matter as the plan can carry on. He explains that in any case, Whitlock is no longer needed in the furthering of his plot. Whitlock gasps as he says "We were...supposed to defeat him...together...!" Varrak chortles as he says "Yes but...well your ideas of defeating him don't quite mingle with my strategy. I simply cannot trust you with a Relic, old friend. You were a tad naive to have followed me to this point, but we'll...call it an unfortunate shortcoming on your part." Varrak steps over the dying magician and waltzes over the carnage of the battle against Kirai towards the portal back home. Whitlock is left to bleed out on the cold temple floor as he faintly watches Varrak finally abandon him to his death.

CHAPTER 15: EMPEROR ALEXANDER ARINIA

Flashes of a farmstead are shown. A younger Alexander is looking over a warm field of grain. As the evening sun glistens, he turns to see the woman resting on his shoulder. **Lutheria Everhart** looks up at him and smiles. At that point, a present-day Alexander wakes up. Within a near completely dark chamber, Alexander awakens from his bed. He begins to get dressed, before looking at his reflection in the mirror. He takes off his eyepatch and reveals for the first time his scarred eye. He examines the eye closely as if thousands of memories are racing within his mind at once. At that moment, a servant enters unannounced.

Alexander looks away quickly so as to not show his face and puts the eyepatch back on. The servant reminds him that the Lord Summit is being held today, and he is expected in the eastern wing within the hour. The begrudging Alexander acknowledges and chases the servant out. Rather than continue getting ready, he sits at his bedside with his head down.

A chamber with many lords of official status gathers at a long table. The seat at the end, reserved for the emperor, remains vacant as the remaining lords bicker amongst themselves. The most obnoxious of them is **Lord Isaac Keenstone** of the Kingdom of Alexandria. He is arguing with the other Lords that “the king shall side with me! Among the kingdoms to join the glorious Arinian Empire, I was first in line!” As the lords continue to squabble, Alexander arrives and the congregation goes silent. With an audible scrape, the chair at the end is pulled and Alexander takes his seat.

Eager to begin, Lord Isaac begins postulating the advancements made by his royal scientists. He details that “our technology has become the wonder of the twelve kingdoms! Mill-powered jennys, artillery advancements, revolutionary military technology...and Alexandria bequeaths it all to you, my king.” At that moment, Alexander cuts him off: “I am not your ‘king,’ Lord Isaac, I am your Emperor. The Arinian Empire is not a kingdom. Kingdoms are inherited. Empires are earned.” The other lords chortle as Isaac is humiliated before the council, and Isaac hurriedly moves the topic onto something else.

He asks Alexander his consideration of examining his suitors. The other lords had argued with him earlier, but Isaac is certain that his maidens will prove to be the most beautiful and pleasing to the Emperor’s liking. This topic turns Alexander’s annoyance into anger, as he stands up after an audible table slam. He states that he will not consider marrying at this juncture, as producing an heir is meaningless: “If I get the relics...or rather, when I get the relics, I will have no need for a wife or offspring. Do not ever inquire this matter before the council again.” Alexander leaves in a huff. The lords are left muttering amongst themselves.

Alexander is seen pouting upon his throne. As knocks are heard on the doors to the throne room, Alexander commands to be left alone. A voice says that Lord Isaac wishes to send an apology. Alexander allows them entry. However, it’s not Lord Isaac at all; it is a maid by the name of **Elizabeth**. Elizabeth introduces herself as one of Isaac’s attendants and formally apologizes on his behalf to the Emperor. But as the two lock eyes, Alexander stands in shock as the image of Lutheria’s face flashes in his mind. The two look eerily alike. After an awkward silence, Alexander offhandedly offers a returning apology and dismisses the maid.

Alexander is then seen in Varrak’s magic study, where he is conducting an experiment to control a school of tadpoles. He’s using the Relic of Water to guide them around the tank, but a small group of tadpoles remains on one side regardless of his motion. After patting the glass,

running the pod in circles, and even bending the water in the tank around, the tadpoles swim straight back to their corner. The Emperor finds it bothersome that the tadpoles are disobedient.

As he is walking through the halls, Lord Isaac “happens” to cross paths with him. He attempts to strike up a conversation with Alexander, but he is begrudging the idea. However, Alexander inquired as to the whereabouts of Elizabeth. Isaac is perplexed at the question, however as he notices Alexander behaving oddly while staring into space and being late to respond, Isaac begins to get an idea. He asks Alexander if he “fancies” his attendant, to which Alexander angrily replies that it is not as he thinks. Isaac, however, has convinced himself that Alexander has become infatuated with her, and says to the Emperor “Elizabeth will be at your full service, my liege!” Alexander abandons trying to get through to the fool.

Now at the garden, Alexander is overlooking a bushel of mallows. He thinks back to the farm again, as he approaches an awaiting Lutheria working in the fields. Lutheria asks about the stock of the markets in town, to which Alexander answers well. He pulls out a bouquet of mallows, saying “I know they’re your favorite, so...I thought it pertinent to...” to which Lutheria quickly replies “I love them.” The memory is cut off as Alexander's attention is called. Elizabeth stands before the Emperor, stating that Lord Isaac told her he summoned her.

The two walk amongst the garden, as Alexander asks Elizabeth about Alexandria and working under Isaac. Elizabeth talks of working in the keep, and lamenting the poor conditions outside of it. She details that Lord Isaac is mostly benevolent to her, but his brutish nature can be difficult. Alexander does not offer much to the conversation, as every time Elizabeth garnered a response Alexander only beckoned her to keep talking. It got to the point where it began to worry her, and at one point Alexander stood silently staring off into the ocean view adjacent to the garden. As Elizabeth began calling to him, Alexander remembered Lutheria again...but this time it was different.

He heard his name...”ALEXANDER!” It was the voice of Lutheria. But the image of her was of cold, lifeless eyes and blood streaming from her mouth. The flashback staggers the Emperor, and Elizabeth looks in fear believing she has said something wrong. Without warning, Alexander leaves.

Elizabeth is seen in the council chamber alone talking with Lord Isaac, who is lounging in Alexander’s seat. Elizabeth is detailing what occurred in the garden, which Isaac finds intriguing. He says that the Emperor undoubtedly has fallen for her, and she should continue to spend time with them to garner a proposal. Elizabeth is visibly uneasy with the idea, but Isaac makes it clear that Alexander’s hand in marriage means having the Emperor himself at his disposal. He says that with Varrak absent from the keep, this is their only chance to claim power at Alexander’s side. Elizabeth is dismissed.

As sunset approaches, Alexander is seen at the private beach of the castle grounds. He uses the Relic of Water to create a long divide in the bay and fires a blast of flame between it. He crushes the fire blast in the divided sea, causing a mountain of steam to arise from the area. He frustratedly continues to shoot fire into the ocean, as his eye begins to well up. More images begin to flash in his mind: a younger Alexander is walking through a forest path eagerly with another bouquet of mallows. He stops as he sees the view before him: a pillar of smoke rising from the sky. He drops the bouquet and begins sprinting in that direction.

He arrives at the farmstead, which is destroyed and in ashes. He calls out for Lutheria and sees the bodies of soldiers littered amongst the crop fields. When he enters the ruins of his

home, he finds Lutheria's corpse. As he looks down at her with a horrified expression, it cuts back repeatedly to present-day Alexander, as tears stream down his face during his barrage of firebolts into the sea. He collapses onto his knees, in a position identical to the memory of him before his wife's lifeless body.

As the night passes to early morning, Elizabeth is resting in the maids' quarters when another attendant wakes her. She tells her that Alexander has requested her presence in the Emperor's chambers. As Elizabeth gets up, the other maid advises her that the Emperor has requested many drinks throughout the night, and is most likely inebriated. This warning scares Elizabeth, and as she approaches the room she is hesitant to open the door. When she does...she finds the Emperor gone. The bed is empty, and the only tell of his whereabouts is the doors to the outside open.

The doorway leads to a roof area where Alexander stands, overlooking the ocean horizon as the sun begins to creep upward. Elizabeth discovers him there and asks if he has slept at all. The Emperor firmly replies with "No." Alexander asks if Elizabeth can be honest with him, to which Elizabeth nervously confirms. After a moment of silence, Alexander asks: "You do not have feelings for me...do you?" Elizabeth looks down as if she were being scolded "...no, Your Majesty." Alexander says that it is better that way and that he would not make any engagements whatsoever.

Elizabeth requests to speak plainly with the Emperor. The Emperor turns toward her and nods. Elizabeth asks if he has any feelings toward her. Alexander turns away before answering: "I thought I did. The truth is those feelings are remnants of older ones, ones I thought I had buried in the back of my mind." Elizabeth asks what he means. Alexander explains that before he became an Emperor before he liberated himself from the depths of Hell, he had loved a woman named Lutheria Everhart. He detailed his time fighting alongside her, marrying her, and then losing her. He looks down at the two relics he holds.

He confesses to Elizabeth that the relics are what he buried those feelings for. He needed to forget Lutheria, forget that love entirely, so that he may be resolute in his mission to create a better Arinian Empire. He admits that "even as an Emperor, even as the ruler of every land, there will always be suffering and death that I cannot stop. Even as an Emperor, there will always be a Kingdom of Alexandria. Even as an Emperor...there will always be more Lutherias." He says that is precisely why he must fulfill the legend of the relics. Control over life can only be available to a god, and no matter how strict of an Emperor he can be, he will never have absolute control otherwise. He looks to Elizabeth and reassures her that those feelings of love that he had for Lutheria, and subsequently he thought he had for her, are completely eradicated. When Elizabeth asks if he's sure...he does not answer.

Elizabeth asks if Alexander could return to his chambers, "I do not wish to command you my Lord but...you need rest. I beg you to get some sleep". He begrudgingly agrees, however, he tells Elizabeth that when Lord Isaac returns to Alexandria, she must return with him. Elizabeth looks down and says "I understand." As Alexander walks back down to his chambers, he remembers the rest of his flashback: a mourning Alexander weeps into Lutheria's body before distant explosions catch his attention. He sees the view before him of a battle engaging in the town distantly. As he witnesses it, his eye stares through with a creeping, bloodcurdling rage. Flashes of his slaughter begin to show, as soldier after soldier is brutally slain. Before these images can culminate, he is awoken again.

The same bedroom, the same routine. As he looks in the mirror, he instead chooses to keep the eyepatch on. The same servant interrupts, this time informing him that Varrak has returned from the world of shadows and is en route with the Relic of Darkness. Alexander smiles and says "Excellent."

CHAPTER 16: A SCOUNDREL'S DEAL

On a deserted island in the middle of the Brimian Sea, a group of buccaneers and crime lords stand over a ruined encampment with a corpse in the center. The various crewmen are investigating the corpse for loose belongings when they stumble upon a parchment with an albatross crest. As they discover it, a higher-ranking crime lord pushes them all aside. **Tybalt Cane** looks over the body intently before asking his foreman how long the deceased has been marooned here. The foreman says that the crabs have yet to feed on him, so he wagers no more than a few days. Cane growls that the Brimian seas are supposed to be his handiwork and that he can only assume "Mr. Eldenson is long overdue for a little parlay."

In the town of Durban, Jormund is on a rooftop overlooking the town with Marley. The two are enjoying ale as they discuss the war and their upbringings. Jormund details his origin as a Nulman beggar and working his way up through the Durban crime ring, saying that "my path was far from honorable...but if the six gods gave me another life I'd do it all again." Marley admits the same, but perhaps they could have chosen a different bandit clan to be a part of rather than one that abandoned him. Jormund argues that clans are nothing more than trouble and that in the wretched world of the Arinian Empire, "There is only one man you can look out for: yourself." Marley says that his attitude is rather selfish, but also contradictory to what Jormund has done for the rebellion. Jormund chuckles and says that he may be right. He also says "But...perhaps my helping of the rebellion is more personal than you would think." As the two sit side to side admiring the orange glow of Durban at twilight, their moment is swiftly interrupted by one of Jormund's black market associates.

Jormund is rather annoyed at the interruption and asks if the matter can stand by. The associate claims it cannot. With irritation, Jormund inquires about the alert to which the associate states that "Cane has called for a parlay." The aura of the rooftop balcony quickly gathers gravity as Jormund becomes dead silent. Marley jovially asks who Cane is, to which Jormund tells the associate to "have him meet at the wall's shadow." Marley's attitude begins to shift as Jormund neglects to answer his question. Jormund orders Marley to follow him and that no matter what they must not cause a disturbance. Marley remains lost, but after Jormund's insistence, he concedes and follows him out.

An abandoned fortress wall looms over a crowd of brown-coated ruffians awaiting the black market dealer's arrival. As Jormund and Marley enter the scene, Tybalt Cane coughs and wobbles his way to the front of the crowd as if to firmly establish his presence among it. Cane asks who Jormund has with him, to which the scoundrel responds "he is security, in case you warrant a need for it." Cane slightly chuckles before moving on to business.

He explains the corpse his marauders discovered on the island in the Brimian Sea and informs Jormund of the albatross crest the captain bore. Jormund asks if Cane were to accuse him of anything then to be direct. Cane argues that ships under the albatross crest were forbidden by Jormund's network to plunder and that doing so was a violation of their pact. Jormund admits that he is confused, as no one he is connected to ever pillaged the albatross ships. Cane roars "Then the bloody Boar King did it! Oh, what a miraculous day of fairy tales! Do tell, did mermaids pick away the crew's bones and dragons burn the wood to ashes?! I know one of your bastard men did this and I had better find out who." Marley becomes apprehensive at the crime lord's hostility as Jormund asks what will happen if he cannot name someone.

Cane's group begins to unsheathe their weapons as Cane firmly states "If I don't well...ah you know how it goes. The pact dies, the war resumes, the heads roll. I'd be delighted to revive our little contest considering your numbers are currently quite lacking." Jormund reaffirms that none of his men were responsible for attacking the albatross, to which Cane jovially retorts that he truly has no grounds to believe him. Cane motions his men to put away their guns and begin to depart, leaving Jormund and Marley bewildered. Cane admits that despite his "superiority" he is not keen on resuming a crime war so soon, so he shall give Jormund one week to give him the man. As Cane and his men mount their horses, he leaves the black market dealer with the parting words "I would either begin the reassortment of your allies or ready them for painting Durban red." Cane's herd rides off as the lone pair are left to decide what to do. When Marley asks if Jormund has anyone they can start with, Jormund admits that he has one.

Jormund and Marley trudge through the town of Durban at nighttime and approach a disheveled tavern with several destitute civilians trying to sleep around the building. The dreary surroundings are quickly drowned out by the boisterous energy of the tavern. Several buccaneers and various ruffians are cheering and drinking with one man in particular enjoying booze and a pair of bawds: **Captain Callem Micard**. The sight is revolting to the pair despite their scoundrel upbringings, and Jormund is short on patience as he tries to claim the attention of the libidinous pirate. Captain Micard offhandedly tells the black market dealer that he and his men have been at sea for several months, and that "you may irritate me after I have indulged myself on the finest drinks your wonderful city has to offer...and the ale." Jormund slams the table and orders Micard to stop "fooling around with the whores" and pay attention.

Micard groans as he asks the two women to go entertain his crewmates while he has a chat with Jormund. The ladies disappear into the crowd as Micard asks what he could possibly want. Jormund emphasizes that Cane has threatened to resume the crime war in Durban if he doesn't bring him someone to be held responsible for raiding the albatross ship, to which Micard indifferently shrugs and says to not bother. When Jormund astoundedly asks why, Micard offhandedly states "Aye, 'twas I that raided the knaves' ship with the albatross colors flying over it." Jormund's eye twitches out of livid frustration. He grabs Micard by the hair and pulls his forehead toward the barrel of a flintlock pistol. Jormund insults the pirate and says that he will be the one cleaning up this mess. As he does, Marley tugs at Jormund for his attention. When he turns, he notices the entirety of Micard's crew holding them at gunpoint.

Marley and Jormund are escorted to Micard's ship and thrown into the brig. Jormund is irritable in the situation while Marley lies against the wooden wall. He tells the black market dealer that nothing will get done without a clear head, to which Jormund berates the rebel for not realizing the situation they are in. He asserts that Micard will likely kill them or worse, and beyond that thousands will die in the war that will inevitably begin without them being able to stop it. Marley snaps back "Of course I know that! Ease yourself for God's sake! Speaking from experience we need to wait before Micard will give us an opening, but as of right now we need to be patient." As Jormund calms himself, he soon realizes the words Marley spoke. He expresses that the bandit has learned quite a lot from Jinx, to which he replies "I may have picked up a thing or two."

After a while, the two are alerted as Micard and some of his crewmates arrive at the brig. He begins to unlock the door and says that Jormund should have introduced his friend sooner.

Perplexed at the question, Jormund looks to Marley and admits he does not understand. Micard approaches the rebel and says "Mr. Weylin was it? We have a...mutual friend in the rebellion. I apologize for hauling you both down here." He brings the pair up to the deck and officially welcomes them aboard the King's Trident as passengers rather than prisoners.

Captain Micard explains the current expedition their crew has embarked on: near the shores of Lumia is an infamous pirate lord who prides himself on hunting the rarest creatures of the sea and selling their body parts for gold. He asserts that his crew will raid his ship tomorrow night and seize his profits and trophies for themselves. He also states that if Jormund and Marley are to help him with this mission, they are welcome to abduct the good lord and bring him before Cane as their "man." Jormund accepts the proposition but is perplexed as to why Captain Micard holds such a grudge against him. The sly pirate captain gives an uncharacteristic glare to the ground as he mutters "he fashions himself on hunting sea-farers." The captain leaves the pair without saying another word.

The following morning, the crew bustles about the main deck whilst Jormund and Marley assist. They notice the pirate captain being quiet since the talk they had last night, and it only takes a scolding glance from Marley for Jormund to approach him. Jormund attempts to break the ice by pretending to guess who the rebel associate of his is, to which Captain Micard sneers "Don't entertain me, picaroon. I know you know it's the sea-farer." Jormund admits he wanted to gently approach the topic, but Micard points out that is not quite the method of the black market dealer. Jormund sighs and confesses he's been told that a lot lately, and that perhaps Cane's threat is getting to him more than he'd like to admit. He proceeds to ask the pirate how he can pull "the reputation" off. Micard is confused by the question.

Jormund points out the pirate captain's lax reputation amongst the marauders of the Lumian Main, elaborating that he can raid and pillage without giving no quarter and yet celebrate with drinks and wenches with some of his enemies afterward. He confesses that "you might have figured the secret to conquering the scoundrel's life better than I have." When Jormund asks how he does it, Micard says that that reputation is not entirely accurate. He concedes that he enjoys his lifestyle of marauding, drinking, and bedding, however, he still abides by his honor and the protection of those he holds dear. As the captain looks inquisitively into the ocean horizon, he turns back to Jormund and asks if he would like to know how he and Alpheus met.

He briefly explains that he once found Alpheus adrift at sea, and recognized his appearance as that of a sea-farer. The crew wanted to throw him back in, but Micard saw fit to keep him around as a crew hand to figure out where he came from and what he could do to help him. The communication barrier was steep as sea-farers are unable to communicate out of the water, and even so, he spoke an unrecognizable, ancient language when submerged. Despite this, Alpheus quickly picked up the ways of the pirate's life and eventually became one of them. However, the pursuit of a galleon they wanted to plunder led them into a storm one fateful day, and Alpheus was flung overboard into the raging waters. Captain Micard broke pursuit with the ship to try and help his friend, despite the crew's objections. His move resulted in the ship being claimed by the storm, and Micard had since climbed his way back up in the world of piracy without his sea-farer friend.

He puts his hand on Jormund's shoulder and says that he never regretted trying to save Alpheus that day. It was a relief to find out in hindsight that he was alive in the ranks of the

rebellion, but beyond his love for piracy and debauchery, he would surrender anything to help those that he cares about. Jormund takes the words to heart as he departs to help the crew. Nightfall approaches and the faint glow of the pirate lord's ship glistens on the twilight horizon. Jormund, Marley, Micard, and several crewmen board a longboat and make their way to the ship.

Micard's crew gathers the ship's treasures into barrels and begins to load them onto the dinghy. Meanwhile, Jormund and Marley make their way into the captain's quarters to get the jump on the lord. A misstep awakens him, and Marley and Jormund rush for cover as the towering man searches his cabin. He arms himself with one of the displayed harpoons and looks around, unbeknownst to Marley prowling behind him. The bandit reaches for a large cloth which he suddenly covers the lord's face with.

The angered hunter begins to swing the harpoon wildly. Jormund and Marley take care not to be hit, and scurry to find something to subdue the pirate lord. Jormund grabs a large horn and uses the blunt end to strike the side of the lord's head. The impact leaves the hunter unconscious, and Jormund and Marley quickly hoist his limp body to the longboat before the rest of the crew can awaken.

After a few days of travel, Tybalt Cane awaits Jormund and company at the abandoned fortress once more. The two groups exchange their glares as Marley throws the pirate lord forward. Cane examines the man and wagers this is who he seeks to present for the albatross raid. Jormund proudly states, "This particular pirate prides himself on pilfering your ships, but he also has a love for skinning the creatures of the sea and making trophies of their remains. I can only trust your...creativity in dealing with him." Cane maliciously grins as he motions for his men to take the lord back. The muffled hunter screams as he is dragged by Cane's men, and the crime lord tells Jormund "We may hold off on our war for now, but do keep a tighter leash on your bilge rats in the future would you?" With their exchange concluded, Cane's group rides off into the distance, leaving the black market dealer with immense relief.

As he and Marley make their way through Durban, Micard catches up to the two and asks for Jormund's attention for a moment. Jormund tells Marley to go ahead to his lounge without him so he may have a chat with the pirate. Micard thanks Jormund for his assistance with taking care of the pirate lord, to which Jormund apologizes for having acted so rashly at the tavern. Micard brushes it off, jovially admitting that "I was perhaps a hair too lax about how dire the situation really was! But if you must repay me, do give Mr. Mocovoy my regards will you? Just so he knows the merry band are doing well." Jormund assuredly nods and says that he will. The pirate and the scoundrel part ways and Jormund runs to catch up to Marley.

As Jormund enters the lounge, one of his workers urgently tells him that they have a visitor. Jormund says that he can entertain this second guest after he is done with his first. He brushes off the insistent man as he enters the office, but a sinister yet familiar growl freezes him into silence "Oh no, I believe you'll find it pertinent that this guest be attended to immediately." The scene before him is alarming: Emperor Alexander with a sword at Marley's throat. As Jormund and Marley look with fear to the looming tyrant, he reaches out his hand with a sinister grin to the black market scoundrel: "Let's make a deal, Mr. Eldenson."

CHAPTER 17: THE ULTIMATE RISK

In the throne room of the Ebony Keep, Varrak kneels before Alexander as he closely examines the Relic of Darkness. The emperor gazes into the black and purple gemstone and listens intently to the spectral hum emanating from it. He congratulates the vizier and admits that he had “misjudged” him. Varrak does not make eye contact with the emperor as he says he is relieved to hear that. Alexander puts the Relic in his coat and rises from the throne. He asks Varrak how soon his troops can mobilize. The question staggers the vizier, and Varrak inquires as to what the Emperor means.

Alexander commands that “the Relics alone are powerful, and yet the fact remains that they are parts of an incomplete whole. So long as Jinx and their band of traitors possess the remaining two, the realm cannot see peace. We need a plan of action to address this, and I believe I have one in mind.” He then asks the vizier if he can trust him completely. After a pause, Varrak states to the emperor “My resources and services are yours to command, sire.” Alexander tells Varrak to assemble his troops at the Lumian capital of Tanis. When Varrak asks if Alexander is leaving, the emperor replies “I’m going to the town of Durban. I believe I know the tools I will need to complete this task.”

In a small meeting room in the rebel base, Jinx exhausts themselves looking through parchments and papers of maps and letters. Aym asks permission to enter and seems to slightly awaken the debilitated rebel leader. Jinx asks for any updates on Marley’s whereabouts, to which Aym saddeningly negates. Jinx takes a deep sigh and lowers their head onto the desk. When Aym asks if they’re okay, Jinx murmurs “I’m sick of losing. I’m sick of failing, Aym. Failing my cause, my men, my kingdom...I don’t want to be a failure to them. But every time I think I have some semblance of an advantage I’m reminded of how much of a fool I am by the empire. I can’t lose again, Aym.” Jinx’s face is buried in their hands, however, an expression of shame is clear from the rebel’s body language.

After a moment, Alpheus enters the room seemingly to beckon the leader’s attention. When Jinx asks if the sea-farer can give them a moment, Jormund soon enters alongside him. The rebel leader shoots up from their desk and demands to know what the black market dealer is doing back at the rebel base. Jormund states that Jinx must hear him out, as time is critical and they might need to hear what he has to say. The rebel leader exchanges a glare with the scoundrel before slumping down into their chair. They allow Jormund to proceed.

Jormund explains that in ten days, Emperor Alexander will be in Tanis for the annual Lumian Harvest Festival. He elaborates that he will be under heavy security but if they can plant some select rebels in the Iron Palace and plan accordingly they will be able to maintain the element of surprise. Jinx slows Jormund down and begrudgingly asks him what he is asking them to do. Jormund retorts “Is it not clear? I sincerely hope regicide isn’t beneath you already, honorable leader.” The room falls to a deafening silence.

Jinx stutters asking if Jormund is sincerely suggesting the unthinkable. Jormund pleads “Jinx. This may be our only chance. He will be far more cautious with the six Relics now accounted for. I’m not asking for payment this time, I swear on my honor. If he is this close, we have to seize the opportunity while it is before us. I’m not asking. I’m begging.” Jormund takes an uncharacteristic bow of humility. Jinx picks up on the scoundrel’s strange demeanor but

knows the man well enough to know his desperation is apparent and genuine. "Okay." the rebel leader mutters.

The rebels begin to prepare for departure to the capital city. Jinx tells Tobias to watch over the base in their absence, to which the man is hesitant at the responsibility. Jinx assures him that they will entrust a patrol of rebel soldiers to assist him while they are away. Tobias reluctantly agrees as Aym, Alpheus, Jormund, and a large majority of rebel soldiers await the leader's beckoning. As Jinx mounts Scourge, they lead the group down the road to the capital city.

The city of Tanis glistens in the orange hue of dawn with a gargantuan mudstone wall, with spikes protruding in a constant pattern across the outside. Within these large walls is a bustling city of markets and trade posts overseen by a baroque castle, the Iron Palace. Within a high-standing building overlooking the market, Lord Tor Sarhan and Emperor Alexander have an indistinct discussion with each other as Varrak enters the room. The emperor dismisses the Lumian lord as Varrak takes a bow before the emperor.

Alexander states that it will not be long before Jinx and their rebels arrive, as they surmise from Jormund's information their hidden garrison is not too far from the capital. Alexander asks if the Cyprus mages are concealed amongst the citizens of the market as he asked. Varrak affirms, and elaborates that "only if the black market scum is not misleading us, I can assure my troops are ready for you." As Varrak forces back a sinister grin, Alexander responds that he has faith that Jormund is not deceiving them: "I have one good reason why the man will not lead us astray, this I can assure you." Alexander dismisses the vizier.

Within a back alley street, Arch-Magician Lucien Dupont awaits the vizier in a disguised garb. The vizier examines his surroundings before asking Dupont if everything is in place. Dupont confirms. As Varrak is eager to carry onward, Dupont stops him and asks if he may inquire about something. When Varrak asks what it is, Dupont asks: "Why did you give the emperor the Relic of Darkness?" Varrak asks if Dupont is questioning him, to which the arch-magician defies the allegation. The vizier concedes "We would not be here had I not earned his trust. If we are to succeed I must keep the waring eyes of the empire off of me. Once the moment arrives when he has his pretty little Relics..." Varrak grasps the hilt of a concealed dagger in his sleeve "...I will be ready."

Midday falls upon the clay city as the market square enters festivities. Lively dances and music fill the air as the hooded rebels trudge through the street. They look upon the Iron Palace over the market square and the Arinian soldiers posted all over its battlements. Jinx asks Aym if they are ready, and Aym states that they will do what they can. The rebels get into position as they patiently wait out the festivities for the ceremonial duels. The crowd begins to gather around the main plaza as two Lumian warriors begin to flourish and spin their falchions. As the two warriors complete their subsequent performances, the crowd roars in cheers as the rebels covertly take down the guards posted around the building.

As the rebels move to enter the main doors, several disguised Cyprus mages begin to nod at each other as they see the rebels begin to make their entrance. Suddenly, as the warriors beget the audience to cheer one more time, the rebels break the lock on the doors as several Cyprus mages simultaneously unleash fire bolts towards Jinx. In a moment of reflexive instinct, Aym turns to see the incoming flames and summons a pillar of fire to block the attacks. As the tower of blaze roars, the crowd is thrown into an immediate panic as the townspeople scramble

away from the incoming battle. The Cyprus mages reveal themselves and begin their assault on the rebels. Aym counters their magic attacks as Jormund shouts to Jinx “We’ll hold them off! Get inside and find the Emperor NOW!” Jinx, Alpheus, and a handful of rebel soldiers charge inside while the rest engage the mages in the square.

As the chaos erupts in the battle, Jormund is left to flintlock and cutlass in a sea of raging magicians while Aym is guarding his fellow rebels against impending magic. He is soon called away from that role as Varrak charges him from the line of attacking Cyprus men. Varrak and Aym engage in a fierce duel of offensive spells as the battle rages on around them. Unlike the battle from Durban, the two mages are now evenly matched as every spell they conjure, every familiar they summon, and every attack they hurl is countered by the other. In the erupting turmoil of battle, the duel between Varrak Lancaster and Aym Morningstar explodes as its beating center.

Within the market monastery, Jinx and Alpheus stay close as their rebel soldiers serve as the frontline to the incoming Arinian soldiers. They battle their way through the halls and make their way toward the bottom cellar. Jinx commands that the rebels charge the door as they and Alpheus hold off the incoming guards. After several thrusts, the door to the cellar breaks free, and the rebels are eager to charge in. Jinx stops them, however, and urges that they must enter alone if they are to strike the Emperor by surprise. They order Alpheus and the rebels to hold off the guards as they slip into the dark cellar.

The distant roars of battle are muffled in the grim shadows of the building’s cellar. Jinx sneaks their way through the darkness as they hear the presence of another man. As Jinx sharpens their focus, they slowly ready their blade as they witness the dim light of a door leading to the adjacent room. They take a deep breath and charge with all of their might inside. But to the rebel’s surprise, they stumble on a scene that leaves them confused and terrified. The emperor was not inside. Rather it was Marley, tied to a support and muzzled by a cloth.

The rebel leader hurriedly frees Marley and asks if he is okay. Marley completely evades the question and desperately tells Jinx they need to get out immediately. Jinx stammers, and asks if they have laid a trap for them here. Marley shouts “No! Jormund told them! HE TOLD THEM WHERE OUR BASE IS!” Jinx freezes in dread. As the meaning of the words begins to sink in, they race out of the room leaving Marley to urgently follow suit.

As the two mages begin to tire themselves from the duel, their fight is suddenly cut short. A deafening explosion roars throughout the city, and the struggling soldiers all stagger to cover their ears. As the battle comes to a halt, Jinx races through the crowd on horseback southward, completely disregarding their foes. An expression of realization soon takes over Aym and Jormund as they see their rebel leader gallop away toward the outskirts of the city. Varrak orders the Cyprus mages to fall back as the rebels quickly scramble to regroup.

The mine housing the rebel base is now a complete ruin of flames. The rebels that weren’t killed in the explosion look around desperately as they suspect an enemy attack. But as they look upward towards the skylight of smoke and ash, they see only one silhouette...the figure descends from the sky and stands before the terrified rebel soldiers. Emperor Alexander, with four Relics of Power gravitating around him, begins to march toward them.

Jinx races through the field between the capital and the rebel base with desperation and haste. As they command Scourge to gallop faster, they witness the towering cluster of smoke enveloping the sky before them. Terror begins to claim the rebel leader, as they are desperate to

make it back before it is too late. As they arrive at the entrance of the mineshaft, they quickly make it down the rocky wall as their platforms and wooden supports burn. They scramble to call out to their rebel soldiers before they stumble upon Tobias. He lies lifeless and cold before the rebel leader with a large chunk of debris lodged into his chest. The rebel leader has no time to mourn their ally as they quickly rush for the treasure room.

The mineshaft burns and crumbles around them as they enter the treasure room. Alexander stands before them, gazing into the Relics of Light and Earth. "Finally..." the Emperor growls. They slowly turn to meet the eyes of Jinx, who has unsheathed their blade. Alexander commends the rebel for their punctuality and states that they will witness history being made. As the two Relics levitate towards him, they begin to dance around him. Their hums become a complete melody, and Alexander fails to contain his laughter. He celebrates the gathering of the Relics, and that he can once and for all realize the legend and bring an end to the conflicts of mankind.

Jinx stutters "I won't...I won't allow you to do this. I can't...I must end you here and now!" The rebel begins to tremble. Tears begin to well in their eyes as they can hardly contain their worry. The sight slightly amuses Alexander, but after a moment his expression turns serious. He walks up to the rebel leader and stares them down "This is perhaps...no. This is the most pathetic sight I have ever seen. You're afraid...aren't you? You...are AFRAID of me." The emperor backhands Jinx and sends them against a stone wall. Alexander demeans the rebel for succumbing to cowardice and laments that the rebellion has entrusted a coward as their leader. The rebel slowly crawls toward the Dragon Stone stone next to the Emperor and clutches it toward their chest in fear.

Alexander does nothing to stop them. As the stone does nothing, Alexander asks if this is sincerely their last act of desperation. He asks if the stone will save them. Jinx neglects to respond. As Alexander takes in the sight of the terrified rebel leader, he turns around and states "Keep it. It's as useless and pathetic as you are." Jinx begins to mutter words under their breath, and as Alexander turns to listen he begins to finally make out the words: "Vakari...help me." The Emperor roars that no one will help them now. They had lost the conviction to defeat him, and now they are left cowering to a rock. The emperor begins to walk out of the room to the rebel's confusion. He mutters "I'll let you live. I want you to face your rebel allies and tell them of your cowardice and failure alive. But know this Jinx, this is not to be mistaken as mercy. If you try to oppose me and the new world again, you will be the first to die." He disappears in the smoke of the burning rebel base as Jinx is left alone.

Varrak and the Cyprus mages gather in a field overlooking the burning rebel base. They await their emperor as he flies over the mages and descends before the vizier. They look in awe as they see the Relics orbit the Emperor. Apprehension fills the mages as the Emperor addresses them: "Today, you all have realized the end of the war against the treacherous rebellion! History shall note you all as the first followers of the new era of humanity! Victory...is OURS!" As the Cyprus mages begin to celebrate, Varrak asks if the Emperor has realized the legend. Alexander pauses. He turns around as the Cyprus mages begin to converse amongst themselves.

"I do not feel changed. I've gathered the Relics but...the change must be coming. No, it...it must be." As the Emperor confides in the vizier, he turns to ponder the Relics he had finally assembled. The Cyprus mages fall to silence. At that moment, the world begins to feel slow.

The Emperor turns his back against the vizier, and Varrak begins to unsheathe the dagger from his sleeve. As the Cyprus mages hold their collective breath, Varrak clenches his free fist as he readies the dagger. The air around them becomes tense. With one fated moment of anticipation, Varrak jabs the knife towards the Emperor's back.

As the tip of the blade begins to make contact with Alexander's coat, the Relic of Earth begins to quickly radiate. The blade shatters. The mages look at the scene in shock. Varrak's anticipatory expression quickly shifts into mortified disbelief. After a moment of contemplation, the Emperor begins to speak, "Did you not think I would see it, Varrak? Did you not think I would anticipate this pitiful farce from its very conception?" Varrak begins to stammer over his words, "I don't...I don't understand...how...?" Alexander states that the vizier has a knack for leaving loose ends. He recalls the sudden absences of his other legionnaires and admits that while it was nothing more than suspicions he had immediately found the vizier out once he received a letter from Jirani Caddel, the father of the late Keondra.

The emperor begins to chuckle as the Cyprus mages begin to ready themselves, "Your pride has once again failed you, Varrak. Now you find yourself unable to comprehend the shortcomings of your hubris at the moment of your anticipated triumph. The bridge of glory that laid before you is now but ash. How unfortunate for you...and your pathetic soldiers." As the Cyprus mages realize their ruse has been unveiled, they collectively unleash a barrage of bolts toward Emperor Alexander, but the emperor quickly responds with the Relics by unleashing a counterblast knocking back Varrak and the mages. As the Cyprus mages charge the emperor, Alexander quickly flies off, with no one able to pursue him. Varrak stares in consternation at the scene before him, slowly grasping the reality that is laid bare: he has lost.

Jinx awaits the rebels returning from Tanis in devastation. As Aym, Jormund, Alpheus, and Marley arrive at the scene, they take in the sight before them and understand what had occurred. Without saying a word, Jinx walks before the group and unsheathes their weapon. They proceed to drop their sword to the ground and trudge away with their head hanging low. At that moment, they stop dead in their tracks and turn to their right. As the rebels collectively notice what Jinx is looking at, they proceed to unsheathe their weapons: Varrak and his men stand before the rebels.

CHAPTER 18: THE LAST STAND PART I

The rebels and the Cyprus mages engage in a fierce stand-off. The mages outnumber the rebels seven-to-one, however, each rebel is eager to fight to the last draw of breath. No blows have been exchanged yet, and Varrak slowly raises his hands: "Now now, let us not tear each other to shreds just yet. I think it is in your best interest to hear me out." Aym asserts that there is no scenario where hearing him out is in their best interest. As the rebels are ready to strike, they are also halted by Marley which comes as a surprise to the main rebel figureheads. Marley explains that Varrak helped the rebels escape the prison, and as such they can afford one opportunity to let him speak. Aym and Alpheus look to Jinx for their permission. The dejected rebel leader mutters "I don't care. Let the magician say his piece."

Varrak calmly explains that he was covertly planning to dethrone the emperor as the rebels sought to do as well. Only when Alexander was present did Varrak fight in allegiance with the empire, but once Alexander had the Relics of Power they would deliver the justice of the realm upon him then. "So that you could take the Relics for yourself?" Aym retorts. Varrak scoffs and stares down the rebel mage as he asserts "Don't impugn my honor, novice. I pride myself on the mastery of the magic arts through knowledge and training of the mind. Using the Relics would be cheating." Aym nearly charges against the vizier for that insult before Alpheus holds him back. Marley tells the both of them to ease off.

Marley asks Varrak what their course of action is now that the emperor has all six Relics. Varrak elaborates that Alexander is powerful, with the resources of the Arinian Empire at his disposal and the Relics of Power granting him command over the elements he is undoubtedly the most powerful human being alive. "But...therein lies one lapse in the emperor's unlimited strength: he is still mortal. Had he truly become a god, none of us would be standing here at this moment." Jinx sneers that his deduction is meaningless, as Alexander merely spared them to live in his "twisted world" and sit on their failures. Varrak insists that he has yet to harness the Relics' true power as he did before Varrak attempted to kill him, but the rebel leader still does not believe him.

Aym interjects, "No...maybe what Varrak said carries some truth to it. 'A soul that is pure' it said within the ancient song. Maybe he did not fulfill the legend because he is unable to fulfill it." As the collective area takes in the mages' words, Marley shares relief that the kingdom is saved, as if what Aym and Varrak said is true Alexander cannot become a god. Varrak quells the bandit's enthusiasm however as he states that if that is the case he will have no grounds to spare any of them, "and with every Relic in his possession it should take him no time at all to hunt us like rats until we are exterminated. And even so, he may yet find a way to harness their power that we have not seen." Varrak asserts that no matter what scenario plays out, they cannot allow Alexander to keep the Relics of Power.

The rebel leader's patience comes to an end as they proceed to demand Varrak the point of his coming here if they are all going to die either way. Varrak adds that both scenarios are grim but they have a chance at defeating him. Varrak walks up to Jinx which puts the rebel on high alert, but they are soon surprised by the sight of the vizier taking a bow before them. Varrak pleads "There is only one course of action we can take: we must form an alliance to defeat the emperor. It may not be ideal for you, and it certainly is not for me, but we are short on

time and destitute of options.” Varrak extends his hand out to Jinx and asks if they would accept, to which their fellow rebels begin to contend over the proposal.

Aym is heavily against Varrak’s offer. He argues that they must disperse amongst the populace and not push the Emperor anymore, and more so that “Varrak is not a believer in the noble cause for freedom. Even if we do succeed in this perilous mission we would serve not but his own ascension to the throne.” Marley fires back that they cannot afford to worry about who succeeds the Arinian government as “if Alexander wins...there won’t be a kingdom to govern.” Aym and Marley look to Jinx, and soon the rest of the rebel group follows. They hinge on their leader’s decision on how to proceed. Jinx looks between them, the people they failed, and the vizier before them and declares “You may have the rebellion as your allies. I cannot call myself their leader anymore.”

The rebels step back from the magnitude of their words. Jinx had willingly resigned themselves as the spearhead of the revolution and allowed them an alliance with the sinister vizier as their final command. Aym denied them of their action, pleading that they not resign themselves but Jinx ordered that their decision was final. Marley was not opposed to the alliance, but even he objected to the idea of Jinx’s resignation. No matter the words or pleas, Jinx was resolute in their decision as they lowered their head and went to go get Scourge. Varrak, disinterested in the personal drama of the rebel high command, declares that they cannot remain here and shall depart for the *St. Ferguson* at once.

As Jinx is readying their horse for departure, Aym catches up to them and makes a final plea for them to stay. Jinx commands that Aym regroup with the others, but he openly defies the rebel leader and declares “I only follow one leader, one who looked out for me and one who swore to protect their soldiers but most of all protect their friends. You can’t go back on that! You can’t-” At that moment, Jinx explodes at the mage in a tone that even startles Scourge: “Damn it all I ALREADY HAVE! Back at the prison, I had nearly given up where the Relics were to Alexander, when I had let myself be deceived once again at Tanis, and most of all when I stood there like a coward when I should have cut down the bastard where he stood! Don’t you see?! I can’t protect you! Just...just go. Please.” The air becomes tense and cold, and neither of them utter another word. Jinx proceeds to mount Scourge and slowly saunters away while Aym stands defeated and silent.

At the *St. Ferguson* fortress, night falls over the sea monastery as rebels, Hasaan soldiers, and Cyprus mages alike all struggle to adjust to their new alliance as the groups interact sparsely outside of short, tense conversations. In the captain’s chambers, Varrak, Aym, Alpheus, Marley, and Dupont all gather around a tactical war map of the Arinian capital city of Eretria. Varrak discusses ideas for battle strategies as he lays out the resources each side has: Varrak has the superior magic user forces, but Alexander has the navy, the army, the wealth, and the Relics of Power. He surmises that they will have to be smart if they are to lay siege to the capital.

Marley stops him and asks what good a siege would do given the circumstances. Varrak argues that the bandit lacks an eye for military stratagem and fails to see that Alexander is the superior opponent no matter how they approach, so a careful strategy is necessary to at least have a shot at victory. Marley refutes that a strategy of safety would be suicide and that if they are to see a better shot of victory they must raid the capital by surprise when the Emperor least expects it. Varrak sneers “Your guerilla tactics are charming, however, they serve poorly in our

current predicament. The emperor will expect us to attack at any time, so no doubt he will smell the change in the wind before we can even conceive of invading the capital.” Jormund interjects the discussion and suggests an approach of cutting off the capital’s supply of food from the northern farmlands to starve them out. As Jormund speaks, however, the room goes silent.

Varrak orders two of his mages to have Jormund escorted out of the room and executed, to which Marley quickly interjects the idea. The mages approach the scoundrel to apprehend him but they are stopped by the rebels. Varrak incredulously asks the rebels what the hell he is still doing here. Marley states that Varrak should not care about the background of Jormund and his ties with the criminal underworld, to which the vizier retorts “Have you all gone MAD?! Did you not forget, Mr. Weylin, that it was HIM that surrendered the location of the rebel base to the emperor?!” The rest of the rebels go silent and turn towards Marley. He swallows his pride and affirms that he has not.

The rebels are in disbelief. Aym and Alpheus try to allow understanding for Marley’s sake but the other rebel soldiers are ready to execute the black market dealer themselves. Marley shouts that it won’t be necessary, and pleads with the vizier “It was because of me that he did! He did it in order to save my life! Please! Grant him leniency, I promise you won’t see him again just spare him!” Jormund tries to interject, but Varrak quickly silences the black market dealer. He declares that it would be foolish to let him go, but seeing as he still has the rebellion’s interest at heart it would not be necessary to kill him. He orders that Jormund be thrown into the brig. Seeing as this is the only course of compromise, Marley yields, and Jormund is apprehended.

The brig of the *St. Ferguson* writhes in damp, secluded darkness as the water of the sea covers the floor of the room. Jormund sits in heavy contemplation as Marley visits him from above deck. Jormund adjusts himself to be as comfortable as he can in a muggy prison and asks Marley when he can get out. Marley says he does not know. Jormund sees the solemn expression on his face and surmises the regret the bandit feels for what has transpired. Jormund assures Marley that he did what was right. Marley asks how, to which Jormund states “The world is not kind to men like us. You protected me because I protected you. There is no shame in that.” Marley argues back stating that he had betrayed the rebellion to save his life and that he severely doubts at this point if it was worth it. Jormund bitterly reutters his point about looking out for the “only man that matters,” to which does not sit well with Marley.

Marley interrupts the black market dealer and declares “Do we matter?! Can’t you see there is more to what I want than my own ends?! I actually believe in fighting the emperor, I want to free the empire, but you haven’t changed?!” Jormund’s demeanor becomes far more serious as he asserts his worldview has not changed: Marley is his own interests, and he would gladly sacrifice the rebellion to save his life a thousand times over. Marley cannot believe the words coming out of the scoundrel’s mouth. He asserts that it would be best if he stays here until the conflict is over, and that “if by some miracle we survive the incoming war, it would be best if we never spoke to each other again.” Jormund dissents the idea, but Marley leaves the brig before he can make his case.

At the Vakian town of Folia, Jinx returns to the company of their brother Cicero in shame. They trek back to the altar where they first communed with Vakari. Solemnly, the former rebel leader repeats the ritual they made on their first visit by placing the Dragon’s Stone stone on the rune and placing their hand on it. They find themselves back in the dream of pure

darkness and begin to call out to Vakari. They yield that they have failed the rebellion and that it would be better to find a new champion to give the Stone to, as they are unworthy of it. The dragon growls that he does not make mistakes, and the Stone chose them for a reason. Jinx cries that the Stone was wrong and that Alexander has all six Relics, so any further fighting would be pointless.

At that moment, Vakari roars Jinx into complete silence. The dragon furiously declares "COWARD! You have been allowed this opportunity to fight for what is right and you YIELD?! You are the champion of the night. You will not submit before the wicked king nor his twisted plot!" Jinx says that they are no champion, to which Vakari orders them to be the champion. When Jinx says that is not possible, Vakari shuts them down: "You do not understand. You exist as unworthy and fearful, but you must be the hero. Willpower is not an act of existing, it is an act of being." Jinx says nothing. After a long moment of inner reflection, Jinx commands the dragon to take them out. Vakari says that they must tell them who they are before they can do that. Jinx tightens their fists and exclaims "I am Haven Valentine. And I will defeat the emperor." Vakari tells them not to forget the Stone and summons them out of unconsciousness.

As Haven wakes up, they place the dark stone into their satchel. Cicerox says that they have a visitor. The rebel is surprised to see that Aym has followed them to the mountaintop altar. Aym chortles "If I may be honest, you should stick with Haven. It has a lot more...meaning I feel." Haven puts their hand on Aym's shoulder and says that they concur. Cicerox asks if Aym would like to stay for dinner, to which the mage politely rejects the offer and states "Varrak and the others have already marched to the Arinian country, I'm afraid we'll have to leave immediately if we want to meet with them in time."

As Haven and Aym ride their way into the Arinian countryside, they arrive at Varrak's encampment where the other rebels welcome their leader back. They find difficulty calling them "Haven", but after a slight banter, they beckon the pair to join the others. In the main yard of the encampment, the Cyprus Collective, the Hasaan troops, and the members of the rebellion have all gathered before Varrak, who is addressing the camp with a speech.

The vizier proclaims: "My friends. Back in my studies of the arcane, arch-magician Jason Whitlock and I had a vision: a society unwrought by the semantics of political squabble or the technological burden of tyrannical oversight. We called it the Order of Autonomy. It was nothing more than a thesis at the time, one that never saw light when I had become advisor to that savage fool Alexander Arinia. But now that dream of liberty can become a reality! The emperor cachinnates to himself in the Ebony Keep, thinking that his heathen artifacts will shield him from the will of the realm. But they shall NOT! On the noon of the morrow, we shall storm Eretria and demonstrate what the people truly desire: our freedom! Our enterprise! OUR COUNTRY!" The soldiers collectively cheer as they chant "oorah" to the confident vizier. Haven looks upon the soldiers both reassuringly and concerningly as they are rallied for the battle that awaits them.

CHAPTER 19: THE LAST STAND PART II

The capital of Eretria awakens to a turbulent sky. Gusts begin to pelt the city as a large storm cloud looms from the coastline. Emperor Alexander stands at the back rampart of the Ebony Keep as several Arinian soldiers prepare around him. They all must shout orders and messages to one another as the deafening winds silence any normal conversation. Constable Jonah arrives before the Emperor as the harsh outside challenges the domestic attendant. Jonah awaits the Emperor's attention as he talks with an admiral before the Emperor speaks with him: "Make this known to the city guard: I want all personnel doubled for the afternoon and all civilians to remain indoors." Jonah shares his confusion with the Emperor's command: "Sire, should we not lockdown our soldiers until the storm passes? The dockmaster said that this one will be particularly-"

Alexander cuts the constable off as he asserts this will be the perfect cover for Varrak's army to attack. He is well aware of the former vizier's tactical disadvantage and knows well enough that he will gamble an assault on the capital using the storm as his cover. Jonah affirms the Emperor's command but pleads that he take shelter in the lower hold with the servants and maids. Alexander denies the request, commanding that his place is to command the army against the enemy. The Emperor declares "I must stand firm in not only the defense of my kingdom, but my truth as well. I am the proprietor of the new world, and I must defend its honor rather than cower in my castle. It is the battle of truth, Mr. Desdemona. The most important conflict of any war. You lose the battle of truth, you are better off not fighting at all." With nothing more to request, the constable leaves to take shelter inside the keep.

The rebel army encamped at the outskirts scramble to prepare as the gales impede them. Varrak stresses as he barks orders at the hastening mages and soldiers, as well as the main rebel figureheads contending with his strategy. Aym argues that "attacking at the height of the storm is exceedingly dangerous for everyone, should we not wait out the storm before making our assault?!" Varrak snaps back as he echoes the words of the emperor: "You know nothing, novice. The downpour will both deafen and blind the soldiers stationed on the city's battlements. We are outnumbered 15-to-1, and if we attack when the bastards can see us they will blast us into oblivion. Perhaps you should leave the tactical figuring to me before you embarrass yourself." Haven demeans the former vizier for his attitude, but affirms that he is right: they need to attack during the storm if they hope to storm the capital.

Within the main war tent, Varrak elaborates on the battle plan before the primary figures of the army. He orders that the rebel soldiers take the frontlines with the Hasaan soldiers, while the Cyprus mages cover them from behind as they storm the western wall. Haven denies the idea and argues "It would be limitless slaughter by the artillery on the western wall. Why the hell are your soldiers the only ones retaining some manner of cover?" Varrak retorts to the rebel leader for a better idea, to which they suggest the Cyprus Collective take the front lines. Aym adds to Haven's idea, stating that if the mages cast "greater barrier" they'll allow cover from the wall's cannons and protect the ground troops enough for them to reach the battlements. Varrak begrudgingly accepts the idea, but sneers that "so long as the novice will take the fire as well." As Haven and Marley begin to snap back, Aym staves them off and accepts the order. He states that further arguing with the former vizier will not help them.

The storm begins to swell as the downpour begins to trickle. Arinian soldiers ready themselves to man the walls protecting the city and prepare the cannons. The Cyprus Collective gathers at the western outskirts as the soldiers in the back lines prepare for battle. Haven gathers Aym, Marley, and Alpheus as the army around them begins to fall in line. Haven states that this is it. They pull out the Dragon's Stone and ask the group to put their hands upon it. Despite their confusion, the group follows their command and all reach to put their hand on the stone. Haven commands that they will protect them in the upcoming battle. As the rebels look up to them, Haven stands above their rebel friends and asserts "Vakari will be watching closely today. We fight for the future of our country, against the hands of evil that the Relics were supposed to destroy. I believe that fate is with all of you on this day. But I will not run. I will not cower before the Emperor. If...if this is the last I speak to you all, so be it. I will fulfill the promise I made to you all, I swear it."

Aym declares that the rebels will protect their leader too. He commands that "we will all make it out okay. I promise to protect you all just as Jinx-I mean Haven has done. I may not be as powerful as Haborym, but I will use my magic to protect those I love today. I will protect you all." Marley says that he will protect them too, and that "when we put that sword into Alexander's heart, we'll do it for every single one of the men, women, and children that have suffered under his empire. And I will do it for you all." As the rebels all nod to each other, Varrak barks at them to get into position and cease the "sentimental nonsense."

The storm's rain begins to strengthen as the last stragglers of the civilian populace rush indoors. The city guardsmen stand silently and intently at the precipitation fog before them, knowing that the enemy lurks within. Varrak stands along the Cyprus line while Jinx, Marley, and Alpheus are with their rebel brethren. Varrak looks to the sky and closes his eyes as the downpour begins to pummel the awaiting armies. He shouts "GREATER BARRIER!" and the mages collectively grunt as a wall of light forms in front of the Cyprus lines. Time begins to come to a standstill. The former vizier is the final word before the battle begins. His charge will incite the front lines, and the conflict will commence. Varrak takes a deep breath. The rebels, the Hasaan troops, and the mages all stand intently as the tension in the air batters them along with the torrent. As Varrak breathes in, he roars as he charges his horse into a gallop. The Cyprus Collective screams a battlecry that not even the storm can deafen. The cavalry of the front lines, armed with the magic barriers before them, stampede as they cut through the roaring rain and commence the Battle of the Storm.

The first line of Cyprus calvary shakes the earth as they charge the western wall. The soldiers stationed along the wall hear the roars of Varrak's troops and the commanding officer shouts "Ready the main battery!" The cannons stationed along the ramparts aim for the clouded area lurking outside of the city. The city guard only hear the encroaching army with no enemy in sight, thus they stand fearfully in wait for the impending foes. A glimmering line of light coming from the magic barriers finally indicates that the enemy is upon them. The commander screams "FIRE!" and the front line of mage cavalry is pounded with cannon fire. The line wavers at the enemy's fire but Varrak roars to hold fast as he charges a magic attack of his own. As Varrak nearly encroaches the western wall, he unleashes a powerful Grand-level fire bolt that rocks the very city.

Within the hazy, grayish-blue skyline of the capital city, a furious flash of orange beams through the foggy rain. The explosion catches the attention of the whole city guard as well as

Alexander. Through the gaping hole in the western wall, the remaining Cyprus cavalry charge in and unleash hell upon the Arinian soldiers stationed in the city streets. The rebels soon charge in the opening the mages had made for them and reunite with Varrak and Aym, both of whom furiously fight on the front lines. Varrak commands that Dupont and the Cyprus Collective ransack the neighborhoods, which garners heavy opposition from Haven and Marley. Varrak groans and assures the rebels that they won't harm the civilians: "It's a 'mage herring'! Arinian army protocol dictates that-!" the former vizier is cut off by Aym with an annoyed "We know!" Haven orders that the group follow them to the Ebony Keep, as Alexander will likely be hiding there.

Alexander demands to receive an update from the commander as he witnesses the magic fire exploding in the distant city. They state that the Cyprus mages have begun to ransack the civilian sector. The emperor demands that the Arinian soldiers be reinforced there to stop them. The commander advises against it, however, and states "But sir! We'd have to supply the men stationed here at the keep! If we send them, we'll have fewer guards here to protect you-!" Alexander furiously silences the commander and asserts "I have the Relics of Power, that's protection enough! My people do not, go defend them! Do as your emperor commands!" The commander affirms and shouts to lead the soldiers stationed along the Ebony Keep's ramparts to the city.

Haven, Marley, Alpheus, Aym, and Varrak all fight furiously through the roaring rain against the impending Arinian soldiers. Varrak and Aym blast through the enemy defenses with their magic while Marley and Haven cut down the guards that come in from either side. Meanwhile, Alpheus takes out the archers and cannons that are stationed along the path to the castle, as the rain allows the sea-farer to slightly be more in his element. After several attacks, they finally make their way inside the Ebony Keep as the Cyprus mages draw the rest of the Arinian soldiers outside.

The Ebony Keep, an impending palace with walls as black as night, stands before the heroes as they trudge through to search for Alexander. They dwarf before a large painting of the Emperor, standing proudly with a cold, humorless expression. The thundering war as well as the continual downpour of the storm roars outside as the Keep itself is devoid of life. "You don't think he abandoned the palace, do you?" Marley utters with a shake. Varrak assures the rebel that the Emperor is a proud warrior despite who he is, and he would not abandon the battle so easily, "no...I believe he is merely clearing the battlefield for himself." Eventually, they reach the throne room. They all freeze in place and arm themselves into a combative stance as they turn to see the Emperor awaiting them, with the six Relics dancing around him.

Alexander commends the rebels for their bold effort. He declares that the day he shall see the end of the old world shall also see the end of the rebels. Varrak shares his surprise that Alexander had not fully manned the Keep with every soldier in his army, to which the Emperor states that it was meaningless to throw soldiers at them to die. He asserts that this battle is all about him and them and that his loyal guards should not die to stop the inevitable. Haven shouts that is not why he did it, and that "you only did this so that you could have the pleasure of killing us yourself! You won't get the satisfaction, monster!" The Emperor shoots up from his throne to loom over the rebels. "Monster?" the Emperor echoes with a harsh tone, "you DARE call me a monster?! Yet you defend the world where the innocent bleed whilst the greedy and vainglorious prosper?! Don't you get it? I am not to destroy the world and recreate it! My mission

was to become a god so that I may rid the world of the malignant, those who seek to further the war and suffering I swore to destroy! Starting with YOU!"

The Emperor shouts as the Relics of Power begin to resonate around him. The power of the Relics surges through his veins, and as the rebels ready themselves for the fight of their lives the Emperor charges his first attack. He lets loose a fireball into the group and engages the rebels into battle. The rebels are not only up against the Emperor, they fight against the very elements themselves. Jets of fire explode from the torches illuminating the throne room. The very bricks within the wall are shot out like projectiles. A furious gust blows the rebels back to prevent them from closing the distance. Each Relic glows as their respective element is utilized. Alone they are powerful, but as all six are used in harmony they make the Emperor unstoppable.

The battle is brought out of the throne room and into every corner of the castle. Varrak and Aym attempt to respond with Alexander's projectile attacks, but their limited magic arts keep being countered by the Emperor's boundless elemental arsenal. Marley and Haven even attempt to restrain his arms so that Varrak and Aym may hit the Emperor directly, but Alexander responds by roaring a blast of fire akin to a dragon's breath. Alpheus harnesses the rain from the outside to try some manner of offense, but the very earth that made the castle acts against him and in the defense of Alexander. Marley eventually abandons the support strategy and attempts to brawl the Emperor via a head bash and several wild haymakers. Alexander soon proves to be the superior opponent however and proceeds to blind the rebel with a flash from the Relic of Light and send him flying into a wall. No matter what the rebels do, no matter what strategy they conceive, it seems that nothing can stop the Emperor.

Eventually, Alexander zeroes in on a single target: Haven. He blasts them into the roof, where the rebel leader begins to draw Alexander away from the others. They make a break for the highest battlement in the castle, but the distance between them and Alexander is quickly closed as he uses the Relic of Water to skate along the rainy surface of the castle walls. The rebel leader and the Arinian emperor are now face to face at the top of the Ebony Keep. Their duel is ferocious, but Haven is desperately on the defensive as they can do nothing against the Emperor's raw power. Varrak and the others urgently attempt to catch up to them. Tragically, Alexander's attacks soon prove to be too much for the rebel.

In one slash of the sword, the world freezes for a moment. Haven is paralyzed. Soon reality takes heed again, and the scene that has transpired bears forth. Blood floods out of Haven's neck as Alexander cuts through it. The rebel helplessly falls to the pavement as they are unable to speak. The blood, flowing from both the slit throat and gushing from Haven's mouth, gags the rebel as their life begins to end. "I warned you," the Emperor growls, "I promised that you would be the first to die. And now I have fulfilled it." Haven soon slumps onto the soaked pavement of the tower and loses the light within their eyes. With no final words able to be spoken, Haven Valentine dies before Alexander.

As the scene is soon witnessed by the other rebels, Aym lets out a blood-curdling cry "You BASTARD!" Against the warnings of Varrak and Marley, Aym charges into battle against Alexander in a turbulent fury. Fireball after lightning bolt, magic strike after spell, the rebel mage soon loses all manner of reason as the agonizing grief takes hold of him. However, the rageful second wind keeps Alexander on the defensive as Varrak, Marley, and Alpheus are soon able to catch up. Alpheus is the first to assist his rebel friend by restraining the emperor with his trident,

followed by Marley who uses his strength to hold him down. In a desperate cry, Marley screams "VARRAK DO IT NOW!" as the former vizier is the final to join the fight. Despite another furious blast of fire from Alexander, Varrak strains to put all of his might into a frozen spike that pierces through the heart of the Emperor.

The air is completely taken out of Alexander. The Relics begin to tremble and slowly lose their levitation. The emperor is soaked with blood as he begins to cough it out of his mouth while it seeps from his gaping wound from the icicle spear. His vision begins to blur. "Death to the king...who thought he could mend his people..." Alexander strains to mutter. Alpheus impales the Emperor with his trident for insurance, and upon that final strike Emperor Alexander Arinia loses his life.

The moment hangs for a while. The rebels had won. But their reality soon crushes them as they rush over to Haven. Aym desperately calls out to their rebel leader, but unlike the battle against Hakuu, there is no salvation. Aym commands Varrak to heal them with his magic, but Varrak says that it is impossible. Aym's cries become wails: "damn it all if you are such a better mage then prove it and save them! Heal them now! PLEASE!" Varrak's patience empties as he scolds the pleas of the rebel mage: "I cannot reverse death! No healing magic can! For the gods' sakes, your friend is gone!" Aym sobs "No..." as they fully submit to the crushing reality before them. Even the tough bandit Marley cannot hide their tears, as he had gone beyond trusting them as a leader. It was even more: he had loved them like family. The rebels had lost family on that dark, stormy tower.

A time of mourning takes hold of the rebels upon the tower. Even Varrak tended to the fallen rebel's sigil. Their sorrow would not last, however. A symphony began to be heard by the grieving rebels, a complete harmony that quickly became more and more powerful. It soon gained the attention of the rebels, and as they turned the sight before them left them aghast. The Relics of Power began to glow.

CHAPTER 20: THE LAST STAND PART III

Varrak groans as he begins to regain consciousness. He sees Alpheus, Aym, and Marley all rise from the ground as he attempts to discern what has just happened. He looks up to see that the storm has parted just above the tower they stand upon, with the warm orange sky bathing the top of the Ebony Keep in sunlight. But as he looks down, the warm feeling soon shifts to horror. "Where...where is Alexander? Where are the Relics?" The rebels soon adopt the former vizier's panic as they realize both the emperor's corpse and the Relic of Power are missing. Suddenly, they feel a change in the wind. The clouds surrounding the crevice in the heavens begin to swirl around the tower. The rebels are blasted with a sudden gale as the area around them shifts.

Soon, a wall of turning clouds surrounds the tower. The storm that had fallen upon the capital of Eretria was becoming a hurricane, with the eye of the storm being centered on the Ebony Keep. The swirling typhoon soon expands beyond the capital city and into the surrounding countryside. Slowly, the cyclone begins to consume the kingdom of Arinia. Even the battle in the capital is put to a halt as they are caught in the harsh flurry of the storm wall.

Behind this storm wall, the rebels could faintly make out a silhouette. It looked like a man, however, the shadow had an unearthly glow to it and large wings. The silver hue of the pupils flashed through the cloudy cover, and soon the rebels realized who this truly was. The clouds parted, and it was Emperor Alexander Arinia alive and well. The Emperor's appearance had completely changed; his brown mane had now become a pure heavenly white, his clothes had shifted into a royal suit of white and gold, a glowing halo resembling a compass rose shimmered above his head, and large wings sprouted from his back akin to an angel. But most notably of all, the Emperor had felt the right half of his face as he took in the final touch of his transformation: his scarred eye had been fully restored. The scar was still there, but the eye was there again. Alexander reveled in his new form.

The rebels had quickly put together what had transpired: the legend had been realized. Varrak had yet to fully accept the circumstances, and reiterated that "I...I killed you. You were dead. How...how can this be?!" Alexander did not respond at first; he had not yet fully taken in his new immortal body. But as the former vizier lashed out again, Alexander finally spoke: "It appears to me we have misread the legend. I was almost afraid that my soul would not be 'pure' enough to realize it. But it seems we had not taken the prophesied song literally enough." As Varrak's composure begins to disintegrate, the rebels soon become aghast at the epiphany the former vizier had just realized. "Yes," the Emperor jovially announced, "by killing me you had made my soul pure. That was the final piece of the puzzle: death! You poor fools! By trying to stop me you have ultimately sealed your fate!"

In a final act of desperation, Varrak unleashes a fully powered blast of fire directly towards Alexander. The Emperor does not even attempt to deflect it, he stands perfectly still as the fire blast strikes true. But once the smoke clears, he stands completely unharmed. Every rebel present tries to attack Alexander; be it with sword, hand, or spell. But nothing works. Alexander almost gains amusement in seeing the rebels struggle to even lay a scratch on him. After a while of letting the rebels attempt to hurt him, he finally participates in the battle by unleashing a single lightning bolt upon Varrak. The bolt completely knocks down the squirming

vizier. After merely one attack, Varrak is helpless to continue fighting. Marley soon follows him. Alpheus falls next. Finally, Aym is knocked back as the last rebel to yield to the god-emperor.

No one is left to stand against Alexander. Their energy had already been vastly depleted in their previous fight against the Emperor, but against a god, there was nothing any of them could do. Alexander cannot help but chortle at the rebels' collective despair: "You had fought so hard to defend your world of misery for NOTHING! How it frustrates me so. You are unable to see the truth of what I fight for. You blindly struggle for your pathetic ideas of freedom and chaos with no regard for the light. You fight for what is, and yet you fight against what could be. Do what is right and give up." Marley is the only one who can manage the words to bite back against the god-emperor: "N-never." Alexander's demeanor falls back to a cold dissonance. He asserts that if the rebels wish to be erased from the old world, then he will grant them this request. "No books nor stories will carry your names," Alexander commands, "but before your existence is forgotten, I shall punish you for your crimes against the innocent."

The sky has become pitch black. Only distant howls and echoes of the darkness are heard. Haven opens their eyes to a world of shadows. As they gather their bearings, they quickly put their hand upon their throat. Their wound has healed, but it is clear that they are no longer walking the earth. It was not a difficult equation to solve: this was the afterlife. A voice called out to them, one powerful and familiar. The voice of Vakari shouted: "Haven!" The rebel leader was only slightly relieved to hear the voice of the dragon. The rebel leader had shared the news with Vakari: "Even after I had bested my fear I have failed you. I know you said what I have to 'be,' but I cannot be who I am not. I'm sorry, Vakari. I'm not your champion." The rebel is soon staggered by a deafening roar. They realize that the voice that had spoken to them is not disembodied. A harsh wind is blown against them as the vibrations of large wings are heard. Haven looked up to see a gargantuan wyvern standing above them. This was him, the mighty dragon of the night. This was Vakari.

"You did not fail," the dragon reassured, "you heeded my instructions. You believed. In my words, in the rebellion, and in the stone you believed. But most of all, you had finally believed in yourself." Haven asserts that belief alone is futile and that despite their will they still died before Alexander. Vakari states that Haven's journey was always meant to be led here, to appear before the dragon god and fulfill their purpose as his champion. Haven says that it would be pointless to do so, as they have lost their life and will be unable to protect those they care for. At that moment, Vakari closes his eyes and taps the center of Haven's forehead with his claw. Through a telepathic vision, Haven sees the scene transpiring atop the Ebony Keep: the Ascended Emperor Alexander and the hopeless torment of their rebel friends. The sight horrifies them to their core. The rebel suddenly becomes desperate and asks Vakari to intervene.

The dragon commands that the gods must not intervene in the mortal realm. He states that the only thing he can do is swear Haven as his champion. He asks Haven if they still have the stone with them, to which the rebel dejectedly admits that it is still in the mortal world next to their corpse. But as Vakari reaches into Haven's stomach, his claw phases through the rebel's body and pulls out the Dragon's Stone. Astounded, Haven pleads with the dragon to use the stone's power to help their friends. The dragon reiterates "It is not I that can help your friends. It will be you. I told you that you are the only hope in defeating the emperor, and that fact has not changed." Vakari states that if Haven puts their hand upon the stone, they will be granted the power of a dragon and admitted as champion to the god of darkness. He warns however that

only the resolute will survive the transformation, and if Haven's will falters they will remain deceased. "I have nothing more to lose," the rebel leader commands, "let me see the stone."

Back on the tower above the Ebony Keep, Alexander ruthlessly tortures the rebels with several bolts of lightning. He admits that once they have fully experienced the pain they have earned in their treachery, he will finally let them die a merciful death. As he begins to charge the electric shackles binding the rebels in place, he suddenly stops. A noise begins to ring in his ear, one that becomes impossible to ignore. He turns to see a faint tear in the fabric of reality pulsate with a dark energy. Varrak's eyes widened as he seemed to recognize the gateway that had opened up. Suddenly, a mighty roar explodes from the dark passageway. In a hue of violet and black, Haven Valentine soars out of the gateway with an altered appearance of their own. "Impossible..." the emperor mutters. The rebels, exhausted from the suffering brought unto them by Alexander, all awash themselves with joyful relief at the sight of their rebel leader alive.

Haven had shifted into a humanoid appearance: Their body is human, but they now bear the horns, wings, and claws of a dragon. Their eyes are a striking magenta with the sclera becoming pitch black. They take a deep breath and command that Alexander release their friends. The rebels are tossed to the wayside, their importance becoming null in the eyes of the Emperor. He is appalled at the newly resurrected rebel leader but asserts that whatever power they have acquired they are still dwarfed by the power of an absolute controlling god. He strikes Haven with a blast of lightning, but the rebel is quick to evade the attack. "Absolute control you say?" the smarmy rebel chortles, "it seems that may not be the case with me." Alexander stands in disbelief. Haven was truly something different.

Alexander commands that whatever futile resistance the rebel will put up, it will be meaningless against an immortal god. He orders that "this new gift of yours is impressive, but you are no god. I will end the suffering of humanity, and no matter what you may do my will is ironclad." Haven takes a deep breath, "Your 'will' shall burn, ascended emperor." The two begin to stand perfectly still. They anticipate the other to make the first strike. The other rebels, fallen to the ground due to their exhaustion, turn their heads to witness the superhumans' stand-off. The wind of the storm around them howls. The light of the sun displays the two foes as if the very heavens watch to see the battle of fate that is mere moments from beginning.

In a near-instantaneous flash, the two charge each other into a clash. Each hit is fast; blindingly fast. Faster than even the mere mortal eyes of the attending rebels can follow. Every clash shakes the ground beneath them, every blast glistens with a colorful burst of energy, and every single strike upon the other echoes with a blaring roar. The rebels knew what they were struggling to witness was beyond a mere duel or even a battle. This was a legendary conflict. One that would decide the fate of the world. The battle between the resolute dragon rebel hero and the willful ascended emperor. Soon the fight is taken to the sky and into the storm clouds towering above the castle.

Behind the dueling demigods was a turbulent sea of storm clouds. The thunder roared as if it were an audience of ghosts cheering the legendary battle. It was clear that Alexander was the more powerful opponent, but Haven's speed outwitted and weaved every blast of light that the Emperor threw at them. Alexander had even caught a natural lightning bolt from the storm and redirected it to fire against Haven. They respond with a magic attack of their own; a great breath of fire towards the Emperor. It would do no good in harming him, but the flame

blinded the area in a large violet light. Through the fire, Haven soared through and charge-tackled the Emperor with their horns.

The resistance Haven put up was proving to be the end of Alexander's patience. They clashed higher and higher until the pinnacle of the storm was reached. They were now outside of the clouds and in the upper atmosphere, with the sun covering the ocean of turbulent clouds in an orange twilight. Alexander became relentless in his flurry of light attacks, giving Haven no time to counter the Emperor. If Haven were to subdue him, they would have to strike carefully and they would have to strike hard. They begin to prepare a combustion spell within the palm of their hand as they continue to dodge Alexander's blasts of lightning and light.

They quickly found an opening to close the distance. They quickly flew to give Alexander a resounding kick to send him spiraling back into the storm. After regaining his senses, the Emperor's anger quickly flared. His hands charged with furious static, he flies upward to the top of the storm to attack the rebel leader. As he clears the clouds, he finally sees Haven within his sights and charges headfirst into the rebel. But as the foes are face-to-face, Alexander realizes that Haven had a spell of their own in preparation, and the maneuver they had pulled with the kick allowed it to get ready. With one furious cry, Haven unleashes the explosive attack point-blank onto Alexander.

The resulting blast is gargantuan. It deafens the fighters on the ground and can be heard from hundreds of miles away. The explosion disrupts the cyclone as well, and the storm weakens as a result. The turbulent gales of the violent storm quickly diminish as the screams of the explosion dissipate. The rebels strain to pull themselves onto their feet with what little energy they have left. Their mortal view of the divine war that had occurred offered them little to ascertain. Until Haven descended above them and landed on the battlement alongside them, they were completely blind to the outcome of the battle. Haven looks around at their rebel comrades in a glance that speaks the words "It is done." This look would soon disappear as they would receive another visitor from the heavens: Alexander comes crashing down onto the pavement, only minorly hurt from the explosion.

Haven readies themselves into a combative stance, but their exhaustion is difficult to conceal. The remaining rebels can do nothing but brace themselves for the impending battle, as whatever power will take hold is beyond them. However, Alexander does not attack. He shouts in frustration and turns to contemplate the fight. He begins to sneer, "I just...don't understand! Why do you fight so persistently for this world?! Why can't you let me take control?! Don't you understand that I'm not going to bring harm unto anyone?! Can't you realize that I just need absolute control to END war and death, not further it?! Damn it all, CAN'T YOU SEE WHAT I'M FIGHTING FOR?!"

At that moment, Alexander turns to the rebels to await some kind of answer to his question. However, what he sees shocks him into complete and utter silence. His serious expression of rage suddenly shifts into one of realization and hidden sadness. The rebels did not see what had shaken the Emperor so thoroughly. But Alexander's point-of-view speaks differently: standing amongst the rebels in a battle-ready stance was Lutheria Everhart. Her face and stance were just as defiant as the rest. At that moment, Alexander understood everything. His lips gave the slightest hint of trembling. His pupils quivered. He quickly turned away from the group, but for a quick moment the rebels saw it: tears welling up in the Emperor's eyes.

The storm around them went from weak to complete dissipation. Rays of light from the sun soon pierced the clouds, and the downpours and gusts ceased. The fog of the precipitation lifted, and the rebels could see the vast ocean that neighbored the Ebony Keep. The fighting within the capital city had ceased. Uncertain on whose leaders had claimed victory, the Arinian soldiers and the Cyprus mages slowly settled into a tense cease-fire. The rebels took in the skies clearing around them, but could not keep their attention off of their foe. But Alexander's demeanor was different. It was dejected, sorrowful, and defeated.

Haven is confused. They do not trust the Emperor and they demand to know what he plans to do. Alexander defeatedly says that he plans to do nothing. "Are you...giving up?" Varrak asks. Alexander states, "In my conquest to acquire control I finally saw the reality of who I was. At that very moment, when you had stood defiantly against my will I finally understood. I lost the battle of truth." The rebels have yet to grasp the meaning of Alexander's words, but as the solemn Emperor looks upon the ocean horizon with an expression of heartache he mutters "You want my empire? Take it. I don't...I want nothing to do with it now." Varrak confesses that he does not understand. Alexander replies that he perhaps never will.

He begins to spread his wings, which puts Haven and the others on high alert. Alexander reassures them that he will bring no harm unto them, rather he is leaving. He recognizes that the will of the human spirit cannot be controlled, even by a god, and as such the world he sought to create with the Relics is impossible. He commands that he will go beyond the mortal world, and see if he may yet be able to create one himself. The earth, however, is theirs. "But heed my words," Alexander warns, "the empty throne will call for the ambitious and sinister. Do not leave the world worse than when I ruled it." With no more declarations to be had, Alexander begins to fly off. Haven is in disbelief and feels that justice has not been served. Varrak is confused, and almost contemptuous at the Emperor's parting words. The other rebels are just relieved not to be dead. Thus, Alexander soars into the heavens beyond the world of mortals, never to return.

It was finally over. Emperor Alexander Arinia was gone. And with him, his world-spanning empire would fall. The Arinian guards formally surrender as Varrak, the rebels, and the Cyprus Collective take the capital of Eretria. Varrak would formally announce the end of the Arinian Empire before the masses, a declaration that would be met with a mixture of disbelief and celebration. Within the Ebony Keep, Varrak would return to the battle-ridden throne room where he gazes upon the empty throne with a victorious expression of delight.

The rebels are gathered in the main square of Eretria. The townspeople recover from both the storm and the battle, and bustle around the rebel group. The sight of Haven is jarring to them, however, and as such they receive a fair share of awkward stares. Aym breaks the silence by asking what they plan to do now that the war is over. Haven admits that the war may not entirely be over, as they have no idea what will happen with Alexander's disappearance. "There is always the chance that Alexander will come back one day," the rebel wagers, "but I get the feeling that may never happen. And if it does, we'll be ready for it. All of us." Aym admits that being a part of the rebellion was his drive in his life. He had no desire to return to Hell and give the reins to his other alter, "but...I can't escape the truth. I can't deny who I am. Who Haborym is. I think it's time I go back." Marley asks if they could perhaps get a drink before they go their separate ways. The rebels unanimously agree.

The Arinian Empire reels from the loss of its Emperor. Many cities celebrate the fall of the Empire, with the city of Durban in particular festively celebrating the empire's fall. Jormund returns to the city, now cut off from Marley he seeks only one objective: rapid expansion of his criminal empire. Haven returns to the town of Folia to reunite with their brother. Aym meets with Freyja to seek passage back to the underworld. Alpheus takes a vessel to the Northern Sea to meet his kind. Varrak assembles his compatriots and other loyal associates to plan the new government of the twelve kingdoms. Marley returns to the destroyed rebel base and sets up a small memorial for his fallen brothers and sisters. Across the land, the people of the former empire both mourn and reunite as their future remains uncertain but their destinies remain in their hands.