



*by Matthew S. Carauddo*



Copyright © 2018 - 21xx, Ziwalos Productions. All Rights Reserved. No reproductions of any kind are permitted without express permission. No portion of this work, nor its media, images, nor any other materials such as: copy, text, icons, graphics, nor headers may be reproduced in any form without express, demonstrable permission from the publisher (Ziwalos Productions, L.L.C.), except as permitted by U.S. copyright law.



<https://www.Diamond-Dragons.com>

~~~ BOOK 1 ~~~

*"Before I start, I must see my end.  
Destination known, my mind's journey now begins.  
Upon my chariot, heart and soul's fate revealed:  
In time, all points converge, hope's strength re-steeled.  
But to earn final peace at the universe's endless refrain,  
We must see all in nothingness... before we start again!"*

Castle 'Kessoshaero' (artwork by Klaudia Bezak)



## CHAPTER 1 -- "The Road Often Traveled" (Prologue)

The battle was lost! But the elder dragon's retreat flight was a serious, calculated strategy. As his earthen-brown wings rhythmically snapped in the relative wind, sounds of devastation echoed at the rear. The sun's rays radiated a ferocious heat upon that Starsday, and the planet's two moons were partially visible... but a deep sense of foreboding haunted the natural beauty of the lands known as 'Taelondria'.

Far below, a worn but well-kept cobblestone road separated two swaths of towering, millennia-old trees. As the ancient dragon's shadow rippled over the stonework and chaparral, he descended. At the rocky path's vanishing point resided a glorious, multi-colored, crystalline castle. But this was no *ordinary* fortress--not built by the hands of a hundred men--Nae. It was forged by the claws of *dragons*.

These majestic creatures christened this keep 'Kessoshaero'. It was not for humans to understand.

Wages of war continued to reverberate far behind the old leader as his altitude decreased. Ranged assaults from sky high still exploded far in the distance. The elder patriarch--named Lejimoto--gracefully touched down as his wings recoiled. Without so much as a pause, he effortlessly shifted into a stalwart stride down the wide track of sandy bricks. As he marched, his wings folded into helical layers at his back, grateful for the respite. But there was little time to spare: the vitric walls and hallowed grounds of Kessoshaero awaited.

Elder Lejimoto was a true warrior, but also facing the proverbial eleventh-hour of his life, well past his physical prime. But behind his majestically designed bifocals, Leiji's aging teal eyes shrouded more important concerns. He feared that his orders to regroup at Kessoshaero may have come too late. Elder's sharp claws bore remnants of what he'd faced in battle: fragments of *glowing bone*. His own wounds were inconsequential, but unfortunately, this was not the case for many others. Warriors. Friends. *Family*.

Reflecting as he paced down the path, Leijimoto considered a dozen tactical choices. Refracting in the sunshine, Leijimoto's twelve sinewy digits displayed ornate rings of various gemstones. Subtle power swirled within the adornments; as if light, fog, and mist were trapped under glassy spheres of crystalline wonder...

Mysterious energy *also* seethed within Leijimoto's fierce cerulean eyes. And lost behind those noble eyes... *were distant memories*. Chronicles of eons past; a society of dragons which embodied vast knowledge, true honor, selfless bravery, and immense history. These dragons (or 'Zell' in their unique language) were not merely soulless creatures buried within banal legends, nor were these winged titans hellish beasts to conquer. Neither did they hail from folklore of flying lizards hoarding troves of silver and gold. The Zell of Kessoshaero constituted a multi-faceted *family*. A society of writers, cooks, strategists, warriors and minstrels alike--but also: poets and *dreamers*.

But upon *this* foul Starsday, dreamers' dreams were shattered. This war was Taelondria's worst in Epochs, and Leijimoto brewed upon the land's dire circumstances. As he marched ever closer to Kessoshaero's drawbridge, several innocent, adorable woodland creatures peeked from the lush thicket at his left and right. These were familiar, innocent little loves ('Gleckos') which Leiji would have normally taken moments to greet, care for, feed, and even with whom to invoke 'conversation'! But, Nae--no time--not now. Elder Leijimoto regretfully passed by each and every furry critter with little regard, offering only crumbs of forced smiles.

As he arrived upon the castle's drawbridge, his footfalls echoed into its circular chasm below. After passing a dozen of Kessoshaero's guards, he was soon but a wings-length from the colossal, crystalline main gate. He reached into his utility belt. Obscured by his leathery scales (and a meager purple cloak) was a regal, three-pronged, aureate key. This key was unlike any which humans would have ever created. The coppery, golden artifact contained multiple complexities--tiny gears, intricate designs, and ridged latches. It boasted a pistol-like, karambit-style grip with three holes. These openings allowed a Zell's claws to slip through and to easily clutch the key--akin to a weapon--though it was nothing of the such.

It was not for humans to understand.

Before inserting it into the lock, with careful claws, Leijimoto skillfully shifted the key's triad of metallic parts, rotating angled pins and jagged tines. He slipped the three-headed device into its matching port which was recessed within the bolted door. His hand twisted counter-clockwise about forty-five degrees, clockwise sixty clicks or more, then finally--counter to near ninety.

Kessoshaero's complex locking system snapped and shuddered. Leijimoto's arcane knowledge granted the venerable old dragon successful access. The giant gateway's elaborately crafted merlons creaked and interlocking crenels parted, revealing the magnificent castle's interior...

\*\*\*

## CHAPTER II -- "Barren Thrones"

A vast room with towering, ancient windows normally welcomed trusted visitors, family and friends. But this Starsday was not graced with such luxuries. Twelve Zell (dragon) warriors planned to regroup at castle Kessoshaero to assess their strategies.



Inside this hall, sounds of steam, hisses and clicks seemed to suggest machinery and inner-workings of apparatus yet unseen. Centrally placed, an ornate oval table (intricately inscribed with 'Dragonspeak' all along its edges) was clearly meant to be the focal point of this conference chamber. There were a dozen seats surrounding the charcoal and ivory ellipse, all similar in magnificence.

Twelve empty thrones.

Elder Leijimoto entered the door to this chamber which hosted the Table of Twelve, and rushed toward his seat. But upon nearly passing a noble, 'grandfather' clock, Leiji slowed his pace, and carefully *listened*...

Full stop. In near-silence, the intricate timekeeper continued at pace and rhythm unfettered, but Leiji hardly breathed. Its stone and wooden framing blended with dozens of precisely placed crystalline engravings, boasting both mastery and magnificence. The clock snapped and sibilated as six gears pivoted underneath their cylindrical pins. These pins controlled six corresponding outer indicators, which wove circular paths at various speeds, traveling both counter and clockwise.

*It was a device not meant for humans to understand.*

Leijimoto inhaled with a patient pause, and turned to face this unique timekeeper. He stared, fixated. The sonorous chronograph churned, but seemingly no differently today than yesterday, yesterweek nor yesteryear. Same as it would tomorrow. But for some reason, behind his circular bifocals, Leijimoto glared with peculiar eyes as it cranked out a solemn cadence. He swallowed. Elder Leijimoto studied the grandfather clock's smokey emanations. Strangely, as if compelled, Leiji *addressed* the device as if it were *sentient*:

**"Zivalos. Do you reveal tragedy... or triumph this Starsday?"**

No response. Clearly, this timekeeper--this 'Zivalos'--had no answers for anyone. How *could* it? It was but an object--a machine. A creation of artistic wonder for certain, but merely an *artifact*. One without voice, except for that of steam, shifting gears, and ticking arms. After Leijimoto had yielded respite for even a delayed

‘reply’, he submitted to the relative silence, whispering in dejection.

*“Very well then... keep your secrets.”*

Distracted by the heavy burden upon his mind, Leijimoto turned away from ‘Ziwalos’. He reposed himself at the elliptical Table of Twelve, perched into the lighter-shaded of the two primary thrones.

Time passed, and soon enough... *sounds!* From the very door Leijimoto had stepped through not moments ago strode a dignified, magisterial, golden dragon. This venerable old Zell bore locks of wondrous white and grey hair all about his face, and his milky eyes exuded great wisdom. However, Artemis was *blind*.

No Zell--young nor old--detected the difference between Artemis’ methods of navigating land and air *even when compared to their own*. The thaumaturge functioned as if his eyes were as clear as Taelondria’s waters at dawn. None at Kessoshaero understood when nor how Artemis lost his physical sight, but it hardly seemed to matter. Perhaps it was at birth, or hundreds of Epochs beyond his younger days. Many probabilities. Still, none who knew Artemis seemed to have an answer--*nor did they care*--as, he was possibly the most intelligent of all Zell within the weathered walls of Kessoshaero. Ironically, he often ‘saw’ what others could not.

Just beyond the stone and crystalline hallway, this snow-bearded wizard emerged from the darkness. He was soon within line-of-sight of Leijimoto’s leathery form. From a short distance, he greeted his dear friend with a subtle nod and formal Dragonspeak: *“Ra Shulodd”*. Leijimoto gestured in return, replying with a more contracted: *“Shulo”*. This speech was called ‘ZellSpohs’ in their own language. Literally: ‘Dragon Words’.

The mystical Ziwalos hissed and clicked with complexity. Its six indicators spun, and each arm continued to rotate at individually unique speeds. Three times here, three more there...

*Six. Three and three.*

As Artemis approached, he passed the towering isochronon. His own demeanor (much like Elder Leijimoto’s) *also shifted* with a heaviness unseen. As the blind, aurelian Zell neared the darker side of the Table of Twelve, he could detect (or more accurately, *sense*) the ten barren thrones. Time churned away, sparking with puffs of smoke. Despite the absence of their allies, Artemis soon found his own seat, far opposite of Leijimoto’s. With exception to Ziwalos’ rhythmic sibilance, an uncomfortable silence filled their ears, hearts, and minds.

Leiji’s eyes valiantly fought but failed to avoid gazing upon one cold, empty seat in particular. Inhaling a somber breath, he fidgeted with his silver cane (which already sat upon the Table). Leiji soaked in the pain as his eyelids draped over his glassy eyes. As he exhaled in silence, his clenched jaw spoke volumes. Zell had fallen, but he could only wonder which of his ten family members would soon return. He’d lost track of so many during the fracas, it was unfathomable to accept that many would likely never return *home*.

As if to ease Leijimoto's subdued anguish, Zivalos bellowed, sputtering mist and flames! It was impossible for any other except a Zell to deduce what Time was declared by the clock, but Elder Leijimoto stood with serious authority, placed his open claws over a closed fist, nodded, and proceeded precisely on-schedule:

***“CHI-YONG TA SUUST. (Thank you for silently waiting.) I fear to ask... but... just us this Time?”***

Artemis paused. Clearly, Leijimoto desired confirmation. The old leader was aware that *some* would fall, but Nae, not ten--impossible--not *all* ten. But Artemis stared at Leiji--as if he could see him through his shrouded, silent eyes. In solemn reverence, the weathered wizard subtly nodded.

*Ten.* Leijimoto dropped his metallic staff back onto the Table of Twelve. In utter shock, he swallowed a broken, stuttered breath, and dared to peer at a second barren seat. The hollow pain seared like a breath of fire. Shattered, he quietly fought to accept it: the fates of ten warriors were now forever sealed. Not a deathly whisper later, Leijimoto's teary gaze fell upon Zivalos once more.

*“Tragedy, then.”*

*Ten empty thrones.* Zivalos' six tines churned with finality, rotating behind glassy facets. *Three and three.*

Elder Leijimoto slumped into his seat once more, and sighed a despondent release. Flash floods of memories rushed in, and Leiji recounted innumerable events. Histories. Friendships. Beloved heroes and family at Kessoshaero: *gone*. Ten dragons could never again complete conversations with him, redeem favors owed or offered, or even resolve petty arguments. So many had fallen--*too many*--and far too quickly. But another deep breath seemed to help. Some intangible force re-steeled the earthen dragon's will. Leijimoto exhaled with fortitude, and steered his focus to the *present*. It was a struggle, but he fought to undertake *initiative*. Action--and that right soon. He lifted his crimson and cobalt cane once again.

***“But there is always tomorrow. What of the young ones, Artemis? Hopeful?”***

Artemis inhaled as he painstakingly rose from his dark seat, and exhaled.

***“Zi... many Bo Zell remain. Most... unfortunately now without family. But, some indeed may bring us... Eyayeli!”***

Leiji gripped his helical spire and his insides stirred. *‘Eyayeli’*. This was a word which Leijimoto was sorely in need of hearing. A word which had not recently been spoken by *any* Zell--not for Sundays nor Moonsdays nor Starsweeks alike. It was a word which humans could not fully comprehend, but the closest translation was akin to ‘spiritual tidings’, or, in this particular case: *hope*. A storm inside of Leiji's heart brewed.

***“Some...? Or one?”***

Artemis smirked. This generated fierce adrenaline within Leiji's veins. It wasn't common for the copper-shaded wizard to register a smile without serious reason, so, when he did (and his ivory beard and brows perked), it clearly meant something *extraordinary* was nigh!

***“Leijimoto... why don't you gaze into their Jee and judge for yourself, Amal...?”***

Leiji's eyes glowed as he fixated upon his old friend. Almost as if he had been hiding a secret, Artemis reached toward the Table of Twelve's center and clutched a silken shroud. In a whisk of six claws, he uncloaked a large crystal, which was cradled in a metallic frame. This hefty gemstone was in the shape of what a human might define as a 'salt rock', or salt lamp. But this was no *ordinary* stone of crystal, nor was it comprised of salt. Transparent and full of clarity, it boasted a blend of so many sparkling varieties of jewels, it was unclear where one began and another ended. The twelve facets of this sizable gem radiated... and, speaking of faces...

Artemis invoked ZellSpohs (Dragonspeak): ***“ZI WA SHULO BO ZELL!”***. Loosely translated: *“Reveal and greet our young dragons!”*.

*FACES!* Images of young Zell magically materialized in the colorful facets of this crystal of communications! These young dragons (and one dragonfly!) were: Jackralvian, Link, Raeniya, Elliott, and Mestrius. All were well-known by both Artemis and Leijimoto alike. *All of whom you shall learn of as our tale progresses...*

Elder Chi-Zell Leijimoto stood tall, his spirit revitalized; his 'Eyayeli' overrun with adrenaline unequalled! He leaned upon his metallic staff. Carefully and closely, he inspected the Bo Zell within the gemstone. Curious, the old patriarch removed his delicate glasses, now mere claws-lengths away from the glassy rock. Leiji's bare, cerulean eyes glowed, studying the faces within the facets.

Zivalos steamed, and all six pointers triumphantly spun their course: *three West, and three East.*

Leijimoto's face ignited aflame with a toothy smile. Inside of his mind and his alone, the seasoned leader seemed to see and hear 'beyond' the mere images of the dodecahedron's facets. Echoed whispers of Kessoshaero's Past called out... *all within his mind!* But, more importantly, Leijimoto could taste and feel something *else* carefully folded between the fabrics of their Futures...

Zivalos roared its precise and mighty call, proudly sputtering a blast of both Flam and Frol.

Raising his arms and cane in triumph, Elder Leijimoto stood upon his throne and majestically proclaimed:

***“EYAYELI-HA!!”***

**\*\*\***



### CHAPTER III -- “Infinite Wings”

Shadows cast from Taelondria’s dual moons were unique, unlike those upon a planet with one such sphere in the void. Often, when both moons were at polar opposite ends, and each reflected sunlight upon the terrain... *shadows appeared ‘crisp’*. It was a phenomenon which few understood.

In fact, humans of Earth would never have comprehended the monumental scale of the planet which the dragons inhabited. It was easily closer to the diameter of Saturn or Jupiter. But it was difficult to be certain, as the Zell of Taelondria retained no chronicled explorations of space; or, so historical records expressed. Although they could fly with great haste and resilient endurance, as any atmosphere grew thin, a Zell’s lungs would dearly suffer. Had any chanced a voyage into the darkness, few to none would have endured. Even the mightiest of Zell were bound by finite resources.

But like dozens upon dozens of other planets, the environments in Taelondria bore some similarities. Oceans, forests, deserts, mountains, and swamps certainly existed. However, upon this particular night upon their planet, all regions appeared magically surreal. And during this mysterious eve upon their planet, an epic battle took place in the star-decorated skies of their lands, far, far away from Kessoshaero...

Amidst the gaseous clouds of the dark night, dozens of Zell swooped, dove, spun, flipped, and twisted. Symphonic bursts of elegant energies and flickers of flame countering ice glowed as gaping jaws unhinged. But the devastating destruction was often evaded by their magnificently poetic, helical aerobatics.

So many variant powers blasted throughout the skies (‘Oos), it was easiest to collectively identify them all as ‘violent arrays of elemental fury’. Streaks of fire versus ice, and vectors of lightning dissipated by acid--just to name four. But there were far more energies in play than solely these base four.



As the battle raged in the skies, they clawed and stung. There were far too many wings to count within this 'battle royale'. Too many to describe by name, type, age, demeanor and their individual histories. However, perhaps by focusing upon a mere TRIAD of these Zell, it would allow even the most common being to grasp an *inkling* of understanding. Certainly, creatures of legendary intelligence (with lifespans of similar duration) might one day begin to study just how multi-faceted the Zell of Taelondria *truly* were, but, overall...

*...Zell were not for humans to understand.*

~~~

Soaring like a bolt of lightning, Jackralvian, a white and silvery-grey dragon valiantly fought alongside his Zell Amals ('dragon friends/allies'). He was of no special regard, and seemed most like any other Zell, save one major difference. Jackralvian was *not* born with the power to breath fire, ice, lightning, acid, nor otherwise. This was not absolutely unheard of, but it was most certainly *rare*.

As Jackralvian swooped and slashed at shadowy assailants upon the eerie night, his closest ally and Amal, Link, battled more enemies not five wingspans away. But Link was not a *dragon*; she was a dragonfly!

Link the 'Ys Zell' was smaller than all of her dragon allies--about half (or less) the size of any traditional Zell--but she clearly understood her strengths and weaknesses twelvefold. Her immense speed made her a sight to see. Her rainbow-like wings and multi-colored patterns left a distinctive blur in her fluttering wake. As the cat-like sprite zipped about the skyline, she distracted and deterred their enemies.

Link had narrowly saved Jackralvian's scales on more than one occasion. This eve seemed to be an odd exception: Jackralvian was *crushing* his attackers--smashing through them like wildfire! Normally, this result was unheard of; most certainly rare. Kessoshaero's enemies were sinister monstrosities of glowing bone, known as 'Zen'th Zell' (bone / ghost dragons). Somehow animated even after initial death, these ghastly calamities fed upon the souls of the living in order to perpetuate their now *undead* existences. Normally, they were beyond deadly, but tonight, somehow, they were less so.

One Zen'th in particular sought to destroy Jackralvian. He (or 'it') was the most behemoth of all ghost dragons: *Nitrozite*. Nitrozite was a phantasmal, skeletal beast--oft referred to as the 'wraith of souls', and he commanded unspeakable demonic power. Despite his ghastly visage and vampiric existence, Nitrozite was as intelligent as any living Zell of flesh and blood--perhaps more so. He was no monster with which to be trifled. A gargantuan nightmare which not even the Grim Reaper itself seemed able to subjugate. Clearly.

And clearly, Nitrozite was poised to burst a destructive stream of doom *right through Jackralvian's heart!*

Fortunately, Raeniya, the red Zell of fire and brimstone flanked the foul monolith of bone, and Nitrozite's poisonous assault missed by a wing's length! Raeniya not only fought alongside Jackralvian and Link--but

she was also a best friend ('Amal') and mentor to both. More experienced and slightly older, her powers of Flam (fire / flame) were among the most extreme--even compared to her instructors!

Intervening, Raeniya charged Nitrozite and executed a mighty tail bash to his bony abdomen. Turbulently knocked out of control, Nitrozite tumbled through the skies as dozens of Zell engaged dozens of Zen'th.

Jackie, Link and Raeniya--The three Amals ('friends')--engaged in combat with their numerous ghostly enemies. On this surreal Starseve--there, folded into the maelstrom of Vas Tach ('massive war')--were far too many winged beasts to count. No matter where one began nor ended a tally of Zell--even when one fell from the Oos ('sky')--no final calculation could be made. Beginning a count of flying foes again--once more (as in, forever)--would yield more data, but nothing definitive: there were simply *hordes beyond dozens*. Results which *seemed* to be, or Nae--*were* endless Zell about the stars ('Vas Oos'). Beside this fact, a final sum was of no use to humans anyhow--*it was not for them to understand* (for all of Ziwalos).

Fire collided with ice. Lightning negated meteoric obsidian and dissipated poisonous gas. The Starseve's moons grew closer as the Zell and their dark foes clawed, tore, burned, and ripped at one another. Mad hordes flew, and countless skirmishes raged on. It seemed that there were more beasts and elemental streams splitting the airwaves than there were stars.

*Thunder and lightning.* Saturated clouds wept streaks of ice and water as the two moons moved in parallax. In a chaotic flurry of wings and claws, Jackralvian was separated from Link and Raeniya. He soon discovered that none of his superiors were in-range to render aid, nor did they have line-of-sight. Oblivious, each warrior fought their own battles elsewhere. Somehow, Jackralvian was isolated.

The ice fall and rain intensified as a dense fog swiftly rolled in. Jackralvian was alone, *but not for long*. Six hidden Zen'th Zell wraiths detected him, congregated, and engaged in breakneck pursuit! Jackie fled from the apparitions, unable to face such overwhelming odds. But the six spectral Zen'th kept pace, hot on his trail, closing with every snap of their insubstantial wings. They were nearly in range to overtake him.

Rumbling. *Lightning and thunder struck once more.* Six pursued. Three and three.

Jackralvian began to panic. Being *physically* assailed was one type of burden. But the overwhelming *fear* he experienced was paralyzing. Imprisoned behind these mental bars, his mind began to drown in a sea of what deaths might befall him. Every Zell of Taelondria knew that there was something beyond the horror of never again awakening. *Something far, far worse.* The soul-shattering fear that once a Zell was killed and thus, 'dead'--Nae, it was **not** the end: *it could be raised again.*

The six wraiths closed in. Jackralvian flew harder and faster, but it was no use: his stalkers seized him, mid-flight. Speared by their ivory stiletto claws, the silver Zell was trapped. Helplessly suspended in the rain as blasts of lightning flashed, Jackralvian's adrenaline masked his pain as he wrenched left and right. But a

ravine of sharp rocks loomed far below. Three Zen'th bashed and cut with brutal disregard while the other three demons immobilized his wings and lower appendages. Jackralvian was crucified against nothing but the Oos itself. He clawed and struggled to no avail.

*Slashes! Wounds!* Seething acidic breath seared his flesh. Ethereal claws raked. Jackie's blood-curdling anguish echoed into the blackness above and down toward the ravine below. But--oddly--no allies heard nor aided him. Only the six Zen'th listened, reveling as his unbearable cries of suffering fueled their hatred. Their stares were blank--emotionless. Strangely, the battlefield now seemed devoid of everything and everyone except the six Zen'th and the one Zell named Jackralvian.

He was *alone*. Hail and rain intensified. All at once, a blinding splinter from the sky struck Jackie's head! Smoldering, it left behind branching, burning scar lines upon his skull--types of 'Lichtenburg figures'.

Ironically, the blast of lightning was both a blessing and curse. Electrified and shocked, the six Zen'th Zell dispersed like flies driven from a cache of raw meat. However, although freedom from their clutches was the *blessing*, the *curse* was the very same: released, Jackralvian instantly plunged toward the perilous chasm. Spiny razors of stone littered a murky acid pit far below, shrouded by low-lying fog.

*Booming thunder rumbled once more.*

Time seemed to slow. Barely conscious, oozing blood, and his scattered vision blurred, Jackralvian tried to regain control. But his fractured mind was obscured by harrowing *fear*. His wings were paralyzed in similar form. He could not command them, but internally, Jackie prayed that they *would* right his descent, that they *could* stabilize his flight, and *must* slow his fall. But, Nae, Naesst--it was all in vain. No response.

*Jackie was about to die.*

Below, the tines of doom loomed. Closer. They grew devastatingly closer. *Closer!* Jackralvian's death-rattling howls echoed throughout the cold evening's air.

The silvery white Zell fell, helpless and *alone*. Raging blood inside his thick veins pounded and pulsed as he tried to cry out, but he could not even hear his own screams. *Closer*--mere wings-lengths now! His vision began to fade. All of his physical senses were stricken inert, totally useless. Paralysis and frozen nerves seized every single synapse as he fell victim to gravity, and to that of terrified, blind *horror*.

*Thunder.*

\*\*\*

'Jackralvian' (artwork by Klaudia Bezak)

## CHAPTER IV - "A Rude Awakening"

Falling... was more akin to *floating*. Sharp 'spikes'... were actually puffs of plush *bedding*. Bright flashes in the darkness weren't lightning at all, nor was it night: it was *morning!* And as it turns out, the waters hitting the Zell's face were neither rain nor were they hail.

Violently lurching upward from his bed, young Jackralvian found himself the victim of an elaborate 'hazing' prank! Mestrius, a young, aqua-colored 'ice dragon' had doused Jackie in cold water, a honey-like substance, and odd-colored feathers. Jackie was nothing at all like the heroic, muscular incarnation he'd imagined within his nightmare; he was the typical, fragile and young 'Bo Zell' self he'd been for Epochs. But now, he was *also* a sticky, wet, feathery mess!



Mestrius had employed his three Bo Zell buddies (young dragons) to trigger the convoluted contraption. Each Bo Zell burst into raucous laughter. As Jackralvian dripped and sputtered, the three bellowed with unending cackles. Mestrius' devious prank had worked with devilish mastery.

***"AAHHahahahaah! I can't believe it!"***

***"Again?! Jackralvian, yer so lazy!"***

***"Don't you ever rise and fly early?"***

The catcalls stung. Once his easily-amused Bo Zell pals quieted down, Mestrius spoke with a half-serious tone.

***"Overslept again!? That's like the sixth time... Jackraaaalvian!"***

A confident Zell of frost and ice, Mestrius may have been a dragon which humans might have classified as a 'lone ranger'. He didn't care for Jackie. In fact, he disliked Jackralvian's cohorts as well--especially Link, as she was not truly one of their kind. Not simply 'Zell', but 'Ys Zell' (dragonfly).

The three Bo Zell idiots ran their laughter's course, happily poking away at Jackie's raw embarrassment.

***"Elder is soooooo going to zap your lazy tail, JACKRALLLVIAN..."***

***"Ha! You look like a drowned Glecko..."***

***"Zi! You're toast... Rallllllvvian! Hahahahaha!"***

Jackralvian hated his long name. Jackie--a white and grey, growth-stunted, albino-like dragon ('Zell'), brushed himself off, arose, and glared. For a brief moment, his thoughts flashed back to being the powerful hero in his *nightmare*, but it wasn't *reality*. Merely imagined illusions of grandeur.

*"Stop calling me that. What'd I miss?"*

*"Miss?! Just now, Starsday or LAST Sunday? You're missing EVERYthing: look!"*

One of the slovenly three opened the curtains and revealed a swath of light from the colossal oval windows. A second Bo Zell angrily indicated parade activity outside. A procession of Zell congregated, merging into a singular path. They headed toward The Courtyard of Courage, where all of their celebratory gatherings were held. During these moments, Jackie hastily cleaned up, attempting to adjust to the sudden chaos and mischief. Mestrius was almost disappointed to admonish Jackie, but did so with giddy satisfaction.

*"Are you serious, Jackralvian?! This is for Titan's deeds! You completely forgot."*

*"STOP calling me by that name. And, I didn't forget. I was asleep!"*

The three Bo Zell glared as they shook their heads, unimpressed. But, unbeknownst to all, a Zell named Raeniya had cautiously approached the door to Jackie's room. The red Zell of fire stood just shy of anyone's line-of-sight as she overheard the rude awakening. Mestrius immediately countered Jackie's tired excuses.

*"Rest. Sleep. That's just great. And typical of you, Ralvi. The bravest warrior ever to take flight, and YOU'RE still in bed."*

*"Not as if you'd know anything about bravery, Jackralv--"*

*"Bravery comes in many forms..."*

She'd startled them all. Raeniya was already extremely displeased with Mestrius and his entourage of bumbling Bo Zell--for several Epochs at this point. Many Tides and many again, she'd put up with all of the snide remarks, under-handed whispers of jealousy and vitriolic insults. She'd even endured their reckless arrogance during training. But Epochs had now passed, and they were all far too old for such brackish nonsense. Insults became less and less *innocent*, and leaned heavily upon the stroking of Mestrius' pretentious *ego*. An ego which could cost lives during *wartime*.

Mestrius and the Bo Zell didn't like Raeniya much, either. 'Much' meaning: none at all. They sarcastically feigned greetings. Simultaneously. Synchronously. Rudely.

*"Ohhhh, Shulooohh Raeniyaaa--"*

*"Ohhh, Zi, Shulodd, Raen..."*

*"Shuuuuuloohhh, Zell Raeniya."*

Raeniya expected their abject sarcasm and mirrored it. She crossed her arms. Never a good sign.

*“Shulo.”*

Undaunted, Mestrius proceeded without fear nor concern.

*“Who do you think you are: Violetta? Treating us like common Bo Zell!”*

Raeniya didn't even blink, but her insides fumed. She *hated* being compared to Princess Violetta, especially because she wasn't anything of the such: neither dainty, nor haughty, nor decadent nor... pretentious.

*“You ARE Bo Zell, Mestrius. We all were once. Nothing wrong with it.”*

*“It is when you're lazy. Hah! Bo Zell RALVI here would SLEEP through any Vas Tach!”*

Raeniya knew more about the misery and horrors of Vas Tach (war) than anyone in the Soporichambers. She'd already experienced serious battles against truly deadly enemies--quite different from safe, controlled sparring matches. If anything, she knew the value of tactical choice over risks and losses.

*“Stealth is far wiser than brazen, unplanned Vas Tach. Maybe not slumber, but YOU could learn to act more QUIETLY!!”*

Teasingly, Raeniya 'attacked' Mestrius with her fiery breath. Mestrius marginally panicked, but quickly regained his composure. Flam and Frol (fire and ice). She crossed her arms.

*“Ahhh!! Raeniya, you tail biter! The Elders will hear about this!”*

*“Don't be dramatic. If I'd meant to hurt you, you'd know. Consider it a lesson... Bo Zell.”*

*“Spare us your 'lessons'! You're weaker than an Ys Zell, anyhow.”*

Raeniya barely reacted. Everyone in the Soporichambers knew precisely who had top marks of Chi-Foi (honors) in combat training, and which Zell did not. She turned her attention to Jackie, whom she'd intended to awaken for Titan's ceremony in the first place.

*“Speaking of Ys Zell... where's Link?”*

Jackie shrugged, clearly unaware of his dragonfly companion's whereabouts. At this point, he just wanted to be rid of Mestrius and head out to the ceremony. He muttered to Raeniya under his breath.

*“We should gooooo--”*

But Mestrius persisted, ignoring his attempts to deflect.

*“Oh, you and that little buzz fly... what's with THAT? Isn't she one of THEM, Jackralvian?”*

Jackie really, really hated being hailed by his full name.

*“She's NOT a ghostie! And stop cal--”*

*“I don't trust her. Or you. Come on, we're missing it, let's go.”*

Mestrius and his merry band of Bo Zell brethren triumphantly marched toward the chamber's exit.

*“Sooooo busted! Lazy tail biters...”*

Dejected, Jackie sighed and slumped back into his bedding. Still exhausted, he had a lot more upon his mind than Mestrius' chastising warnings. Something far heavier than gobs of honey and feathers. Raeniya spoke.

*“Idiots. Just forget about them. But, Jacks--you look... drained. What happened last night?”*

*“Well, Linky and I WERE out late trying to collect rare gems...”*

*“Why? And past curfew, I imagine.”*

*“It wasn't THAT late!”*

Unconvinced, Raeniya tilted her head and glared as she crossed her arms yet again. Another bad omen.

Jackralvian and Link were *always* up to something. Usually, their mischief was harmless fun. And although Linky was usually the primary instigator, Jackie rarely refused to play along. To be fair, Raeniya also enjoyed it when they included her in their silly adventures and tomfoolery. But an ominous inner warning signaled something *different* this Sunday. Something mysterious. Jackie looked *ragged*. Not in a normal, 'he didn't sleep well last night' demeanor, either. Obviously, he lacked proper rest, but it couldn't have been that alone.

*“It really wasn't so late, Raen. But I do feel drained... Sholh.”*

'Sholh' could hardly be translated into human language. It certainly meant 'tired', but also something far more drastic. A heaviness deep within the soul, but something too obscure to describe in most languages. 'Sholh' referred to someone awakening from their slumber, and yet, *still* felt ragged and frazzled.

But just then, as if timing was often key and lock in Taelondria, the third member of this triad of friends approached. Link the Ys Zell (dragonfly) fluttered around the corner, just about to pass through the open door of Jackie's room. Her iridescent wings glowed with an almost-prismatic light.

A cat-like, serpentine sprite, Link was a bright, multi-colored creature. Quite jovial of spirit this Sunday, Linky carried a sack of gems which was nearly her own size and weight. The bag swung to and fro as she changed vectors, which wreaked havoc upon her flight maneuvers. She struggled, but adapted.

***“Jaaaacks!! I got one! The rest were no good, but this one might have fire resistance! Pretty cool, hanh?! Get it? Cool? Anyhow. Hey, are we going to Mr. Univer--”***

Unfortunately for Link, she was completely unaware that Raeniya was on the other side. Link made a hard left turn at a hefty rate of speed, and blindly collided with her fiery friend (‘Amal’). Being that she was so much smaller, Link erratically bounced off the gorgeous Zell of Flam. Raeniya shifted focus, but she was neither harmed nor did she budge. Link, however, twirled out of control, and her tiny claws naturally lost hold of the sack of gems. The bag splattered to the tile ground and spilled out small, imperfect shards of Rubies, Sapphires, Emeralds, and more. Frazzled, Link awkwardly attempted to finish her thoughts.

***“--verse's... uh, Titan's... uh--ceremony. Shulo, Raeniya!”***

Link’s cute whiskers perked up as she offered a toothy, cheesy smile. Raeniya peered at the scattered gems littered upon the dodecahedron-shaped tiles. She assessed the sparkling mess, then reclaimed Link’s button-nose as a target for her inspecting eyes. She crossed her arms AND tilted her head.

***“Shulo... Ys Zell.”***

Link knew *that* tone. She fidgeted, and her furry ears slightly folded. Doe eyes wide, Link chanced a very subtle ‘eyeballs only’ glance at Jackie. Both knew what Raeniya’s demeanor signified. To evade further trouble, Link employed her most prized tool of conversational tactics:

Pandering.

***“Ahem... Raeniya! You... you... look so... RADIANT! I mean... your wings, your Talos, your Jee--”***  
***“Save it, Linky. I know you two have been up to something, and--”***

Jackie saved Link.

***“UP to something? We haven’t done anything. I’m just tired! Sholh!”***

It was usually the other way around. Link was always getting *Jacks* out of trouble. But, the two were sworn to secrecy by Artemis regarding this particular fetch quest. Raeniya wasn’t likely to divine anything useful. Link should have left the matter alone, but instead, the little Ys Zell somehow deduced that even more pandering was ideal.



It was not.

*“Up to something?! Why would we... be up to ANYthing but getting ready for Mr. Univ--”*

Fanfare and cheering from the distant ceremony shattered the Ys Zell's babbling nonsense, reminding all three that there were more important events this Sunday. Hazing pranks, exhausted Zell, and spilled bags of gems all fell to the wayside. Jackie nearly fainted from the blast of adrenaline:

*“CEREMONY!! We're really late now! Let's go, Link, let's GO!”*

He'd barely finished his outburst, but had already scooped Link into his claws faster than lightning's strike. The two flew out of his bedchambers quicker than Raeniya could rest her claws on her hips. The Zell of Flam was blindsided: before she'd even realized it, the two friends ('Amals') were halfway down the hall, nearly outside the main door of the Soporichambers!

*“Hey! Rahlaik! Wait for me!”*

The ceremony in the distance looked promising. No weather concerns. Decorations were still being placed and organized, but it appeared as though everything for Titan's honorary commemoration was proceeding gorgeously. It had been a beautiful dawn as well: the sun glimmered, and a light breeze carried a comfortable, carefree warmth. Nothing seemed amiss. The skies were clear, and the tree leaves fluttered like the wings of one-hundred Ys Zell in the wind...

It was a perfect Sunday.

\*\*\*

Nitrozite's Lair (artwork by Klaudia Bezak)



## CHAPTER V -- "Shadows and Bones"

Clearly, not all Zell were of flesh, blood and *life*. Some beasts of Taelondria were indeed 'animated', but not exactly *alive*. Far from Kessoshaero, through and beyond the Desert of Marrow, where craggy mountains amidst pools of toxic sand traps abounded... *was a phantasmal lair*. A dwelling not simply 'of the dead', but one which housed the **UN**dead. Inside this fortress within the core of the rock-face was a cold, dark, and dreary existence. The 'Zen'th Zell' (Bone and Ghost dragons) resided within.

Nitrozite's chambers were akin to that of a dark wizard's. An ethereal library lined the walls, along with bony metal braziers and candelabra. Blue and amber flames crackled, drifted, and swirled--as if alive, but yet... not. Like the Zen'th Zell themselves.

Nitrozite sat in his spiky throne with a luxuriously commanding repose; back to his subjects. Reaching into a small cabinet of bone nearby his marble work table and arcane shelves, he selected a chalice forged from the claws and spine of an Ys Zell. Pouring from an oddly-shaped, funnel-piped carafe of what seemed to be blue and red blood, he held the drink aloft and sipped at his leisure... *as he chanted phrases of evil*.

The glowing Zell of dust and doom turned the pages of an old text with sharp, decayed claws. His bony digits wielded ornate rings of varied gemstones. Reading incantations, he continued to whisper; confidently intent to invoke... *something wicked*. The skeletal, broken remains of an Ys Zell were strewn out upon the marble work table before him. As he gazed downward at the fragile bones, Nitrozite's words seemed to permeate deep into the tiny serpentfly's skeletal corpse!

Scarlassh--a Zen'th Zell servant and executive of Nitrozite's command--cautiously entered. He did not glow as did his Lich King leader, nor was he nearly as large. One of Scarlassh's eyes was seriously maimed, raked with four scribbled scrapes all throughout. It was anyone's guess as to whether the eye still functioned, but his

other undead monocle was mostly clean and clear. At Scarlassh's left and right followed two Zen'th Zell sentries. Lanky and nervous as Scarlassh was, he fearfully indicated a warning to his guards.

*“Wait behind. He does not like being interrupted...”*

Primarily against his will (but in favor of duty), Scarlassh began the long, arduous dozen paces which led toward Nitrozite's bone-framed, metallic, marmoreal throne. As he drew closer, his master's hellish chants (the very 'SpohsZell' which he whispered) induced Scarlassh to quiver with dis-ease. Nitrozite murmured: *“Plok Cay Zen'th Cyur”*. Scarlassh did not truly understand.

Scarlassh slowed as he stepped within mere wingspans of his lord, just at the back of Nitrozite's imposing throne of luxury. The ethereal Zell of Zen'th ignored all distractions, yet Nitrozite was now aware that some intruder tainted the sanctity of his studies. But, he was too busy chanting spells ('SpohsZell') from the pages to break his spectral concentration for insignificant trifles. His hissing hexes did not relent.

*“Plok Cay Zen'th Cyur... PLOK CAY ZEN'TH CYUR...”*

Scarlassh waited for what seemed an eternity. He physically swallowed and leaned closer, lowering his head and wings, intent to issue a report. Halting him without even a gaze, Nitrozite raised a glowing, skeletal hand.

*“Suuuuuusssst...”*

Nitrozite's breath broadly drew out syllabic resonance like the very mantras he chanted. Scarlassh froze where he'd planted himself, closing his decayed mouth. Nitrozite returned to sifting through his mysterious tome of magic. The slow, deliberate turning of pages, his echoing chants, and occasional sips of blood from the Ys Zell bone chalice grew maddeningly unnerving. The two sentries which had entered with Scarlassh earlier looked on with hesitation and *fear*. They remained in the background, knowing better than to intervene. But Scarlassh had a pressing message, and, against any iteration of better judgement, the slash-eyed Zen'th Zell dared to address Nitrozite once more.

*“My liege--”*

*“VAAAS SUUUST!!”*

Nitrozite slammed the chalice to the marble and it was instantly pulverized. A scattered mess of bone, crystal, and metal debris remained--now amidst a shallow pool of dark blood. Scarlassh cowered and knelt, immediately aware that his very undead existence might now be forfeit. And *no* Zen'th Zell desired to be eradicated. Very different from a normal doom, no amount of magic could raise nor re-raise anything from *eradication*. And only this degree of pulverization could assure such an aspect of finality. Nitrozite had eradicated many: an action he did not hesitate to inflict upon those who crossed him.

Despite Scarlassh's concerns, Nitrozite meticulously closed his book with a single claw, and carefully placed the leathery tome of magic upon the marble workbench. The wizardly wraith slightly tilted his throne toward his accursed intruder. His deep, scaly vocal tones pierced Scarlassh like poisonous claws.

*"I was reading..."*

Nitrozite's visage and body were obscured by his position.

*"Uhhh... hh... ah... apologies, my lo--"*

*"...and concentrating...!"*

Scarlassh's babbling brays were cut short as Nitrozite proceeded with his maniacal incantation. Without further guidance from the antiquated tome, his voice echoed: *"Plok Cay Zen'th Cyur"* once more. Snaps of sparks and twirling swirls of bony dust gathered about the Ys Zell's remains! The ghostly phantasm absorbed its decayed energies as the corpse dissolved into dry soot! Nitrozite glowed brighter--his eyes and limbs throbbing with increased energy.

*"NEVER interrupt what you do not understand. EVER."*

*"Nae, never! Nn--Never! Forgive me, my liege!"*

Nitrozite clutched the book and rotated his throne full about, revealing a shadowy, ethereal specter of a Zell. His eyes: empty sockets which glowed of red, purple and amber. There were signs of tattered clothing and sinew all about the crenulations of his bone-work, but, merely *memories*.

*"Now... what is it, Scarlassh?"*

*"It... it was a Ttt-TRAP, liege!"*

Scarlassh had a propensity to stammer and stutter. But not simply when he was in the presence of Nitrozite. He stumbled with his Spohs in front of Cascadia... Thalagost... Vilophage: any and all.

Nitrozite disliked defeat--especially when it was delivered in spite of outnumbered foes. He'd sent *five* to face *one*. Victory should have been nearly guaranteed. The odds were stacked *in favor--not against!*

*"Failure. Expected, of course. Written all OVER you, fool!"*

Nitrozite launched the manual of magic at Scarlassh. It connected with visceral power, and several pages whipped and darted asunder, eventually floating to the stony ground of the desert mountain lair. Scarlassh cowered deeper, stung by both failure, and the heavy, leather-bound manuscript.

*"My Lord, but, but it... iiiit was Titan! TITAN!! He... you... know that... he is-- too... too--"*

*“Continue.”*

*“Too strong! Too... too Vas for... for ALL of us! We lost Undreath and... and--w... we--”*

*“Continue!”*

Impatient with the laborious explanation (rife with pregnant pauses), Nitrozite snarled and looked away. He shut his glowing eyes. *Visions abounded.* Nitrozite began contemplating the battle via his own internal senses of deduction. He envisioned his army stalking Titan, but instead, the azure legend of strength took the initiative. All the while, Scarlassh stammered on, describing the destruction and command Titan reigned over the inferior band of bony thugs. The azure Zell was certainly a force with which to be reckoned. Muscular and nearly as large as Nitrozite himself, Titan may have been the only Zell who could rival him--physically, that is.

Nitrozite postulated every strike, every monumental wing slap, every raking of claws. Imagery of the brawny hero smashing through and laying waste to his Zen'th Zell allies seemed... logical. Titan was aptly named.

*“...Vi--Vilophage was sss--struck down, severed into two! Even Thalagost fell! Nitrozite, the two si... sisters also intervened! We were unable to retrieve it, barely escaping!”*

The ghost of ethereal bone was especially displeased to hear of the two oceanic sisters having their curious claws involved. He couldn't be certain exactly *how* they had interfered, but he made a mental note--with desires to exact revenge when the Time was correct. Scarlassh blathered on, but it was short-lived.

*“Nitrozite... Nitrozite! What will--”*

*“Suust!”*

Nitrozite spread his twelve claws wide, exhaled with displeasure, re-opened his eyes, and leaned far back into his throne. He selected a fresh chalice from the cabinet of bone, and poured himself yet another dragon blood's drink. As he sucked at the thick crimson and indigo liquid, he cast a devious stare at his one-eyed servant. He truly hoped for a glimmer of intelligence. Perhaps one day, but Nae--not now--not *this* Starseve.

*“Hmm--truly an incredible warrior. Cunning. Brave. Unique! We shall send... congratulations.”*

Nitrozite heartily drank, casually accessed a technical panel, and continued working. He quickly studied the pages of one work, and summarily cross-referenced others. He scribbled notes and perused scrolls and tomes.

Scarlassh was confused--bewildered beyond his normal state-of-existence. Expecting death, the ghastly Zen'th balked, glancing to his bone dragon assistants--each of whom offered no solace nor understanding. Scarlassh finally (and erroneously) shifted his attention back to Nitrozite.

This would have been a particularly excellent moment for Scarlassh to have acknowledged his master's order, performed an about-face... *and exited.* Scarlassh, however, did not.

*"I... but, Nitrozite, why wou--"*

Nitrozite slammed his ivory fist on the marble, instantly halting the chatter. He whispered a hiss:

*"Was I... unclear? Confusing?"*

Scarlassh froze. It was at this moment that Scarlassh knew--he should have left. A sense of deep foreboding filled the air. Lit fires blew, whipping wax and sparks all about! Loose objects trembled, falling left and right, while others slid asunder. The ghostly braziers and Transylvanian candelabra littering Nitrozite's chambers throbbed with red and purple illumination! A rumbling of shifting stones echoed everywhere.

*Sudden swarms!* Throngs of grey and brown undead Ys Zell appeared out of seemingly nowhere. The zombified creatures chaotically seethed and buzzed overhead and in all directions.

*"Execute my decree or you will lie next to your fallen brethren!!"*

Scarlassh and the Zen'th Zell sentries hastily retreated, dodging the infestation of locusts with each step. The three knew their orders, no matter how odd Nitrozite's directive seemed. They would deliver the congratulatory message to their enemies at Kessoshaero. Whatever such trifles as this would achieve remained to be seen, but the three Zen'th Zell had no intentions of further aggravating their master.

Still settled into his throne, Nitrozite turned to face the archaic workbench once again. The swarm of Ys Zell had nearly dissipated, and a calm but eerie ambiance returned to the shadowy laboratory. The ghostly demon of the dead was finally left alone to his studies and incantations... *or was he?*

Nitrozite's second in-command was a ghastly witch of cunning evil. Casscadia lurked in the dank shadows whenever evil was present. She wore a tattered cloak and hood of black, and the remains of Casscadia's body were slathered in a viscous and deadly-scaled purple. She slipped into frame like a shadow scheming to become more than merely the absence of light...

Nitrozite was immediately aware of her approach--even without line-of-sight. The evil wraith possessed a level of intuition which defied logic, and tapped into the extra-sensory. His studies were many, and Nitrozite's powers grew stronger with each passing Starseve.

*"They do not understand, Casscadia. They cannot Jee beyond a single, pitiful Skyseve in this-existence."*

*"They do not seek change, your greatness! But... I am surprised. Why would you wish to revert to your former 'fleshed' self? I find our powers to be doubled in our deathly form!"*

Cascadia's question was anything but non-sequitur. It was true: Zen'th Zell seemed to possess extended strength and endurance when compared to their living counterparts. But this was solely via the unholy graces of feeding upon and deracinating the recently perished souls of the living. Still, there was something more about their state of existence which Nitrozite knew, but Cascadia did not. Something he was not revealing.

The skeletal wraith ran his claws over the many chronicles he'd previously organized, continuing his research. He drank a hefty swig of blood from his chalice, and ruminated as he lamented. Nitrozite's experiments and careful analysis of the tomes he'd collected over the Epochs had served him well. They provided edification in ways which few Zen'th could truly comprehend. Much like humans... *they did not understand.*

***“We ARE powerful. But this state of transition is... incomplete. I sense it... I feel it. You do not know what I Jee.”***

Cascadia was instinctively intrigued. She too had studied well and learned much as the Epochs had passed. Nitrozite was also unaware of what *she* knew, or, perhaps it was better described as what she did not reveal. And so, the deceptive witch followed suit, also pouring herself a coagulated drink.

***“Perhaps one Moonsday, you shall teach me. But for now, I have a new plan, liege. One which Titan could NEVER survive!”***

Nitrozite stopped. Intelligence and cunning were traits which Scarlassh rarely offered, but Cascadia seemed to embody both more and more with each cycle of Taelondria's two moons. With a devious curiosity and a smirk, the phantasm of bone looked up from his devices.

***“Continue...”***

***“We approach the wrong way, lord. The path is not direct... but circular: a way of STEALTH!”***

With conviction and revenge upon his lips, Nitrozite sneered, revealing a bed of stiletto-shaped, serrated teeth. The hollow sockets he had in lieu of eyes pulsed and throbbed.

**“CONTINUE...!”**

Shadows flickered as the wind blew, and the demonic candelabra burned onward into the night. Their collective laughter echoed throughout the stony halls of Nitrozite's skeletal, craggy demesne.

\*\*\*

Leijimoto & Althe'aya (artwork by Tadeo F. Phillips)



## CHAPTER VI -- "A Living Legend"

The majestic skies ("Oos) above Taelondria's forestry were clear and vast, but so too were the cobblestone roads winding throughout Kessoshaero. Even Zell often *walked* in lieu of flight. Would a non-winged creature constantly *run* in order to arrive at each and *every* various destination? Nae--and it was a distinction which few considered. As Zell soared amidst harried battles--dramatically shifting speeds, vectors, altitudes, and more--such athletics required *endurance*. Thus, the Zell could become exhausted just as would any creature amidst such strenuous activities. Certainly, the *fortitude* which a Zell possessed was far more *monumental* compared to most creatures--Zi--the Zell were mighty. But, extreme fights or flights (or both) left them duly fatigued. No Zell could fly indefinitely, let alone with neither respite, nor drink nor food! And so, it was common for the Zell of Taelondria to WALK to many destinations, and actually--quite often.

But, when one was in a *hurry*...

Jackie, Raeniya and Link *hurriedly* attempted to catch up with ongoing preparations for Titan's ceremony. Already late, the three heroes flew low over the winding cobble paths from the Soporichambers. It was fairly certain that Gertranimor was going to be *angry*. The old, charcoal-scaled matriarch of Kessoshaero was a pearl of wisdom, and a joyous delight of motherly love, but she detested tardiness. It was a rule of Kessoshaero for all Zell to assist with chores, and there was much to be done. Time was short. Cooking, cleaning, construction and more needed to be completed *on Time*.

As the three rushed their short flight to the Courtyard of Courage, Link's especially keen sight allowed her to



spot a few loose gems, and into her bag they went. Raeniya continued to ponder why they collected these 'Jhaeoos'. Jackie and Link had *never* been so dedicated to gem-collecting--Nae--not *until very recently*. She was quite curious, and skeptical of their intentions.

***“What’s with the gems?”***

Immediately blurting out a response, Link had grown tired of kept secrets. Although she was *normally* quite the chatterbox, on this particular Sunday she was feeling especially ‘sans filter’.

***“Are you kidding?! Elder Artemis has been on the prowl for as many--”***  
***“LINK!!”***

Jackie, however, was not as willing to unveil a single shred of information. The old wizard had sworn them to secrecy, and it seemed under the most serious of conditions. Artemis even scheduled a private conference with the Bo and Ys Zell: to meet the two near the old Ivory Tower in the forest. It was all so wildly mysterious and enigmatic, but clearly for reasons which only Artemis seemed to be privy. The amber sorcerer had never before requested such a discreet quest. Or most *any* quest, for that matter. It was either trust or desperation.

Intrigued, Raeniya ignored Jackie’s attempts to stifle Linky’s blabber. Raeniya didn’t care about the Jhaeoos themselves; only the ‘*why*’. It was one of the reasons she hated being compared to Princess Violetta.

***“I thought that was last Tide?”***

Link was quick to retort as her colorful wings fluttered out a dizzying rhythm.

***“Well... it was. But then--”***

***“Liiiiinnnk--”***

***“WHAT?! She has a right to know!”***

***“I’ve a right to know WHAT?!?”***

As if Timing was always of the essence in Taelondria, the three Amals had just caught up to the tail end of the crowd, and before they could begin, they were instantly swarmed with questions and directives from a slew of their superiors. Time for work! So much had already been prepared, but there still remained a solid dozen chores for Jackie, Link and Raeniya. Tables to arrange, decorations to assemble, torches and braziers to ignite... all to honor Titan’s glorious achievements.

It was a perfect Sunday.

~~~

The Courtyard was glorious. Nearly every Zell of Kessoshaero was in attendance. Gratitude unlike any before flooded the hearts and minds of all as the final touches were completed. Displays reflected Titan's selfless achievements to protect the city, his relentless work to train and to teach, and for defeating multiple, simultaneous assailants. The azure powerhouse fought with the strength and resolve of two--Nae--three Zell. But, perhaps of even greater monumental clarity was Titan's pure *heart* ('Cyur').

The beautiful 'Courtyard of Courage' was a tranquil melding of nature and innovation, peppered with crystalline markers and way-points. Precision-cut stone decor was fashioned by the dedicated design work of talented, expert Zell. But this Sunday, special additions amazed and dazzled every eye and ear. Vellum-lined lamps were lit aflame, hung high, and triumphant music was strummed by the brilliant Bardiche: Kessoshaero's primary minstrel (with accompaniment by fellow Amals). Gorgeous foliage and fresh flowers were carefully arranged. Tables of delicious edibles and pitchers of glorious, honeydew liquids abounded--all complementing the natural landscapes. Even the stone and wooden staircases which led through the forest, over brooks, and into gazebos were strewn with ivy, lighting, and precious gem shards. Simply *enchanting!*

Titan wore a distinct black, onyx amulet. He'd carried this artifact for Epochs, far before he'd set even a single claw upon the grounds of Kessoshaero. But few understood *why* he donned the pendant, nor where and when he'd received it. None knew if it held power of any sort. Most postulated that it was a family heirloom, or possibly an item which once belonged to a partner. But again, none knew for certain. And fewer still (if any) were likely to trivialize Titan's rigorous daily schedule by pestering him about such trifles.

A dozen Zell guards stood at-the-ready, holding intricate staff-like torches. These poles would later be lit via varied bursts of breath from the sentries. Tall braziers of metallic and crystalline origin were also to be illuminated by these staves. Later, all of these would easily be extinguished by icy breath from other Zell.

Front and center at the Courtyard, Elder Chi-Zell Leijimoto stood tall, awaiting Titan's approach--proud as any life form could be. He had longed for this moment, and here at long last, it had finally arrived. That perfect Sunday. It reminded Leiji of a very special Sunday--one long ago. His mind was briefly whisked away. Time stopped, and he reflected, revisiting memories of when he'd first laid eyes upon fair *Althe'aya*...

*Althe'aya* was Leijimoto's love. He'd encountered her long ago, peacefully sleeping amidst a meadow of silky flowers and wild grass. All at a Time when he thought no other Zell could possibly exist in the lands of Taelondria. The castle--Kessoshaero--had not yet been built, as, the two Zell *themselves* were the ones who would later construct the fortress! Prior to this, Leijimoto assumed he was alone. He had flown a lonely journey, far from his previous refuge, retreating from a planet-wide Vas Tach (great war). He believed himself to be the very last surviving Zell. Fortunately, he was mistaken, and in the best of ways. *Althe'aya's* eyes, golden colors, and very existence had struck such a chord in his Cyur (heart), it was indeed relevant to quote Bardiche's own poetic phrases: "*Music is Magic!*". To Leiji, *Althe'aya* was BOTH. Her voice was of unequaled intelligence and verve, but she resonated vibrations of magic into his soul beyond *all compare*.

CHEERING! Elder Leijimoto's vivid dreamscape quickly dissolved as he heard the raucous cries of his subjects. He smiled, fully re-awakened to the wonders of it all. The celebration was glorious, and the Sunday: perfect. His eyes beamed as did the magically decorative torches.

Soon, the azure, monumental Titan approached. A long, double-row of six and six ceremoniously outfitted Zell lit twelve corresponding braziers as the hero of legend passed. All eyes revered Kessoshaero's champion, and few to none could compare. He was the protector which anyone of any land and any Time had hoped for--one whom they prayed would forever remain.

Titan's pace slowed to a respectful gait as he admired his dearest leader. Claws over his fist, he greeted Leijimoto, bowing with deep adoration and humility. He, too, had awaited this moment for so very long. Leijimoto was not only his liege, but more importantly, his Vas Amal (loosely: 'friend of deep respect/love').

A Sunday like none other! The sun was bright. The breeze wafted a refreshing and crisp scent, and tree leaves fluttered like Ys Zell wings. Awaiting Leijimoto's command, the crowd grew anxiously silent. With a nervous breath, a nod and a smile, he signaled to his subjects that it was all to begin. Compelled to truly communicate the event's importance, Leijimoto dramatically swooped his arms in a grandiose, circular manner, finally placing his right, open-clawed digits over his left closed fist. This was a custom of honor--a gesture in which Zell paid respect, greetings, and even farewells. Some may have understood it as a 'bow', perhaps demonstrated from expert martial arts practitioners within other cultures. Leiji's six outstretched right claws specifically formed an oval, ring-like shape, but three of those claws simultaneously aimed toward the heavens. The left fist underneath represented a sense of grounded strength and resilience, but compassion as well; and also: a promise to *offer* all three when required.

It was not something which humans could truly comprehend.

*“Approach! TA RAS ZI WA CHI-YONG! Yong... for your Vas deeds, my courageous Amal... and our seasoned warrior of Kessoshaero... LoSumm... Chi-Zell... TITAN!!”*

Magnanimous roaring cheers split the wind in the trees. Even the nearby ocean waters 'heard' what heroics resonated upon this perfect Sunday. Titan knelt, bowing his head. He rested his wings low to the ground--a symbol of allegiance and great respect. In his distinct, deeply resonant tone, he answered:

*“CHI-YONG. Chi-Foi... Eyayeli-ha!”*

*“EYAYELI-HA, TAEUUSAH-AY, Foi Amal. You have faced much evil, Titan. Yet, even amidst treacherous Vas Tach, you are calm; at peace, with the Suust of Oos. And may the plentiful Oos watch over us ALL!”*

As it was customary, all Zell of Kessoshaero echoed Elder Leiji's words with a resounding, unanimous shout:

***“VAS OOS WATCH OVER US!! JEE ALL!!”***

These were ‘group prayers’ requesting that the heavens render aid, and for a sense to ‘see all’ of the Future...

Jackie, Link and Raeniya were certainly interested in the days to come, and quite respectful of the ceremony, but, Raeniya’s curiosity got the best of her. She wanted to know what Artemis was planning when he’d requested Link and Jacks to collect Jhaeoos shards. To her, it didn’t make much sense: what was the point? Certainly the imperfect fragments were useful here and there, but... why Jackie and Link? And why so secretly? She felt compelled to figure it out, ceremony or not.

*“Right to know WHAT??!”*

Raeniya whispered at mere claws-lengths, so as not to disrupt the ceremonies. Jackie and Link glanced at one another, then, back to Raeniya. The two simultaneously mimicked Elder Leijimoto’s usual methods of quieting a crowd...

*“Suuuuusst!!”*

No creature enjoys being ‘shushed’ (even though the *sound* of this dragonspeak was closer to ‘soost’), but Raeniya knew that pressing the issue would have led to embarrassment and dishonor. This was *Titan’s* Sunday: not the moment for silly banter about imperfect Jhaeoos collections. Still, her interest was piqued.

Link surreptitiously delivered her bag of shiny treasures to Artemis. He smiled and nodded, acknowledging her fine work. Link returned to Jackie and Raeniya, and the three continued to vaguely listen as Elder Leijimoto rambled on. Oddly, Raeniya felt as if something was awry, but ignored it and quipped:

*“They’re not even COMPLETE Jhaeoos! Just... useless shards!”*

More cheers erupted from the crowd. Leijimoto’s speech had finally ended, and so, the azure hero of Kessoshaero was prompted to respond (as tradition decreed):

*“The blessing has been mine, liege. By focusing only to serve my Zell Amals, I am steeled with both Chi-Yong and Chi-Foi. My Talos and Cyur have been put to their best usage: service.”*

*“Zi, Amal. And we too, have Vas Taeusah-ay for you! As do our... many... Bo Zell? Now, where ARE our Future heroes?”*

Elder Leijimoto scanned the courtyard. Raeniya realized that they were *not* in their correct positions. This explained why they hadn’t seen Mestrius, nor their green-scaled Amal, Elliott (a happy-go-lucky Zell of acid

and poison). Jackie, Link and Raeniya scrambled forward, nearly knocking Elliott over. He beamed, gleefully ecstatic to have located his only Amals. Leiji finally caught line-of-sight of them, nodded to the plucky younglings, and charmingly smiled, claws over fist. Although Elder Leijimoto wasn't concerned about their tardiness, there were other authorities who were *far* less forgiving.

As Link, Raeniya and Jackie had pushed their way into proper position, they suddenly found themselves face to face with one of their many superiors: Gertranimor. Motherly and nurturing as she was, Gerty was *not* lenient like Leijimoto. The pearl and ashen-shaded grand dame of Kessoshaero was *strict*: a Zell never to be crossed! Not if someone valued their teeth (or ears--she was often very loud). And, on the terrible occasions when Gertranimor was angry, she rattled off rapid admonishments with a dizzying haste! Anger *and* speed: not a pleasant combination. Luckily for Jackie, grandmother Gerty was in a pleasant mood this Sunday, thanks to the festivities. Besides: she actually *liked* Jackralvian. She hollered a response to Leijimoto.

***“They are the Future! OUR Future!”***

Although publicly proud, privately, Gertranimor smacked Jackralvian quicker than her tail bash, whispering a scolding: “*Late!! Why’re you always LATE?!*”. As Elliott watched, Jackie winced, praying that Gerty’s short but mostly painless assaults would soon cease. She only struck him thrice. It was a *mostly* perfect Sunday.

Bardiche noted the tardiness as well. He was not a medieval weapon in the most literal sense, but nearly: he was a *minstrel*. Zi, that is correct: a *bard!* Bardiche was ready to play for the festivities; his multi-faceted musical instrument (‘Leutronica’)--attuned to begin. This ‘Leutronica’ was a device capable of creating just about every subtle musical tone and sibilant percussion under the two moons of Taelondria. While adjusting three strings and three knobs, he jokingly spouted prose to his eccentric companion (named ‘Garjeegyl’):

***“Presently, our Future is late to the party. As usual... in the Past.”***

Bard smirked, but his ally scowled. Garjeegyl was a wiry, gargoyle-like Zell with wild eyes and a quirky demeanor. He floated nearby his poetic Amal, and scolded *him* for bothering to chide Jackie’s tardiness. Who cared? And why did it matter? Sunday was for celebration! To Jeeg, all that mattered was that everyone was having fun, and enjoying the drinks and food he’d prepared.

***“Alright-alright-alright, just leaves ‘em BE, Bard!”***

Garjeegyl had a very unique way of spouting ‘alright’--and, rapidly. Part of his quirky behavior, certainly--but it was both charming and endearing whenever he’d trill out: ‘ahriteahriteahriteahrite’ prior to, and *after* most anything he wished to say. Everyone loved him, especially for all the wonderful concoctions he’d dream up and dole out. Jeeg was Kessoshaero’s main cook, rations expert, herbalist, and mix-master of fine libations and wacky beverages! He’d prepared a literal throng of mysterious drinks this Sunday, and he intended every last one to be quaffed--bottoms up!

Suddenly, as if Timing was of the essence in Taelondria, a trumpeting fanfare echoed throughout the winds of the Courtyard (complete with pomp and circumstance), announcing the arrival of none other than the Zell Princess Violetta. A Chariot beyond the clouds materialized in the distance as it grew ever closer.

Everyone stopped and took notice, although it wasn't exactly a unanimous mindset of joy and wonder for all. Most *disliked* Princess Violetta. Some did not approve of her... behavior. Others merely tolerated her. Those who remained merely ogled her luxurious but sultry beauty--mesmerized by her seductive exuberance. Violetta was... controversial. Elliott, however, was always smitten by her silky ways--whether she was coming or going. Struck like a bolt of Thuune as he watched her float down like an angel from the heavens, his Jee sparkled like the Vas Oos. She didn't even know Elliott existed.

The Bard, as usual, subtly played upon his own words, as oft a poet is wont...

*“Spohsing of ‘as usual’...”*

As Bard observed Violetta's lavish caravan closing in, Dupree'--a Zell who fancied himself a 'Paladin' (at least, from a human's perspective)--stood nearby. The knight wasn't fond of Violetta, either. However, unlike his comrade-in-arms (Llewelyn), Dupree' believed that the Princess was merely young and impetuous. Her lack of sanctity and virtue were primarily signs of immaturity. This greatly saddened Dupree', especially because he'd devoted his life to serving fellow Zell (not unlike Titan). He shook his head in disappointment.

*“Oh by my sword and Althe'aya above.”*

Dupree' carried a sword which boasted a jagged blade. The metal resembled a lightning bolt's shape, but it was--of course--incarnated of steel, silver and bronze; certainly not of actual energy. Dupe also wore (extra) armor: a breastplate with chain rings and strong links separating key areas of the mail, all of which allowed good freedom of movement. No other Zell was as pious as master Dupree', nor did they carry nor wield steel.



Llewelyn growled and grumbled a sarcastic, disenchanted tone...

*“Errggnnnhhehheh, joy. Here she comes...”*

Llewelyn (an icy, faint cyan-shaded curmudgeon of old) didn't trust Violetta. Perhaps because he was an old-fashioned, hardened warrior, far older than the Princess. But her pretentious attitude, and air of haughty

disdain severely clashed with Llewelyn's blunt, serious nature. He did *not* 'use' his Zell Amals for pointless monetary nor societal gain. Gain, however, was Violetta's very *instinct*--much to Kessoshaero's chagrin.

And thus, the arrival of Violetta trumped even *Titan's* popularity. An amethyst Zell of extreme riches and status, she was adorned with large gemstone rings on all her digits... a circlet, two anklets, two bracelets, one amulet, and six 'winglaces' as well. The quintessential 'Cleopatra, princess of Dragons'. A truly hedonistic yet dainty Zell, always posturing to appear as twice what she wasn't, and thrice what she'd ever accomplished.

Descending into view, her four Zell servants paraded Violetta in circles as she luxuriously lounged in her bed-like 'Sky Chariot': a literal flying carriage of decadence for her convenience! With certainty, nothing was wrong with Violetta's lavender, butterfly-patterned *wings*, she simply preferred not to 'waste' her energies flying about when *others* could do it *for* her. How charming she was. But Elliott remained enamored.

The crowd cheered with wild abandon, parting in the center to make way for the gold and silver airship's landing. Shortly thereafter, the music, chatter, and excitement hushed into a curious silence. Violetta stepped down from the portal of her carriage, and addressed the entourage. She spoke with regal energy:

***"VAS VAS RA CHI-YONG, LOSUMM ZELL Titan! You honor the royal family with your strength, power, and virile cunning as a warrior, great defender of our city! None hold you in higher regard than do my father, my mother, and I. And thus, we present a glorious GIFT!"***

As she spoke, a monumental crystalline statue of the azure legend's likeness was hoisted into the courtyard's center, and summarily unveiled! Elliott's heart thumped. Titan stared at Violetta, leering with suspicion. His eyes fixated upon hers, searching for a hidden agenda--usually revealed by her transparent lack of tact. Still, he ceremoniously placed his left fist under his open-clawed right, and subtly nodded as he gestured.

***"Yong."***

She ignored his dismissive nonchalance and smiled, playing to the crowd. The gargantuan Jhaeos statue nearly eclipsed the tops of Kessoshaero's towers. Callously, it overshadowed everything within the Courtyard of Courage--the trees, too. The sculptured effigy skirted upon the edges of gaudy, irreverent design, and was *certainly* too large to be anything else but a metaphor for Violetta's... over-compensation.

Bardiche knew an opportunity when he saw one.

***"Subtle."***

Garjeegyl, Link, Raeniya, and other Zell snickered, but Violetta blabbered on, paying no pause nor notice.

***"Titan, in addition to this glorious statue of your likeness, I am also blessed with Chi-Foi to offer***

*yet another present to you: myself! We shall dine together this Moonseve. Perhaps YOU will tell me of YOUR triumphs, and I shall tell you of MINE...”*

Dupree’ shot a glance to Llewelyn, not three wingspans away. As Lew drank, he groaned. His eyes rolled so far into the back of his head, even Gerty felt it. Then, he grumbled and growled, sneering. Charming, indeed.

Titan was required to respond, but chose to do so with careful tact--mostly to negate the lack thereof from the Princess. Again, he nodded with subtle apathy.

*“Perhaps.”*

*“Zi, it will be certain. Ahem. Now... we celebrate your PROWESS!”*

The crowd knew that Violetta hoped to incite boisterous cheers, so, they obliged and acquiesced. It was better than hearing her endless drivel. Anything to get back to the celebration, chats and drinks. Artemis stepped forth moments later, prepared to deliver a speech of his own. His lessons were always of great wisdom: directly in contrast to Violetta’s vain, self-serving ramblings. An astute sorcerer, Artemis even donned the white beard and silver locks humans considered a ‘wizard’s likeness’. But, there was no coincidence here: it was simply a matter of age. Artemis was over **1,400** Epochs old (very loosely akin to ‘Earth years’)! It was not atypical to reach such an age: there were several Zell even older than Artemis. Leijimoto, for one. And Gerty was nearing her 2,000th Epoch--approaching what would normally be the ‘end-of-life’ for a Zell. And with great age came experience and wisdom. However, the ages of dragons were not meant for humans to understand: one Earth year was *not* identical to an Epoch, as, *their* planet’s diameter was *far* greater.

But Jackie, Link and Raeniya were interested in other matters of speech this Sunday (but also the food and drinks). As Artemis made proclamations of hope, inspiration and courage to the Courtyard’s entourage, his voice seemed to fade into the background. The three Amals focused upon Violetta’s shocking behavior. The triad most definitely *should* have been listening to Artemis’ great wisdom, but the Princess’s actions were *scandalous--enough* to take precedence. Frowning, Raeniya gawked at Violetta’s copious array of jewelry.

*“Prowess?! Wow, get a load of HER--”*

Link wanted nothing of the such. Or, so she retorted:

*“Naess, no way. All that jewelry and flashy nonsense makes me sick!”*

Violetta strutted and primped. The Princess was almost like a display cabinet of... wares. Sultry, suggestive wares. Raeniya and Link continued to inspect Violetta’s surplus of Jhaeoos.

*“Show off.”*

*“Zi, right?! I’d never use jewelry to flaunt MY powers. And imagine it, Raeniya: removing all*



*that nonsense EVERY single Starseve?! Nae, Naess.”*

Raeniya could barely contain her chortles. Link giggled. Both agreed that Violetta was quite haughty. In fact, Violetta often treated them as ‘lesser beings’. It was rare that she even addressed the two. It was possible she’d never done so. It was also entirely plausible that Violetta knew neither of their *names*. Charming, indeed.

Jackie, however, hadn’t cared in the least, nor noticed. The white Bo Zell had intently observed Titan throughout the entire ordeal, curiously studying the giant hero before he posed a question to his Amals.

*“What’s HIS power?”*

*“What?”*

*“Titan. He’s amazing, but... no Flam, no Frol, no Thuune... what are his powers?”*

Like Bardiche, Link rarely missed a chance to point out both irony and humor.

*“You mean OTHER than being humongous and stronger than a hundred of me?”*

Raeniya adored Link almost as much as did Jackie. She didn’t always scorn their tomfoolery.

*“NO one’s stronger than YOU, Link!”*

The Ys Zell grinned with a playful blush, but proudly agreed as she flew off, muttering a confident: “*I know, I know*”. She was trying to get a better look at some of the ceremonial fun as she casually quipped back:

*“I said one-HUNDRED!”*

Link, being an Ys Zell, was often misunderstood. She hinted to comparing Titan to *one-hundred* Ys Zell--not simply to herself *alone*--a fair correlation. In fact, one-hundred Ys Zell were likely *stronger* than any one Zell.

Jackie continued to study Titan with great curiosity. Raeniya munched on Brambleberry topped with Shallice. Dupree’ and Llewelyn drank heartily as Bard merrily played magnificent tunes. Elliott was Elliott, and mostly gawked at Violetta. The Sunday’s ceremony promised to be the most lavish, beautifully executed pageantry of pleasantries Kessoshaero had experienced in a long, long while. The first real triumph in at least three Epochs. The weather felt perfect, the wildlife frolicked in playful harmony, and the patrons of Kessoshaero were well-fed. Everyone drank heartily as they smiled from ear to ear.

It was a gorgeous Sunday. Nearly *perfect*.

\*\*\*

## CHAPTER VII -- "Words of Warning"

Titan had little regard for pomp and circumstance, but he deeply respected the extensive efforts which Leijimoto had infused into its preparation. But Leijimoto had been looking forward to the honorary celebration *far* more than had Titan. And although it was extremely satisfying for Titan to witness others smiling, laughing, and enjoying a well-deserved, carefree Sunday... the valiant azure Zell felt the proverbial 'invisible call' to remain vigilant and focused. He was always the last to eat... last to drink... last to stop training (even if he instructed), and he was the very last Zell into the Soporichambers after nightfall. But Titan had always gravitated toward rendering aid and service long before he'd made his way to Taelondria--far prior to meeting Leijimoto and joining the Zell of Kessoshaero.

So, even as the wondrous celebration in his own honor surrounded him at every turn, he worried, knowing something was not right. Titan had pressing concerns which he felt required immediate (yet relatively private) audience with Chi-Zell Leijimoto.

Artemis continued to edify and inspire the crowd. His Spohs echoed both wisdom and instruction--precisely what everyone expected from their cherished wizard. And although Titan normally absorbed each bit of his sage counsel with sincere respect, this Sunday, Titan whispered to Leiji. As he did, he produced a cylindrical device. This odd object was a holographic scroll--one with a dark warning.

*"Leijimoto--my liege. Have you read it? His... threats?"*

Leijimoto steadily surveyed the distant crowd. Here and there, he locked gazes with hopeful Amals within the crowd. Claws over fist (indicating 'Chi-Foi': honor), they smiled, and he lovingly echoed the gesture with his giddy patriarchal grin. Distracted, but not forgotten, he replied to his Amal and hero.

*"Zi, Titan. I have indeed, Amal. Chi-Zell Artemis briefed me, Skysday."*

From afar, Leiji connected yet again with his loved ones in the crowd, claws over fist. Titan held the scroll aloft, finally thrusting it toward his great leader. The message was a dire warning; the very same congratulatory message which the ghostly Zen'th Zell Nitrozite had instructed Scarlassh to deliver...

*"The young ones--our Bo Zell! **NONE** are safe, liege! We must--"*

*"Suuuusst. Titan, now is **NOT** the Time, great one. This is all for YOU, my Vas Amal..."*

He politely rejected Titan's insistence, holding up his left palm with gentle concern. Leijimoto subtly accepted the magical parchment, but *shut* and locked its subtle mechanics in short turn. The old patriarch removed his glasses and proceeded to carefully clean the gem-crafted lenses. Titan's jaw slightly fell in abject shock. Normally, Leijimoto would have immediately addressed the problem. Something was *different* this Sunday.

Cheers! The surrounding crowd was transfixed by Artemis as they laughed, agreed, and listened--entirely oblivious to the goings on with Elder and Titan. Leijimoto tucked aside his glasses. Titan was beside himself.

***“Chi-Yong, Leiji. It is my Chi-Foi. But... my lord of Lords; our Bo Zell! We m--!”***

Leiji clutched Titan’s shoulders with a serious but loving smile. The crowd cheered again as Artemis projected his lessons far and wide. Neither Leiji nor Titan heard, but Leiji stared deep into Titan’s wondering eyes. Titan stared back, and began to Jee: Leijimoto had longed for such a Sunday. For celebration. It had been Epochs since Titan had seen him so vulnerable. Nitrozite and his conniving ambition was not the focus.

***“They NEED this, my honorable Amal. I need this. And on this very Sunday.”***

Leiji paused to look up and away, but did not release his loving grip on Titan’s muscular frame. The time-weathered Zell stared deep into the Oos (‘sky’) as if he’d never once seen them...

***“Kessoshaero’s morale was beyond repair, Amal. But Nae, now... what YOU’ve done... they’ve begun again. You have ignited every last Zell’s Cyur like Vas FLAM! Where otherwise, all were shattered and lost! Instead, now, once more, once again... I am the Plok Tach SUMM I once was! I’ll not forget this, your greatness. Nor shall THEY!”***

Touched, Titan gawked. Timing and irony aligned as Artemis completed his own speech, and the crowd’s crescendo of cheers came to a gorgeously triumphant, sustained roar. Ironic, perhaps, that “the crowd roared” was a phrase well-known by humans, but indeed... when a Zell cheered, it was a roar nearly by default! Ironic too that the Zell could have easily been bellowing their responses to Leiji’s heartfelt evocation to Titan... in lieu of Artemis’ invocations. That is--had they heard any such wavelengths of inspiration...

The cheering continued as Leiji stared at his azure hero. Titan briefly put aside thoughts of duty. He detected tears welling in Leiji’s old, war-torn eyes, and felt some of his own. Elder Leijimoto had served Kessoshaero for every Epoch. He was a seasoned warrior, but also endlessly quested to provide hope and harmony to all--especially upon this Sunday. But, he’d grown old, as all Zell and creatures do. He desired peace.

The cheering subsided. Leiji chuckled as he let go of Titan’s broad shoulders, noting how his claws barely compared to Titan’s. Yet the azure hero’s similarly caring, gentle nature proved to be an amazing juxtaposition to his robust strength. Something which many others never noticed nor acknowledged.

Titan would make a genuine and worthy successor for the role of command. Of course, Leiji wanted to reveal this ‘passing of the guard’ to his hero at a much later date. And now was not that Time. All things were to come to be when the moments were right. When Zivalos ordained it. And thus, Leijimoto dared not ruin such a wonderful reveal. Especially not upon such a grand Sunday.

And it was a *perfect* Sunday.

The crowd's chants dulled into a buzzing hum of subdued conversations--vibrations. Sounds which ironically mimicked the trilling wings of Ys Zell, but of course, Link was the *only* Ys Zell amongst them all.

Artemis beckoned for Leiji to fly up and over, front and center, intent for him to begin the magnificent celebrations. Elder Leijimoto's duties called, and yet, all he truly wanted was to Spohs more with *Titan*. To smoke, drink, eat, laugh, and to recount old triumphs with his finest Amal. But now was not the moment for *that*, either. If Nitrozite's warning message would wait until after the festivities, so could further conversation.

Leiji looked to the crowd, then back to Titan. He smiled with zeal as he giddily draped his glasses back over his fierce blue eyes and slicked his white hair. Excited as any leader could be, he leaped upward and away!

As Leiji ascended, Titan had seen into his heart with better understanding and reverence than ever before. He now knew what it meant to truly *enjoy* a Sunday. To appreciate not duty, nor call of work--Nae: to cherish life and *family*.

Roars erupted as Leijimoto soared. Time had been well spent with Titan. With a toothy grin, the stalwart leader waved at his loved ones--excited as a Bo Zell--and engaged with his subjects as he approached. Artemis stepped away as Chi-Zell Leijimoto hovered above the center circle of the Courtyard of Courage.

Silence resonated. The sun gleamed. The winds were fair, and the gleaming oceans effervesced! Ahhhh--not just 'a' perfect Sunday. *The perfect Sunday!*

Leijimoto stepped forward, took flight, and soaked in the moment. He rallied his subjects with a loud, air-crackling bellow into the distance. They cheered, howling roars of love and smiles of ivory! Fondly, he reflected. The Zell scanned them all, listening to the overwhelming cries of elation. His thoughts were *almost* as if truly Spohs and truly '*heard*':

*"Althe'aya. All the hundreds of Epochs... but this... THIS is my best memory, tomorrow and forever. My golden angel... I miss you dearly. But this Sunday, I feel you are WITH me. You are mine, and I am yours. I send to you celestial Chi-Foi and Vas Taeusah-ay, my Taeuyeli. Althe'aya: I shall remember you for all of Zivalos... tomorrow, and also forever!"*

Leijimoto removed his glasses once more. The flare from the sun still seemed to refract through his Jee ('eyes') as he addressed the dozens upon dozens of Kessoshaero. But removing his lenses helped. Besides, Leiji enjoyed peering into the Jee, Cyur, and Eyayeli of his subjects...

The 'Jee' were the eyes. The 'Cyur' was the *heart*. And as for 'Eyayeli'... the closest explanation of this was the

*spirit and the soul. But, it also signified 'hope'. It was something most humans could not truly understand.*

***“ZELL AMALS! Chi-Yong Ta Suust. Normally, I would Spohs at length. But... this Sunday is so perfect, so flawless... I lack the Spohs to do it justice, and so, better to award it six moments of Suust. Chi-Foi to you all, Zell Amals. I appreciate you. I Jee you all. Your dedication. Your courage! Your Eyayeli. I have endless Taeususah-ay for Kessoshaero; and may the Vas Oos watch over us all. CHI-FOI, and VAS RES: this Sunday... is... OOOUUURRRSSS!!”***

Claws over fists. Echoes of “Chi-Foi!”, “Eyayeli-ha!” and “Vas Res!” resonated everywhere. The air was filled with roaring howls, zealous applause, and thunderous chants of morale! The perfect Sunday, indeed.

*But...*

Far and away--back inside the now nearly empty Castle Kessoshaero--there within the grand hall where the Table of Twelve proudly stood--Zivalos churned. The ivory and gold mechanism steamed, smoked, and suddenly clicked. As if Timing was instantly *wrong* upon this Sunday, the six arms of the clock *misaligned*. Three and three. *A broken tempo.*

Violetta’s towering crystalline statue (which she’d unveiled to honor Titan) *unveiled something all on its own!* In what only humans might have defined as a ‘Trojan Dragon’, the glassy monument shattered open! Out of the jagged Jhaeooos fissures spilled a literal flood of undead, dark grey and mud brown *Ys Zell!* The deadly drones immediately dashed about in chaotic, relentless patterns of attack. Panic at Kessoshaero ensued.

That wasn’t all. Hidden Bone and Ghost Dragons (‘Zen’t’h Zell’) struck from both shadows and foliage far in the distance! Partially *invisible*, the phantoms fired off volleys of bone arrows from secret vantage points. It was impossible to pinpoint the dozen attackers. The forest was vast; the greenery, thick. Dissenters also poisoned the mix, which made it difficult to make distinctions during the sudden maelstrom of violence! Immediately, many Zell spouted adrenaline-spiked assessments of blame--mostly directed at Violetta.

***“Dissension!! Violetta, this was YOUR doing! DISSENSION!!”***  
***“She’s set a trap!”***

Violetta desperately looked about, wide-eyed, noting only fear, anger, and mistrust coming from those whom she considered to be her *family*.

***“What?! Never! I am no traitor. How DARE you!”***

Dupree’ wasn’t concerned about pinning blame onto any Zell other than those assailing them at that very moment. Most of the threats were from the undead Ys Zell, but the incoming ‘sniper fire’ wasn’t easy to track,

either. Dozens upon dozens were struck from the left and right, and some *attacked one another!* Unfettered by the wild chaos, the valiant Zell of prayers and honor drew his jagged-edged sword.

***“Not only Zen’t’h Zell; spies in our very ranks! Althe’aya, protect us!”***

It was hard for anyone to know if Dupree’s invocation to the long dead Zell of gold would be heard, but without further ado, the armored Zell flew into battle. Others continued to assail Violetta with heated Spohs:

***“Violetta, how could you?!”***

***“You’ll pay for this!”***

***“She’s doomed us all...”***

***“Death will be upon YOU as well, cursed Princess!!”***

***“The Princesses’ gift was a TRAP!”***

Violetta’s eyes welled, wide as the two moons. Panicking, fear and sadness overtook her.

***“Nae, Nae! I... I am innocent! I--I... I... aaaaaaarrgggh!!!”***

Paralyzed, Violetta shrieked, retreating in instinctive cowardice. Her Zell servants immediately escorted her to the Sky Chariot, chanting *“Protect the Princess!”*. They launched into the clouds with haphazard abandon, nearly crashing moments after takeoff. But the decadent carriage and its precious contents soon soared off... leaving the Zell of Kessoshaero behind.

Hardly a stone’s throw away, just as Leijimoto attempted to re-position his glasses upon his blue Jee, *he was hit!* Leiji’s bifocals tumbled to the ground, as several bony arrows struck, protruding from Leijimoto’s scales.

*Elder Chi-Zell Leijimoto stumbled, wobbling.* His perfect Sunday was ruined, but it would take more than bone and marrow to kill such a heroic warrior. Dazed, he hesitated, but soon began a systematic search for his uniquely designed glasses.

Icy warrior that he was, Llewelyn took immediate action, barking three precise orders. Incoming attacks would be easier to assess from up high.

***“Defend the Crown! Protect Leijimoto! To the OOS!!”***

A dozen Zell echoed his command, yelling “Oos” (‘sky’) in ZellSpohs. This was one of the ways of the Zell: echoing to acknowledge an order (or even a prayer). An ironic similarity to methods of militarily-educated humans. Perhaps the two forms of life were not as dissimilar as initially imagined, but there was still so much which humans did not understand.

Intent to protect Leiji, Titan was interrupted by multiple assaults. More so than any other--as if he were a favored target. Some ivory shards protruded from the powerful Zell's steel-scaled exterior, but *none* fazed the great azure. He deflected some incoming projectiles aside. Titan scanned about, attempting to identify the sources of the sniper-style arrows. But, Nae--nothing--no visuals. He grimaced in frustration.

***“Vile treachery!”***

The chaos of Zell was relentless. Some took to the skies, others stomped across the forest floor, while others swooped around tree branches. Dissenters were few, but still hard to catch, and the Zen'th Zell were nowhere to be seen! *Only shadows...*

Elder Leijimoto absently, shakily retrieved his glasses. Time froze for him as Ziwalos sputtered. Leiji was exhausted. Epochs of Vas Tach ('great war') had run their due course. His muscles ached and his digits creaked. He stared in abject horror at the disastrous Courtyard of Courage. Magnificent tables of food, glorious drinks, gifts, decorations and more were ruined. Titan's *triumph* had warped into *tragedy*.

*The perfect Sunday. Decimated. Lost...*

As Titan fended off more bony arrows whipping through the trees, he could only chance occasional glances at Leiji--who still seemed almost frozen in Time. Leijimoto drifted, barely walking. His eyes were vacant, but longingly focused onto something (or someone?) deep into the horizon. Something unseen, perhaps...

*It made no sense to Titan!* Leiji was not heavily nor critically wounded: why did he stare and balk?

A single moment of Suust later, Titan began to understand. He could almost *taste* the lament which Leijimoto was beginning to experience. A spirit on the edge--the Dark Edge. *The Very Precipice*.

Bone arrows, spikes, spells of hellacious energy and more whizzed past Leiji from every angle--barely missing! *Leiji barely reacted*. Others sheared tiny bits of his meager cloak clean away. Titan swallowed. His mentor now moved at what seemed to be an *underwater* pace. The azure hero bellowed a shrill cry to his old Amal:

***“My liege!!”***

Leijimoto's reaction was also delayed. The old warrior absently pivoted. Slowly, he gazed upward at Titan's broken statue, the disaster of broken junk about the Courtyard... crushed flowers... shattered lights--all in chaotic disarray. He solemnly whispered to himself: *“All were shattered and broken”*. His face grew pale. This Sunday's tragedy took a terrible toll upon him. Leiji had longed for a Sunday of respite from Vas Tach. He'd *required* it for too long. As did everyone at Kessoshaero. A Sunday of triumph *over* tragedy.

*But this Sunday was no longer that day.*

Exhaustion of the soul set in. A tear rolled down Leiji's left eye. Then another from his right, much larger than the previous silky drop.

Titan continued to fend off incoming fire as the remaining army of Kessoshaero increased the 'radius of scope', searching for their unknown, unseen assailants far and wide. The battles had spread over monumental distances, which left Titan and Leiji almost entirely isolated from their Zell Amals.

***"Leijimoto!"***

The old leader barely heard Titan's second call, nor any other sounds. His mind ('Mea') was attuned elsewhere. He vacantly turned his gaze upward to the heavens where the sun shone bright. Another bone razor cut through the air (mere claw-lengths from his throat!) but nothing hit. Nae, nothing yet.

And so, Titan could wait no more. He would *not* let his best Amal, fatherly mentor, and sole inspiration in all of Taelondria fall to some dishonorably fired, stray bolt of bone! He would not let *anyone* fall if it was within his power. *Leiji would not fall upon this Sunday.* Titan rocketed forth with a thunderous howl, fiercely charging at his revered Lord... *and he tackled him!*

As if Timing was of the essence, had the great azure not taken action at that very moment, Leiji would surely have been riddled by at least three lethal spears. But neither Zell was struck as they rolled: they were *alive*.

Titan cradled Leijimoto, protecting him. The next volley of assaults were easily absorbed by Titan's defenses and thick indigo scales--he was only lightly wounded. Leiji still clutched his glasses and vacantly whispered...

*"Chi-Yong, Amal..."*

***"My lord! Please!"***

*"You were right, Titan..."*

***"My lord? I... right about what? Please..."***

Titan was almost *begging* for him to give the order. Another bolt streaked by. It was clear to him, though: Leiji had never dreamed he'd have to proclaim an order for Vas Tach on the very Sunday of *any* honorary ceremony. Leijimoto had grown tired of Vas Tach ('great war'). He wanted no more of any of it, but all other methods of negotiations had failed. There was clearly no choice, but the choice had to be decreed.

Chi-Zell Leijimoto slowly replaced his glasses. He stared off, watching both Zell and Zen'th, far in the horizon.

*"You were right. Like with the humans... Epochs before Ziwalos. Nae, there can be no EyaySuust."*

Titan's heart sank deep into a place which none could truly comprehend. He then knew what Leiji most



desired this Sunday, and every tomorrow after. 'EyaySuust' was impossible for a human to understand, but the closest explanation could be: 'peace'. A sense of harmony and respect for Life; and for the Universe's existence which the simple and banal word 'peace' could *never* denote with any true level of accuracy.

So, that Sunday of EyaySuust could never be. The Zen'th Zell were twisted. *Broken*. Their Eyayeli: *absent*.

***"Leiji. Please--my Vas Amal--the ORDER."***

It was Time. There was nothing else which could be done. No more negotiations, no Spohs of a truce nor some agreement in which the two vastly different societies could live in harmony. The Zen'th Zell only desired to consume, dominate, and to enslave all. Just as they had begun to subjugate the Ys Zell. *It would not end there.*

Leijimoto took a monumentally deep breath, and nodded. And then another. He breathed faster and faster, channeling his adrenaline into *anger*. His mood transformed. His deepest disappointment with Nitrozite and the Zen'th Zell brewed... *but it had already festered for Epochs*. The Zell of Kessoshaero had endured their enemies and shown compassion for far too long. Leijimoto's desire for justice and victory swelled, resonating deep from within his vocal chords. He bellowed his command, unleashed as never before!

***"TA... RUS... TAAAAAAACH!!!"***

*Inside Kessoshaero... upon the wall behind the Table of Twelve... Zivalos sped forth. Six--three and three.*

Leijimoto's thunderous war cry penetrated the souls of all upon the battlefield, echoing amidst every tree and lake. The guttural sound waves reverberated far over ocean and through every particle of dust. Leijimoto's order was echoed by dozens: ***"RUS TAAACCH!!!!"***

Howling into the wind, Titan and Leijimoto erupted into breakneck flight, engaging every Zen'th Zell in range with no regard for their own lives. Primal instincts rose to the surface, and although this rage brought them great strength and haste... their compassion was equivalently lessened. Empathy had long since dissipated far into the furthest reaches of the sun, moons and Vas Oos...

Titan and Leijimoto exacted fearsome, brutal assaults upon their foes. Their howling snarls struck fear into their undead enemies, penetrating not only bone, but the very remnants of their Eyayeli. Dashing and streaking like two meteors, Leiji and Titan plunged directly into the explosive Armageddon at Kessoshaero, folding themselves further and further into the invisible fabrics of Vas Tach...

This Sunday had only *begun*.

\*\*\*

## CHAPTER VIII -- "Courage Under Fire"

Pandemonium. Zell of flesh and blood assailed those of bone and spectral animation. Undead Ys Zell drones swarmed the skies, pelting, pecking and instinctively biting. All whilst fire, ice, acid, electricity and unknown powers streamed in all directions throughout the daytime winds. No human could possibly have survived, nor been able to explain the frantic fracas of muscular wings and scaled torsos twisting and twirling about--all while razor-sharp claws slashed and stabbed. 'Insanity' was the wrong word, but--Nae, Naess--there are others, but none other to make the proper comparison. This was 'Vas Tach'.

Raeniya was imminently attuned to incoming fire, desperately focused on protecting Jackie. But she also attempted to determine the origin. Beyond that, there was another distinct problem, specifically regarding her powers of Flam: setting everything *ablaze*. Unlike Zell of ice and poison (for example), one misguided blast, and the very forests and grasslands about Kessoshaero would ignite into infernos! In essence, Raeniya was *not* free to spit flames with reckless abandon--she needed to act judiciously. This was one of the limitations of being a Zell of Flam. But Jackie was also under fire...

***"Watch out!"***

More spine-like projectiles burst from what seemed to be the trees themselves, yet, Raeniya was prepared. She deflected several away with her wings and also by shifting her momentum and flight path. Simultaneously, Raeniya incinerated additional bony lances with three swift flashes of her intense, fiery breath. She was nothing if not *precise*. No wildfires *this* Sunday. But the onslaught continued.

Not all Zell powers were of Flam and Frol (fire and ice). Jackie seemed to have no powers of breath at all, and Link was--of course--Ys Zell. She was also unable to shoot volleys of energy from her jaws, but she was *quick*. Very, very fast. Nearly double the speed of any typical Zell. A huge advantage: haste kept her ALIVE.

More enchanted ivory bolts soared, but Link zipped and circled around each and every with her naturally acrobatic abilities. Link had a 'reckless' but effective flight style, one unlike any Zell. Only *Ys Zell* could perform such tight, twisting figure-eights or corkscrewing twirls! Absolutely nothing hit her.

***"SOMEone's upset about not being inviiiiiiitteedddd...!"***

Link's jovial spirit seemed to penetrate even the darkest of moments. As if she was completely impervious to anything evil, anything deadly--everything of imminent *doom*.

Jackralvian, however, was in imminent *danger*. He was about to be hit by a larger arrow which even Raeniya did not detect. But Linky spotted it, posthaste. The adrenaline-charged Ys Zell bolted like a rocket, and within milliseconds, she'd aggressively collided into Jackie! Both tumbled haphazardly to the ground, fortunately safe from serious harm. All jagged arrows of bone had *just* missed the two Amals.

*“Chi-Foi work, Link... that was CLOSE...”*

*“TOO close!”*

The two best Amals arose from the mud and leaves, and reestablished flight. They caught up with Raeniya quickly. While the three pulled back to gain perspective and distance, *unfortunately* they were subjected to a perspective of a different kind...

Violetta's sky chariot was now high and far into the horizon. It was simultaneously a sore and sad view, and yet, dejectedly expected. Raeniya took a deep breath, shook her head, exhaled with a squint, and crossed her arms. Everyone knew what *that* meant.

*“And there she goes: decadent coward. Some Princess.”*

Link resonated on precisely the same frequency as did Raeniya: *disappointed* and *disgusted*.

*“All glitter... no gold.”*

Jackie was conflicted over the Princess's hasty retreat. Although he completely disagreed with Violetta's choices (and her general demeanor), he truly understood what it felt like to live in both fear, and, being singled out as the source of conflict. But, the Zen'th Zell were *deadly*. Not every member of Kessoshaero was a warrior. However, it sure seemed that every one of their cadaverous *enemies* were.

~~~

Swarms of battles raged on. The individual skirmishes which polluted the Courtyard and its surrounding forestry were *dizzying*. However, there was one Zell who remained determined to expose their hidden foes. A certain golden-colored, blind wizard trod carefully *yet slowly* about the forest floor...

Artemis had situated himself far from Kessoshaero's defenses--in the thick of it all--amongst dozens of trees. While the many Zell of Kessoshaero aggressively flew to engage in one-on-one *melee'* combat or wildly hectic ranged assaults... *Artemis stood alone amongst the forest*. He methodically paced forward.

The golden conjurer of mysticism ignored all else and listened well; his acute, aural abilities: *laser-focused!* Bone stilettos whizzed past, yet he paid little regard. Though his physical sight had long eroded away, his remaining senses were significantly enhanced, and allowed Artemis to often detect what others could not.

Nearly within a meditative state, he inhaled a deep, full, long breath--and *concentrated*. Some noise faded. Other wavelengths of sound were *magnified*: bony, spinal arrows splitting the air... oceanic swells, far off... war cries, shouted orders, and screams of raging pain. All of these teetered at the very fringe of Artemis'

acutely attuned Mea. Only the constant, windy breeze remained an issue, acting like static, white noise--preventing him from pinpointing his foes. And the sheer multitude of tree leaves shimmering about: well, there were *so many!* Far too many. The howling zephyr obscured the most subtle of sounds.

But just then, a huge gust stronger than all the others struck, and without warning... *subsided!* A dead stop--quick quiet. It was as if Time itself had ceased in Taelondria. Artemis listened to the subtle vibrations *closely*.

*Deep inside Kessoshaero, Zivalos also slowed, as if echoing the momentary silence. Six arms... three and three. The indicators all nearly stopped. And, as if the very Timing of this Sunday was on the razor's edge of Fate--Artemis pinpointed the most curious of unnatural sounds: **heavy rustling amidst the foliage!***

Immediately breaking his trance, his face grimaced with anger and conviction as he valiantly turned back toward Kessoshaero's grounds. His stentorian warning bellowed into the horizons everywhere...

***"INVISIBILITY!! They're in the TREES!!"***

His desperate Spohs echoed into the ears of all at Kessoshaero--just as Leijimoto's had, earlier. And as before, the Zell warriors *echoed right back* to acknowledge. The balance of power had shifted back to the Light, and the winds howled alive, gusting through the leaves once again. *Zivalos' resumed its normal cycle of Time.*

Hoping to reveal one or more of the cloaked Zen'th Zell--Llewelyn spat a few specifically directed blasts of frosty breath at the forest floor, searching, but the Fates did not favor him. Nothing was revealed. He knew the were close, he could *feel* it! But *where?*

***"Take flight! I can barely Jee..."***

His trouble: Llewelyn had tried his icy breath *low to the ground*, nearer to the trunks and lower branches. But, he'd not considered that the Zen'th Zell were perched *up high!* And that they were changing positions. Stealthily. Using that very rustling of the leaves in the wind to guise their primarily invisible movements.

Dupree' had an idea, though. Probably the best of them all. But, were it not for Artemis' warnings, it was unlikely the wielder of swords and armor would have fashioned such an illuminating epiphany. He flew up upon Bardiche, calling to him from afar, just before he closed the distance upon his musically gifted Amal...

***"BARD!! Bardiche... bless us with a TUNE, Amal?! Attune..."***

As if Timing was key and lock this fine Sunday, Bardiche smirked at Dupree's jeu de mots. Not only because he'd dedicated his Epochs to poetry and songwriting, but *also* because the *exact* same solution brewed in his own Mea not moments prior: *to dispel the mirages and Jee beyond the veil*. And Spohsing of brews, all things being equal, an icy drink with a frothy top sounded dashingly refreshing to the Bard! Like Leijimoto, he tired

of Vas Tach, and longed only for a wonderful quaff to gulp, and a tale to sing in the Tavern...

*...but it would have to wait until after this battle ceased.*

But Garjeegyl's yummy mixtures and flavor-instilled concoctions would have to wait. Bardiche was not about to let another moment pass without 'playing to the shadows in the crowd'.

Firmly holding his instrument in the left, Bardiche raised his right arm high, claws fully extended.

***“Such ironic Spohs, winsome wielder of wondrous weaponry! I've an ENCHANTING chord prepared. One to dispel doubt... and DISILLUSION!”***

*His Spohs seemed to echo. Bardiche's claws began to fall. Time seemed to slow. Zivalos mirrored the stall. Bardiche's syllabic resonance carried... careened... SOARED!*

Inside Kessoshaero's crystalline walls, the six indicators of Zivalos sluggishly lingered once more. Ambient sound faded into emptiness. Bardiche's claws completed the descent, brushing over sinewy strings. Taut, suspended cords vibrated upon his mercurial Leutronica. The minstrel skillfully executed a sharp, magnificent chord. Digits strummed, caressing and finessing the multi-faceted, sonorous Leutronica...

Melodic sound waves arced outwardly, reverberating *everywhere!* The world and all its atmospheric glory behaved as if a stone had been cast into still waters, and thus, waves and ripples abounded throughout the air. Swells of light were subtly cast about. The surges of sound and illumination floated, fluttered and wavered! Each and every Zen'th Zell--high, low, or mid amidst the trees, all cloaked by invisibility--was *penetrated by these magical waves of deep, humming reverberations! Compromised by magic.*

Perhaps the only way to describe what summarily occurred (at least--to a human) would be that the previously near-invisible silhouettes of each Zen'th Zell... 'glitched out'. Frazzled as if static on a screen had interrupted a transmission--and Bardiche's power ballad completely dispelled the their insidious subterfuge. *Disillusionment no more!*

Simultaneously, Titan's black, charcoal-colored Amulet faintly glowed. Titan bellowed and roared, flying high into the sky like a streak of lightning. This drained a significant amount of his stamina, but enabled a 'Dragon's eye view' from far above--just under the clouds! The timing was perfect: the great azure easily identified each exposed Zen'th Zell below, their tactical formations, and which wielded crossbows.

***“Vile traitors! I Jee you ALL!”***

Lunging downward--as would an eagle to ensnare a sea creature--*so too did Titan!* The gargantuan azure dive-bombed with cataclysmic haste, deep into the lower heights of the battle. The muscular hero ripped

about the forestry, wreaking brutal havoc and disarray on his Zen'th Zell enemies! Branches snapped like kindling, but more so did the *bones* and sinew of his outmatched skeletal adversaries.

Flushed from their revealed positions, the Zen'th formations and firing lines were completely dismantled. Titan's immense speed, tactics, and stalwart bravery raged through like a cyclone. The balance of power began to further favor of the Zell of Kessoshaero. As always, Titan fought with the strength and honor of three. He was truly a living legend.

Lejjimoto valiantly projected commands and instructions, and Llewelyn growled out tactics of his own. Bardiche unlatched the hidden, razor-sharp blade housed within his mystical, musical Leutronica and cut down two of his unsuspecting foes--lopping one at his left, then one at the right! Music was truly: *magic*.

Garjeegyl was physically weaker than most typical Zell, but his intelligent usage of acidic potions he'd fashioned into projectile weapons really did the trick to dissipate bone! Intoxicating how Jeeg couldn't hit the broadside of a barn during casual gem-tossing games in the Tavern, nor was he much good for ranged target practice during training. But in a pinch, within a skirmish: he was *dead-to-rights on-target!*

***“AhhhhhhhRIIIITTE!! I gots ANOTHER bony bony, Bard!”***

***“Amazing achievement, Amal! But now, now... don't become a janky jester, Jeeg...”***

Bardiche smiled at his quirky Amal's ingenuity, but always teased him--even amidst danger. Jeeg was already so wiry, wide-eyed and wound up by his very nature--but, Bardiche's chiding jokes kept Garjeegyl calm.

~~~

Skulking in the shadows amidst the foliage, dust, and fog of the cold morning air, Casscadia slithered forth! It was as if the pockets of darkness and shade combined, and rendered the witch incarnate. The cloaked Zen'th Zell had her sights set on Titan. Nitrozite may have claimed her tactical ideas and plans as his own (nearly every time she offered her ingenuity), but, it was of no concern to Casscadia. She was ready to smite Titan from the sky in order to claim her prize.

***“As high as you soar, you do not Jee ME, great one. On this Sunday, YOU shall perish!  
Remuneration for the warriors you stole from US!!”***

Prepared with a portable ballista of bone and ivory construction, Casscadia enchanted a horrific, spiny projectile with a dark, poisonous magic. Loading this toxic armament into the machine, Casscadia launched the deadly missile from her hidden vantage point.

It connected with a terrible thrashing, raking into the legendary azure Zell's body!

On this Sunday's battle, it may have been the very first blow which rendered significant, seething damage to Titan, aching throughout his pulsing veins! Until then, little had fazed him; his naturally dense armor and tightly woven leathery scales were far too resilient. But this time, the blow rendered *serious* damage.

The bulky hero peered about the skies, shooting his gaze in all directions, but Titan was unable to identify the attacker's origin, and thus, fought on--engaging once more with the foes at hand.

Cascadia smiled, confident that by launching three to four additional tainted shots from her powerful ballista... if they struck true, *Titan would fall!* Permanently.

Unless someone or something intervened...

~~~

Meanwhile, far upon a different side of the battlefield, nearest The Courtyard of Courage (and its surrounding waters), another altercation was in flight. Dupree', Llewelyn and Artemis closed distance upon Scarlassh--having already bested and defeated other, lesser Zen'th Zell. At the lead, arms-master Dupree' held his sword aloft, striking at Scarlassh, but missed. He persisted with great zeal as they soared about cliffs, ocean and rock. Dupree' had faced many foes--but *never* this particular, one-eyed skeletal assailant.

***"Taste sharp steel, Zell of Zen'th!"***

Another swing, another miss. Scarlassh was a nervous wreck around dangerously unstable overlords such as Nitrozite (who was decidedly absent from this surprise skirmish), but in battle, he proved cunning; deadly. Scarlassh smugly cackled return-fire to his armored foe's spirited threats.

***"Ss--such a barbaric tool! Are your Talos so sh--short and weak? Hehehehhhh!"***

Once again, Dupree' slashed at Scarlassh--connecting--but the blow wasn't powerful enough to stop the dastardly bone drake. Yet, he howled in pain as Dupree' proclaimed consecrated heroics.

***"Short?! Never! But my weapons are RIGHTEOUS! Haaah!"***

Dupree' sliced at Scarlassh yet once more with his unique blade, but now Scarlassh intended to catch him off-guard with a well-timed counter-attack. This was actually worth noting--all Zell fought with cunning tactics, subtle techniques and razor-sharp skills. Any Zell was vulnerable after either *slightly* missing their target, or, even when they'd actually *connected*. Although clearly, this would seem counter-intuitive (especially to an untrained, unaware human), it was precisely the advantage of the counter-attack: *Timing*.

And Time... was everything. Especially in the lands of Taelondria and beyond its reaches...

And thus, just as Dupree' *landed* his action--Scarlassh instantly turned about like a whip, howling out a twisting, dust-riddled cone of doom at both Dupree' and Llewelyn alike! The two brothers-in-arms were caught in the tornado's violent wake. Their flight paths disrupted by warped wind, the pair convulsed.

Fortunately, Artemis had fallen behind during this chase (or, more aligned with his level of tact and intelligence, the wise gold Zell *calculatedly* kept Time and Measure), and quickly divined that now, every moment mattered. Detecting trouble, Artemis knew he'd have to act quickly to save his Amals... but how?

Scarlassh's tsunami-shaped air currents destabilized both Dupree' and Llewelyn so badly, they wobbled and shuddered as they flew. The conflicting waves of gas amplified tenfold, and the two Zell awkwardly flipped over, gyrating out-of-control within the cavitation of airwaves! Scarlassh's tornado 'vortexed' the two downward, and Lew and Dupe were overtaken by gravity. Blinded, confused, and haphazardly tumbling away, the Zell warriors barely recognized the height of their danger: a ravine of jagged rocks below.

Artemis--still mostly out-of-range--concentrated intensely, chanting 'SpohsZell' (spells), to summon roots, rocks and vines! Part of Artemis' natural powers were binding abilities, and thus, he literally *caught* his fellow Zell Amals just at the final lengths before the razor-sharp tines below could claim their kills. Artemis had negated Scarlassh's work: Dupree' and Llewelyn were spared. Disoriented, the two looked about--only slightly shocked to find their golden wizard savior and Amal hovering just nearby...

***"A frustrating, yet formidable foe."***

Scarlassh looked on from a distance, aware that at certain moments, surviving the onslaught of battle was the more ideal step toward ultimate victory. As oppressed as he was by his so-called allies (most Zen'th would easily *sacrifice one another* in order to preserve themselves, rather than render aid), Scarlassh was well-versed in survival. It was a telling factor when considering the differences between Zell of *flesh...* and Zell of *bone*.

Scarlassh flew off. He had an agenda--namely, with Cascadia. Other Zen'th Zell and undead Ys Zell threatened Dupree', Lew and Art soon after. Clearly, the three warriors had more battles to endure...

~~~

Cascadia's hidden vantage point was not selected at random. She chose to position herself nearby an ancient Ivory Tower--a structure which was near-poised to give way, due to erosion, weather and dilapidation. She fired yet another deadly bolt from the creaking ballista, flanking Titan once again! Hidden just beyond the shadows and dense foliage nearby the tower, the witch's post was nearly undetectable.

Jackralvian crawled through ivy and greenery, popping his head out to size up the battles about the skies. He was not merely hoping just to survive, but also attempting to determine any course of action he could take to



help. One which would not summarily result in his immediate doom! Jackie was only meagerly trained for Vas Tach, and also small and weak (for his age). Jumping into the fray would have been akin to throwing a newborn Glecko into the mysterious dangers of The Forgotten Forest. Sadly, as luck would have it (or should we label it 'unluck?'), Jackie stumbled upon the dark witch's sniper's spot!

Oblivious, Casscadia continued to assail Titan with her poison-enchanted flechettes. Yet, even though Jackie was behind her--and nearly silent--after six more shots, *Casscadia paused*. Her claws released the ballista's triad of triggers. Eerily, the dark sorceress rolled her soulless gaze to her right... *and turned about!*

***"You! I... I KNOW you: I recognize your JEE!"***

It seemed impossible: how? How could Casscadia have detected him so quickly, let alone *identified* him? As Fate would have it, Jackralvian couldn't deliberate long. But his Mea brewed. He suddenly felt... *lost*. Hazy!

*His vision warped... swooned... parallaxed... and blurred...*

Jackralvian's brainwaves were overrun by a deep, subconscious memory. He recalled his own infancy: a moment from the Past. A terrible storm of thunder and lightning flashed, but it was not here in the Present. Jackralvian was struck in the head by a bolt from the heavens! One just like the Light from his *dreams*...

It was this very stroke of Thuune which had left the branching 'Lichtenburg figures' of burned tissue upon Jackie's forehead and skull! Scars. At least, this is the closest term that seems comparatively close: an earthen term: 'Lichtenburg figures'. Snapped back into reality, Jackie shivered and frantically looked about. Reality had returned. He understood none of it, but it wasn't imperative: *Casscadia approached!*

No other Zell were within the vicinity. The cries of Vas Tach, hellfire and doom sounded off in the distance, but all too far for anyone to help. *He was alone*. Jackie trembled, fearfully backing away as Casscadia crept closer with every stride. She was much, much larger than was he--and certainly, beyond a shadow of a doubt, much stronger... *and far more deadly*.

***"Naaeesst...! Don't be afraid... you were born among us..."***

But he *was* afraid. Casscadia extended an arm, yet her claws were relatively retracted. Jackie questioned the odd moment, confused. It was unclear whether she intended to deceive and to do harm, or somehow, *to help*.

As it just so happened, Link--amidst a battle of her own--always had radar-like 'feelers' when it came to Jackie's safety. She'd wondered where he was (after they'd briefly been separated), and Time had raced by! Understandably so: all were deep-folded into the pockets of a confusing and chaotic Vas Tach. There was rarely a respite to think. But her tiny nose perked up as she'd scouted one last section of the forest. And, luckily for Jackie, she found line-of-sight with her best Amal. Her delicate whiskers twitched.

There he was--in the distance--*but mere wings-lengths from Cascadia!!*

Her adrenaline spiked and she nearly choked on her own breath. In shock, she stared--her Jee, wider than both of Taelondria's moons combined. Cascadia was *dangerous*--even for Chi-Zell such as Leijimoto or Artemis. As a *Bo Zell*, Jackie was *no match*. Neither was Link. Alone, that is.

*"Oh, why don't they just leave us all ALONE!"*

The heroic Bo Ys Zell nearly panicked, but even more fortunately than before, she was nearby the most ideal Zell of Kessoshaero who could offer any help. With desperate haste, Link darted toward Titan, floating just within his earshot. She indicated Jackie and Cascadia's position.

*"Need a little HELP here, Mr. Universe!!"*

Titan hardly blinked, immediately scanning toward Link's emphatic indications. He spotted them.

*"Bo Zell!!"*

Time slowed. Titan bellowed, instantly rocketing through the air. His stamina began to wane (as did the mysterious magic of his onyx black Amulet)--and yet he expended all that was necessary to reach Jackie in the shortest amount of Time possible. Like a metallic missile from a crossbow, Titan collided with Cascadia mere claws-lengths before she could reach the Bo Zell. Both tumbled fully clear of Jackie.

But just then... *disaster struck*.

Multiple Zen'th Zell emerged from the shadows--as if all that had just transpired was part of a sinister plan--and each skeletal foe fired upon Titan simultaneously. Cascadia cackled away as he was struck and pelted.

*"Hahahhahah! FOOL! I'd not have harmed him! He belongs with US!"*

Overwhelmed and weakened by the combined brutal assaults, sliced again and again at every angle imaginable, the azure Zell FELL! Crashing through branches helped break Titan's descent, but the monumental hero struck the earthen forest floor with a thundering impression in the mud. Dead branches and falling leaves showered him moments after. The great warrior remained still as the dust cleared.

Jackie stopped breathing a moment: he couldn't believe his own Jee. Nae... NAE! Not *Titan!*

But Titan howled in pain, as his Life force faded. Cascadia's veins throbbed with adrenaline and the thrill of the kill. Cackling, she moved onward and elsewhere, leaving the azure giant for dead. *But Titan peered.*

Hidden, Jackie made eye contact with the hero, who was clearly in terrible shape. Subtly, Titan shook his head, as if to indicate: *“Nae, Bo Zell. Do NOT reveal yourself.”* Jackie winced. He wanted to help, but *fear* had seized him tight, stuck in stalemate within his very own Mea: act, or stand fast.

Surprising each and every, Chi-Zell Leijimoto descended from far above, separating the Zen'th Zell in all cardinal directions! Center to each, Leijimoto roared a resounding *“Naaaaaaeesstt!!”*, and bashed Scarlassh with a thunderous spinning hook kick. Pivoting, he wing-slapped another bony Zen'th into a tree, and tail-whipped another! As if it were not enough, even as bone arrows still protruded from Leijimoto's leathery-skin, he rapidly pulled one from his own gullet, and furiously stabbed another Zen'th through its skull! Finally, he wheeled around once more and spat an erratic cyclone of electricity from his jaws. Two more Zen'th (one of which had attempted to clutch him), vaporized into bone meal as they met his sparking stream of rage!

*“Naaee!! You shall NEVER take our Cyur! Let havoc FALL. No matter our end, we will PREVAIL!”*

His booming voice echoed into the forestry. This Sunday... *had only BEGUN!* Leijimoto was engulfed by fury and a guttural instinct for revenge: two emotional states which made him nearly unstoppable. Nearly.

Scarlassh clumsily backed off, cringing in utter fear. Although he'd only just arrived at this stage of the battle, after previously having dealt with Dupree', Llewelyn and Artemis, he'd decided that regrouping was wise.

*“Re... retreat! Let none follow! R... rain smoke and ash upon their JEE!!”*

Whispering dark evil, two Zen'th Zell jointly invoked a spell which darkened the skies. Smoke and ash swirled as the two chanted *‘Vas Tirassh Zen'th Oos’... and a monumental twister was made so.* Heavy winds blew, and erratic leaves spun, as muddy flotsam flashed throughout all. Vision was poor. Timed perfectly, Cascadia slipped away into the unnatural but overwhelming shadows of debris, leaving Scarlassh and the other Zen'th Zell to fend for themselves. However, the cunning sorceress wasn't quite ready to exit the battlefield...

Jackie remained hidden within the nearby vines and brush, solemnly keeping watch over Titan.

Engulfed in the smoke and ashen winds, Elder Leijimoto attempted to fight on, but the heavy winds and dust-riddled pebbles which pelted him were beyond overwhelming. Elder's glasses were ripped away from his cerulean Jee, lost in the violent storm of smoke, ash and debris! His old vision, limited; his sight, blurred.

The ghostly Zen'th Zell took to the skies, using the subterfuge of the stormy spell to guise their exit. Scarlassh remained behind--still hidden--suspiciously waiting for Cascadia to complete her primary objective...

\*\*\*

## CHAPTER IX -- "The Last Stand"

Cascadia scanned the dense forestry for the elusive white Bo Zell, carefully scouring Jackralvian's previous positions, but spotted nothing unusual. For an ivory-colored Zell who may have *normally* been quickly detected within such dark foliage, the witch of doom became convinced he'd retreated. Considering him of little regard, her soulless Jee narrowed as she turned her gaze back to her fallen prey: Titan.

Only a stone's throw away from the ancient brick tower (and her ballista--now out of ammunition), Cascadia cautiously stepped through the mud and chaparral and paced ever closer to the now helpless azure Zell Titan. The felled hero was nearly motionless; barely able to shift about, let alone stand--but he was conscious. His wear Jee swelled, flickering about, and his body wept thick streams of viscous blood.

But, Jackie had *not* retreated. Yet he fearfully watched from his hidden sanctuary amidst the dense brush, wondering if he should remain still, or take action and intervene. Once again Jackie stared at Titan's trembling Jee, and as before, Titan's subtle, commanding glance for Jackralvian to stay put was made crystal clear. At that moment, it seemed Titan would pass out, overrun by blood loss, stress, and drained stamina. His foggy Jee fluttered shut. Remaining silent, Jackie scanned the skies. *No one. No help.* And he dared not call out nor move--now, *he could only watch...*

Cascadia shifted, and stopped directly left of Titan's body. There it was: *the Amulet!* Titan's onyx medallion swirled with wisps of unknown power. Cascadia leaned in. She studied Titan's face. *Nothing.* Stillness--silence. She knelt, allowing her just within reach of the Amulet upon his leathery neck. The way the chains were fashioned, Cascadia needed to snap them with her claws. She cautiously slipped two of her stiletto-sharp digits underneath the charcoal pendant's chain... and slightly lifted it mere claws-lengths away from the giant azure's throat...

*Titan clutched at her neck!*

Shocking Cascadia as if a lightning bolt had just flashed upon her, Titan's huge right fist attached to her gullet like a snake's fangs to its prey! Claws dug in. Cascadia was petrified, choking on thoughts doused in panic, drowning in endless waves of fear. Titan's adrenaline-flooded gaze pierced...

*"Y... you... are... a TRAITOR! Your... Zen'th was long ago... but... a far worse FATE AWAITS...  
Zell of DUST!!"*

Cascadia's paralysis permeated every crevice of her body, but, Titan's grasp was faltering from his poisoned condition. She struggled for escape, still firmly grasping the Amulet, but finally lurched backward to freedom! The black medallion snapped from its chains, now fully in her possession. The death witch tumbled awkwardly through the air in reverse, and took to the skies with a blind, 180-degree turn.

***“Not so fast, Thief Queen!”***

Link rocketed forth in a multi-colored flash, startling the Zen'th Zell as she violently rammed her. The collision was precise: Link skillfully forced Cascadia to fumble the black dodecahedron mid-air, and in one fell swoop, the little Ys Zell zipped underneath to recover the Amulet!

Jackie felt a sense of hope coursing through his body as he witnessed his best Amal perform this feat of bravery. He almost blurted out: *“Zi! Chi-Foi work, Link!”*, but thought twice about revealing his position. *Something* was compelling Jackie to wait. To pause just a moment longer. But he didn't know why...

Link--unable to carry the dark medallion's weight--quickly tossed it down to its rightful owner at the forest floor. The Amulet partially sunk into the mud, a mere wing's length from Titan's crash zone. But his Jee remained barely open as they shivered erratically, and his wounds were ghastly.

Pairs of fighters, both bone and flesh alike had made their way into the area. Undead Ys Zell still swarmed. Cascadia fumed, ultimately focused on exacting revenge upon Link.

***“Vile fly!! That Amulet is MINE!!”***

Cascadia chased her to little avail: Link was far too agile. She was, in many ways, very different from her drone-like, undead adversaries. Linky had actual training with her relatively newfound family of Zell at Kessoshaero. She was treated not just as 'Ys Zell', but essentially as 'Zell' when it came to skill-building.

Just then, Scarlassh approached. The earlier ashen storm summoned by the Zen'th allies had begun to thin; soon to clear. Scarlassh noted this constraint, and hastily beckoned to the dark witch.

***“Cascadia! Come ON! Quickly!”***

But Cascadia was far too enraged, distracted and fully focused upon Link. She angrily swatted in utter futility as the little Ys Zell spun about, taunting the witch.

***“Sllllooww, slow, SLOW! You ghosties need to exercise...”***

Linky's insulting remarks were a part of her charm, voiced only when she had an unwavering sense of confidence. Her conviction resonated, and Jackie began to abandon his own fears.

The artificial smoke screen had nearly dissipated. Scarlassh insisted that the witch heed the warning:

***“CASSCADIA!!”***

The dark witch paused, but soon decidedly shot a glance back at the fallen Titan--helpless and vulnerable. Jackie's adrenaline spiked; his concern for Titan now tenfold. However, Scarlassh and the others would wait no longer, and vanished into the horizon as the dark fog thinned out. Casscadia ignored this, and swooped directly over to Titan, landing nearby, claws fully extended. *She was going to finish him.* Titan's strength no longer waned--*it was gone.* The poison flechettes had worked their due course, and the gargantuan fighter had already exhausted every last ounce of heroism he could muster. Even as the punishing toxicity brewing inside his veins burned, his wounds ran cold. Although he was still conscious, it was clear that his spastic, shaking tremors spelled almost certain doom. Casscadia smiled.

But, just as she closed distance, only paces away from Titan... the most curious and unpredictable event began to unfold.

Deep within Kessoshaero's walls, Ziwalos' six pointers aligned! All six aimed East: *three and three...*

***"Stay... back... WITCH!"***

Jackravian's courage summoned, he and Casscadia were suddenly Jee to Jee, wing to wing! He'd already intervened, having flown directly in-between Titan and Casscadia. But the witch was far more powerful and a veteran of actual warfare. The inexperienced Bo Zell was frightened beyond compare. Jackie knew that intervention might earn him certain death--but he could wait no longer. Milliseconds felt like eternities, and his nightmares froze his very thoughts!

There were worse things than mere 'death'. He feared this, certainly--but his *worst fear...* was becoming one of *them!* Like Nitrozite. A Fate worse than death: transformation into a *Zen'th*. No remorse. No heart. No love. No soul. Just like *Casscadia...*

But the witch had faltered, stopping midway. And why? Because it was so very *curious* to her. Unexpected. Why... *why* would this small, pathetically underdeveloped Bo Zell even fathom the *idea* of facing her?! It was... shocking. Unnerving. Doubt began to seep into Casscadia's Mea, but for only a moment.

Confidently, Casscadia lashed out with a screeching growl, slashing at the Bo Zell... *yet he instinctively dodged.* Casscadia's mouth gaped, her entire countenance dumbfounded! A heckler from the crowd jeered:

***"Can't hit what you can't JEE! Hah!"***

Much like Bard, Linky never missed an opportunity to eek in a joke. Especially if it was at the expense of Casscadia. But the best part of this zinger was that Jackie's confidence *grew tenfold.* And ironically, it was through laughter and joy even amidst panic and doom! Granted, Jackie's inner strength to face up to the witch (with a sense of agility, no less) seemed to have come from elsewhere--somewhere, deep within...

Meanwhile, Raeniya was still neck and neck in a fight of her own, but happened to look toward the Ivory Tower of crumbling bricks. And there Jackie was: engaged in... *battle?* She could barely believe her Jee. Jackralvian floated mere *wings-lengths* from Casscadia! But, the *witch* was the one who seemed flustered.

Casscadia raked the air, missing *again*. Both white Bo Zell and Zen'th floated and hovered all about the decrepit observatory (which Casscadia had selected in order to guise her sniper shots). Jackie used the tower to his advantage, placing it in-between himself and Casscadia whenever he could...

*...which gave him an idea.*

As she made another attempt to strike him, he dodged once again, but flew upward, vertically aligned along the white spire's aged stonework. In what seemed insanity, Jackralvian intentionally slammed himself into the column's top! It crumbled, groaned and leaned. Primal rage persisted as Jackralvian roared, maniacally slapping his tail into the structure with such fury, he could only have been described as mad and *possessed!*

Boulders, debris and stone chunks tumbled downward. Jackie was--of course--above the rockfall. Casscadia, however, was victim to the gravity of the situation as the stony pieces plummeted.

Link witnessed all of this from afar, and her mouth gaped. She'd never seen anything like it--certainly not from Jacks. From her vantage point, watching Casscadia get pounded from an Armageddon of jagged rocks was *immensely* satisfactory. She didn't pause for long, though. Link darted over to the abandoned obelisk, and helped launch brick shards directly toward the evil sorceress's twisted face! Jackie continued to slam the crumbling stonework with his tail, shaking down more debris. Deluged and overwhelmed, Casscadia was unable to fly out-of-range. She attempted to shield her Jee--mostly in vain.

***"AAAAAAHHH!! Barbarians!"***

Just then, Raeniya bested her latest Zen'th Zell enemy with a few searing bursts and a back-flipping tail bash. She diverted her flight path to aid Jacks and Linky. As she arrived, she quickly sprayed a cone of Flam at the confused sorceress, taking caution not to set any trees ablaze. The falling stones from the Tower helped with Raeniya's additional assaults on Casscadia: they extinguished minor hot-spots left upon the forest floor. Casscadia was at a distinct disadvantage; wounded and struck again and again as each moment passed.

Out of the haze of debris and dust, Scarlassh swooped in to guide Casscadia away, pulling her from the rubble. To his dismay, initially, Casscadia resisted.

***"Nae, Scarlassh! The Amulet... I must--"***

***"It's too late! We must retreat!! NOW!"***

Cascadia reluctantly followed Scarlassh into the shadows and fog. By then, Dupree', Llewelyn, Link, Raeniya and others were free to attempt brief pursuit, but there was no point. The battle was won, and it wasn't prudent to give chase. Titan needed their aid! All the while, Jackie had returned to assess the azure giant. He crawled forward, frightened by Titan's ghastly wounds. The critically injured hero of Kessoshaero choked and howled. But as he found the strength for calmness and clarity, he Spohs, staring at Jackralvian.

*"Your instincts... led you to... aid me--even amidst great fear..."*

*"Stay still! I'll get help!"*

*"Naess! There is no... Time."*

Titan clutched at his black Amulet... and offered it to Jackie.

*"Take it! Trust your... instincts. But guard it, also. It will... help when all seems lost..."*

*"Nae, Titan! You can't--you..."*

Titan erratically sucked in a gulp of oxygen. His lungs sounded... wet. Heavy. Jackie was petrified. Link flew over, nearly frozen in shock. Leijimoto was not far out-of-range, and clamored to get to Titan's crash zone.

*"We all have our... Time... and, so shall you. Be at peace--at EyaySuust with it, Bo Zell. Some day, it shall set you FREE! Ta Nn' Plok Jee Shulo... Vas Oos Zi Jee Taeusah-ay..."*

In human language, what Titan had proclaimed in ZellSpohs loosely translated to: *"Just because you do not see something, doesn't mean it isn't there"...*

*...but the true translation was not meant for humans to understand.*

Leijimoto arrived, visibly horrified as Titan breathed his last. The great azure's once vibrant colors faded, and Titan's body slightly withered even moments after death. And so, Titan of Taelondria... was gone.

*Leiji's Eyayeli shattered into nothingness. The old patriarch's Cyur sank into depths unknown. His Jee grew wide, teetering upon the edge of tears. His entire body trembled; his gaze, emptied. The old legend hadn't felt this hopeless since the biggest eclipse of his soul: the death of Althe'aya. Titan was an Amal, a brother. His brother. A warrior and hero to all, but--HIS hero.*

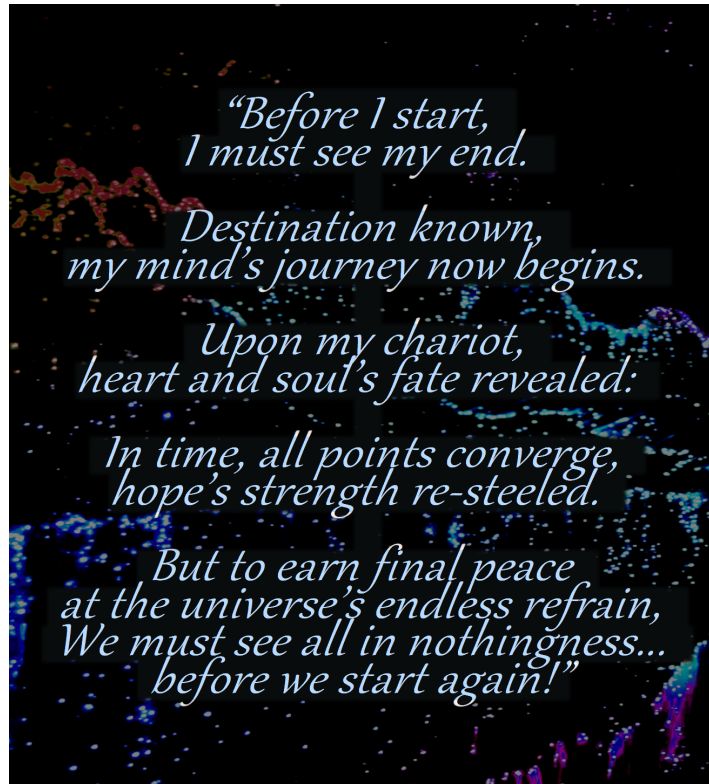
As the shadows and smoke of battle cleared, Dupree', Llewelyn, Artemis, Raeniya, Link, and others gathered. None Spohs, but merely prayed, claws over fists. The shock and horror were far too massive for idle chatter. They mournfully surrounded Titan's crumpled body, staring at what once was their greatest champion.

Time felt stagnant. Deep inside Kessoshaero, Zivalos' six indicators inched forth, but something was different: as if the ageless timekeeper knew of the fallen hero's Fate. Steam, and machine-precise moments



crept by, like sluggish, reluctant eternities. Jackie absently gazed downward to behold Titan's dull, onyx Amulet with his silvery Jee. As Jackralvian cradled it, he realized how small the dodecahedron had appeared upon Titan's long, sinewy throat, yet it was beyond over-sized for his Bo Zell claws. Jacks could hardly breathe; the shock was transfixing as he stared at Titan's corpse... and his mysterious stone.

The sparse remnants of the Zen'th Zell's dark magic evaporated, and the dusty redness of the previously obscured skies had finally cleared to blue. Violetta's monstrous statue of Titan's crystalline likeness loomed far in the background of Kessoshaero's grounds, *broken and shattered...* as were the Cyur and Mea of all.



The 'perfect' and triumphant Sunday... had become a hellfire of tragedy.

\*\*\*