

## Note:

The tale you are about to read is about my longest going character Tag that has been in play since 2010 and was in development well before then. This is not only his official lore, but also tales of his previous Role-Playing campaigns played on StarCraft's Cortex Roleplay. Inside this tale you will get to relive his actual accounts and what transpired during these campaigns thanks to notes and recordings of the campaigns. How Cortex worked is that everyone was basically a Dungeon Master and we all meshed our characters and stories together to form an epic saga that spanned years of playing together with friends across the country and beyond. There was no rolls or classical D&D rulesets, just a bunch of people role-playing each and every scenario and any balancing or combat was also determined by how well someone could role-play.

Some considerable shout-outs include:

Tag, Entrioch, Trandil, Skard, Bior, Lotoss & some others: Keller (aka Slayer Wasp)  
Gestalt, Hawk, the хищник Wizards, Skrag, Xoren: Nick (aka Battlewolf)  
Hild, Asta, Velief, the хищник Lords, & others: Oozy  
Runa: Amanda (aka shared accounts with Battlewolf, his sister)

NPCs or extras: Played by whoever on the fly

There are many more characters you will see over time and many of them were also just played by randoms or other high-tier RPer in the Cortex community like RedArmy, Shefford, Clone, & FeuerSturm who are all not only coders for the Cortex engine but top-tier RPer who joined our campaigns on occasion. From medieval to sci-fi Tag has seen it all, and it can be a pretty wild story.

# *Tag*

## Prologue

From across the dark abyss of the world rises to sight a deep foreboding continent named **Telios**, a war-torn country forgotten in time by the rest of the world. Its grisly continent face riddled with mountains, large expansive forests, long winding rivers, but more importantly secrets amidst the chaos. These secrets however have been lost due to years of conflict between the West and Southern provinces. To the West you have the kingdom of man who call themselves the **Valgard**, consisting mostly of humans whose ideology relies on the magics of

old. To the South you have the vindictive kingdom of the **Xolum**, who believe it is their right to purge the entire world of magic and magic wielders. With two kingdoms set forth upon the same continent with completely opposing views, war was certain. Xolum set forth mighty crusades across the border to the Valgard almost yearly. Many died with each onslaught, all the while to the East the kingdom of dwarves, who were known as the **Khator**, watched and made profit for years by supplying weapons and tactics to both sides. With a war waging beyond scale, further chaos decided to join in as the Northern clans of trolls awoke from their icy slumber to launch deadly raiding parties upon the land. Years went by with tales of epic battles, heroes rising to the occasion, and all sorts of utter chaos tearing Telios apart at the seams. It seemed as though war would make the continent unliveable. Eventually, surrounding countries learned of what was going on and decided to pick their sides of this deadly conflict as the fighting started to break beyond the borders of Telios. It was then that the darkest times Telios had ever seen came to pass, starting with the disappearance of the Khatorian Dwarves. It was as though they had simply vanished in a single night without any trace of their existence. Their massive continental length trench lines housing their cities empty and void, their cavernous mines without a soul, and the great fires illuminating their mighty mountain citadel dead without reason. Before anything could be explained a darkness shrouded the land in chaos, panic spread like wildfire as the sun was blotted out by the moon creating a deathly eclipse that enveloped the land in a red blood-like haze. All across the land demons of old flooded in and ravaged villages and towns, killing and taking any they wished. This day was known as the “Telios Culling” and during this time Tag’s home village of **Crol** was chosen to be culled.

# *Act 1*

## **Chapter 0: The Raid**

Situated in the Western kingdom of Valgard, Crol was a peaceful farming village that welcomed all races and magic users. It was home to many a great warrior family, and an even better blacksmith who was rumored to craft the deadliest blades in the land. This blacksmith was actually Tag’s father, Trandil, who owned a small establishment run only by his family. His family consisted of his son Tag (10), his daughters Skuld (5) and Gyrd (3), along with his beautiful wife Turid. Before Tag was born his father had served in the Valgard’s elite guard, the Troll Tamers, Trandil never spoke of these times having been scarred from years of deadly conflict. Most spoke of Trandil in hushed tones, some calling him a hero and others just frightened of the man. All together the family mostly kept to themselves and didn’t bother much in the affairs of the village, and not much was asked of Trandil once he had served his term of service with the military. Instead, he spent day and night forging one single blade over the course of 7 years. No one was allowed to disturb or bother him whilst forging, not even his own

family dared to step foot near his enclosed forge area during that time. Everything was good for awhile, the harvests came and went with new faces and tales from the surrounding lands and peace seemed to of found its place in Crol. Until that one fateful night when the sun showed black and the land was cast in red. Tag remembers that day quite well, it was the day he lost everything.

Time seemed to freeze as everything turned red, everyone around Tag stopped mid-stride frozen and stricken with fear, not even the birds dared whistle any longer. Without warning an eerie shrill rose from the forest surrounding the village of Crol, breaking the silence. 10 year-old Tag turned to see monstrous demons atop even more unspeakable mounts of old rode forth into the village, slaughtering everyone around him. The village guard stood no chance, their weapons seemed feeble against the raw power of these ghastly raiders. Wizards amongst the village populace took up arms, only to be struck down moments later their magic seeming to only tickle the powers of darkness. Tag stood outside his home frozen in fear as he watched the onslaught, barely able to acknowledge his mother running to grasp him from behind while his sisters cowered in the doorway of their home. Tag turned to face his mother, only to have one of the riders sweep past him its beastly mount grasping Turid in its jaws before snapping her clean in half before Tag's eyes. The blood of his mother splashed against Tag's face as his sisters screamed with all their might. Before Tag could snap to his senses, the same rider broke forth towards his sisters. Smashing through the front of the house, the rider brutally slayed both Skuld and Gyrd who stood no chance. With turmoil enveloping all of Crol, a deafening battlecry arose above all else as Trandil barreled from his forge adorned in his official Troll Tamer's armor wielding a blade of unspeakable power. Trandil cleaved his way towards Tag, killing and butchering any raider that stood in his path. Upon reaching his son, Trandil stood down on one knee to take in his son's face with his hand, however for the last time. Just as Tag had met eyes with his father a ray of energy shot out turning Trandil to ash before Tag's very eyes. Tag spun around towards the source of this horrifying occurrence only to find a being shrouded in darkness, the only thing visible from the depths of its cloak being an eerie white smile. With unbridled hatred the boy snatched up his father's blade, a blade that nearly no one should be able to wield let alone him, and charged forth towards his enemy. Raiders stepped forth laughing at the boy, their grim howls filling the air. Screaming so hard that he ripped his voice from his throat and crying so hard his eyes began to bleed, Tag leapt towards the raiders cleaving the first 3 in half with a single swing. One by one each raider was brutally ripped apart by Tag's hands, leaving only him and the spectral being. Before Tag could take vengeance upon his family the being raised one skeletal hand from its robes, freezing Tag in place. "Hear my words boy," it said "I shall brand you as my own from this day forth. You shall wield your father's sword for the rest of time, may it swing true. I will have need of you in the future, but for now your rage will be a menace upon the land, your name shunned, and your legends spit upon. You shall be known as Tag the Desecrator, berserk upon all." With those words spoken, Tag was flung into a sense of pain so unbearable that it should've killed any normal man. Tag awoke 4 days later, the only things reminding him of what had transpired were his father's black runed sword and a burning rune on the side of his neck. A lone voice ebbed at the back of Tag's mind as he gathered his senses, it was his father's voice. It uttered a single word over and over, the name of his sword, "Slayer Wasp."

## **Chapter 1: The Griffin's Gaze**

Filled with unspeakable hatred towards the evil spectre that brought upon uttermost death upon all Tag loved and knew, the young boy set fire to his village turning it into a large crematorium. Depleted of physical energy and strength, Tag tied his father's sword to his back and trudged on fueled only by determination. The enormous blade of Slayer Wasp dragging a trail in the dust behind Tag. He wandered for days without food or drink climbing hills and walking through forests until he reached a lone tavern near Druid's Rock. It was there that Tag truly learned of his new found strength.

The large enormous fort of Druid's Rock loomed over the horizon as Tag reached the outlying tavern, it seemed full to the brink with people of all sorts. It was night time, the air humid and filled with drunk laughter from the tavern. As the boy approached the tavern swaying left to right from exhaustion, 3 figures approached the boy. In front of Tag stood two humans and an orc, all of which wore loose leather armor wielding all manner of weaponry. Who appeared to be their captain stopped the boy in his tracks, resting the palm of his hand on Tag's forehead. Tag looked up into the man's eyes, giving a scowl of hatred at being stopped. The man simply looked down towards Tag and said,

"What do we have here lads? That's a nice sword boy, you been corpse lootin' from the border?" Tag simply stared on, his starved 10 year old frame seemingly miniscule to these large men.

The orc amongst them spoke up with loud thunderous laughter, "Look at what ties the sword to this whelp, isn't that the sigil of the Zanfen house? The bastards condemned to death in the Northern glaciers?"

The men exchanged glances with sinister grins spreading onto their faces. The leader spoke once more, "I thought they were all dead, I guess one is still kickin' aye boys? I do believe heads of the Zanfen house fetch a fair price from the Druids!"

The three men then slowly began to draw out their blades of steel, the orc also taking out a long wooden rod which he then tried to smack the boy around with. The first blow came towards Tag with a playful amount of force, smacking into the side of Tag's face knocking him to the ground. Tag spit his life blood onto the ground and looked up with anger on his face as the three laughed and the Orc continued to beat the boy. There were no screams, no wincing, no response as Tag took his beating.

"Oi did you beat him on the neck Gildar?" Asked one of the men.

“No, been aiming for his ribs so we can still have fun! Wait why is he blee-” The Orc replied, only to be cut off before finishing his sentence.

With movement so fast that most mortal eyes would be unable to ascertain what had happened, the Orc slowly slid in half gushing his pressurized blood in all directions. In front of him stood Tag, Slayer Wasp drawn to full, blood flowing down onto Tag's hands. The remaining two goons screamed with panic, drawing their blades to full. Tag didn't hesitate, he went for the next villain by shoving the end of Slayer Wasp through the open mouth of the leader, turning the blade so that it cleaved the man's head in two like a sliced melon. The third man rushed to strike down Tag, his deadly steel edged blade coming down with fury. Tag turned, his eyes red with unspeakable anger, a devilish grin spread from ear to ear. The third man fell with ease as Tag run him through, lifting up the man's body on his sword clear above his head. As the corpse slowly slid towards the boy holding him up, blood rained down drenching Tag in red. Time seemed to slow as Tag took in his victory, but just as it had stopped it resumed as a loud bellowing yell came to his ears. Tag's eyes focused and turned towards the sound, the innkeep stood outside his tavern with awe. Tag growled with primal rage as the man ran towards him, he readied Slayer Wasp to kill once more. However, as the man approached he swung no weapons, instead he carried a blanket with which he wrapped Tag in. The anger faded, and his eyes grew heavy as warmth filled Tag. The rune on his neck calming down and his father's sword growing heavier in his hand. Passing out from exhaustion, Tag was carried in by the innkeep who kept whispering “It's alright now lad.”

Years passed like the falling of leaves for Tag as he lived in blissful peace for a time at the Griffin's Gaze tavern having been adopted essentially by the kind Velief who owned the establishment. Tag grew up at the Griffin's Gaze to the young age of nine-teen, with various vivid episodes of his rage breaking out over the years as all sorts of vermin seemed to pass through the inn on their way to Druid's Rock. All the while there was only one soul who seemed able to calm Tag down in every scenario, a girl named Runa who had grown up alongside Tag. Runa was Velief's only daughter, and was a specially kind-hearted individual who looked out for Tag. Tag had fallen in love with Runa, but unable to tell her in fear of one day fully becoming the monster he had been branded to be so. He knew deep down Runa probably cared for him in the same way, but he couldn't quite acknowledge how someone could love someone such as him. It was so that Tag kept himself mostly secluded, working hard for Velief and transporting goods sometimes to Druid's Rock. Things seemed to be good for a time, that is until the ground rocked and fire rained from the sky as Druid's Rock exploded setting the horizon on fire with evil.

Tag stood outside, practicing with Slayer Wasp for what seemed to be the millionth time, his muscles straining and moving with the weight of the enormous black runed blade. It was then that Druid's Rock exploded with furious fire and death. Tag stood motionless, staring at the blaze as the memories of Crol flooded his mind. All he could think is that it's happening again, his world is about to end once more. The sky filled with green energy, ash rained from the sky, people ran to and fro in panic, and Runa raced from the tavern to grab Tag. Tag turned to meet her as Runa grabbed his arm and raced inside. Velief was hastily packing supplies and counting his belongings, he yelled towards Tag.

“Grab what you can and take Runa to the wagon outback, we have to leave. NOW!” shouted Velief.

Tag nodded, tying Slayer Wasp to his back with the same sigil band he had worn when he was found. He grabbed several heavy sacks of supplies with one hand, and grabbed Runa’s wrist with the other, racing towards the backdoor. He threw the supplies and Runa through the door towards the wagon and went back for Velief. Before he could round the corner he heard shouting from around the corner, voices he couldn’t understand. The ground suddenly rumbled as something large had hit the ground outside causing a fiery explosion, the front of the tavern exploding sending slivers of wood and steel into the walls. The voices from around the corner screamed and writhed with the cries of death as blood pooled towards Tag’s gaze. He rushed the corner only to find a family shredded by debris and Velief impaled to the wall by a long piece of some kind of organic spike, a spike that Tag couldn’t recognize. It was spear length and made out of some kind of fleshy like material, and oozed some kind of green substance. Filled with grimace, Tag turned to walk back towards the door to Runa. It was as then that he heard her scream, a blood churning scream that sent him into a rage. He kicked open the door, Slayer Wasp drawn at the ready only to find Runa’s twisted corpse being feasted upon by a demon resembling one rode by the raiders from Crol only it had wings. “No.” he whispered under his breath as he took in the sight. The beast looked up from its meal, one of Runa’s arms still in its mouth as its fangs slowly spread into a venomous grin. Tag doesn’t remember much of what transpired after that, he remembers slowly raising a hand to the side of his neck and feeling blood running from the rune that was branded there. All he remembers is waking up covered in blood and various wounds laying atop a small mountain of demon bodies, all of which torn to shreds. He looked to his right and saw Slayer Wasp embedded blade end into the ground, stained deep with blood, and pieces of demons still grasped in his hands from tearing some apart with his bare hands. He remembers burying what was left of Runa and Velief a short ways away from the Griffin’s Gaze atop a grassy knoll.

Upon returning to the battlefield that used to be his new home, Tag grabbed a few bags of supplies but halted when his eyes locked with a large wooden crate with a note pinned to it. The note read his name, and upon reading it Tag began to cry softly.

“Forgive me Tag, but I went back to Crol. I knew one day you would try to return there to get some of your family’s belongings, so I thought I would be the one to do it for you. I wanted you to feel whole again, and maybe someday do this dark world some good. In order to do that you would need protection, and I won’t always be there to protect you. I love you Tag, and always will.” Signed Runa.

Tag slowly opened the crate to reveal a set of black armor with silver trimmings, various runes forged directly into magical points of the armor. It had been his father’s armor that he had adorned during his times as a Troll Tamer, it was the only set of armor of its kind. Each set of Troll Tamer armor was crafted over the course of centuries by the greatest wizards in the land, and each set was crafted specifically for its wearer as it became soul bound, giving the wearer special powers and protection against evil. Tag adorned the armor quickly, tucking the letter

inside, and turned to leave behind what had transpired here. From this point on Tag was known throughout the land as the Black Swordsman, and to others of old he was still known as Tag the Desecrator, berserk to all.

## **Chapter 2: The Black Swordsman**

Time seemed to slow for Tag as it was one mercenary contract after another for him for as long as he can remember. Serving under the thanes of the Valgard, Tag served as a sword for hire amongst some of the bloodiest battles Telios had ever seen. Fighting in sieges, open-field battles, and all sorts of other skirmishes across the border, Tag seemed to never quench his thirst for blood. After the fall of Druid's Rock the war had seemed to reignite as the Xolum believed the Valgard had began practicing darker forms of magic, and the Valgard believed their gods had cursed them for waging peace with the heathenous Xolum. All the while Tag was there at the front lines, his skill unmeasurable and his rage seeming to allow whatever army he marched with capable of conquering any and all in their path. It went on like this for quite some time, never did Tag stop to rest or find comfort in places. It was at the Southern castle of Thunderfoot that Tag finally found his place, a place amongst those he felt he belonged.

The Valgard army had besieged Thunderfoot for almost a week with wave after wave of men throwing themselves at the walls of the castle. It was on the 7th day of that week that they finally broke into the massive keep, and Tag was there at the front of it all. Tag swung Slayer Wasp relentlessly, cleaving whole sections of the walls clean of any foe. It was Tag who was able to capture the gatehouse almost alone, allowing his allied forces to storm the keep. What Tag didn't realize is that he was being judged. From across the field of battle stood a small army of mercenaries hired to join in on the Valgard's side of this siege, amongst them was their leader adorned in all white armor, staring at Tag throughout it all without blinking. After Thunderfoot had fallen to the Western powers and Tag had collected his money, he was followed beyond the roads back to the Western border.

Out of the corner of his eye he spotted at least 4 riders approaching his flank on the road, his right hand slowly released the grip on the reins of his horse ready to unsheathe Slayer Wasp at any moment. 2 of the riders galloped along either side of Tag ordering him to stop, then a 3rd rider approached from the rear. A female voice spoke out,

"Black Swordsman, cease your ride and listen! I order you to stop!" she said.

A venomous grin spread on Tag's face, no one could order him to stop. Unsheathing Slayer Wasp, he prepared for the worst. Having his horse stop all together, the rear rider smashed into Tag's horse sending both flying off their mounts. Landing with the grace of a cat, Tag stood in defensive formation whilst the female rider careened into the ground. The other 2 riders yelled with shock at the sight and circled around to engage Tag. The first rider hooved towards Tag with deadly intent, only to have the horse underneath the man get cleaved in two by the furious might of Slayer Wasp. The other rider rode to a safer distance in pure fear of Tag, whilst the

female rider had managed to re-mount and charge Tag once again. Running to meet her, Tag slid onto his knees swinging Slayer Wasp to take out the legs of the horse from beneath her. She again fell towards the ground with great disdain, yelling curses of all kinds on her trip to the earthen ground. Before Tag could reposition and prepare for the other riders, a cold blade rested on the nape of his neck between his armor and helm, a cold voice rasped out to him.

“Enough, I have seen enough.” the voice said to him.

Tag measured his options on how to spin and defeat this strange foe, he already knew it was the 4th rider he had spotted amongst this group of seemingly bandits. Alas, before Tag could act on his options the female knight had thrown away her helmet to reveal a close cropped red-haired lass with pure frustration and anger on her face, she sprinted forth to simply slap Tag clean across the face, knocking his half-helm off.

“What the hell! You killed my horse you fucker, what kind of man decapitates and maims a horse with such ruthlessness!?” she screamed in frustration, heaving from the anger.

A grin spread across Tag’s face as he responded, “It worked didn’t it, got you off your horse so I could talk to your boss without killing his underlings.”

She simply gave a “hmp” of frustration as she crossed her arms and spit at Tag’s feet. Without his helm, Tag took her in completely. Her hair was close-cropped like a man’s hair, her complexion very beautiful, and she was adorned in a captain’s garb of steel white trimmed armor with green clothing over her chainmail. She also carried two nasty looking broadswords at her hips, Tag could tell based on her small frame that she could be quite deadly on the battlefield. The voice behind Tag spoke,

“You will come with me to my camp and share words with me!” the man coolly said, taking his blade away from Tag’s neck.

“Are you insane Hawk!? The man is obviously just another brute, if he is even a ma-” she was cut short as the man called Hawk raised a hand to silence her.

It was from this point that Tag was taken back to their camp, or more like a rather large forest hamlet housing a sizeable army. Tag learned that this band of mercenaries was called the Three Eyed Ravens, or Ravens for short, it was here that Tag found his place. The man named Hawk was tall and very thinly built, but extremely deadly. He had long flowing white hair, and a very attractive complexion, making him have the look of a very important noble. Tag was told of the Ravens who were an army of misfits trained and ordained to be an elite group under one banner who no kingdom could control, fighting for whatever side they deem fit. Hawk asked Tag to join him and his army, all the while eyeing Tag up and down constantly, drawn to the man. At first Tag refused, but then Hawk had requested a duel for his life as he now considered Tag a prisoner. With an evil grin Tag had accepted, except during said duel Tag found Hawk to be an



equal with the blade. With the same white steel blade from before rested upon Tag's neck once again, Hawk forced Tag to swear his allegiance to the Ravens. At first Tag was angered, but over the course of two years Tag had become one with the Ravens, knowing most of the army by name and becoming the closest amongst all towards Hawk. The two were practically blood brothers and decided on everything together, Tag trusted him with his life and life was good. They fought many decisive battles for the West, and were known throughout the land without a single defeat. A mentionable battle being the cavalry charge of Deran's Hand. At Deran's Hand the Xolum had marched over 1,200 men far beyond the borders by night, taken by surprise the Valgard were in danger of defeat. It was here that the Ravens poured from the forest numbering only 200 by horseback, their general Tag leading the charge. They smashed into the Xolum forces slaughtering the foot infantry with ease, while Hawk lead an additional 300 infantry and archers from the front while Tag attacked the rear. Together the 500 men were able to defeat the 1,200 Xolum soldiers with barely taking any losses. The fame and reputation of the Ravens grew daily with every battle such as this.

Over time Tag became the most famous of the group, bringing more men and women into the fold of the Ravens. It wasn't fame or money that kept Tag going though, it was his new family and the prospects of falling in love with the red-haired woman from that first encounter. Her name was Hild, and although the two quarreled still time and again, Tag had grown a liking for her. Having never been able to fully gain love and affection before, Tag however was helpless and could not admit to her his love for her. He was fearful of her actual feelings and if she truly detested him, although there was plenty of occasions where Tag suspected she did love him as well. The way she would look at him at camp or on the field of battle, the way they fought side by side, and just the overall energy between the two. As time passed and battles were won, the war seemed to slow for a time as the South was losing bad to the West who was supported by the Ravens. However, things were not altogether too good for the Ravens following their sworn fealty to the Western king.

Many amongst the Valgard courts deemed the Ravens dangerous although useful, sure they could turn the tide of battle and win this war, but what about after the war. Many detested the Ravens, calling them simple minded bandits with no authority or nobility. Many a time during a council in which the Ravens were invited argument would strike and although a brother to Hawk, Tag was asked to leave before going berserk and killing all the thanes and nobles out of rage. Hawk and Tag trusted each other without question and loved each other as brothers, they were literally family through and through at this point, but it was at this point Tag was growing worried. It seemed Hawk no longer wanted to have their band be tied to just themselves as Hawk had sworn their fealty to the Western king and demanded his name be allowed into the list of thanes, declaring himself having a seat at the courts. Hawk wanted power, and Tag could see it. Both Tag and Hild, Hawk's two generals, grew worried over time about the inevitable outcome of these politics. Hild would argue that Hawk may bring their destruction, but Tag, although worried, would always say to trust in Hawk that he knew that what he was doing would be best for their family.

It was then that Hawk returned one day after a heated council meeting that things were starting to change, during the meeting the king, under the influence of the thane Athils, had asked the Ravens to fight one more battle before being granted nobility. Alone they were to take

the fortress castle of Honorcloud, a near impenetrable fortress that had never been conquered before. Hawk had agreed, and said he would take the fortress in under a day with only half their force. Astonished both Hild and Tag gave him bewildered looks, both filled with doubt at the news of this suicide mission. Hawk informed his two generals that Hild would remain here with the infantry and archers, while Hawk and Tag would take the calvary to take the fortress alone. Filled with anger and frustration Hild cursed Hawk to no end before storming from their command tent leaving the brothers alone and Tag filled with questions. Hawk raised a silencing hand before telling him they leave for the fort tomorrow.

On the rise of the next day, 500 Raven calvary lead by Hawk and Tag stood near the desert fortress of Honorcloud which was located in the only desert within Telios. With a river to their back and the fortress to their front, there was no chance of retreat should the armies within charge to meet them. Tag stood alongside his brother, ready for combat, but wishing Hild was there alongside him. Hawk sat atop his horse staring at the fortress, silence filling the field as the Ravens grew slightly uneasy. With a creaking and moaning that filled the void, the gates of the fortress opened to reveal nearly the entire army of the region to be waiting atop horseback, numbering well over 4,000. The Xolum forces charged forth towards the Ravens with unrelenting speed, Hawk yelled for a retreat to the river. With uncountable enemies on their rear, the Ravens raced for the river forming a defensive circle on horseback at the river's lip as the Xolum forces encircled them. Battle waged as the 500 stood against the 4,000, it was the bloodiest conflict either side had ever witnessed. Men and women Tag knew and loved were dying all around him, back to back both Tag and his brother fought with all their might, never stopping the swing of their united swords. It was looking bleak with defeat inevitable as the Ravens were being forced into the river, men and horses being swept away by the tide. It was then that a great horn blew across the battlefield silencing all and forcing everyone to stop, for across the great expanse of the field at the fortress of Honorcloud that the Xolum banners no longer existed, but the banners of the Ravens swayed in their place. The fortress was taken, and the walls were lined with hundreds of Raven soldiers blaring horns and notching arrows, arming catapults, and preparing to engage the Xolum from the rear. While Hawk and Tag had forced the main army out of the fort and engaged their attention, Hawk had secretly told Hild to take her force to infiltrate the fortress and claim it while it only contained a lone guard crew. They had achieved the impossible as the remaining Xolum troops were forced to run for their lives or surrender. The Ravens were now considered a noble house and asked to dine with the nobles at the great Western ball, which is where Tag's story took a grimacing turn once more.

### **Chapter 3: The Burden of Nobility**

The great halls of the Western kingdom of Valgard were alight with joy and laughter, the mead halls were overflowing, and noble thanes and jarls traveled far and wide to the great hall of Dunrook. It was here that a great ball or feast was being held in honor of the Ravens and the success brought to the armies of the West. Situated high atop a hill-top overseeing the vast fortress city, the great hearths burned and the ale was poured in every horn and cup. Everyone that attended was exquisitely dressed for a ballroom occasion, looking their finest in such a rare

occasion of celebration. Even Tag was dressed very well head to toe with a black and green silk tunic while also wearing his house sigil band for a sash topping it off with a Ravens pendant worn around his neck. Tag hated every minute he spend walking up the stairs towards the great hall as he was not one for such parties, nor dressing and bathing to meet other's standards, but Hawk had persisted he be present. He had decided to arrive a little late to avoid further unpleasantries, and had just reached the top of the winding stairs past the many gardens and fountains also filled with people when he saw her. Away from the golden great hall full of dancing people and tables lined with nobles, stood Hild in a magnificent black and gold dress. Unlike many of the other Ravens and Western folk who were partying and enjoying the celebration, Hild was off to the side on a balcony gazing into the stars, her jewelry and headpiece reflecting the moonlight giving her a light aura. Tag had never seen something so beautiful in his life, but he was quick to remind himself of who he truly was and that he still did not know of her standing. Conflicted with worry and doubt, Tag made the decision to join her rather than be bored to death by the trials of the nobles gathered around Hawk at the center table. He slowly made his way to her, greeting Ravens and comrades he passed along the way. Upon approaching her, Hild slowly turned around revealing the full extent of her beauty further, the sight made Tag uneasy on his feet for a second. It was then that Hild broke into thunderous laughter, bending over from the might of her amusement.

"Uh... What's so funny Hild?" Tag said gruffly, a bead of sweat rolling down his face with fear.

"Well, I never thought I would see you here of all places let alone dressed so fine! You even bathed and combed your usually tousled hair!" She exclaimed with glee as she approached him.

Tag's heart began to race as she got closer, and it raced further when she began to fix the collar of his tunic for him that he honestly had no clue as to how it was supposed to be worn.

"There, now you're complete." She smiled, looking up into his deep green eyes.

"Hild I-" Tag stuttered, but before he could finish his statement the musicians had setup and began to play an epic tune as people started to gather for dancing.

"A DANCE!?" Hild yelled in delight, she cleared her throat to speak in a deeper more authoritative voice, "Sir Tag of Crol, would you please join me amongst the dancing? Your presence is required at once!"

Tag grinned and nodded as he reached to take her hand which upon taking her hand, Tag was pulled with great speed and strength into the thick of the dance. They spun wildly, danced, and laughed with glee for what seemed to be an eternity, doing whatever they wanted. Hugging each other closely, Tag spun her outwards once more to have her twirl into the thick of the dancers. He took a step back to admire her and just to reflect on how good it felt to be a part of something and someone again, it was then he noticed he had a visitor. Standing directly next to him was Hawk who quickly leaned in close and whispered quickly into Tag's ear.

“If you love her and all of your comrades you will heed my words. Lord Athils is conspiring with others amongst the court to have us all destroyed in order to maintain power within the courts, they deem that we have served our purpose. His plans including assassinating me tomorrow before moving in to exile the Ravens. Only you can stop this my loyal Tag, it is only you I trust. You must execute him tonight, he has already left and is staying at his estate less than a mile from here.” As the final words of Hawk’s statement reached Tag’s ears, Hawk vanished without a trace.

Tag’s face of utter glee and happiness turned sour and back to his usual view of disdain, he knew what he must do, kill.

Hild finished her twirl and had recovered her senses, laughing hysterically the entire time. When she turned to look towards where Tag had stood once before, he was now gone without a trace. She looked all around the hall with no luck, he had abandoned her. Filled with sadness and distraught she took back to her lonely balcony where she spent the rest of her time. The truth of the matter was that Tag had raced from the hall under the cover of darkness to the Raven camp, it was here that he dressed back into his usual attire minus his armor and Slayer Wasp for he needed to be more stealthy this time around. He raced off into the night towards Athils’ estate.

Upon reaching the estate, Tag crept silently through an open window on the second story careful to not alert the many guards located on the estate grounds. He awaited at the top of the staircase, listening and waiting to see if he could pinpoint Lord Athils.

“More wine m'lord?” said once voice, a servant probably.

“Leave the bottle, and leave me alone for now I must think!” exclaimed the harsh voice Tag recognized to be Athils.

There was some footsteps as the servant left the room and Tag was free to approach. He sneaked his way down the staircase which was right next to the drunken Athils who sat in a chair before the fireplace. Tag was able to walk silently all the way up to behind Athils without making a single sound, making him almost seem a phantom of the night. Before Athils could even comprehend what was going on he was seized and pinned to the wall, his mouth covered by an insanely powerful gnarled hand. Tag slowly slid the blade into the man’s heart whilst pushing back the hood of his cloak to reveal his face. The eyes of Athils turned large upon recognizing his assassin, but it was too late as Tag slowly turned the blade killing the man. Just as Tag let the body slowly slide to the floor he turned and locked eyes with a small 5 year old boy who stood mouth agape, it was Athils’ son nobody had told Tag about. Seconds passed as the two stared each other down, it was then that Tag began to hear the steps of guards approaching the opposing corridor and the young lad turned to dash for the hallway. Tag had no choice but to seize the boy and hold him until the guards passed, holding one of his massive hands over the boy’s face to keep him silent. The boy struggled fiercely, clawing away at Tag’s hand in fury as Tag looked onwards towards the halls to see the guards pass.

A minute passed as the guards finally went about their patrol and left the area, and it seemed the boy had given up on his struggle. With a sigh of relief Tag turned and released the boy, only the boy had his eyes closed and was unmoving. Confused, Tag tried to jostle the boy and shake him only to discover he had accidentally suffocated the young lad with his massive hand while trying to keep him quiet while the guards were moving past. The look on Tag's face could speak a million words as tears rolled from his eyes, and pure distraught filled every fiber of his being. It was indeed a dirty task Hawk had asked of him, but killing a young pup such as this was not part of this deal. He truly was a monster was the only thought running through his mind, and no one could love a monster that steals the oxygen from the lungs of the young. He screamed a bloody battlecry, deafening all those within the house as he ran away. He fought and battled with a handful of guards on his way out, slaughtering them with ease but taking a few scrapes himself especially when he threw himself over the walls of the estate.

It was about 4 in the morning when Tag arrived back to the great hall covered in blood and a look of pure sadness and anger on his face, he blamed Hawk for this as he knew his so-called brother had only asked of this task out of his lust for power. He saw him, he saw Hawk waiting at the top of the staircase and nearly broke into a sprint towards him, only to have Hild step in front of him.

"What has happened!? Where did you go, why are you covered in blo- Oh my god, you're wounded!!" she exclaimed in fear.

Tag knew that if he told her exactly what had transpired that Hild would truly never love him or look at him the same way again, he also still had feelings towards his brother Hawk and didn't want to destroy the family he had joined.

"Hawk asked me to run an errand, but I was attacked by bandits on the way." Tag said gruffly.

Hild stared at him with disbelief as she had a hard time believing THE Tag was wounded by some simple bandits. "Well, let's go home and tend to those wounds I am sick of this party anyways." she said.

As the two walked back towards the Ravens camp, Tag locked eyes with Hawk who simply nodded towards Tag. Hawk's blue eyes glowed red for a brief second as Tag looked at him, but thinking he was hallucinating, thought nothing of it as Hild helped him back towards camp. With Athils out of the way, Hawk had become one of the most powerful thanes amongst the Western courts, and no one would be able to step in his way other than the king himself.

## **Chapter 4: Death Is Nigh**

Tag sat within the confines of his tent for days in absolute silence, blankly staring outwards from the opening of his tent. On occasion Hild would stop by to redress his wounds

and make sure they did not contain infection, all the while silent herself and not paying him much other attention. Tag was deeply upset, not only at the terrible crime he had committed, and the realization that Hawk was nothing but power-hungry, but he also felt he had failed himself with Hild. He knew deep down that the reason she paid him no attention was that he had left her at the ball while also lying to her upon his return, and he knew she was angry. On the sunrise of the 5th day of his self appointed exile, Hild found Tag standing outside his tent adorned in his armor with bags of his belongings slumped over one shoulder like he was leaving. She stared at him from her own tent that was opposite his with a confused and sad look on her face as she watched him look up from the ground towards her.

“I am leaving the warband Hild.” Tag said gruffly without emotion as he left her gaze to look at the ground.

“Wha- Why are you leaving!?! You can’t leave us!” Exclaimed Hild with bewilderment.

“I no longer belong here, and I cannot follow a man who no longer needs me.” Tag said with sadness in his eyes.

Before Hild could say more, Tag began to shuffle towards the exit of camp. Hild quickly threw on some fresh clothes and ran out of her tent to stare after Tag, she then realized many of the Ravens had also left their tents or stopped what they were doing to stare after Tag. The Raven’s most proclaimed and honored general was abandoning them, and morale was dipping fast as many tried to approach Tag to beg him to stay only to be shoved aside.

Upon reaching the edge of the Raven camp Tag came face to face with Hawk who was also adorned in his armor. The two locked eyes, Hawk’s eyes shining red for a split second just like the night Tag was ordered to kill for him. Tag’s eyes widened upon realizing this was no illusion and he gritted his teeth in anger.

“You cannot leave.” Hawk said coolly.

“I can, and I will. I have served my purpose, my sword has slain enough for you. You said I could leave when the war is over.” Tag said in response while the whole camp remained motionless.

“Is the war over?” Hawk said with a grin.

The two stared at each other in silence for what seemed to be an eternity until Hawk spoke once more, “If you truly want to abandon your family here Tag, then you will at least accompany us on one last meeting. Is that fair?”

Tag nodded stiffly, he did not want to linger around the likes of him any longer. With his nod of approval, Hawk yelled into the camp for the army to prepare and armor up for a final meeting.

The entirety of the Raven's army sat atop their horses in an open clearing in the midst of the Western hills, Tag and Hild at the front waiting for when they were to be signaled to head into town. They were told by Hawk to wait in the clearing until they were sent a messenger telling them to head into town as part of a parade before being awarded by the king. Hours passed as the men began to converse and make the best of the time, Tag and Hild simply stood next to each other looking outwards without speaking. It was then that Tag heard it, a whistling sound buried deep beneath the sounds of conversation. Shadows fell over the army as the sky filled with arrows raining down towards the unsuspecting army, Tag rushed to cover Hild with his massive form. The first wave of arrows struck the Ravens with no mercy, killing and maiming many, 3 arrows struck the back of Tag who was shielding Hild. With a grunt Tag broke the shafts of the arrows and looked over the hilltops sword drawn awaiting combat. All around them soldiers marched onto the tops of the hills, Hawk leading them accompanied by all the Western nobles. Tag spit blood onto the ground and stared down Hawk with anger, his rune beginning to burn wildly and gush red. Hild looked from Tag to Hawk with shock and terror, unable to fully comprehend what exactly was happening before her as the world she knew was crashing down. The Valgard army notched their arrows and prepared for the order to fire as the nobles looked to Hawk for the final command. Hawk gave an evil vile grin as he waited, simply locking eyes with Tag. The white haired menace then took off his helmet slowly and waved his long luscious hair to reveal a rune on the side of his neck, one that when aligned with Tag's would form a full runic circle. Tag's eyes widened in disbelief upon the sight of such a thing, he took a few steps backwards in utter shock as his rune died down and he filled with fear. The air around everyone began to still as the sky darkened and thundered, lightning of red raced across the sky giving a red haze about the battlefield as everyone stood still in fright of what was to come. Hawk looked upwards closing his eyes before laughing wildly.

"It is time, time for power to granted to those deserving! You, Tag, will be bear witness to what is about to happen!" Hawk bellowed, breaking the silence.

Darkness swirled around the whole of the armies as the land around them transformed, everyone was transported into a different realm, the realm of the demon lords.

The ground beneath them was that of skulls rolling over hills as far as the eye could see, nothing grew there, and the air reeked of death. Everyone stood in shock, unable to ascertain what was happening. Hild stood and grabbed onto Tag's arm for reassurance, afraid of what was happening. It was then that the hills came to life with unspeakable hordes of demons of all kinds, gnashing their teeth and licking their lips.

"He is here, he has brought them! The grand feast of old has come to pass!" The demons chanted.

The ground shook and trembled with great power as behind the two armies a massive pillar exploded from the ground into the sky, towering above all in the shape of a hand. Hawk raced forth towards the pillar whilst all stood in shock, riding its ascension into the sky laughing the whole way. It was then that the hordes of evil descended upon the armies. Tag yelled for a

defensive formation and prepared for combat, the Western armies and nobles ringing the Ravens engaged the demon hordes forming an almost protective circle around the Ravens. With the Valgard acting as a distraction, the Ravens formed a circle formation around Tag, Hild, and the wounded, with their spears outwards in all directions while archers fired from the center.

“We must get out of here Hild, we won’t last for long!” Tag yelled above the cries of combat.

“No Tag, we must hold here while you go.” Hild softly said, looking up into Tag’s eyes.

Tag looked down from the battle to meet eyes with Hild, before he could say anything Hild shushed him and spoke again, “You must defeat Hawk, I feel like we are about to witness something even worse. I know you can do it, and I know that once it is done you will return for me. Go now!”

Hild then raced away from Tag to join the defenders who fought for their lives against the demons who were devouring men and horses like no tomorrow. Tag yelled in frustration and looked back and forth from Hild to the pillar before taking off towards the pillar. Upon leaving the Raven’s formation, Tag came face to face with demons as the Valgard forces were diminishing to the evil masses. Blood was pouring down the hills mixed with pieces and remnants of men and horses, corpses of demons numbered far less than those of the armies. Running and yelling a loud battlecry, Tag leapt into the onrushing horde cleaving before him a path. With each swing, 10 or more demons would fall from Slayer Wasp, the rune on his neck increasingly growing bright and bleeding from each wave defeated. The demons rushed forth to overwhelm him, focusing him amidst the battle, Tag now stood in the middle of hundreds of them surrounded on all sides. Arrows rained forth, wiping the immediate demons around him buying him some time. Tag looked to the source and found Hild ordering the archers to focus fire on the demons surrounding Tag to help clear a path. Tag grinned and continued to clear a path as though harvesting wheat from a field, slicing and dicing his way towards the pillar.

Eventually, the wounded and bloodied Tag made it to the pillar of skulls, various wounds covering his body, his clothes torn and ragged, and his armor falling apart. Tag tore off his armor and began his climb, he dug the blade of Slayer Wasp deep into the pillar of skulls that bled upon entering the blade, covering Tag head to toe in blood as he climbed the massive pillar. Below, he watched the Ravens for some time while he climbed as they were surrounded and fighting for their lives, Hild raced about the center giving orders and rallying the men and women. He forced his gaze away from them with all his might, he had to trust they would hold or else everything would be meaningless. Infuriated, Tag climbed on and by the time he reached the top his rune was burning so bright that embers began to fly around his neck from the heat, and blood kept on running down his side.

On the palm of the hand that was the pillar stood Hawk in front of 3 ghastly figures, one of which Tag recognized from Crol.

“Welcome Tag, we’ve been waiting for you.” The three said in unison.



“Let us start the ritual already.” Hawk said impatiently.

The three began to channel power into Hawk who was lifted into the air from the extent of the ritual, his figure changing. Tag yelled and charged the three lords, only to be repelled backwards time and again as he charged with all his might. After several attempts, Hawk came back down towards the ground, covering the palm in smoke. Tag waited outside the smoke to see what foe he now faced. From the smoke emerged Hawk, or what used to be Hawk, as a figure of all black stood in his place. The being had wings folded from his arms to his sides, wrapped around him like a cloak, the body of the being was covered head to toe in red runes and black fur with long claws on its hands and feet. The head of the being had Hawk's eyes, but it was shrouded in a perfectly round black helm resembling a hawk with white lines forming an outline. The eyes glared at Tag with evil intent, and Tag became even more infuriated as his rune began to spread lines throughout his body igniting him with hatred. Tag charged Hawk, sending parts of the ground flying as he rushed with Slayer Wasp in hand. With unmeasurable speed Hawk took flight and smashed into Tag standing before him. With a glint, clawed hands slashed and tore at Tag with speed so fast not even Tag could keep up, each blow felt as though he was being slammed against rocks by a tradeship. With each blow, Tag was slowly being pushed towards the edge of the pillar, eventually standing on the very edge of the palm. Covered in even more wounds and soaked with blood Tag looked towards Hawk who had ceased his attack. Hawk suddenly vanished, flying past Tag only to return a few moments later carrying Hild in his clawed feet like a hawk carrying its prey. Tag's eyes widened as he yelled and prepared to charge once again, only to have the beating wings of Hawk send forth a wave of energy that knocked Tag over the side of the palm.

Tag fell for what seemed hours before landing Slayer Wasp into the side of the pillar, sliding down even further before coming to a halt. He quickly took out an extra sword he kept at his side and began to climb quickly, maddened by the fact Hild was in danger. Below him, the hordes of demons raced up the pillar behind him gnashing and biting at Tag's heels. Kicking, slashing, and digging, Tag kept racing up the pillar. Just barely ahead of the demon horde, Tag reached the top where he found Hawk petting the face of the unconscious Hild, the three lords were nowhere in sight. Tag readied himself and growled with anticipation as he prepared to attack Hawk once more, his rune burning raw power through his veins enveloping him in anger and power. Before he could strike, the demons caught up and swarmed Tag, taking hold of his arms and gnawing at him. Tag slashed and cut down demon after demon with Slayer Wasp until one managed to bite at his sword arm sending Slayer Wasp over the side, he then resorted to using his bear hands tearing them limb from limb. Through the chaos he watched in horror as Hawk began to take Hild in his arms and remove her armor slowly, he was going to humiliate Tag further and ruin everything of his. Tag yelled no over and over again at the tops of his lungs as he tried to clear a path out of the hordes of demons, his eyes wide and filled with unimaginable amounts of anger. Hawk then proceeded to turn Hild over and started to rape her before Tag's very eyes, her helpless form unable to stop what was happening. This act sent Tag flying into an even more mad state of being as he tore apart demons so quickly none could fully tell what was happening as he ignored any new wound he acquired and trudged on, slowly moving towards Hawk. By the time he had cleared the pit of monsters that entrapped him, Tag

had lost an eye and was covered head to toe in wounds of all sorts. Still he charged forth yelling towards Hawk swinging only his bare fists. Hawk tried to stop him with waves of energy expelled from his mind, only to have Tag charge through them surprising Hawk. As one fist connected with Hawk's chin, the demon flew backwards dripping blood and releasing Hild. The rune on Tag's neck turned from fiery red to green as his eyes began to glow with green radiating energy as everything went black around Tag.

Tag doesn't remember what happened after that, all he remembers is waking up back in Telios on the same bloodied field holding Hild in his arms and wrapping her in a cloak, Slayer Wasp embedded in the ground a little ways away. With Hild still unconscious, the West untrustworthy, and a new mission ahead, Tag trudged on leaving a trail of his own blood behind him as he walked. He walked forward for hours before finding rest in a cabin a few miles away, he set Hild softly down onto a stack of hay in the stable before passing out from exhaustion on the ground. Through vivid memories, Tag remembers being found by a young boy and elderly father who brought Tag and Hild into their homestead.

## **Chapter 5: A Higher Calling**

Tag awoke covered in sweat finding himself in a dank underground cavern dimly lit by candles and shafts of daylight, he looked down and noticed he was covered in bandages and only able to see out of one eye. He didn't hesitate, he stood up and instantly slumped back against the rock wall from the effort. Grunting from the pain he slowly examined his surroundings more thoroughly. The cavern he found himself in had several bed rolls, lanterns, and a few supply crates next to a waterpool that had a small waterfall running down into it from the surface. It was when his eyes locked on the waterfall that he noticed Hild wrapped head to toe in bandages staring and playing with the falling water like a child.

"Hild!" Tag exclaimed rising to his feet with all his might and stumbling over to her.

He placed a hand on her shoulder and spun her around to face him, Tag met only empty and innocent eyes devoid of any knowledge. She screamed in fright and scurried over to a far corner of the cavern, wrapping herself in a blanket.

"Wha- It's me, Tag." Tag said softly after her.

A new voice spoke from the cavern entrance, a child, "She doesn't remember, her mind is frayed."

A young girl who was maybe 9 years of age stepped from the darkness and walked over to comfort Hild, telling her it'll be alright. Another voice spoke from behind Tag, a boy who was maybe 14 years of age that was lounged on a small cliff behind Tag.

“Tag, the black swordsman, take it easy will ya? You’ll scare the lady acting so fast, although your face would be enough.” The boy said laughingly.

Tag gritted his teeth in frustration, “What happened to her? Who are you?”

“Dunno, she has no memories and her mind is so frayed that she acts as though a child. As for me,” The boy leapt down from the ledge and walked up to Tag, “Call me Bior, son of Skard the great blacksmith who made the sword you carry working with your father.”

Tag’s eyes widened as he took a step back in confusion, he didn’t know Skard lived let alone had children. He knew Skard quite well growing up as he had been almost a grandfather to Tag and his siblings, but to have children at his age seemed impossible.

Bior laughed, “Don’t worry, we are adopted! The old man doesn’t have THAT much fire left in his smithy. That one over there consoling your friend, Hild you said, is Asta my sister.”

Tag looked back over to Hild who was sucking her thumb and staring blankly at the rocks while Asta pulled Hild’s blanket up and hugged her. Tag gritted his teeth further as anger spread on his face, he had to fix this.

“Where is my sword boy?” Tag asked frustratingly.

“Skard has it, he knew you’d want to leave immediately and he wanted to speak to you.” Bior said with a grin. “Follow the passage to the surface, he is laying in bed on the second story of the hut. Please do be more gentle than you were with the lady, he grows weaker every day.” Bior was now frowning in sadness at mentioning Skard’s failing health.

Tag nodded grimly, “Watch her with every fiber of your being, if anything happens to her- “

“Lemme guess, you’ll remove my head from my shoulders and kick it like a puny pebble underfoot? Don’t worry, we’ll take care of the nice Hild.” Bior said.

“Alright, I will speak with Skard and then I am going to find the Ravens and set this ri-” Tag was saying before being cut-off by Bior.

“Tag, the Ravens are dead, all of them. They were found in an open field near the capital along with the King’s army, it was rumored they clashed and so all Raven remnants are labeled by all of Telios as outlaws. It would appear you two are the only ones left, and even the South hates your guts.” The boy exclaimed.

Tag stopped mid-stride before marching off again without saying a word, his fists clenched tightly at his sides as he made his way to the hut.

Tag entered the blacksmith's hut, taking in the familiar surroundings as he had visited here on occasion a child. He remembered sitting by the hearth and listening to Skard's stories while his father warmed the smithy and prepped the materials, he loved visiting Skard and listening to his great war stories of his father and Skard as they traveled the country. In a way it was like Tag was able to learn more about his father and the world here more than at home, making Skard's home a safe haven of sorts when the townsfolk of Crol got too overwhelming. Now the fire in the hearth blazed dimly, and the smithy was cold and dead from not having been used in a good while. Walking through the house towards the stairs, memories flooded into Tag's mind setting him at ease for a brief moment before beginning his ascent towards Skard. When he reached the top he found a grayed old man laying in his bed wrapped in blankets, his long white and gray hair tied back with his long beard rough and tangled.

"Ahh, Tag, welcome home boy! Step further into the light, let me see you!" Skard exclaimed between a cough here and there.

"Skard." Tag said softly with a warm smile as he stepped into the light produced by a window above Skard's bed.

Skard took in the massive form of Tag who was a bit roughed up from his battle in the fields, "You are still quite the trouble maker I see!" Chuckled Skard, his still strong voice bellowing.

"And you still wear the house sigil I see." Tag said nodding towards the red Zanfen house sigil band tied around Skard's forehead like a headband.

Both smiled at each other in remembrance as Tag calmly sat down at Skard's bedside. "How long have I been out, and where is my sword?" Tag quickly said.

"Relax child, you've only been asleep for about a week which is good for those grisly wounds you had. As for the blade, it is here with me." Skard motioned beneath his bed where Slayer Wasp rested in some silken cloths.

Before Tag could reach for the blade, Skard stopped him, "I know what you want to do, you've always been one to take action Tag. I know you want to go out and find a fix for your lady friend, and more importantly, you want to strike down the ones that have once again wronged you. However, you must be patient and wait!" Skard exclaimed with incredible might before breaking into a coughing fit and laying back down to catch his breath.

"You must wait and let your wounds heal more lad, I also need to fix a few things for you. For starters, your blade is dulling and you have no armor. You won't last long with a dull stick and no protection!" Skard scoffed from his bed.

Tag raised an eyebrow in confusion before realizing what the old man was about to do, "No Skard, you must rest! You cannot smith, your body's failin-"

Skard slapped Tag across the face faster than Tag could anticipate, "I am dying, it is no secret, but that doesn't mean I can't prevent you from dying a fool's death!"

Skard slid from his bed and stood towards the window creaking and cracking his bones from the effort, he was still a large and well built man for his age. Tag stood opposite him and nodded in acceptance, he knew Skard wouldn't let him argue against him on this matter.

"Now then, while I fix MY sword and make you some better armor than the trappings you were wearing before, there is someone here to meet you." Skard said with a devilish grin. "Just relax and don't freak out though, he can seem a bit... intimidating."

Tag looked around now sensing the presence of someone else being in the room, and out of the corner of his eye something came to life. With the whirs of mechanisms and bright lights turning on, a large being encased in a metallic suit of armor to the likes none had ever seen came to life. Air wheezed out of its joints as it took a few steps out from the darkest corner of the room, the floor creaking from the massive weight of the figure. The armor was lime green colored and scuffed in various areas, or at least on the plating as the gaps where a man should've been was simply more metal and strange ropes or tubing, but it still had the shape of a man. As the massive being stepped into the light, its face shield slowly slid up from the front of its helmet to reveal a young leathery man. His face was lightly skinned with a neatly trimmed goatee and short cropped black hair, and he wore a strange device about his eyes that had glass in them.

"My name is Entrioch, admiral of the темная лошадка, and I need your help Tag. The fate of this planet depends on it." The man said gruffly with little emotion in his voice.

Tag stood there in astonishment for a few moments before Skard spoke for him, "Don't worry Ent, he's just in shock he'll do it for ya once he hears what is at stake. I know the boy, he's the one."

Skard then shuffled down the stairs towards his smithy while he left Tag at the mercy of Entrioch who was now moving closer towards Tag. Towering above even Tag, Entrioch looked down from his power suit to meet the one good eye Tag had left.

"I know this can be quite a bit to take in, but I need your help warrior and in exchange I will help you. I know of the trials you have faced, and I have seen you in combat, you are the one I need most in this dark hour." Entrioch said in a grim tone.

Tag simply looked at him with no emotion, frozen in confusion at the sight of the spectacle, unable to understand what was happening.

Entrioch leaned down slowly so that they were face to face, "Allow me to cease the formalities. I know this can be a lot to take in, but I am not so different from you. I am a man, a human, and

just like you I have lost nearly everything and seek to fix things and take vengeance.” Entrioch said slowly, sadness filling the man’s eyes.

Tag slowly nodded, “You said you could help me?”

Entrioch gave a slight grin, “Yes, I can help give you some tools and information to help you on your quest, but first you must help me. Allow me to explain the situation, please, take a seat with me.”

With a gust of air the suit began to open, the front of it receding into the back of the suit to reveal a man who was actually smaller than Tag adorned in some strange clothing. He wore a black vest with a white necked shirt underneath, his pants were blue and worn while his boots were tall necked and made of hard leather. At his side he had some kind of strange device holstered at his hip, some kind of dagger thought Tag assessing the man as he stepped out of his suit. The two sat down in wooden chairs next to Skard’s bed as Entrioch began to tell his tale to Tag.

Coming from a land beyond the stars on a different world than the one Tag lived, a war was raging between good and evil. A war that had made its way to this very planet and the evil that lead the march threatened all life that lived here. A race of demons or creatures of old had awakened and have gone world to world conquering all and devouring anything that stood in their path, even Entrioch’s home planet. They were known as the хищник in Entrioch’s native tongue which translates to predator, and they were vicious beings that could survive even the vacuum of space and time. Since the fall of Entrioch’s homeworld, even his home system of planets, Entrioch has been leading an army of remnants across the galaxies trying to defeat the хищник and save all he can to spare them the fate he has had to go through. While mentioning his homeworld, tears began to bubble up in Entrioch’s eyes at the memories and Tag stopped to ask him what had happened exactly. Entrioch explained that they had spotted the enemy fleet on fast approach to his homeworld, he remembers sitting outside with his family while they watched the streaks of fire and laser fire race across the sky as the battle between his home fleet and хищник fleet waged. He remembers the falling debris landing all across the cities and into the countryside where he lived, but he remembers what rode on the back of the debris even more. A piece of debris had landed near his farmstead and a being of horror emerged, crawling on six legs and covered in a strange tan carapace with long fangs dripping with green substances. Entrioch recalled how it had chased him and his family into their home and pinned Entrioch under a fallen beam forcing him to watch it devour his family whole, and it even acknowledged he was there, but made him live with what he had seen. Eventually, Entrioch was able to escape the beam and make it to the city where people were being mass recruited to fight back against the tides of хищник that were then invading the planet. Through sadness and anger, Entrioch had joined and was shipped straight into the atmosphere where he continued the fight. It was there in space aboard the темная лошадка (Dark Horse) that Entrioch was no longer a farm boy, but an admiral who took charge while the хищник mutilated and destroyed his homeworld. Tag interrupted him briefly to recall the exact description of these хищник Entrioch had been fighting, and upon detailing them in length Tag’s eyes began to widen as

memories flooded in from Crol and the Griffin's Gaze, they were the same demons that had attacked his previous homes.

"I know that look, you have seen them before." Entrioch said.

Nodding slowly, Tag began to fill with hatred at the memory of all that had befallen him. He gave Entrioch a look that screamed to be allowed to take his revenge as his fists tightened and he grit his teeth.

With a sinister grin Entrioch spoke, "As you can see now, we have both fallen victim to the same enemy, and that enemy has taken everything from us. Join me in fighting the demons above your planet and I will do what I can to restore your friend's memories and give you information on where your enemy Hawk is. I saw the demon realm battle, I know he has fallen to the might of the хищник lords."

"Tell me what I must do, and when we can leave! My sword is yours Entrioch!" Tag yelled, standing up from his chair quickly.

Rising slowly to meet him, Entrioch continued, "As we speak my ship is in the atmosphere fighting the хищник fleet while my ground forces are engaged and encamped on your moon, we leave tonight to join in on the ground assault, then we must defeat their fleet. If we manage to win on both fronts your planet will be safe, they never attack the same target twice if they fail. After it is done, we shall leave your planet and move on to the next one that befalls danger. For now, let us rest and prepare for what lies ahead."

As Entrioch left the room, Tag looked out the window into the sky where he could faintly see small streaks of red and green racing back and forth, now he knew what he must do.

"I will defeat the хищник and cure you Hild, and then I will go forth and destroy every last хищник lord that allies with any demon so long as I live, this I swear on Slayer Wasp!" Tag yelled, smashing a fist into the wall breaking the wood slightly.

## **Chapter 6: Written In The Stars**

Tag stood in a empty dark metallic room, darkness surrounding him as machines churned and whirred to life around him. His armor gone, his sword resting in a corner near the door, the only thing on him was a pair of orange pants given to him by Entrioch. He stood there waiting for instruction, his physique showing his many travels over the years. With his hair trimmed closely into a militaristic buzz, his beard trimmed close, standing on the cold metal floor Tag looked gruffly towards the orange hued viewport window across the room from him. Entrioch stood on the other side of the window, nodding to Tag signaling him to move to the

center of the room. Covered in various scars, a brand new leather eyepatch over one eye with a runic symbol etched over the eye, the large 5 foot 6 man lumbered towards the center circle of the room with a return nod.

Upon reaching the center circle of the room, the room sprung to life as hydraulic arms reached down from the ceiling to lift Tag's arms into the air as many other arms around the room sprung to life bringing forth various pieces of metallic armor. It was the same kind of armor Ent had been wearing upon Tag's first encounter with him, however it was styled different with a much more sleek and light-weight design. The arms encircled Tag, locking into place the pieces of armor one at a time as other arms drilled in each piece and attached the hydraulic cables and attachments at an intense speed. Tag stood there in bewilderment as he was transformed from a near naked man, to almost an entirely new being, a mechanical being. As more of the armor was assembled over him, systems began to come online and hum to life. The roar of the back thrusters and engine roared to life, filling Tag's nostrils with the smell of brimstone and fire. Tag flexed his hands and rotated his fingers as massive metallic gloves or hands were locked over his, it was all so different for Tag. By the time his new form was complete, Tag now stood nearly 6 foot 8 in a sleek black power suit with crimson inlays. Runes of old were lasered in upon assembly completion, a copy of his neck rune was carved in closely to the visor port almost over where it would be on his actual neck, another reminder he was still cursed. As a final phase of assembly, one of the hydraulic arms struggled but managed to carry Slayer Wasp to Tag's outstretched hand. The visor lowered to reveal all of the diagnostics and began teaching Tag what each thing meant inside the suit, all the while another arm spray-painted a Three Eyed Ravens' insignia onto the front of the visor. As the arms retracted, the platform moved so that Tag was now facing Entrioch, Tag swung Slayer Wasp in a practice formation with ease before resting the blade into a sheath of metal on his back causing sparks to fly in all directions. Entrioch grinned sinisterly at the sight of his new ally, his hope to save this planet was growing quickly by the minute.

Tag and Entrioch wasted no time, there was a war waging and with every passing second more and more life was lost to the endless void. Tag was instructed to lead the ground forces on the moon's surface while Entrioch commanded the fleet from space, Tag was to land at Crater 31 and to make a death march to Crater 20 where the хищник hivemind was currently located. It would be a suicide mission, but both Tag and Ent agreed that they needed to end this quickly for there was so much more at stake than the battle they were about to fight. The plan was simple, while Entrioch's secondary fleet was currently engaged with the хищник fleet near the moon, Ent would warp the primary fleet closer to the moon's surface to unload troop transports directly down to Crater 31 which was 3 craters over from Crater 20's location. Both knew it was a dangerous task to get there to begin with as the exposed transports were easy targets for хищник fighters and ground cannons, but there was no other way, it had to be a fast and hard landing before they could properly dig-in. Once on the ground, Tag would split his army into 4 different task forces as they marched towards their goal of Crater 20. At the start, they would all make towards Crater 20, but as they encounter the other craters along the way, a task force would be sent to each crater to deal with them individually while the main force continued to Crater 20. Once a crater is liberated, that task force would then continue on to help the next one until all forces catch up for the final battle at Crater 20, and Tag would lead the



main force that continually goes towards Crater 20. All the while Ent will try to hold back all хищник air forces, while also trying to provide air support from above.

Tag stood next to Entrioch on the bridge of the темная лошадка peering out into the void of space, the beauty of the vast open stars was overwhelming. Never had Tag thought he would be able to see such a spectacle, especially when staring out the viewport towards his home below. The enormous planet that he had been standing on moments ago seemed so small now with his problems so far away, he felt so small and insignificant. After being entranced for only a few seconds, Tag was shaken back into reality by a thud against the main viewport as a corpse smacked against the window. Soon hundreds of bodies were floating by along with all sorts of scattered debris. The once beautiful and serene spacecape ahead of them was now a floating graveyard filled to the brim with the grim reminder of why they were there in the first place. Silence overtook the bridge as the room turned red from the emergency and combat flood lights turning on, all was still as everyone onboard looked outwards into the fields of dead and dying floating towards them, knowing they could share the same fate in the next coming moments. Entrioch nodded to one of his helmsman who then turned a few dials that, with a few seconds of static, in-turn started to play an orchestral slow song throughout the entirety of the ship. The rhythm was slow and steady with a very noble tone as the singer of the song began to chant an almost melodial battle-cry. Entrioch turned to Tag and placed one of his unarmored hands on Tag's arm.

“This is the warsong from my homeworld, the homeworld of many amongst this fleet, although in our native ‘Ruski’ language that you may not understand, it sings of ‘remembering the dead this day and to carry them with you as you bring down victory upon the enemy.’ So, Tag, let us carry with us all that we have lost, and bring victory to those who would not see us have it.” Entrioch said slowly with a wild look of certainty in his eyes.

Tag's Raven visor lifted to reveal his face to Ent whom he locked eyes with, “For the fallen, for those who live, and for those to come, let us bring a swift and deadly victory over our enemies this day.” Tag said before slowly turning from Ent to begin his descent into the hanger to board his landing craft.

As Tag turned to go board his vessel, Entrioch looked out of the viewport to watch the clashing fleets and smoldering moon ahead of them, watching the streaks of laser-fire and explosions with a feeling of both sadness and triumph as the warsong of his people bellowed around him.

## **Chapter 7: Shooting Stars**

Tag stood in the small sleek landing craft near its cockpit, gripping each side of the ship's walls with a hand, staring towards the raised loading ramp with his visor down. Onboard with him were about 2 dozen other soldiers or marines as Entrioch had called them, each encased in a lime-green powersuit with their own customizations and decals. Not all of them

were human either, some were of races Tag had never before seen or even heard of. Entrioch had explained earlier that many within his fleet were from fallen planets the хищник had conquered, while some were also recruited from successfully defended planets. Each of the troopers were seated in 2 long rows on either side of the ship, facing towards the center aisle, waiting for landfall to commence.

Eventually, Entrioch's voice came on overhead to address the troops telling them to prepare for warp. All of the soldiers braced themselves, and some simply began to rock back and forth knowing that they were about to descend into hell. Tag remained standing without speaking, just waiting. With a very loud screeching noise, time seemed to slow for a split second as everything around Tag seemed to slip into almost an entirely different void until returning to normal, they had warped. Warning klaxons sounded all around them as the entirety of the темная лошадка shook from the fighting outside the vessel, all the while the sound of fighters could be heard squealing out of the hanger around them to engage in combat with enemy ships. Tag knew it would only be a few seconds now until they too would be taking off to begin their fall towards the moon. Tag was standing there with his eyes closed in anticipation and meditation until a strange voice yelled towards him in a high-pitched strange sound with a thick accent. Tag opened his eyes to see one of the marines hailing him, the marine had their visor open to reveal they were some sort of bird humanoid with colorful purple, blue, and red feathers.

The beaked fellow cawed over to Tag, "Captain, although I haven't met you personally before, I have watched the tapes of your travels like everyone else here. Before our possible demise, I would wish you to remember my name, to carry it with you when you bring down this evil." The bird creature stopped to catch his breath for a moment before yelling louder. "My name is Xoren, of Deminstra! Remember me Tag, live on!"

Before Tag could respond, soon all of the marines were lifting their visors to reveal their faces and shouting their names to Tag, some of them passing along their dog tags to Tag who stood there holding them in his hand. As the troops chanted for Tag to remember them, the cabin of the ship turned red signaling their drop was imminent, and all the visors in the room lowered while they began checking their weapons and preparing in greater anticipation of what was about to happen.

The landing craft slowly shook as it moved to lock into launching position, soon the cabin slowly started to fill with the same song that had been playing on the bridge sending eery chills throughout the cabin. Tag stepped forward, his boots magnetically locking onto the floor as he lifted his visor to address the brave soldiers around him.

"Soldiers of the темная лошадка, I may not know all of you, but today I know that you stand here defeated many a time before only to rise again against these forces of pure evil. We've all suffered, but today they shall be the ones suffering. Although you are not defending your own homes in this battle, you are defending mine, and I extend my honor to all of you for doing so. I shall remember and recant all of your names for as long as I live, for you are all Ravens and comrades this day. Angels amongst the stars, sent to save a world and help a lowly man such as myself from the demons that approach. You are all heroes to me."

All of the marines rose to their ready positions, their boots locking in place and gripping the railing above them, looking towards Tag with newly found hope and energy. With his speech concluded, the bay doors beneath all of the landing craft slowly creaked open to drop the ships towards the moon's surface. Their craft shook and rocked from not only falling but the intense incoming flak from the ground below as they fell like shooting stars towards the moon. Transmissions from all of the other troop carriers came online, some were filled in yelling as their landing craft were blown out of the sky while others were stating they were about to make landfall. For what felt like eternity, Tag's ship dropped towards the moon at immense speed as more and more screams and yelling filled his ears and explosions rocked their descent. Some of the marines began to recant prayers from their various gods while some sang the warsong. With a loud thud and the sound of roaring thrusters, they had finally landed at Crater 31.

The loading ramp slowly lowered and the marines rushed out the open door as Tag slowly made his way forward, making sure no marine was left behind. Green laser fire flew overhead followed by gauss spike bullets and red laser fire as Tag and his force raced to the crater's edge where the other forces were hunkered down returning fire with the хищник forces approaching their location. Tag looked around to see dead marines floating through the skies with scattered хищник remains floating with them, the enormity of the assault had finally began to sink in for Tag as he realized just how large the conflict was growing as he looked up to no longer see the stars and space, but massive fleets locked in conflict. His grav boots thudded loudly in his head as he made his way forward, passing wounded and dying on his way. Several of the other captains, distinguished by their red powersuits, rose to meet with Tag. One of the larger powersuits with an extra set of arms, spoke to Tag in a guttural tone, revealing his face within his visor as a pale alien humanoid with various tusks and no hair and flat face, "Captain Tag, rrrk we have only lost a handful of the landing craft, Entrioch's personal fighter squadron was able to escort rrrrrk the majority of us. We are ready to commence phase 2."

In a much more matter of factly and intellectual tone, another captain whom was much smaller and more human looking with purple skin spoke, "I agree with Skrag, we are ready Tag, we should commence the attack as soon as possible while they only have scattered forces in the fields ahead. We should use the cavalry troops to clear the path, Captain Lotoss?"

While Tag gave a look of confusion at hearing of calvary troops, the last captain spoke up. This captain was much like Tag and very strong looking, only his face was shrouded in some kind of smoke in his visor. "The cavalry are yours to command Tag, I believe you would fit in quite nicely with them. Captain Gestalt is correct, we should strike right away while they are scattered."

Lotoss then motioned towards a task force who were calmly standing a little ways away in waiting, Tag slowly began to grin devilishly behind his visor. All of the cavalry soldiers were carrying large shields and wielding menacing looking swords. Tag formulated a plan quickly with the other captains to position the main infantry behind the cavalry who would form 4 wedges ahead of the infantry to clear a path while they made their way to the next craters. After all

reached agreement, they began to order the troops into position, Tag at the head of his cavalry wedge. Looking right he nodded towards captains Skrag and Gestalt, and then looked left to nod towards Lotoss, signaling to begin the attack. Hurling over the crater wall, they charged onwards toward the хищник forces ahead of them.

## **Chapter 8: Glorious Lunar Warfare**

Forces united under one banner from across the stars charged gloriously over the crater walls towards the approaching хищник forces with no quarter. Time slowed for Tag as he set his sights on the horizon while sword and claw clashed amidst heated fire of both laser, bullet, and acidic spray alike. Bodies of the dead or dying floated slowly up towards the stars disappearing into the chaos above, they still marched on. Being in such an open field of combat, the wounded and dying had to be left behind, there was no time as more хищник soldiers poured out of every crevice and nearby crater to swarm Tag's army. At the head of the army, Tag slashed and cleaved his way through swathes of enemies, leaving scattered remains and blood floating in the air around him as he pushed forward. The fighting was brutal and heated as хищник bombers joined the fray, dropping bombs of organic and magical design that left soldiers in ribbons to demoralize the living. The face of the moon was in utter chaos, claws reached from crevices to snatch at unsuspecting soldiers, swords slashed deep into the heads of хищников spraying green blood in all directions, gauss and laser fire collided with enemies cutting them to pieces, green acidic spheres of energy shot from хищник rifles met marines with deadly intent turning their armor to paper in the vacuum of space, the sounds of the dying on both sides was drowned out by the sheer amount of fighting going on.

Igniting his thrusters Tag launched himself into a larger хищник impaling it with his sword before landing back on the surface of the moon, he turned to look towards his troops who were now surrounded but still moving. His eyes darted around the battlefield, filled with adrenaline and hatred, he knew it wouldn't be long until his rune may start to bleed. It was then his eyes locked onto a figure floating past him that was surrounded in a floating pool of blue blood, gasping towards him. As the body slowly turned about to reveal the visor, Xoren's eyes met Tag's. The great bird had several spikes protruding from his chest and his rifle read empty on ammunition, the bird was muttering towards Tag with great intensity. Tag was barely able to make out that Xoren was muttering the word 'Victory' over and over towards Tag. The air in Tag's lungs caught in his throat as his eyes widened in shock and sadness, only to squeeze his eyes shut and bite down on his tongue. He had to win, he had to defeat the хищник not only for the dead but for the ones they were going to have to leave behind. Tag then looked back towards Xoren memorizing the bird's face, another being that Tag would never forget from this day, nor would he forget any that died here this day.

Tag's visor began to illuminate red as the lines on his rune slowly began to ignite and bleed with great power and intensity, he was going berserk. Turning around to face his objective, Tag opened his now bloodshot eyes that were filled with insurmountable anger. His grip on Slayer Wasp tightened so hard the gears within his armor creaked and moaned from the

effort to stay intact, his thrusters roared in preparation for launch, and Tag was gritting his teeth so hard he began to shave the enamel from the tips of his teeth. With a roar that blasted an unsuspecting хищник behind him to ashes, Tag launched at incredible speed towards Crater 20. With no hesitation, Slayer Wasp cleaved and cut at passing хищник sending their lifeless forms to the stars. On occasion a хищник would collide with Tag only to be turned into a green smear as they exploded from the impact of meeting with such a fast moving force, this made the berserk Tag only grin harder as his teeth had started to push so hard against each other they made his gums bleed. Tag's armor began to show the wear of his assault as stray spikes would collide or impale the metallic surface, sometimes injuring Tag except he didn't even register he had been hurt. Covered from head to toe in green blood, хищник spikes, and all sorts of other marks, Tag's thrusters ran out of fuel forcing him to continue on foot. Without skipping a beat, Tag marched on, clearing a path ahead of him.

Having watched Tag charge so viciously into the enemy horde without hesitation, the marines of the fleet gave forth a mighty battle cry and charged to meet their captain in his goal to achieve victory. Eventually, the different task forces began to split and make their way to their various craters, fighting to the last breath to arm the explosives needed to destroy the хищник hive located in each crater. It wasn't long until captains Gestalt and Skrag had successfully liberated their craters and Lotoss was making his way into the inner circle of his. Both Skrag and Gestalt's forces had already begun their effort to regroup with Tag's task force who was barely able to keep up with Tag who was still cleaving a path towards Crater 31 without rest. Bayonets affixed, guns roaring, and swords at the ready, the marines showed no fear as they clashed with various bands of хищник in their path leaving a trail of both dead friends and foes alike. Victory seemed to be in their grasp until a scream rose above all others on the communications radios, it was Lotoss.

"There are too many at my crater!! I am down to only a handful of my soldiers! We need immediate air-support and reinforcements!" Lotoss screamed frantically.

"-zzt- This is Admiral Entrioch -bzzt- can't get to the surface -zzt-" Entrioch replied grimly through static.

"*Rrrrk* Hold on Lotoss, me and Gestalt and regrouped and are headed to your location!"

Within the crater walls of his objective zone, Lotoss fought alongside only a measly twenty other marines who were surrounded and pinned in a small rock foundation only a few meters from the nearby хищник hive. Firing his laser pistol and slashing at any хищник that got too close, the bloodied and tired captain fought on while trying to encourage his men. Lotoss looked up from the fighting to the stars above, his visor illuminated by the chaos above him. His gas life figure showing no emotion as small lights flickered in the cloud within his visor only to be snapped back into reality as a хищник landed into his right pauldron, straight through even his extra layers of armor. A purple gas wheezed and whooshed from the opening on his shoulder as Lotoss dropped his gun to put a hand over the hole. The cloud within his visor grunted and groaned from the pain for he was a gaseous being from a distant planet and his form was dying

to the vacuum of space. Before he could react, another spike grazed his left leg, tearing it open to release his body from the armor. All was growing bleaker by the minute for Lotoss and his men as the approaching хищник forces began to gain ground and charge their location. Lotoss looked down from his leg to the hive before talking calmly over his radio.

“Like the eternal torch that was dropped from orbit to light the entirety of my planet aflame by the хищник, I will do the same to their hive. It was an honor serving alongside you all, liberate this planet and defeat the хищник.” The hollow voice of Lotoss echoed over the radio into the ears of all the captains and generals above as silence filled the communications for a second.

The screaming voices of Skrag and Gestalt echoed from Lotoss’s radio as he disconnected the communications in his suit and prepped his thrusters, the launch alone would suck the rest of his being into space killing him. Strapping the bomb to himself and arming it, he walked in the ring of his troops and placed a hand on each one’s shoulders before turning off their grav boots and launching them above the crater to safety. With a great burst of energy and fire from his thrusters, Lotoss launched himself directly into the хищник hive structure with great intensity. By the time he reached the structure, Lotoss was already gone it was only an empty and lifeless power suit with a bomb that collided with the structure. Several seconds of silence passed until the entire crater illuminated in a grand explosion as the hive structure was destroyed and the nearby хищники were turned to dust in eternal flame, the remaining marines of Lotoss’s force flew with sadness towards safety to try and regroup with the others.

Without knowing what had even transpired due to his berserker rage, Tag was still marching towards Crater 31 without slowing, his own forces barely able to keep up with his pace. It wasn’t long until both Skrag and Gestalt had slowly began to catch up to Tag’s army, and together the combined force was able to reach the edge of Crater 31 just as the fighting had slowed and Tag’s rune died down. Covered in blood and with several spikes protruding from Tag’s damaged and sizzling armor, Tag heaved from the effort he had expended to get them there. Both Skrag and Gestalt met with him at the edge of the crater as they peered below to see what they now faced. Being the largest crater on the moon’s surface, the 3 captain’s stared down towards a small cocoon like structure in its center, surrounded by all sorts of хищник spawn. They knew the cocoon had to hold the hive mind or lead хищник wizard within, that was their objective and they had to destroy it in-order to liberate this planet and its unsuspecting inhabitants below. Tag looked from Skrag to Gestalt with a nod, this would be their final charge towards victory, and they had to win for the sake of millions.

“-zzzt- Let’s give these hard working infantry an air-show! -bzzt-” Entrioch’s voice boomed from their radios.

A squadron of screaming bombers whipped past over-head to drop their payloads on the hordes of хищники in the crater below, blowing many of them apart and engulfing more in the flames. However, the price of victory is always sacrifice and many of the bombers were shot down during this brave act while the infantry army screamed a glorious battle-cry as Tag raised Slayer Wasp into the air to signal their charge.

Screaming so hard the veins on his neck seemed like they were moments from exploding, Tag lead the charge towards the cocoon. After taking a few steps, Tag became immobilized as his troops flooded past to meet the хищник forces in locked combat. Tag's eyes widened in fear, his ears rang, and his heart began to beat extremely fast as images of a similar battle flooded his mind. Memories of his battle in the demon realm began to flood his mind as the marines around him suddenly began to look like the brave Ravens, and the cocoon suddenly resembled the same hand tower from the realm. Unable to move or think clearly, his mind began to spin from the memories of a familiar battle. Suddenly, a voice spoke out to him in the back of his mind, it was Hawk's.

"I see you have been busy my dear old friend. These new friends you have found to replace me shall suffer the same fate as the Ravens, and you will find no victory here. Their sacrifice will be in vain, as all of the sacrifices made by you or anyone is. Join me, and together you and I shall rule as we rightfully should. My disciples are everywhere, do you really think it'd be this easy to stop not only me but my new more powerful friends?" Hawk's poisonous words echoed into Tag's mind, spreading darkness throughout his body.

"No..." Tag whispered softly.

"Win here and you will only find me to grow even stronger and I will take everything you hold dear from you, even your beloved Hild whom you do not deserve." Hawk laughingly whispered. Tag continued to mutter 'No' over and over to himself while Skrag and Gestalt rushed to his side, shaking him back into reality, yelling at him that victory was near. Most of the хищник surrounding the cocoon were dead and the infantry had formed a protective circle around the cocoon defending it until it could be disposed of. Tag opened his eyes and looked from Skrag to Gestalt with bewilderment, gripping Slayer Wasp harder in his hand.

"*Rrrrk* We have to end this now Tag, your sword is all we have left against the cocoon! *Rrrrk!*" Skrag yelled above the fighting.

"Yes, destroy the cocoon Tag, we shall defend you while you complete the task." Gestalt said matter of factly.

Tag walked towards the green pulsating cocoon slowly, seeing a small human being floating slowly within. As Tag began to prepare Slayer Wasp to complete the deed, familiar white hair swirled towards the cocoons surface. Tag's eyes widened in disbelief as he recognized the hair as being Hawk's, without hesitation he screamed as he sank Slayer Wasp deep into the cocoon over and over again in anger. The cocoon exploded and shot green fluids up into the air as the being floated out of the opening. Tag grabbed the being quickly and smashed the lifeless body to the ground where he prepared to sink Slayer Wasp into the being's form only stop mid way. Upon looking at the face of what had emerged from the cocoon, he found himself staring down at the face of his own father. Memories flooded his mind to that fateful night his whole family had died, to when his father had been vaporized by the хищник wizard.

“No... No it can't be!” Tag yelled in disbelief.

Maniacal laughing echoed in Tag's mind, “Your father was a great asset Tag, his strategic thinking from years of fighting and leading were of great use, especially at figuring out how to properly destroy the world you inhabit. Not to mention figuring out all your weaknesses! The night the Grand Warlock transported him here, we began to know everything we needed. Yes, our forces will no longer be able to reinforce us on the planet, but we have all that we need to succeed.” Hawk laughed from the recesses of Tag's mind.

Tag stood there locked in an endless gaze with his father as Trandil's body slowly began to cover in frost from being exposed to space and his organs began to shutdown. Tag was watching his father die again, as he didn't even realize the fighting around him had ceased as the хищник forces began to retreat and warp out of the system. All Tag remembers is stumbling backwards before blacking out from shock and disbelief at what had transpired.

## **Chapter 9: Dying Dragons**

Tag was out cold for quite some time before waking up in the medical bay of the темная лошадка his wounds closed shut and nearly healed. After taking a few moments to reflect on what had transpired, Tag headed to the bridge to give Entrioch a debriefing on what had happened on the surface as he was eager to return to his main quest of defeating Hawk and curing Hild. Tag gave a slow recount of what had happened from the moment he had landed, and was sure to remind Ent to be careful as Hawk had mentioned something about his disciples being everywhere. It wasn't long before Tag stood in front of a landing pod with all his belongings with him and Slayer Wasp sheathed over his back, Entrioch stood before him to see him off.

“Tag, I cannot thank you enough, and I know those below cannot thank you enough even if they may never know of the deed you have completed. My fleet and I shall soon continue onto the next system to defend the next planet, we all thank you.” Entrioch said with a sincere bow, only to be grasped into a hug from Tag.

“I will remember all those that died valiantly to defend a home that wasn't even theirs, we are all comrades in arms now brother. It is I who should be thanking you for helping us, and I hope to see you again.” Tag stated while giving Entrioch a firm hug.

After being released Entrioch continued, “There are still хищник demons and wizards on your world and I know you are determined to hunt them down, and I wish you the best. As promised I have a few things for you.”



Entrioch reached into a bag he had with him to reveal a leather map of not only Telios but of the whole planet with several marks scattered across it. While showing Tag the map, he also produced a small vial of a shimmering green liquid which he also handed to Tag.

“This map has locations of several хищник wizards and lords, along with several small hives, do your best to destroy the hives quickly and to study the wizards before engaging as they are quite powerful. As for this vial, give it to Hild and she should be cured in a few days time.” Entrioch explained.

Tag took each in hand and nodded to Entrioch before boarding his landing pod, he was set to land close to Skard’s house to cure Hild. As the door of the pod sealed shut and the docking clamps released the pod into space, Ent waved from the docking door window wishing his comrade the best of luck in seeking his revenge.

As Tag’s pod entered the upper atmosphere a being watched the pod from the bridge of the темная лошадка, eyeing the progress of the pod closely to time its descent. After waiting for the landing pod to enter the upper atmosphere the being pressed a button on one of the read-out dashboards in the bridge away from the rest of the crew, careful to also disable any alarms of the craft’s status. After pressing the button, a small explosion could be seen from the bridge as Tag’s pod exploded and rocked violently shooting down to the planet like a falling phoenix or dragon of sorts. With a grin, the being watched the dash read-out to watch the status of Tag’s pod disappear off the screen signalling it had completed its landfall. Breaking the silence, a firm hand rested on the being’s shoulder followed by a voice.

“Good work out there Gestalt, you and Skrag did excellent and I mourn the loss of comrade Lotoss, he was one of the best. I just hope we can put an end to this disease plaguing the universe and seek out and destroy every last хищник amongst us.” Entrioch’s voice boomed. “I sure do hope our newest comrade, Tag, completes his quest of purifying this planet. I do hope to see him again.”

Gestalt turned around with a smile, “Indeed Admiral Entrioch, it was a shame we lost Lotoss, but at least we are victorious once again. I too hope the best for our young comrade Tag, I am sure he is doing well and rushing to help the war effort as we speak!”

As Entrioch turned and walked away to resume his duties and prepare the fleet for warp, Gestalt looked out of the port-window to where Tag’s pod had blown-up with a sinister smile.

“The pieces have been set and the king is in checkmate, now this planet can truly be liberated from the vermin inhabiting it and the true rulers can take over.” Gestalt whispered to himself almost chuckling, the young Neuroxian’s eyes glowing green for a split second.

The back of the landing pod exploded in a fiery explosion filling the cabin with smoke as it hurtled towards the planet’s surface throwing Tag about the cabin. What would be later mistaken as a dying dragon falling from the heavens, Tag’s pod careened down towards Telios

landing a few miles from Skard's house into a swampy bog. Tag crawled from the burning of the pod covered in cuts and bruises, trying to catch his breath in the haze of smoke rising from the craft. After only crawling a few feet away the pod finally exploded launching Tag straight into the tree-line where he was knocked unconscious, the contents of the vial Entrioch had given him spilling out from its broken canister onto the ground. Tag and Entrioch had been betrayed, and there was no telling what else was at hand.