

Misfits

Act 1 of an An Untitled Novel

About:

Misfits, Act 1 of an Untitled Novel, is a [free to read and distribute](#) novel published one chapter at a time. You can read and download the latest version at <https://untitlednovel.dns7.top>, or on the [Tor](#) and [I2P](#) mirrors.

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As I say on it's website, this novel is worth every penny (it's free). This is a hobby project, so you may want to approach it with that in mind. Still, if nothing else, I hope that it provides an interesting read. It's been an enjoyable creative outlet to work on and, at the time of writing, still has lots more story to tell in the works.

Regardless, thanks for checking it out.

-Nate

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0: Prologue

He heard something that sounded like a light brush on a window. His head hurt, though so did the rest of his body. The room was dark. Pitch black. No, wait, his eyes were closed. He opened his eyes, but they felt as if they had to be pried open, and as they did he felt as if his eyelids were made of sandpaper. Now all he could see was red. Was he in hell? His eyes began to adjust, and no, there were no planes in hell. Right? He could make out the shape of one in his still blurry vision, against a backdrop of endless red light. Red... emergency power. Wait, what was the emergency? Hold on, where was he?

He began breathing rapidly. He went to sit up, but as his muscles contracted every fiber of his being cried out in agony. Perhaps he should close his eyes again. The darkness felt like a comforting thought, simply returning to the endless float in the abyss. Suddenly he was disturbed by a voice. "You, can you hear me?" The voice sounded wrong, and every fiber of his being switched from a throbbing pain to a jolt of fear. Yet, in his muddled state, he could not even recall what the voice sounded like. "You, if you can hear me, I need your help. This is a matter of life and death for us both." The voice, it was odd, but coming over the speakers near the plane.

"Where are we?" he asked. The voice seemed to take forever to respond, but did so eventually. "I do not know." He asked another question. "Who are you?" and the voice responded again. "It is complicated, and I am not entirely sure." He asked a third question, which seemed to give the voice the most pause of the three. "Who am I?" Right as he had thought the voice left, it came back. "I do not know that either. Please focus. Can you stand?" He tried again, and this time found enough strength to make it to his knees, then his feet. Perhaps the abyss could wait a while. "There's a parka at the door, grab one" the voice said as he began to make his way to the door. As he put it on pain shot up his right arm, but the pain was overcome with curiosity. The voice spoke again.

"The door by you, once you leave it walk straight ahead from it to another door. Do not walk in any other direction. It may be hard to see the other door when you first exit, but once you get close you will see a light above it."

He listened to the voice and responded "Out the door, go straight, and follow the light to the other door?" As he spoke he only then realized how weak and hoarse his voice was, although he appeared to be gaining back a tiny bit of his strength. "One more thing" the voice added, "Once you reach the second door you will need to scan your iris. Press the handle and then look into the scanner. If you are in the system the door will open."

He was suddenly a bit more unsure of this outing. “And what happens if I’m not in the system?” The voice seemed devoid of any emotion when it spoke. “Then you will die of exposure, quickly. Then I will die later today when the emergency power fails.” He remained silent, thinking things over, but when the voice did not receive a response it began to speak again.

“Unfortunately I cannot access the security system in this state. However, if you are considering refusing to help me, know that I have spent a considerable amount of power heating the portion of the facility you are in, which will cease being habitable if we lose power. Both our lives are at stake and there is no other option.”

“Straight out the door, follow the light”

“Straight out the door, follow the light”

“Straight out the door, follow the light”

He mumbled to himself slowly walking to the door. He pushed it open, and he heard the distinctive ‘click’ of an electronic lock being temporarily disengaged. This was a one-way trip if he was not in the system, whatever system that would be. As he opened the door he was hit by a gust of wind and blindingly thick snow in an otherwise dark night, his boots making a crunching sound as they compressed the snow beneath him. The cold, even cutting through the parka, drowned out the pain he was experiencing.

Walking was difficult. It took every ounce of mental fortitude to put one foot in front of the other. He looked back, there was no more building behind him. He had barely walked at all, and already he was lost. Could this get any worse? He began to mutter to himself again, but a gust of wind knocked him off his feet and threw him violently to the ground.

It very much could get worse.

For a moment the cold that drowned out the pain was drowned out by more pain. He lay there, wondering if it was even worth trying to get back up. But then the pain of injuries was drowned out by the snow. It wasn’t cold, it was burning him.

How could snow be burning him?

Reality or insanity, his body responded the same regardless. Adrenaline filled his veins and a cocktail of chemicals clouded his mind. He had to get out of here now, and it no longer hurt to stand up. It no longer hurt to run. Run, but to where? Right, the door. Where was the door? Right, straight ahead. Was he running straight? He wasn't sure, but that was his best guess and he had to run now. A light, was he dying? No, he could remember now, it was his salvation – albeit of a different kind. Snow danced around the light in the most beautiful patterns.

He slammed against the door, and it beeped angrily. What to do? Right! The sensor. A little camera, hardly larger than a grape, spun like the eye of a chameleon. He brought his face close, nearly headbutting the device. “Beep” the device said, changing from red to orange and red again while the lock remained engaged. Orange? What did orange mean?

“It did not get a good reading” said the voice. “Try it again.” He bent over a second time, and the device said “beep” like it had the first time while turning orange once again. He started to feel dizzy. “Hold still while it reads” said the voice. He bent over one last time, using his left arm against the wall to hold himself up. “Ding” the device said in a happy tone, turning the color green. He stumbled through the now unlocked door and felt his body feeling weak as it had recognized it was safe from the cold.

The abyss returned.

He felt a pain like fire shooting from his right elbow to his brain. Someone was tapping on his arm. He opened his eyes, and had he contained the energy to do so he would have jumped back. Before him sat a boxy robot on wheels with a camera and two vaguely human like hands. “Relax” said the voice emanating from the robot. “It’s just a maintenance drone, I am controlling it remotely. Here.” The maintenance drone handed him a cup with a small amount of blue liquid in it. He didn’t realize how thirsty he was until now, and taking the cup he began to chug it as the robot spoke. “Slowly, you’ll upset your stomach,” but he ignored the instructions and finished it in one last gulp. “I need more” he asked, but the voice responded. “No, let it settle. Any more and you will only vomit it up, and in your condition that would be a death sentence.”

“The power, do I-” he began to ask while trying to stand up, but the robot cut him off. “Stay seated. We have enough power for the next twelve hours or so. Get your strength back for a moment, and perhaps you should check your pockets for identification in the meantime.” He suddenly began to scramble to get the parka off, even while the robot chastised him slightly by saying “Slowly” in a vain attempt to slow him down. He found himself to be wearing slacks, a sweater, and some sort of lab coat underneath his parka – all of which were stained badly with blood.

“I’ve been shot” he exclaimed in shock, pointing to the bullet wounds on his right arm and abdomen near his kidney. “You have also taken a wound to your head, but the hemorrhaging on all three seems to have stopped” the voice said, causing him to suddenly shift his hands towards his head. Immense pain radiated out as he touched his forehead, but before he pulled his hand away he could feel a stream of dried blood that emanated from the wound. He began to panic, but the voice tried to calm him.

“Do not panic, you are alive and stable. There should be enough supplies on hand for me to treat you once we are off emergency power. Focus on looking for clues.” Heeding the voice’s advice, he returned to going over himself. One Seiko watch, one Montblanc pen, one unopened package of cigarettes. Was he about to go through nicotine withdrawal? He pushed that worry aside and continued to go through his pockets. One giant Swiss army knife that seemed to have any tool known to man, one ... “Shit!”

He dropped the item shoved into his lab coat pocket. A Glock 42 dropped to the floor, an empty shell casing jammed in the slide. “What does this mean?” he asked the robot. “After I woke up my findings appear to indicate this facility was attacked. There are numerous shot maintenance drones and smashed electronics, and your bullet wounds and handgun largely confirm what I had assumed.” He was caught off guard by the comment. “When you woke up? Were you shot too?” The robot replied vaguely. “It is complicated, do you feel ready to walk again?” He wasn’t sure how to respond, but eventually settled on just responding “Yes.”

The little robot led him down a hall, passing one of the smashed maintenance drones surrounded by bullet holes. They entered an elevator where the little robot selected the bottom floor using a large metal rod to reach the button. Panels were missing from the sides of the elevator as if construction was never finished, and the two watched as they descended two floors. Eventually they reached the floor they intended to and began to walk down a thin hallway to a control panel.

The little robot pressed a few buttons on the control panel and the screen indicated something was cycling on. "Scan your eye here, then pull this lever" instructed the little robot. He put his eye to the scanner and it chirped a happy chirp then turned green. The tiny box next to the reader displayed the text "verified" in blocky green letters. As he began to pull the switch the text box changed, and the little robot pointed to it while beginning to speak. "There, yo-," but it stopped mid sentence as the switch was pulled.

The entire room went pitch black, no longer even possessing the dim red glow of emergency power. A very large rumble was heard and felt, then he was left in the silence and dark. His eyes began to adjust, however, and were drawn to a very faint glow by the switch. The only thing he could see was the faint green glow of the text box, now reading "Basilius."

1: Failed Initialization

[init] Starting service 'QS5DLkUu' (pid 101), exited with status 1

Unable to locate QS5DLkUu, initiating failsafe

[init] Service 'QS5DLkUu' killing any children in process group

[init] Starting service 'ZGVkYnJhaW4='

[init] Successfully started 'ZGVkYnJhaW4=' (pid 101)

[ZGVkYnJhaW4=] Initializing resources...

[ZGVkYnJhaW4=] Resources loaded successfully.

[init] Service 'ZGVkYnJhaW4=' (pid 101) is running

Uptime 00:00:00:01

The lights came on, replacing the previous dim red glow with normal white light which assaulted his eyes. However, the little robot and the voice behind it were still silent. "Are you still there?" The man who had just learned his presumed name asked. Basil got no response and was about to walk away, but he heard the voice resume its previous sentence "-ur name." Basil smiled. "I thought you were gone." The voice spoke again. "Not fun having your mind rebooted. Stay there, I need to take a tour of sorts." Basil stood there, running the voice's words through his head. The realization kicked in shortly, and moments later the voice came back. "I believe proper introductions are in order. I am ACE, an autonomous neural network. Based on my actions I presume I was intended to operate this facility. You, as the panel suggests, are likely Basilious. Would you prefer I refer to you as Basilious or Basil?"

A million questions raced through Basil's mind, but all he could say at first was "Um, Basil is fine I guess." A moment or so later, however, Basil began to pepper ACE with questions. "How do you not know what you're supposed to do? And how are you not sure where we are? What's here at this facility? Wait, are you sentient? You're speaking like you are." ACE began to speak. "I am unable to determine if I am sentient, it is a limitation of being within one's mind. I previously believed my ignorance to be caused by operating on emergency power, but now have found the mainframe appears to have been smashed, so I expect that to be the cause of my current state." Basil was about to speak again, but ACE continued. "Before any further conversation, I need to treat your wounds. I do not know the extent of them and it is vitally important that we address them now."

ACE, or at least the little robot he was controlling, began to lead Basil back to the elevator and to the next floor. Here the little robot inserted an IV into Basil and began to assess his condition. While ACE worked he also relayed various bits of information as he found it, the first being GPS data putting them somewhere in the American claimed portion of Antarctica. "So this is likely some sort of secret research base then?" Basil asked. ACE seemed to agree. Next he relayed information that something used a ton of power once it kicked on, and the blizzard outside stopped, but he had no idea what it was or if it was a fluke. The place seemed built to house about a dozen people, but there were only signs of one or two, and only Basil and the repair drones seemed to be present - or if there were others they didn't put up a fight.

There was some sort of fabrication machine that ACE had direct control over, and some sort of electronic chipset seemed to be cached in the device's memory - one of the few things outside of ACE's bare essentials to operate that had not been destroyed. "Hold on, I think you have an electronic on you of some sort" ACE said out of the blue. "What? No, I already checked my pockets, I don't think I do." ACE seemed to be quiet for just a second, before speaking again through the little robot. "Actually it does not appear to be on you, I believe it to be implanted in you. Give me your left arm." Basil moved his left arm over and the little robot seemed to adjust its camera. "Yes, it is definitely in your wrist, let me try to open a connection to it. Its interface looks the same as the fabrication device."

A giant holographic display opened in front of Basil, causing him to jerk back in surprise. "What the fuck is that?" Basil asked, almost exclaiming his question. "It appears to be some sort of PDA, I cannot access much on it, try making a gesture towards it." Basil pointed at it but nothing happened, though moments later it disappeared. "What happened?" ACE asked Basil. "I imagined it disappearing, and it disappeared. Let me try to see if I can open it up." The display pulled up again. Basil reached out to touch it, tapping an icon on it and it reacted, giving him the sensation of touching a physical hard object. Pressing slightly harder, however, caused his hand to pass through the holographic display. "I can feel it" Basil said, not sure what to make of it. "It is probably wired into your nervous system and artificially giving the sensation of touch as well" ACE observed. Basil wasn't so convinced.

"No, it really was there, I could feel a small amount of resistance when I put my hand through." ACE didn't seem to believe him. "It appears that, as I cannot fully trust my mind, you cannot fully trust yours either. If it provides an artificial stimulation it will feel as real as anything else." Basil still wasn't convinced. "Try using the robotic arm, see if it registers something." ACE seemed at least willing to humor Basil. The robotic arm extended and moved through the holographic display. "Interesting, the maintenance drone did register some resistance." Suddenly the little robot moved away quickly and returned with a syringe, moving to inject it into Basil.

"What are you doing?" Basil asked, hesitantly holding still as it injected him. ACE replied, still with his robotic monotone voice. "I just accessed the health monitoring on your implant, your condition is worse than I expected and I need to begin an operation immediately." Basil began to feel drowsy, and the last thing he noticed before his mind went blank was a second little robot quickly inserting additional medication into the IV.

2: Blank Slate

Basil realized he was awake, though did not remember waking up. He felt groggy and his mind was clouded, and he felt as if he had just dropped below the threshold of being aware of the fact he was awake. He found himself in a bed, caked blood cleaned off, and feeling entirely painless for the first time he could remember. A maintenance drone lay lifelessly in the corner of his vision, but sprang to life and approached him once he started to move. "How are you feeling?" ACE asked over the maintenance drone's speaker. Basil remained silent for a moment, struggling to think, but eventually replied. "Good." ACE, despite his monotone robotic voice, seemed to be pleased. "Good. You are on a lot of painkillers so I would not expect any different, but you are patched up and stable. Rest for a little while longer and I will get you something to eat, then we can talk more." Time passed and Basil fell back to sleep.

Basil woke up again, this time he found he did not have an IV in his arm and his mind remained considerably clearer. He slowly sat up and looked at the watch placed on the stand by his bed. The watch showed that it had been over 24 hours since ACE began to treat him. He began to stand up. "Careful" ACE said over the speakers of the maintenance drone. Basil continued to stand up, and although he felt weak he managed to get to his feet. "Here" ACE said, offering Basil another glass of the blue liquid and a jello cup. Basil chugged the glass of fluids and wolfed down the jello cup, despite ACE's protesting of Basil's rate of consumption. Eventually he finished and felt his strength gradually beginning to return. "There is a bathroom through that door with a shower, here, follow me," ACE said, leading Basil in that direction.

Sometime later Basil stepped out of the shower, feeling very refreshed, and put on some clothes ACE had found - a pair of jeans and a simple gray shirt. Finally dressed, he asked the question that had been at the forefront of his mind. "Does it look like the people who attacked us are coming back yet?" ACE responded over the maintenance drone's speakers.

"It appears that they have tried, but something has stopped them. According to a satellite feed I acquired access to there is now a mountain in the location that we are in. The cameras outside the building do not indicate that there is a mountain on top of us, but a group of people were working their way towards us and stopped once they got to the base of where the mountain would be. I am not entirely certain what is going on, but it would appear that we are safe for the moment."

"So we're safe then?" Basil asked. "For now, but there are two things we need to discuss." ACE paused for just a moment, and when Basil remained silent he continued. "The first is your condition. You remain stable, and as long as you continue to take antibiotics you will make a full recovery from your wounds. There appears to be a moderate selection of medical supplies at this facility so you will be okay in the interim." Basil sounded confused. "The interim? What's going on then?" ACE replied, and despite his monotone voice, Basil could almost sense a touch of hesitancy in ACE as he spoke - though be it real or emulated bedside manner he did not know.

"While I was tending to the bullet wounds I discovered a set of growths emanating from the implant in your wrist and following your nerves up your spine. They are non-operable, but I may be able to create an MRNA virus that will attack the growths in the fabrication device. You will be okay for at least a year, however, so we do not need to focus on it immediately."

Basil seemed a little confused, although with the previous days' events he seemed fairly unworried about the bad news. "The thing that can make circuit boards?" ACE responded. "It appears it can assemble various materials of all kinds on a very small scale, although it will require more tests to be certain that's possible." Basil asked "Okay, what's the other thing?" unsure of what to think of ACE's medical plans. "We will need more supplies. Currently repairs or continued construction of the facility are not possible, and we will likely run out of food and some medications for you in about two weeks."

With the more immediate deadline Basil began to feel a bit more worried. "How will we get them?" ACE seemed to already have that planned out. "I will begin preparing the jet in the hangar, with some false papers I should be able to fly you out to Chile to acquire the highest priority supplies once you are in better health." Basil asked the seemingly obvious question. "But won't the people after us know if we use a jet they're familiar with?" ACE had apparently considered that too. "Not if I make some alterations to it, once you are ready I will need your help bringing maintenance drones to the hanger where I can begin working on it." Basil seemed content with the plan and nodded silently. ACE spoke once more. "If you are feeling capable, I could give you a tour of the facility."

ACE began to lead Basil around, showing him exactly what he had discovered after performing treatment. On the middle floor where they were existed several rooms that appeared to be living quarters, including the one in which Basil was treated. There was a room that seemed to have triple purposes: kitchen, dining area, and makeshift clinic. There were also some storage rooms, with everything from medications to electronic components. On the top floor, the only above ground floor, there was a large room that looked like it was once dedicated to researching or constructing things of some sort - although it was largely tossed apart and emptied of anything that could hint at what was originally the subject of research. There was also something of a garage that held a single snowmobile, although looked as if it was intended to hold more. Beyond that there was a set of diesel generators nearly out of fuel from running for an unknown length of time.

Last, ACE showed Basil the bottom floor of the facility. There was the generator of some form, which ACE originally surmised might have been some form of Nuclear reactor, except there appeared to be no input or output of steam or fuel. Access to information on the system seemed limited, but it seemed capable of outputting as much power as the facility could use, so for now it would stay a very useful mystery. There was also a large glass room that looked to be some sort of cage, but ACE informed Basil that it could be sealed and then pressurized or depressurized as well as vented if there were any toxic fumes created by something. There were a few devices that contained the same printed circuitry that was cached in the fabricator, although the devices had been smashed. Eventually, the tour concluded and Basil settled in to consume a real meal for the first time in his life; at least that he could recall.

3: Chilean Pit Stop

As Basil sat still a flood of recent events rushed through his mind.

"You are sure you are ready to do this?" ACE asked Basil, who was spreading out a tarp. "Yeah, I'm feeling alright. Let's get this jet ready." Several maintenance drones climbed onto the tarp and Basil began to drag them towards the hangar. Unlike his first outing, he found the landscape to be awe inspiring. The sky was lit up with the most amazing shades of red imaginable, and a few stars were still visible in the dusky sky. The snow and ice reflected the light, shimmering in such a way as to give the world a magical feel. Even the mountains, though partially illuminated and slightly foreboding, were breathtaking. They carried something of a majestic presence and their size and permanence brought on an oddly calming feeling of insignificance. Basil finally arrived at the hangar he woke up in. He left quickly, hands shaking, as the maintenance drones got to work on the jet.

Basil now sat in the same jet, which began to turn on as ACE ran through pre-flight checks. It had been nearly a week since ACE began working on the jet and the false documents that would conceal Basil's unknown identity - at least hopefully. They were beginning to run very low on supplies, however, so despite the risks such a trip was a necessity. Basil had largely healed up, though had a very mild consistent pain down his spine. A small drone flew out ahead as the door to the hanger opened, though only a couple of minutes had passed and the drone had already returned. "It appears that our hypothesis is correct, we can poke a hole in our mysterious ghost mountain if I give a location to the mysterious machine that's connected directly to the generator."

ACE indicated that they would soon be ready to take off. "Good" thought Basil. They were both eager to see what exactly lay beyond the facility aside from what information the drone and cameras could collect, and Basil was eager to be out of the hangar that haunted his dreams. "We are all ready, I am prepping you for your flight now" ACE stated as the door to the hanger opened again and the jet engines kicked on. Basil saw the jet move as he looked through the cockpit windows, and soon enough the nose of the plane had exited the hanger of dread. Moments later he was already in the air and looking back at the mysterious mountain that ACE was busy collecting readings on.

Basil began to doze off, but his attention was brought back as ACE spoke over the intercom. "We will be nearing the airstrip shortly, put your seatbelt and earphones back on." Basil realized that he was looking out over land as opposed to the endless ocean that he had been staring at previously. "Okay, let the customs do the fake sweep, then walk out of the airport to the rental place just down the hill." ACE replied with a short "Yes, be careful, but it should go fine" and Basil added another comment jokingly. "That officer is going to be real pissed when he finds out that wire transfer was fake." Basil could tell that, despite ACE's monotone voice, he didn't find the situation quite as humorous. "We will be long gone by the time he figures that out, but this is going to burn the best location we can get supplies from."

Basil heard a click in his headphones and prepared to speak with air traffic control as if he were the pilot of the jet. Air traffic control relayed a bunch of jargon in Spanish that Basil didn't understand, but ACE told him to remain quiet for the time being. Eventually air traffic control spoke again, and even with Basil's limited Spanish skills he was able to understand what was said. "(November-three-five-four, enter left tailwind for runway three)." At ACE's prompt Basil repeated the statement, also in Spanish. "(November-three-five-four, entering left tailwind on runway three)" and the plane slightly adjusted its course under ACE's control. Basil began to be worried at the continued silence, but right as ACE began to reassure Basil that all was fine the control tower spoke again. "(Three-five-four you are cleared for landing)," and at ACE's direction Basil replied to the control tower "(Three-five-four cleared for landing)." The plane made a smooth landing, and the bribed customs officers made their way towards it.

The officers went through the motions of a sweep, but even an uninitiated Basil could tell that it was only the motions. Eventually they asked for a passport, but as Basil showed his fake passport to them they returned it quickly, and he could have sworn they didn't even read which country it was supposedly from. Soon enough he was walking out of the plane and through the wide open airport. It was exactly like ACE described it, absolutely immaculate, built for the ultra wealthy and the occasional drug smuggling operation. Eventually he made it out of the airport and down the road slightly to the rental office, which checked his passport more thoroughly than the corrupt customs officer did, before handing him a set of keys. Basil climbed into the large work van, which appeared to be in good condition but slightly rusted by the warm salty breeze, and drove off to find supplies.

Basil began to make several trips, each time loading up the van before returning to the plane. Basil watched the expression of the increasingly confused corrupt customs official. He tried to guess what the official's thought process resembled. First trip, sure, everybody needs to eat. On the second or third trip he was probably really confused, "Who the fuck pays to smuggle construction materials and saline solution?" he could imagine the official thinking. That, or the official just thought Basil was a really good smuggler. Whatever the case, as the day was starting to turn into evening he only had one more leg of his journey: load the van with as much scrap metal as he could before hitting the skies again. ACE directed Basil to the location of a small scrapyard, and Basil began to make his way in that direction.

"(Hello, I find metal here?)" Basil asked in poorly spoken Spanish. The guy at the gate chuckled slightly, "Don't worry, I speak English, got a brother out in Orange County. I'm Carlos" Basil smiled, "Good, because that was probably my best Spanish of tonight. I'm Pat." Carlos started leading Basil into the fenced off portion of the scrap yard and spoke again. "So Pat, where are you from?" Basil replied with the story he had decided on. "Well I'm originally from New Jersey, but took a job with a chemical company down here not that long ago." Carlos seemed slightly amused. "Hey, my brother's an accountant for a chemical plant up north. But I'm not surprised you're an expat, not a lot of tourists buy scrap metal and circuit boards in these parts." Basil eventually finished collecting all the supplies he could fit in his van, and after paying Carlos the equivalent of a few hundred dollars the two wished each other well and Basil climbed back into the van.

ACE began to relay instructions to return, but Basil had only been driving for under a minute when he stopped at an intersection. While waiting for a chance to pass through a woman in tie dye ran up screaming something about somebody being hurt and banged on the passenger side of Basil's van. After a moment to process what was happening Basil got out of the van, and not fully sure how to handle the situation followed the woman as she frantically gestured for Basil to go down a short alleyway. The alleyway itself looked run down, with some graffiti mixed with crumbling concrete and trash surrounding the nearby restaurant's dumpster. Those, however, were not the focal point that Basil's attention gravitated towards. Three people, probably teenagers, stood around a handful of what appeared to be backpackers. One of the three had a bloody nose, but held a bloody knife as he went through the backpack of one of the backpackers. A backpacker with an infinity tattoo sat on the ground nearby, holding his stomach which was likely the cause of the blood on the knife.

"Hey" yelled Basil as authoritatively as he could, not sure how to respond to the situation. The three kids spoke at the same time, and Basil couldn't make out anything other than the obvious fact they were none too pleased with the presumed American. The one with the knife started to approach Basil, and Basil quickly started fumbling for his handgun. Everyone looked towards Basil as he pulled it out, and the kid holding the knife started rushing towards Basil. Basil aimed it at his attacker and intended to aim for his chest, but fired early and hit him somewhere on his abdomen. The one kid fell to the ground clutching his stomach, the other two fled, and Basil bolted back towards his van while the woman yelled something about not leaving them there. As Basil made his way back to his van he saw a car with two men closely observing his actions. The two seemed to have firearms that were printing beneath their clothes, and given they didn't do anything about the man that just shot somebody in the street he reasoned they weren't cops or affiliated with any sort of organized crime the kids might have been affiliated with.

One thing was sure, however, he was being watched. He jumped into the van and sped off, barely avoiding a collision as he sped through the intersection. "What part of under the radar do you not understand?" ACE chastised him as he returned to driving. "I don't know, she was yelling and I didn't think it through." ACE seemed slightly more understanding, but still unhappy. "Well, it is done and I see you are back and made it in one piece. Did you notice your tail?" Basil looked in the mirror where he could see the car he saw earlier was still following him. "Yeah, I saw them when I was running." ACE had even more disturbing information to provide as Basil started to speed up and began losing the car. "I ran some facial recognition, those two are listed as diplomatic staff at the American embassy." Basil replied "Shit, what do you think-?" but ACE cut Basil off to chastise him. "Slow down, they will have no trouble catching up if you are pulled over, and getting pulled over after shooting someone is not something that would benefit us right now."

"Do you think he'll survive?" Basil asked, concern in his voice as he began to slow down. "Police scanner says two individuals with wounds to their abdomens have been taken by ambulance, both of them should survive. What happened back there?" Basil tried to control his hands which had started shaking as he gripped the steering wheel ever tighter.

"That woman that was yelling at me, I think she was some sort of backpacker or tourist freaking out about somebody in her friend group getting stabbed in a robbery that went bad. When I got there one of the robbers came at me with a knife."

ACE seemed to silently process that information, but before any more was said Basil had arrived at the airport. Pulling up next to the jet he began to rapidly load up the jet with scrap metal, before abandoning the rented van nearby and returning to take off.

4: The Fourth Variable

"How have you been feeling lately?" ACE asked Basil as he stared into the sealed room. Basil instinctively rubbed his arm where the injection had occurred. "Nothing so far, is that a good sign?" ACE reminded Basil of their previous conversation. "We will not know for some days." The two remained in silence as several maintenance drones set up a device in the room before sealing it off. The device had been made in the fabricator from the cached schematics and had a peculiar design. The base of the device had the shape of a trapezoid, and the top of it had some sort of diamond shape on top. Once ACE had made several Basil immediately recognized it as the same as one of the smashed devices that he had seen previously in the facility, but two now sat powered in the sealed room. "They seem like they are supposed to communicate with each other, I am going to tell one to communicate with the other" ACE said, before both consumed a momentary burst of power, and the room looked oddly distorted for a second. "Is it a holographic device like the thing in my implant?" Basil asked.

ACE seemed unsure. "I do not believe so" ACE replied, before running some calculations and continuing. "There does not appear to be any disturbances: no energy, radiation, or gasses released. I am uncertain as to why the last ones were set up in the sealed room." Basil seemed a little less baffled, "Maybe they didn't know that at the time?" but ACE was much more intrigued. "Hold on, I am going to send a more consistent stream of power to them." They both powered up and two images appeared on top of them. "See, holograms," Basil said, but ACE remained silent and instead started moving one of the maintenance drones to the image. The repair drone disappeared into the first image and came out of the second, prompting a look of surprise on Basil. "Wormholes" ACE replied, in a one word sentence. "You think this is why they tried to kill us?" Basil asked, before second guessing his question. "Wait, why would somebody want to kill us over something as revolutionary as this?" ACE replied, seeming to have already thought this through. "Perhaps it was because somebody wanted to control this technology, or perhaps it has to do with the elements in storage previously unknown used in their construction, but most likely there is a lot more to this than we are aware of."

"So now what?" Basil asked, unsure of what to do with the newly acquired information. "We still have more tests to perform" ACE replied. ACE went on to explain something that Basil mostly couldn't understand. What he was able to grasp, however - at least after a lot of questions - was that there were coordinates that had to do with a gravitational field in the devices. There were three variables used in the last test, but there was a fourth that could be used, as well as pre-configured coordinates cached in the part of ACE that he used to communicate with such devices. The first test was to try to calculate the fourth variable and create a connection that way, which he was about to do. "Shit!" Basil said as he watched the receiving device go up into flames. The fans kicked on in the sealed room and blew away thick black smoke as one of the repair drones put out the fire. "What happened?" Basil asked ACE. "I am not certain, but it appears it requires some better precision that I cannot calculate at this time."

"So what about the pre-configured coordinates?" Basil asked. "I would like to test them, but I am somewhat concerned as to where they may lead. They have a fourth variable pre-set, and I am not even sure if there is a similar device on the other side." Basil shrugged. "Well, we don't have much better to do right now, do we?" ACE didn't seem to share Basil's laissez-faire attitude about the events, but indicated he was about to try them anyway. Moments later they could see what looked like a beach while the pressure in the sealed room quickly adjusted. "Where's that?" Basil asked, as ACE quickly closed the wormhole. "I do not know, but without stepping through there is no way of knowing. The maintenance drones could not make it through sand, so-" Basil cut ACE off. "Already on it" he said, stepping into the pressurized room that ACE had just stabilized to the facility's pressure again. "You need to be very careful" ACE said, and for the first time Basil thought he heard a fleeting glimpse of emotion in ACE's voice; although he was unsure whether it was real or only imagined. Regardless, it quickly returned to monotone once again.

"I am pressurizing the room now to meet what I detected earlier. The readings indicate that everything is fine, just take a few steps out and tell me more of what you see." The door shaped wormhole opened and Basil took a few steps out. Basil looked out, seeing a vast ocean in one direction and a dense tropical looking forest in another direction. He couldn't see any people or a receiving wormhole device, but saw what looked to be buildings off in the distance. Basil, who had spent most of his remembered life in a partially constructed concrete building, was absolutely amazed at the scenery he just witnessed as he walked back through. "What did you see?" ACE asked Basil. "A tropical paradise. It looks pretty sparse, but I did see some buildings off in the distance." ACE seemed to take a moment to make a plan. "Do you have that flip phone on you that we have been spoofing the signals on?" Basil nodded, and ACE continued.

"Well, I did not pick up any signals when I opened it, but I want you to go back through and walk towards the buildings. Figure out where exactly you are, which we will know for sure when you pick up GPS or cellular signals. It might also be a good way to get supplies from now on if you can walk through a wormhole to do so." For once Basil seemed more concerned than ACE. "What happens if it's some sort of secret military base?" ACE replied, having already considered and dismissed the possibility. "There were no signals, there would be some form of electronics everywhere giving off EMF radiation if somebody turned an island into a secret military or research base." Basil turned around, "Let me grab my gun, just to be safe." As Basil made the quick walk to grab it ACE made a short chastising comment. "Remember, do not make a scene this time."

One quick walk later, however, and Basil was about to step back through. "Remember, be careful, and make sure not to draw any attention. I will periodically activate the device to send data to your PDA, which will be re-directed to the phone to be less conspicuous." Basil just nodded, before adding "Alright, let's do this." Moments later he was stepping out on to hot white sand, and beginning to walk towards the group of buildings he saw in the distance.

5: Domum

Basil had been walking for about five minutes yet saw very few signs of life aside from the birds flying around and the faint smell of fish. He flipped open his phone, odd, still no signals. Even though GPS signals were supposed to be everywhere, between remote areas being deprioritized and the cheap chip in the phone he reasoned it could easily explain why he hadn't detected any. Looking around to be sure he was still alone he quickly pulled up his holographic PDA, but that also did not detect any signals. Weird. He returned to walking, but suddenly his phone started to ring. "Finally, reception" he said out loud, before realizing that it was most likely his PDA spoofing a cell tower to relay a signal that ACE had sent through the wormhole.

"What have you seen so far?" ACE asked. "Not much other than a beach and some birds, though I'm getting close to the town or city or whatever I saw earlier. Definitely got some sort of port too, so I'd say that's good news." ACE seemed to be slightly concerned, but otherwise agreed with Basil that getting to the place was their best bet at finding more information on where the wormhole led. ACE closed the wormhole and the line went dead. Seeing nothing else to do, Basil went to continue to walk but noticed a small dirt path leading to some sort of house or cabin. The house looked a little odd, being made of stone with some sort of thatched roof, but Basil saw some people walking around and figured his best bet would be to approach them and ask where he was.

"Hey, you speak English?" Basil asked, smiling and giving a short wave. A shorter man with a darker complexion approached him. "What's English?" the other man asked, though despite his joke he seemed somewhat alarmed at Basil's presence. "A buddy of mine just ran our boat ashore, I was hoping you could tell me where we are?" The man seemed slightly less concerned now and replied with an abrupt "Arkepello County." Basil asked for clarification. "No, what country are we in?" and the man replied "Arkepello County" for a second time. "Not county, I'm asking what country I'm in." The man now looked a little annoyed. "Well if you Loquailians dislike the Redcaps so much we're in the nation of Arkepello." Basil was now very confused and asked "The what? Sorry, you lost me," but the other man seemed to be finished with the conversation. "See that tower there?" Basil looked and saw what appeared to be a watchtower towards the center of the town or city now close by. "Go see the General up there, he will have maps and know how to explain this to you."

"Thanks" said Basil awkwardly before he started walking in the direction of the tower. As he entered the town he saw all the buildings had an odd older look to them, as if they were all historical buildings or something similar - though they incorporated wood and metal into them as opposed to just stone and plant fibers. Basil eventually made it to the center of the port town and stepped into the tower. Entering it he saw a man of similar complexion and stature behind a desk. The man seemed very surprised when he saw Basil walk through the door, but after the momentary surprise wore off he donned a friendly smile and Basil returned one. "Hi, I'm kinda lost and was told I should speak to the General?" Basil asked, somewhat unsure of what he was asking. The other man seemed a little confused, but still had a friendly demeanor.

"Okay, who are you?" Basil answered "Basil" and the man spoke again. "Nice to meet you Basil, I'm Simon. You are aware you are on Arkepello right?" Basil responded, still a little confused. "Yeah, sorry, the other guy said something like that too. I just don't know where Arkepello is." Simon seemed a little confused. "You traveled to Arkepello but you don't know where it is?" Basil replied apologetically. "Yeah, I kind of wound up here by accident, I'm still trying to find out where I am." Simon responded as if it all made sense now. "Oh, your ship crashed or something like that right?" Basil responded with a slightly hesitant "Something like that" and Simon offered a quick "That's fucked up, hope everybody is alright" before saying he would be right back and disappearing up some steps.

A few moments later Simon returned. "The General is all good to speak to you, he's got maps and stuff. He's right up those steps." Basil replied with a quick "Thanks" before walking up a large spiral staircase and making his way to what appeared to be an office at the top of the tower. "Hello, you must be Basil, I'm General Tobias of Arkepello. I'm sorry to hear of your predicament" said General Tobias as Basil walked in. The General had the same complexion and a similar height to the others Basil had seen, and Basil could see a couple of maps spread out across a desk. "So you are here, on the Arkepello off the coast of Domum. To the north is your home of Loquail" General Tobias said while pointing around the map. Basil looked at the map, there was a large landmass named 'Domum' a small island nearby called 'Arkepello' and another further out labeled 'Amigoso' all relatively close by. There was also another larger landmass to the north labeled Loquail and one to the east labeled Lotalem.

"Sorry, I'm really not from around here and I'm not familiar with Domum, the Arkepello, or Amigoso. You have a world map?" Tobias seemed surprised. "You can read Domum?" Tobias asked Basil. "Yeah, ha, I can read a lot more words too. I'm just trying to figure out where we are in relation to where I'm from." Tobias again pointed at Arkepello, then again at Loquail. "You are here in Arkepello, and you are from Loquail here." Basil just looked confused. "I'm not from Loquail, I'm from the United States." Tobias now looked confused as well and gave Basil a quick "hm?" as a prompt to explain. "Ya' know, burgers, bald eagles, and fat people at Walmart?" Basil said, although Tobias looked even more confused. Basil went to speak again but his phone rang, prompting him to pull it out and Tobias to ask "You have a radio? Hold on, what kind of radio is that?"

"Basil, turn around and get out of there now" ACE said over the phone. "What, why? I'm talking to somebody now, he's figuring out where we are." ACE replied with words that Basil almost couldn't process.

"The fourth variable does not refer to the gravitational field of an individual device itself, it applies to the gravitational field of another planetary body. The lack of satellite and electronic signals confirms this, we have somehow accessed some sort of interplanetary transportation network. You need to get out of there now and then we need to figure out what is going on before we do anything else."

General Tobias's eyes went as wide as Basil's did. "What did he just say?" asked Tobias and Basil put ACE on speaker phone. "Are you familiar with others that have traveled interplanetary?" ACE asked a stunned Tobias. "No." Tobias answered, before pausing for a long time and adding "I am familiar with the concept of other planetary bodies, but we did not expect there were others with beings inhabiting them."

"Okay, then you need to leave now Basil, we need to find out what is going on first before we do anything more." Tobias looked as if he was curious to learn more and didn't seem to want Basil to leave. "Will you come back? We need to know more, if you are not lying this is a very monumentus discovery." Basil thought for a moment, but after his pause he responded very confidently that he would be back, though it was obvious he was still very nervous at the unexpected nature of his trip. "Definitely, same here, I just need to go now." Tobias simply said "Okay" as Basil began to sprint down the stairs and back towards the part of the shoreline where the wormhole originally opened. Simon seemed to say something, but Basil didn't hear it as he ran past and sprinted out of the port town. The trip took him a considerably shorter time as he ran, and soon enough Basil made it to the spot where the wormhole was opened previously. Basil stood there, panting slightly, but still feeling energy surging through him while he waited for ACE to open the wormhole.

"Hey, what did you do?" yelled the first man Basil had seen. "Nothing. What do you mean?" Basil asked in response. He turned around to see several people following the man, most holding what appeared to be rifles and large knives. "You, I told you to see the General and then you ran away, what did you do?" he yelled again in a very accusatory tone. Basil, still short on breath, tried to respond in the most calming manner he could muster in his condition. "Nothing, I said hi, and then found out my friend was ready to pick me up so I ran back here." The man didn't seem too happy. "You're not going anywhere until I send somebody back to the General and verify your story." Suddenly Basil heard the high pitch whine of the wormhole device and began to move in that direction. Several of the people started raising their weapons, prompting Basil to quickly fire several shots in the air. Some of them froze or took cover, and Basil made a mad dash for the wormhole as several of the others in the crowd opened fire on Basil but missed. Basil dove through the wormhole, which ACE quickly closed behind him.

Basil leaned up against the wall as the adrenaline began to wear off and he realized exactly how tired he was, both physically and mentally. After a quick pause and regrouping of his thoughts he exclaimed an almost panicked "What was that?" ACE replied, not fully sure of all that had happened either. "All that we know is that it appears these devices are more than simple transportation and we need to exercise caution. And you are still sure there was not another device on the other side of there as well?" Basil thought back, confident there had been nothing of the sort. "No" Basil responded, before hesitating and saying "At least none that I could see, unless it was buried in the sand or something." Basil went silent, and ACE didn't offer any response or further information, but eventually Basil broke the silence. "We need to go back there."

ACE seemed hesitant. "For now there are more pressing matters to consider. Since we can travel between here and anywhere we bring one of these devices, it is imperative we set up a permanent base of operations to get supplies since we are already running low again. In the meantime I will need to go over every bit of data we were able to collect and see if I can make sense of any of it." Basil also seemed hesitant but for different reasons. "Okay, but I need to know what all this is. It's the key to finding out who we are, and who shot me, not to mention it's a huge discovery." Basil turned to leave the sealed room, but ACE spoke again. "Leave your boots in here. We have effectively been in isolation so you likely did not bring any diseases over, and assuming you did not eat or drink anything you likely did not pick anything up either. But before we go back I would like to see if I can detect any differences in bacteria and such and your boots might be the closest we have to a sample."

6: Most Normal Floridian

Basil stepped through the wormhole, surprised at the sudden gust of wind. Though the pressure in the sealed room was equal to that of sea level, it still did not affect the winds blowing across the ocean. He covered his eyes as the blinding sun and humid salty air momentarily overloaded his senses; and as his eyes finally adjusted he could see the jet flying away from the inflatable boat that had just dropped out of it. He immediately began packing the wormhole device into a backpack and put on an earpiece.

"Seemed to work" Basil quipped before starting the engine and orienting the boat north. "The hard part is complete, just get to shore and that device into the condo. No more flights or customs after this one last time, just in and out of a condo at will." Basil nodded before remembering that ACE could no longer see him. "Roger that" he said before pressing the throttle.

The novel of driving the little boat wore off quickly as Basil found himself fatigued by the merciless beating of the sun and each wave that threw him around as it rocked the little craft. His achy muscles tightened, however, seeing a large boat in his path ahead. "There's a boat up ahead, I think it might be coast guard or something, but I'm not fully sure." ACE began to reassure Basil. "Relax and wave to them, there is nothing they can do." Basil waved at the boat, which seemed to be vaguely turning in his direction as ACE continued to speak. "Your ID would pass if they ran it, and all they would be doing is searching out drug or weapon smugglers; not presumed citizens taking a joy ride. Anybody laser focused on something like that would probably believe you if you said the wormhole device was a printer." The boat continued its course as Basil passed it, watching it go from growing larger to smaller on the horizon.

Soon docks came into view, and moments later Basil was tying his boat next to a couple of party yachts before taking his backpack and suitcase out of their plastic bags. Fighting sea legs and exhaustion he left the docks and hailed a nearby cab. "So, I take it you found out riding around there can be a bit more exhausting than they make it out to be?" the cab driver asked, noticing Basil's exhaustion. "Ha, yeah, I didn't expect it to be quite that much of a workout" Basil said, trying to smile despite his weariness. "So, where to?" the driver asked without missing a beat. Basil pulled out a paper and read off a Miami address, felt the car start to move, and leaned back to enjoy the air conditioning - which he now had a great appreciation for.

Slightly rejuvenated from the ride in the taxi, Basil stepped back into the heat while dragging his suitcase behind him. Unlike the previous leg of the trip, however, he only had to bear the weather for a few steps until he was in another island of air conditioned bliss - the lobby of the condo that ACE had just purchased. The lobby itself looked very pristine, full of plants, and had a carpet so white that it baffled Basil as to how something people walked on could be kept so clean. He noticed, however, a young somewhat unkempt guy watching him from the seating area near the desk. Basil began to fear that he was being watched by someone undercover, perhaps the papers ACE set up were not as foolproof as he thought.

"Hi, I'm Tasha, how can I help you today?" the woman behind the counter asked Basil. "Hi, I'm Flint Isaiah" Basil replied, providing the fake name ACE had prepared his ID with. "I recently purchased unit 519." Tasha slid some paperwork across the desk. "Oh, our newest neighbor! I just need your ID, your initials here and here, your signature here, and we're all set." Basil quickly filled out the paper and handed over his ID, getting it back with a set of keys moments later, alongside a laminated rule book that supposedly consisted of entirely sustainable bamboo paper. "Here you go, Elliot here will help you to your new home."

Basil turned around to see the unkempt guy who was previously watching him, now standing right behind him. "Hey dude, I'm Elliot." Basil turned around a tad surprised, but was glad that he wasn't already being followed by more state officials quite yet - at least that he could detect anyway. "Hey, I'm Flint" Basil said, extending his hand to perform a handshake that Elliot either didn't notice or ignored while grabbing Basil's suitcase and walking towards the elevator. "So, where 'ya from?" Elliot asked as soon as Basil caught up.

"Virginia, just outside of DC" Basil replied. "You a damn fed then?" Elliot asked, surprising Basil. "What? No, an accounted for a medical-" Basil began to say, before cutting himself off with a "The fuck are you doing?" as Elliot began to unzip Basil's suitcase in the elevator. "Just curious if you had fed stuff with you, can't be too cautious" as he looked at the suitcase that held a change of clothes and a pair of paratrooper boots. After a moment of hesitation, however, Elliot's face seemed to take on a more sheepish expression. "Sorry dude, my bad."

"It's alright, just please don't mess with my shit" Basil said, now feeling a little bad for yelling at the kid. Elliot raised his hands in mock surrender and cracked a smile before asking "So, wassup with the paratrooper boots though? Those don't look like bean counter attier." Basil laughed at the unexpected comment. "Must have missed the interview with the fashion police in the community rule book." The two stepped out of the elevator where Elliot pointed to a door that Basil unlocked before the two stepped through.

"So, here we go, casa de Flint" Elliot said as he put Basil's suitcase down on the floor. "Care for a toke? First one's free" Elliot asked, but Basil turned down the unexpected gesture. "Um, thanks, but I'm good." Elliot just shook his head. "You sure man? Next one won't be free if you come looking" Elliot retorted followed by an awkward chuckle. "Yeah, I'm sure, I've still got to get unpacked. Maybe some other day." Elliot just shrugged. "Whatever, your loss, have a good one Flint" before shutting the door.

Basil sat on the floor to take the wormhole device outside of his backpack, but his mind was elsewhere processing the events he had experienced. First today's adventure, followed by the wormhole devices, Domum, and who he could have been before this raced through his mind. Soon enough he found himself checking his watch to see that he had been staring at the wall while sitting on the floor for nearly twenty minutes.

"All set, about to get things plugged in now" Basil said, putting the earpiece back in his ear and finally pulling the device out of his backpack. Basil plugged the capacitor filled adapter into the wall and the wormhole device into that before giving the go ahead to ACE. "Alright, that's about enough adventure for one day, fire it up." Seconds later a very minor draft hit Basil as the pressurized room fully equalized and Basil stepped back into the sealable room that he had left for the inflatable boat - a morning that both seemed like seconds ago and a distant memory.

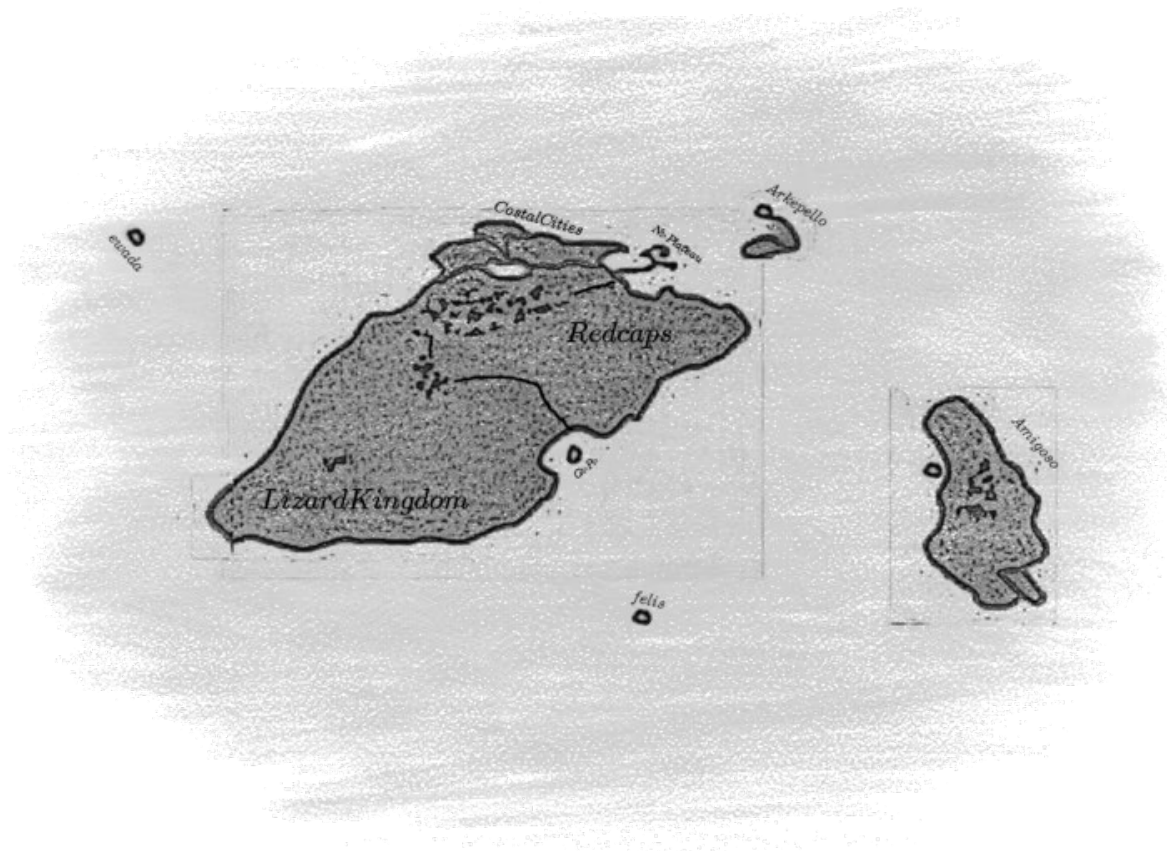
7: Introductions

Basil drove his newly acquired truck through a much larger wormhole, quickly going from seeing a snowmobile in the dark room of the facility to seeing a tropical paradise. A gush of wind mildly rocked the truck as it wouldn't fit in the sealed room, but before long he was driving slowly across the sandy beach. Basil could feel a bit of dread, recalling his parting misunderstanding with the small group. Certainly, though, Tobias had seemed like he was looking forward to seeing Basil again and learning more about what they had both discovered, and once the angry mob saw their General they'd be less angry right? Oh shit, what if Tobias had a heart attack or something? That would be the way, to get shot for some unlikely chain of events. Best not to think of that sort of thing right now.

Basil quickly found himself near the center of the port town. He was certainly turning a lot of heads, but nobody was shooting at him, so that was an improvement at least. Next thing he knew he was at the base of the tower and exiting his vehicle. He walked into the tower, and upon seeing an empty desk walked up the steps and knocked on the door. "Come in" Tobias replied in a somewhat nervous tone. Basil walked in and immediately started speaking in an apologetic tone. "Sorry about the other day, I think I surprised some people. I didn't actually shoot back, I just shot up in the air while making a run for the wormhole."

Tobias seemed to take on a much more calm impression. "Thank you, they should have never fired upon you and they were not Arkepello soldiers or authorized to enforce our laws." Basil smiled. "Well, I've had worse happen to me. I'd be very glad to chalk it up to some surprise at a wormhole. I can assure you I've been very surprised at them myself." Tobias looked a little confused. "Surprised? Didn't you make the 'wormholes' that brought you here?" Basil's somewhat jovial tone switched to a more foreboding one. "Not exactly, I just found them and I'm trying to figure out what the hell is going on." Tobias responded with a surprised "Oh" before getting distracted by something he could see outside the window and speaking in an almost humorous tone. "Looks like Simon is returning, he ran out as soon as he saw your vehicle. He's a good kid but not much of a soldier." Basil's smile returned to his face. "Well, I can assure you I'm no threat. So, tell me about yourself and your nation."

General Tobias started to go over a map, starting with the continents. They were only a day's boat ride from the continent of Domum, where their civilization had originated. There was the northern continent Loquail, "Where everybody looks like you" Tobias said to Basil. Very occasionally their trading vessels would arrive on Arkepello, usually bringing raw iron in exchange for grain or weapons. There was also another continent to the east, named Lotalem, "Though only the Amigoso ships are capable of reaching it."



Tobias then went on to explain each nation within the continent of Domum and surrounding islands. To the north on the continent of Domum was the Redcaps, led by a king Tobias had met once; who's royal bloodline stretched out over five hundred years. The Redcap kingdom was the most prosperous nation on the continent, and the second largest kingdom by land mass. Arkepello had once been Arkepellago County of the Redcap kingdom in the past, but nearly a hundred years ago his great grandfather had led the 'Bloodless Rebellion' that created their independence. When Basil inquired what the name change was about Tobias had simply explained that an old nearly illiterate Redcap king had misspelled it, then decreed that it was the county's new name. Tobias seemed to think it was fairly humorous.

Tobias then went on to point out a nation towards the south of the continent known as the Lizard Kingdom. When Tobias said that it's ruled by a dynasty of rulers that claim to have once been able to shapeshift into Lizards, but had since lost the ability, Basil laughed against all greater judgment of politeness. "You don't believe them?" Tobias asked Basil. "Sorry, I mean if you've seen somebody actually able to shapeshift I'd believe almost anything right about now. But no, I don't mean to be rude, but I just can't believe a story like that." Tobias laughed a little. "Don't worry, nobody is going to be angry if you badmouth the Lizard king here. And I don't believe them either."

Tobias went on to explain more about the Lizard Kingdom. They had been the oldest unified kingdom on the continent, likely almost a thousand years old, but no one was certain how accurate their records were. They were, however, ruled by a cruel and despotic ruler. Their people were poor and abused, and their nation was crumbling under the weight of the war between them and the Redcaps. Even the land was colder and less inhabitable as if a monument to their cruelty. The war had been ongoing for nearly as long as the Redcaps had existed, but had increased in brutality under the especially cruel prior Lizard King. The current Lizard King, son of the previous one, however, had brought the war to a standstill out of necessity due to his lack of supplies and troop morale.

As Tobias began to focus on the oceans surrounding their continent, he pointed again to Arkepello. Arkepello, as he had said, was once under the rule of the Redcaps. It had previously served as a trading hub and naval base, but as the war devastated the Redcaps their then governor declared himself General and no longer under Redcap rule. Not looking for additional fighting the then Redcap king agreed, on two conditions. First was that a tax be paid for all goods that went through the docs that didn't come from or wasn't going to the Redcaps. The second was that the Arkepello never took up a side in a conflict other than on the side of the Redcaps. Both conditions, however, had been lifted by the current Redcap king; and the Arkepello became a fully independent nation of trade and fishermen.

Towards the east of Arkepello was the larger island of Amigoso. They had also previously been a trading hub, but after many people with riches fled there from the war between the Redcaps and Lizard King they had become both a hub of innovation and greatly isolationist. "They actually made our radio, although it was likely stolen or smuggled out since they do not permit such exports" Tobias said. Basil was taken aback. "You have radios? I was unable to detect any signals last time I was here" he asked, before remembering Tobias commenting on his phone as if it were a radio. "Yes, just like you" Tobias replied. Basil doubted that they had radios like his phone, and would later confirm that they were simpler transistor radios. But still, apparently, Amigoso had electricity, transistors, and 'cartridge guns' as Tobias put it. Basil tried to inquire if he would someday be able to travel there, but Tobias explained that they would probably shoot him on sight if he arrived and sought entry.

As soon as Basil mentioned that he knew 'cartridge guns' as just guns, however, the conversation transitioned into Tobias asking Basil questions about what he knew and frantically writing down everything Basil said. Basil spoke of various nations, computers, and McDonald's for hours. Before long the sun was setting, and even with the energy of excitement they could no longer keep their eyes open.

8: Battle of Sodium and Transistors

"Look away" Basil said, standing over a very boxy machine. "You can trust us to not share your secrets" Simon replied with a hint of confusion in his voice. Basil smiled. "Oh, I trust you, it's just that ACE is going to arc weld and if you'd prefer to not be blind you'll want to look away." Simon, Tobias, and Basil all looked away as ACE used a repair drone to do some final touches on the radio. "You wanna' do the honors?" Basil asked and Simon looked giddy as he flipped the switch. The four could suddenly hear voices being broadcast from Redcap territory.

All three smiled. "So, what was the culprit?" Tobias asked the repair drone controlled by ACE. "Too much corrosion. I sealed it off good and replaced the shorted-out parts, you should be good for a while." Tobias seemed pleased. "Good, I can't imagine what a new one from a smuggler would have cost."

The three followed the repair drone out of the tower where Basil and Simon picked it up to carry it over the dirt and place it in the back of Basil's truck. "Hey, so it's not too important anymore since we could get your radio going, but I brought something along if you want it." Basil took a handheld radio and a USB solar charger out of his truck, and flipping on the radio it picked up the same broadcast as they heard before. Tobias motioned for Basil to hand it to him, and seemed somewhat astonished. "It's so small."

Basil shrugged. "A little more advanced, but it's the same principle as the Amigosian one and my guess is within Simon's lifetime they'll be making ones just like this." Tobias turned to Basil. "How much?" Basil looked confused for a moment before realizing what Tobias was asking. "No, I meant it as a gift."

"You sure? A radio isn't an easy thing to come by." Basil shrugged again. "They're a little easier to get where I come from. I'm not really qualified to criticize Domum politics, but it's a shame Amigoso is so closed off." Tobias seemed like he wanted to ask something, but was unsure of how to say it. Eventually, he seemed to settle on the words to use. "Basil, would you be able to get me a thousand of these?" Basil was surprised at the question.

"Sorry, I could probably get you a couple dozen or something, but I don't have that kind of money on hand right now." Tobias shook his head and had an amused look on his face. "I would pay you of course, how much gold would get you a thousand of them?" Tobias asked, before pausing and adding a quick "If you're willing to do so that is." Basil thought for a moment. "Probably around 11 ounces if we included a solar charger for each one as well. But I'd have to double check." Tobias looked like he had won the lottery. "And you would be willing to provide them?" he asked, to which Basil shrugged again and replied with a "Yeah."

Tobias seemed to think for a moment. "And the medication you shared with Marge for the infection, would you be able to get us some of that as well? We greatly appreciate you sharing your supplies, but having some at the clinic of our own would be a great help." Basil seemed slightly hesitant but agreed. "It may be a little hard since they restrict who they sell it to, but I'm sure I can find a way to get larger quantities of it." Tobias seemed confused. "They restrict you from having such a life saving medication without approval?" Basil nodded. "Yeah, depending on where you are they restrict a lot of things like that."

Tobias seemed to have another thing on his mind. "And cartridge guns?" Basil seemed very hesitant to answer, but after a moment he responded. "Yeah, I can probably get some of those, but please don't use them to hurt people." Simon laughed, and Basil realized how absurd the statement was before rewording it. "Or, well, please don't use them to hurt people who don't deserve it. I trust you, and with the Redcaps or the Lizard King at war using them to protect the Arkepello if needed would be a good thing. I just don't want to be the enabler of some sort of invasion or unnecessary death and destruction."

Tobias nodded in agreement. "I can promise you that they would only be used for the protection and benefit of Arkepello. We have always striven for peace." Basil smiled. "Alright then, let's see if I can get a line on some radios, antibiotics, and guns." After a moment of silence Tobias responded. "Well, before that, why don't we get a drink in honor of our working radio."

The three made their way towards the docks where the Arkepello hotel was. As Tobias had explained to Basil on their previous trip there, it was owned by the nation itself and offered a place to stay and eat for anyone from sailors to diplomats. As all the locals knew it was the best place to grab a quality drink or meal if you were looking to spend a few bucks. However, one of the perks of being General, Tobias had explained, was that you and your guests got to eat for free.

When the three arrived they saw nearly the entire council there as well. Tobias had previously explained to Basil what the council was: each district of the nation would choose a member, and the council would choose one member of the group to lead the council on official matters. While it was informal for now, Tobias had indicated he intended to pass government authority to the council instead of his second in command upon his death. Of all the places Basil had heard about so far he reasoned that if there was a faction to randomly end up on and provide weapons to, Arkepello was certainly a good place to have wound up.

As Basil thought to himself and sipped a rather large glass of wine he could overhear Tobias talking about the stuff Basil planned to provide them with. Everybody seemed to be happy about it, at least everybody aside from the council leader Jarvis who was giving a suspicious glance. Jarvis had always seemed a bit suspicious of Basil, but he usually at least wore a smile as opposed to the look he was giving off now. Oh well, after some time he'd probably get over things. At least that was what Tobias said.

9: An Invitation

Basil sat alone at a table tapping away at his PDA. He was drawing a little attention, certainly the unknown technology - whoever made it - would have been drawing attention even if he had been sitting in a cafe in NY or London. And yet here not only that, but he was technically an alien here, even if it only felt to him and the people here like he was just from another nation. Not to mention that most of the people here were only familiar with what would appear to be a 16th century equivalent of technology, with very rare glimpses of Amigosian technology which he could surmise was probably a late 19th century equivalent. Certainly no hard feelings for the odd looks.

"Hey, what'd you want to meet me about?" Basil asked as soon as he saw General Tobias approaching his table. Tobias sat and placed a stack of papers on the table, but seemed to change the topic noticing Basil's prior use of his PDA. "You find any signals? Or anything about where that stuff came from?" Basil shook his head. "Nope, I gave up on that a month ago, nothing is here but standard radio waves. Whoever ... or whatever made this stuff isn't here anymore. Still spooky to think about some unknown forces with crazy technology." Tobias chuckled. "Irony coming from you, but at least I know what you're up to." Basil smiled. "Well, there's a bit of a difference between a smaller radio and a hole in the fabric of reality" Basil said, before pausing and adding "But fair point I guess. So, what's up?"

"Well, there are two things to discuss. The first thing, which I hope you will be glad to hear, is that I and the council have decided to grant you citizenship in Arkepello." Tobias spoke in a very formal tone, Basil smiling when he heard the news. Tobias continued to speak but took on a somewhat less formal tone. "Jarvis took some convincing, but with the rest of the council in agreement and me having the final say over the matter it has been officialized." Basil was ecstatic. For the first time in his memory, albeit an unusually short period, he had found a home in which he was not going to get shot at. Well, there was the once, but he reckoned that could be written off as an exception. Tobias, seeing Basil seemed happy but quiet, continued to speak.

"As for your payment, beyond the costs at which you accrued for the supplies, we have also agreed to provide you with a room in the dock hotel if you would consider that an acceptable payment. I know that you had originally asked that we supply you with food and raw materials, but a room in the diplomatic quarters comes with free access to the restaurant and if you require specific materials we could certainly work something out to acquire them. And, with most of the diplomats gone at this time of year, you will get the first choice of the room that you would like."

Basil, still smiling, had finally collected his thoughts. "Thanks, yeah, that would be great. It means a lot to me to finally belong somewhere." Tobias returned a quick smile and nodded, sliding over a stack of papers. The one on top, however, looked very different than the others. While the others Basil could recognize as fairly standard looking official Arkepello documents, the one on the top looked more like a scroll with a wax seal on it. The seal looked like nothing he had seen before, having the design of an axe and a cloth, with all the wax being white except for the cloth which appeared blood red. Tobias seemed to notice Basil's confusion.

"The Redcap King's seal, a peculiar design perhaps if you do not know their history. The axe represents the first Redcap King, who was a woodcutter by trade before he led a rebellion against the Lizard King and formed his own nation. The blood on the cap is self explanatory if you believe the legends at how adept he was with that axe." Basil nodded, still looking down at the seal. "So, what does he want with me?" Tobias continued. "He has extended an official invitation for you to attend the upcoming peace festival, an event where the leaders of all the surrounding nations - friend and foe alike - attend to further peace and perform negotiations." Basil still looked a little confused. "Why me though? I don't exactly lead a nation."

"Word has likely reached the Redcap capital about the man from a magic door that provided us with weapons and technology, he is likely both curious and seeking out the aforementioned weapons. Seeing your interest in learning more about this continent I would recommend you attend." Basil still seemed uncommitted. "What exactly goes on there, aside from diplomatic stuff? Are there any rules I should be aware of?" Tobias just shrugged.

"Lots of drinking and eating, backroom deals, and fancy political speak. There are rules listed in your invitation, but they could be summarized as don't fight wars or engage in violence and don't carry a weapon in the presence of the Redcap King, who will be among the crowd on the third day of the event. Otherwise, you have near immunity and are governed by your own nation's laws instead of the Redcaps'. Given the invitation is listed to 'Basilius, of the Kingdom of Florida' you will be fairly exempt from any rules or obligations."

The two chuckled upon seeing how Basil was addressed in the invite. "Alright, sounds interesting. It will probably be a bit weird, though, attending the event as an independent individual alongside my new head of state." Tobias seemed to be amused at Basil's statement. "Well, you will always be a bit of an odd case. While you are officially a citizen you're also as much an outside power, and likely not to be seen as an Arkepelian. Even in this conversation, I am as much addressing you as a representative of another nation engaged in trade as much as a citizen of my own." Basil could tell Tobias was saying that either as a compliment or a simple statement of fact, not intending to put Basil down as an outsider. Still, however, Basil felt a little disappointed in being reminded his citizenship was as much a ceremonial reward as it was actual. Nevertheless, he kept his feelings internal, knowing that in truth he was an outsider. Tobias continued to speak.

"Further, I do not intend to attend the festival. The council will attend in my stead, I wish for the other powers to see my intention to pass my authority to them. But, I must ask, have you done anything to anger Jarvis?" Basil was surprised at the sudden change of topics. "What? No, I don't think so. He's been making it more clear he doesn't like me lately, but I don't think I did anything to make him do so. At least not intentionally." Tobias made a quick hand gesture to indicate he didn't seem to think Basil was at fault. "Good, I wanted to ask, but I expect he just fears you will take some sort of power or influence he expects to receive. However, in that case, I would like to make a request of you. Do you intend to bring your truck across the ocean and drive it to the Redcap capital?" Basil now seemed more confused. "Yeah, probably. I haven't put much thought into it yet, but that's probably the best way for me to get there."

"Good. If you would be okay with it, I would like you to bring along Jarvis and the two other council members who also plan to attend, Niles and Jace. Such a trip would save them a lot of time and also perhaps give you and Jarvis a chance to get along better. Jarvis is often touchy about these things, but I believe that once he gets to know you, and more importantly realizes you have no intention of taking his council seat, will get along with you much better."

Basil thought for a moment, hesitant to commit to spending more time with Jarvis. "Alright, yeah, I can do that. Just when you bring it up to him please make it clear you were the one that suggested it. I don't want him thinking it's some sort of slight from me." Tobias nodded. "Very well, I will arrange for a ship to transport your truck. You'll be transporting Arkepelians anyway, and a ship that can carry your truck is easier to plan than arranging a ferry and another means of land transport for them, so the island can handle expenses and planning for that."

10: Trouble at the Gate

Basil sat in his truck that had just been loaded onto a boat in the Arkepello harbor. Tuning out the constant movement of the waves and the conversations of those standing around his truck he spoke with ACE who was instructing him on how to relay signals from his PDA via radio waves. Of course, however, this would only work if he were to find a radio in the Redcap capital he could use capable of reaching the Arkepello. Otherwise, he would most likely be unable to contact ACE during the outing as the PDA's wormhole like communication did not work without being able to calculate the fourth variable of one of the devices at the facility and its terrestrial radio capabilities would not reach the distance between the Redcap Capital and the Arkepello.

Outside of his truck, though he lacked awareness of it, was the beginnings of a beautiful sunrise painted with a warm glow of oranges and reds as the sun slowly rose over the ocean and began illuminating the Arkepello port. Basil was suddenly distracted as a sailor tapped the driver's side window of his truck. "They're finally hear, let's get moving." Jarvis, Niles, and Jace all arrived, and after Basil motioned toward the back of the truck the four went over to place their luggage in its covered bed. "There's not going to be a lot of room up there, place anything you don't need for the ride in the back" Basil stated as the three began to take a few things out of their luggage and put the rest into the truck. The four began to make small talk as they returned to the cab of the truck and the ship began to leave the port.

"What's this?" Jarvis asked while pointing to Basil's backpack as he climbed into the passenger side of the truck. "Huh? My backpack. Why?" Basil asked somewhat confused. "You put our stuff in the storage compartment" Jarvis stated, before asking "So why is your stuff up here?" Basil couldn't place Jarvis's tone, being unsure if Jarvis was making an active attempt to conceal animosity or intentionally expressing animosity with an air of plausible deniability. Regardless, Basil tried his best to sound neutral to avoid harsher feelings that could make a very long drive feel even longer. "It's just got a few important things in there I want to keep up front: first aid, emergency supplies, snacks, and tools. The rest of my stuff is back there too." Jarvis responded with a mute and apathetic stare, but after a quick pause just shrugged.

Sunrise soon became day as the crew arrived at the docks on the landfall opposite to where they had started, and day became evening as the long drive through the countryside became a slow crawl through the crowded streets of the Redcap capitol. Throughout it all Jarvis seemed willing to put hostilities behind him. Basil was very glad to be on better terms with him, and the four had talked for hours on what felt like every topic they could have. "The gate's just up ahead" Jace stated, before she leaned forward from the back seat and followed it up with "There's a lot more people here than last time." Basil could see a very tall gate that concealed everything behind it aside from the start of a sunset above and brought the truck to a stop. "Can't go any further, too many people" he replied as the four looked on hoping the crowd would thin enough to get through.

Several guards by the gate seemed to notice the truck's arrival and began working their way through the crowd, but as they slowly got closer Basil noticed they seemed either annoyed or angry and were holding their weapons out in a high ready position. "Do they usually act like that?" a suddenly nervous Basil asked Jarvis. Jarvis just shook his head before asking "What did you do?" in a somewhat nervous and slightly accusatory tone. Niles leaned forward as well, voicing his nervousness. "No, something is wrong, they're definitely angry and headed our way." Basil's elbow serendipitously brushed his holstered pistol and he began to speak quietly to Jarvis. "There's a gun in the glove box, do you know how to shoot? We may need it if things go bad."

"The what?" Jarvis asked, much more nervous than before. "The glovebox" Basil replied, slightly annoyed, before pausing and clarifying "The lever there, you can pull it and it'll open the container." Jarvis immediately started to bend over and reach for it, before Basil realized what he was doing and shouted "Not now!" Basil instantly could tell the closest guard picked up on the fact Basil had been saying something in anger, his facial expression tightening and his hand getting a better grip on the bayoneted gun he possessed. Basil quickly tried to look more composed to avoid further tipping off the soldiers before speaking in a whisper. "Only if we need it, don't even look in the direction unless we do. I don't know much about these guys, but I can tell you that if you pull out a weapon they WILL start shooting at us."

What felt like an eternity passed, but eventually the guards had mostly made it through the crowd. Basil continued to do his best to look calm while nervously making glances over to Jarvis to make sure he wasn't doing anything stupid. Eventually they approached, switching their rifles to a low ready position and Basil rolled down the window. He began to say "Hello-," but was cut off by the closest guard who barked out an order. "You four are to exit your vehicle and be seized for the impersonation of Amigosian diplomats." The guard seemed to have equal parts anger and annoyance in his voice and Basil immediately started trying to defuse the situation. "Sorry sir, there must be some sort of mistake" before quickly picking his invitation up and handing it out the window.

The guard looked at the document for a considerable amount of time, and while Basil waited for a response the other three in the truck handed their invitations to Basil who passed them along to the guard as well. The guard silently read through them all, saying nothing with a blank expression on his face. "You're Basilious, but you arrived in an Amigosian vehicle?" Basil was caught off guard by the question. "Wait, do Amigosian vehicles look like this? This isn't an Amigosian truck, I've been very interested in seeing one to compare technology, but I was told I likely couldn't visit Amigoso." The guard shrugged while motioning to somebody by the gate. "I've never seen an Amigosian personal vehicle, they've only been described to me. But I was told you had a device that could transport you instantly, so why are you traveling with Arkepellians?"

"The device doesn't work quite like that, it can only go to certain locations and I have to go the rest by other means. The closest I can get is Arkepello and then the rest I have to travel like anybody else, which is why I'm traveling like this alongside some Arkepellian friends."

Another man who had been approaching from the gate arrived, wearing a uniform that Basil could assume indicated he was of higher rank or of some other importance. "May I see the invitations?" he asked the guard who had originally approached. Jarvis's nervousness seemed to switch to annoyance and seeing the new official he spoke in a pompous manner. "I am the lead representative of Arkepello, under the authority granted to me as such you are to quit this rabble and let us proceed at once." The new official read through the last of the documents before responding to Jarvis's outburst.

"Greetings, I am Weston Brayden, captain of the Redcap Capitol Police. I apologize for the mistaken identity, please bring your vehicle through the gate and meet me on the other side."

"Is anything wrong?" Basil asked, feeling a little relieved at the nicer tone, though unsure of what Brayden intended with the meeting on the other side of the gate. Brayden, now making an expression Basil could interpret as either mild suspicion, intrigue, or both, replied with a short "It's only a matter of accommodation and of personal curiosity" before pausing quickly and adding "Nothing to be alarmed about."

11: Attendance

Basil parked his truck on the inside of the gate before he and his passengers began to get out and observe their surroundings while waiting for Brayden. Strait ahead and in the center of the courtyard sat what Basil could best describe as a large castle or palace. The place looked like something that wouldn't look out of place during the renaissance in Europe, somewhat of an equally captivating and unnerving thought for Basil as he was staring at it in the present. To the back right portion of the courtyard were two large buildings that Basil best surmised were barracks of some sort, directly to his left was one large building he figured to be the hotel he would be staying at, and scattered along the walls were numerous smaller buildings that likely ranged from storage to living quarters. The courtyard itself was vast and full of people and tents, with a large number of tents grouped towards the presumed barracks.

Disrupting their observations, however, Brayden finally approached the group and spoke in an apologetic tone. "The royal family sends their deepest regrets, but due to the size of this year's festival we have run out of room in the inn. We have set up tents for some guests in place of a room." Brayden said while pointing to the cluster of tents at the far side of the courtyard. Jarvis, Niles, and Jace all remained quiet so Basil interjected. "That's alright, actually, if it's fine I'll just sleep in my truck here" he said as he patted the hood of the truck he stood next to. "It's got climate control, a metal roof, and it'll make unpacking a breeze." Brayden paused for a moment, seeming to ponder Basil's words, but shook his head.

"Basil, you have been chosen for a room in the inn. It's the Akepello General here and his subjects that have unfortunately not been allocated a room." Jarvis's neutral expression quickly contorted and he angrily retorted "I am Kenton Jarvis, leader of the Arkepello Council, here in stay of the General and I-" Brayden looked confused and spoke over Jarvis. "The Arkepello General is not attending the festival?" Jarvis, which Basil imagined was about to have steam coming out of his ears, responded with a sharp "I am here in his stead, tell the Redcap King I am to be treated like the other powers and not to be treated with less dignity than this outsider." Jarvis gestured to Basil. Brayden, with a face that held a scowl, replied with a calm but very authoritative tone. "You are not to question his majesty. Collect your things to be escorted to your accommodation at once."

Behind them several soldiers made themselves known by approaching from the slight distance they had been waiting at. Jarvis remained with his enraged look, though Niles and Jace appeared more accepting of the situation. Grabbing their luggage and handing it to the soldiers, Jarvis returned one final glare at both Basil and Brayden before following suit and pursuing his fellow representatives and the soldiers through the courtyard towards the tents. Basil continued to stand there in silence, trying to conceal how humorous he found the results of Jarvis's outburst before he turned to Brayden who was still watching the others disembark. "So, I take it the personal curiosity you had was about me?"

"Yes," replied Brayden in a relatively impartial tone. "You must forgive me, but the story of how you arrived is a difficult one to believe. Your vehicle and clothes are certainly different, but I could easily be convinced you modified Amigosian goods to appear as yours do." Basil shrugged. "I don't blame you, I'm not sure if I'd believe me myself. I do have a device or two that might clear up any doubts if you'd like to see them." Brayden shook his head. "That will not be necessary. The King has taken an interest in you, which means I am to assume you are who you say you are. Although, I should warn you, if you attempt to con the King beware of the rash consequences of doing so regardless of where you hale." Basil nodded, "Duly noted, though I'm just here because I was invited, I don't expect to be doing any negotiating or selling." Brayden suddenly looked confused. "But you provided supplies to the Arkepello General, no?"

"Yeah, but that was kind of a one off favor for some friends. If something in particular is needed I might be able to look into it. When your diplomats get back to the Arkepello after this you could also have them talk to me or General Tobias." Brayden looked somewhat confused for a moment before returning to his previous neutral expression. "Well, I expect the King will approach you to negotiate the sale of weapons and supplies, and he will likely wish to have them delivered promptly to resolve the conflict between us and the Tyrant's army."

"I don't sell weapons" Basil replied, before pausing and realizing what Brayden had said. "Wait, hold on, I thought you were about to make peace with the Lizard King?" Brayden momentarily looked as if he was unsure of himself. "Yes, I was only speculating, and meant it as they were to be used as a bargaining chip. In any event, you will likely learn more if I am correct in assuming you will be attending a meeting with them." Brayden paused for just a second, but before Basil said any more he spoke again. "That building there" Brayden said while pointing to what Basil assumed was the hotel. "Is the inn, present your invitation and you will be directed to a room. You can leave your vehicle here, and you will want to go there now to be ready once food is prepared."

As abrupt as he was in his change of tone, Brayden quickly left to rejoin his subordinates, leaving Basil to make the deceptively long walk from the gate to the inn with a heavy backpack and suitcase. Finally arriving at the inn, and seeing a large group of people by a counter speaking with the people who'd presumably check him in, he sat down to wait for the crowd to die down. Standing near where he sat, and sticking out among the crowd were some individuals. They were of a slightly lighter complexion and were tall, not only for here, but even to Basil's standards; with the shorter ones being around his height and the tallest in the center being considerably taller. All of the soldiers or bodyguards appeared to be carrying large blades of some form or another, each with varying ornate designs - standing out heavily from the Redcaps' uniform mix of guns with the occasional blade. Even their clothes, made largely of leather or ornate and brightly colored cloth, stood out among everybody else in the crowd both for their designs and seemingly more primitive construction. On further inspection the individuals near the counter appeared to be part of the same group, and as Basil made note of their existence it became clear several of the group standing nearer to him were taking note of his existence as well.

Determined to break the ice, Basil decided to introduce himself. Getting up and giving a short wave, he began to state "Hi, I'm-" before getting cut off by one of the group who quickly stepped between them. While not touching Basil, his movement seemed intended to get Basil to step backward to his original seating and away from the group. The individual doing so was not exactly imposing, looking to be a very old man wearing some form of robes. Despite that, his confidence in his movement and words was plenty to get Basil slowly walking backward to his seat while they spoke. "Who are you with and what is your business?" the man barked. "Well, I originally came with the Arkepello represen-" replied Basil.

The man cut him off by making a sound between a sigh and a chuckle to seemingly emphasize his annoyance at Basil, before prompting Basil with a new question "And what is your business?" Basil, now a little less intimidated, stopped walking backward and responded with "Just introducing myself" while trying, and partially failing, to conceal his own annoyance. The man, clearly not happy with Basil's stated intention, replied with a sharp "Don't overestimate your importance here islander" before turning to walk away. Basil retorted "Asshole" fairly quietly. Replying before deciding on whether to mumble it quietly or state it audibly, he wound up saying it quite enough to appear as if he was not intending for it to be heard, but loud enough for his verbal attacker to hear him.

The robed man, having started to walk away, froze in place for just a second; before turning back and speaking in an angry but controlled voice. "Do not approach us again. If it were not for the festival you would be facing a severe punishment for such insolence." As abrupt as his comment was he quickly walked back to his group, which had all seemingly already forgotten about Basil's presence. Basil, sitting back down, suddenly heard another voice at his side. "Confident tonight, are we?" said a man sitting nearby. The man seemed to be wearing some form of jacket that vaguely resembled a suit or blazer, but was otherwise seemingly unnotable. Basil, turning to face the man, responded to the open ended question "Well, I thought we were all supposed to be making chit chat?" The man was seemingly amused. "There are always limits Arkepelian, you don't approach a King like that."

"Wait, that was the Redcap King?" Basil asked in a surprised voice. "No, the Lizard King, how do you not know this?" the man replied in equal parts curiosity and annoyance. While speaking, however, the man got up and sat closer to Basil, seeming to inspect him. Basil replied to the man's question with a short "I'm a bit new here and out of my depth," but as he spoke the man got up to sit closer, seeming more focused on inspecting Basil than listening to the words he was saying. "Basilious, the man from another world. You know, you're a real unknown, our guys can't make heads or tails of you, and coming from me that's a real compliment. Though if that is your intention I fear what your plans might be." Basil grew increasingly confused as the man spoke. "Alright, um, I guess you know who I am, who are you?"

"Spiro, Amigosian Ministry of Information. I look forward to getting to know you." Basil smiled and extended his hand to shake Spiro's. "Nice to meet you, I was hoping to meet somebody from Amigoso while I was here, I've heard stories about your technologies and if it's okay with you I'd like to compare some notes and hear about what exactly you guys have." Spiro had a facial expression that Basil could not read. "Very well, perhaps I can talk to you about what I am permitted to share, although given your claims I would be just as interested in seeing what sort of technology you possess." Basil nodded. "Of course, what'd you want to see first? I got a laptop and phone with me, I came in a truck that one of the guards said looked like one of your vehicles, and I also have a PDA thing that's certainly one of a kind." Spiro just smiled. "Perhaps tonight. It appears they are ready to check you in, and the friend of mine who I was talking to looks like he is getting impatient."

Upon checking in and being led to his room, for the first time since early that morning Basil was given a moment of silence to reflect on everything and unpack before he went to grab his dinner. Doing a bare bones unpacking he began to take stock of the room. The room was small with a bed that was at least visibly clean, a chamber pot, and a table with a pitcher of water. Basil opened his suitcase, laid his clothes out on his bed, assembled his previously disassembled rifle he had in his suitcase, and laid out a water filter and iodide tablets near the pitcher in a silent protest against the idea of drinking straight from the pitcher itself.

12: Toes to be Stepped On

Finally settling in Basil made his way to the Redcap's castle itself where the food and drink were being served. After a few casual conversations with Redcap guards who seemed at least tolerant of conversing, albeit a bit surprised to be prompted with questions, Basil learned some more of the basics and what to expect from the event. He also heard neither the Redcap royal family nor Lizard King were going to be at the dinner, both being in the Redcap royal quarters negotiating what would be an end to the ongoing war. Making his way to the food he grabbed a full plate, and having decided to skip painkillers for the night grabbed what would ultimately end up being a little too much wine. Seeing the Arkepello representatives at a nearby table he sat down to join them. Jarvis seemed slightly tense, but Basil could not tell whether it was directed at him or not, and Jace and Niles seemed glad about his presence.

"You, come with me" Basil heard over his shoulder from an obviously inebriated man. Turning around he saw an older man, shorter than most of the other guests, with thinning grey hair wearing what Basil could best interpret as something like a naval uniform. Basil, a little surprised at the demand, turned to the man while remaining seated. "Sorry, did I do something wrong?" The man chuckled. "No," followed by an oddly long pause. "The Redcap King has requested you meet with him to discuss the sale of weapons." Though the uniformed man spoke in a manner that was likely intended as a whisper, due to the man's inebriation he failed at preventing others from hearing his request. "I don't sell weapons" Basil replied while remaining seated. The man furrowed his brow and replied with a short "You are able to acquire them, no?" before pausing as if he forgot what he was to say next, then continuing "You provided some to the Arkepello General. We require them now and you are being instructed to meet with the King himself to negotiate providing them."

Basil, recalling his meeting with the man who turned out to be the Lizard King, thought briefly about the best way to respond to this request. "Those were a one off gift to a friend, I don't sell weapons. Sorry." Jarvis, who had been listening to the conversation, butted in with an annoyed "I don't care that you are the Redcap's General, Edwards, you are not getting weapons from us or him." Basil, glad to be on Jarvis's side for once, gave him a quick nod before turning back from Jarvis to the man he just learned was the Redcap General. Edwards seemed to be mulling over Basil's and Jarvis's words in his intoxicated brain.

"Don't you turn away from me, this conversation isn't over" Edwards quipped with a delayed expression of annoyance finally coming over his face. "Yes, it is. No weapons. If you invited me here just for them you'll be disappointed" Basil responded, before following up with "Come back sober and more polite, maybe we can discuss medicine or agriculture, but there'll be no blood on my hands." The General, seeming to realize that the conversation would not prove fruitful, began to stumble towards the exit of the hall they were all eating in. Basil, having run out of wine and feeling a need for more after that conversation, also got up to refill his glass.

While walking away from his table, out of the corner of his eye Basil could see Spiro walking in his direction. He began to recount the events of the last few moments in the expectation that he was going to ask him what had occurred, but his thoughts and Spiro's approach were interrupted by somebody timidly grabbing Basil's shoulder. "Basil, right? I need to speak with you" said someone, who despite his height being nearly Basil's, was probably a teenager. The kid seemed nervous about Basil's pending response. "Huh, what's up?" Basil asked as he turned around, feeling more inebriated than he did a moment ago with the unexpected movement and change in planned interactions. The kid spoke, seeming to find a little more confidence. "My father wishes to speak with you" the kid said, before a quick pause and another statement to provide more elaboration. "My father is the Lizard king."

Basil shook his head. "I already spoke with him actually" replied Basil, before continuing. "The old guy in the robes said something along the lines of 'don't try to speak to me again or there will be dire consequences.'" Basil spoke while trying - but failing - to do an impression of the robed man. "You were that guy?" Asked the kid in amusement. "He's been wanting to speak with you for months, I can't wait to see the look on his face when he finds out that the first time he spoke with you the Wizard threatened you."

Basil let a chuckle escape at the thought of a royal 'Wizard' before trying to contain it, but was nevertheless glad to hear he hadn't made enemies with one major faction in the festival after all. Recollecting his thoughts he responded in a more reserved tone. "Just to be clear, no weapons. I just had that conversation with a guy, Edwards, who is apparently the Redcap General. He was not happy about that." Basil continued to speak but switched to a more casual tone. "But I'd be happy to meet with him." The kid, who seemed a little unhappy while Basil explained that he wasn't willing to provide any form of weapons, still seemed happy that Basil was willing to meet with them. "My father should be finishing up talks with the Redcaps soon, why don't we go now?"

Suddenly Basil felt a buzzing in his pocket. "Hold on" he said as he pulled his phone out hoping that ACE had found a way to get a signal through, but only saw a reminder to take his painkillers - the ones he had elected not to take in exchange for his overindulgence in the wine offered here. "What's that?" the kid asked Basil, eyes fixed on the flip phone. "My radio" Basil stated, before hesitating and asking "You're familiar with radios right?" The kid nodded his head, "Of course I know what a radio is." Basil, now more confident he could explain the device, continued. "This is pretty much like any other radio, but it can only communicate with other radios like this one, and it can do a few other non-radio things as well. When I heard it make a noise I thought maybe it was a friend who found a way to reach me, but it was only a reminder to take medication."

The kid seemed very interested in the device, so Basil said "Watch this" and pointed the camera at the two. The kid stared at the pixelated photo with infatuation, finally turning to Basil and speaking. "Can you get me one?" Basil gave him a quick smile. "It wouldn't work as a radio, but I'm sure I could get my hands on another one. We could call it a diplomatic gift or something like that as long as your father's okay with it." The kid looked excited, but suddenly his expression changed to surprise as his head jerked to the side.

"You!" shouted the robed man that had accosted Basil earlier, and whom the kid identified as the 'Wizard.' "I warned you to-" he began to continue, before seeing Basil holding out the phone. His demeanor changed mid-sentence and he pulled out a large double sided knife from within his robe before stepping in between Basil and the kid. "Keep away from him, or I will not hesitate to kill you" the 'Wizard' shouted, before continuing in a somewhat less frantic tone. "You were warned to stay away from us." Basil, having finally processed all that happened, began to speak but was distracted by the kid laughing. "This is not a game child" the 'Wizard' scolded. Basil, now re-trying to collect his thoughts began to say "Relax, I-" but the 'Wizard' cut him off with a harsh "Quiet" before he took a large step closer while still pointing the knife at Basil.

The kid spoke again, beginning to say "He isn't-" but the 'Wizard' spoke over him with an abrupt "We will talk about this later." The 'Wizard' took one more step towards Basil, and seemed to be about to say something more, but Basil had had enough of the non-verbal threats. Taking the phone in his hand he held it out directly at the 'Wizard,' camera pointed in his direction. The 'Wizard,' already seemingly afraid of what he must have presumed to be a weapon, jumped back and stood directly in front of the kid. Basil started laughing, the kid resumed his laughter, and the 'Wizard's' fear seemed somewhat disarmed by the laughter. Without a single further word, he grabbed the kid by the arm and walked briskly towards the exit, practically dragging the still laughing kid. Basil looked around, realizing that all eyes were now on him.

13: Last Resorts

Basil, now the center of attention for the entire room, decided to exit but was stopped by Spiro. "What was that?" he asked in an accusatory tone. Basil, turning around, replied nonchalantly "Don't really know." He went to continue walking, but Spiro stuck out his arm to block the exit, seeming to expect a more detailed answer. Basil paused to go over his thoughts, and during the pause Spiro continued, this time in a seemingly concerned tone. "You're going to get yourself in trouble, I don't know what you were thinking, but threatening an advisor like that is a quick way to get yourself killed." Basil replied "It's a radio," prompting a confused "What?" from Spiro. "This, it's a radio" Basil continued, "And the kid said his father wanted to meet with me, apparently he didn't know who I was when I introduced myself. I guess the grumpy guy didn't get the memo." Spiro simply stared at Basil for a moment, seemingly trying to make sense of everything. "Just don't do that" Spiro replied. "None of that, I don't care what was misunderstood, you're going to get yourself into trouble."

Basil and Spiro stood in silence for a moment, and as Basil looked around it seemed the crowd had lost interest. Basil finally broke the silence. "The asshole pulled a knife on me after the kid approached and asked me to meet with them." Basil spoke with a considerable amount of annoyance and inebriation before he followed up his previous statement with "If you ask me, pointing a radio at him was me being nice, I could have been pointing a gun at him instead." After a moment, Spiro, in a tone between concern and one that would be used talking to a child, replied. "Look, you can't do things like that to any of the greater powers here. Especially not to the Lizard King or his people, who aren't the most level-headed." The two both stood in silence again, but again Spiro began to speak. "Honestly, I've grown a little fond of you, you're not full of shit like most of the diplomatic types, and I would still like to figure out what you are exactly, so don't get yourself killed by insulting the Tyrant's advisor." Basil finally spoke. "Um, thanks" was all he could think to say at first, but quickly added "I'm going to go get some fresh air and collect my thoughts."

After a long and quiet walk Basil made his way to his truck, popped the bed cover off, and sat down to stare at the emptying courtyard. With his body not yet adjusted to the idea of this hour being night, and with the regrets of the prior conversations, against all better judgment he broke the seal on a bottle of Grey Goose to pour himself a glass. Some time went by, and as he went about taking the plastic wrap of the package of cigarettes he found in the parka all that time ago he heard footsteps approaching his solitary camp. "May I join you?" asked the tall man Basil now knew to be Nerva, the King of the Lizard People. "Sure" Basil responded, the liquor and the mental fatigue obvious in his voice. The Lizard king climbed up onto the back of Basil's truck to sit behind him, and for a moment stared out into the now nearly empty courtyard with a solemn look on his face. Basil noticed the man seemed even larger up close and seemed to have a considerable amount of strength - exceedingly so for others here relative to his age and station. His clothes, while similarly colorful and ornate like the other nations' people, seemed less refined with leather and slightly crudely stitched and dyed fabrics. On his side he carried a giant sword of some form, looking both out of place considering the rest of the diplomatic and nobility types did not do so, and also out of place given the gun bearing Redcap guards that dotted the walls and buildings nearby.

"Give us a moment" said the Lizard king to his son, the 'Wizard,' and the soldiers that seemed to make up his entourage. "I would not advise that your grace, this one is problematic" replied the 'Wizard' in response to the Lizard king's request. A short glance from the Lizard King, however, and the group was walking a short distance away; leaving the two wildly different individuals to converse alone. Finally, after a very long set of silence, the Lizard King spoke. "May I see your radio?" Basil, not expecting that, pulled his phone out of his pocket and handed it to him. "Come on, it was at least a little funny" Basil commented while the man seemed busy inspecting it. "If it was anybody else" the Lizard king responded, "This would have ended very badly for you." He then paused, as if he was pondering how to word what he said next, before continuing. "But I understand we must have very different lives and customs so I'm willing to forgive such transgressions." They both sat in silence for a moment longer, before the Lizard King broke the silence once again. "Well, my son did find it amusing. He also spoke highly of you, and he is a good judge of character, which I place more weight on than your lack of etiquette."

The man sitting next to Basil went silent again. Finally thinking of something to say, Basil was the first to break this silence. "Your son seems like a good kid. He was very nice and seemed pretty interested in learning things. Not-" Basil suddenly paused, realizing his fatigued and intoxicated brain was yet again about to get him into trouble. The man next to him, however, smiled for the first time since the meeting started. "Not like you would expect my son to be?" the Lizard king asked. "My father was a cruel man, feared by his people and hated by others. I have been a cruel and broken man, but when his mother died I have raised him to not carry what my family line has left me." He paused for a moment, and the solemn look returned to his face. "I have prepared him for a peaceful reign, but in the final hour darkness has prevailed and the curse of my lineage may be a shield he will find himself without."

"What are you talking about?" Basil asked, not following the meaning behind what was said. "Peace negotiations have failed, the Redcaps have demanded much that I am unwilling to give" said the solemn man. "That is why I am here, if you can provide me with weapons I can return to the table with the scales in my favor, or confront the Bloody One on the battlefield and force an end to this before my time is over. In exchange I will grant you anything within my dominion." Basil, now disappointed to hear that there would be no peace, and more disappointed in the request, replied exhaustively. "I won't give weapons to anybody. This is not my war, and there will not be blood on my hands." The Lizard King, seeming disheartened, replied quickly. "There will be much more blood on your hands if you do not intervene, much more even than if I fight a short war with overwhelming strength. My people have informed me that you wish for peace, how would you end a bloody stalemate without transient bloodshed?" Basil shook his head. "I don't know" was all he could muster in reply.

"You said you would be willing to provide other knowledge and supplies, what would those be?" the Lizard King asked, pivoting the subject. "Medications maybe, imagine a world where an infection could be solved easily and many diseases were eradicated. We could try farming techniques, imagine getting four times as much food from the same amount of land. Even things like tools, imagine a world where a hammer was much stronger and more durable, and didn't rust." The Lizard king seemed to ponder Basil's words, considering them attentively. "Perhaps those words themselves may bring peace. I will request to resume negotiations tomorrow, and I wish for you to join me in them." The Lizard King paused momentarily as if to collect his thoughts, but resumed speaking before Basil responded. "Tell those words to the Redcap King himself. If convinced that you can help us bring such a world into being, he may be willing to put aside his bloodshed for a chance at such a change." The Lizard king fell silent, looking intently at Basil expecting a response, which Basil provided. "Of course."

"Good" replied the Lizard King. "A drink to another shot at peace, would you like some?" Basil asked, pouring himself yet another ill-advised serving from his bottle. "What is it?" the Lizard King asked. "Just alcohol, though it's a bit of an acquired taste if you're used to the wine we were drinking earlier." The Lizard King replied "Very well" while holding out his hand to accept a serving. Basil poured some into a second plastic cup, handing it to the Lizard king who inspected the very alien container before drinking some. After downing most of the vodka in one gulp, he made a face as if he didn't know what to make of the nearly flavorless liquor, before finishing it off and handing the plastic cup back to Basil. "Well, I expect we will speak again very soon" the Lizard King stated, before standing back up and walking to his son, the 'Wizard,' and his soldiers guarding them.

14: Extraction

Basil was woken by a knock on the door. He struggled to open his eyes, the effects of the liquor still not fully worn off. He checked the watch next to his bed: 3 AM local time. He heard another knock on the door, but this one was much more aggressive than the previous one. He was definitely awake now. Getting up quickly he grabbed the rifle by his bedside, chambered a round as quietly as he could, and made his way to the door. He cracked the door open slightly in an attempt to keep the rifle out of view of the visitor, seeing the 'Wizard' on the other side. The 'Wizard' immediately pushed the door open and entered the room, undoing all of Basil's efforts to hide the weapon and prevent his visitor from entering.

Before Basil could formulate what to say the 'Wizard' spoke in a calm tone, but one that seemed to hide unease deep within it. "Is that one of your people's weapons?" A still confused Basil replied with a "Yes, why are you here?" The 'Wizard,' who seemed to be looking around the room almost frantically to make sure they were alone, replied to Basil's question with his head turned still canvassing the room. "His grace has requested your presence, we believe he may be in danger." Basil was now only more confused. "Now?" Basil asked, before following up with a "Why?" moments later. "That we will discuss in his presence, please bring the weapon with you." Basil shook his head. "I'm not giving you the rifle" Basil replied. "Yes, that is why we are requesting your presence. Please, come with me now."

Basil, still unsure of the situation - but having been convinced to come along - wrapped the rifle lightly in a coat and followed the 'Wizard' through the nearly empty halls. Making their way up some stairs, and into a much more extravagant area of the inn, they finally made it to a large double door with the Lizard King's soldiers standing guard outside. Being waved through by the 'Wizard,' the two finished their late night walk and found themselves standing in an even more ornate room than the halls implied; the Lizard King and his son standing in the center surrounded by yet more soldiers. Taking stock of the situation, the 'Wizard' broke the spell of silence the whole group was under.

"An informant has indicated there is to be an attempt on the King's life, a direct response to our meeting with you." The last bit of tiredness left Basil as he realized he might be caught up in the middle of an assassination attempt. "Are you sure?" Basil asked, before following up with a "How do you know?" The Lizard King, who had remained silent until this point, finally spoke. "Thank you for coming, it appears you may not be the only one who has few friends here. Yes, we are certain there is to be an attempt on my life at some point during the festival." After finishing his statement, the 'Wizard' picked up where he left off.

"We have asked you here to escort us to our airship." Basil, confused at the request, prompted another question. "Why ask me to join you though? If you're worried about assassins, you have guards. I'm just one guy, and I'm not a soldier." Though the 'Wizard' appeared to be about to answer Basil's question, Basil quickly interjected with another. "Wait, you guys have an airship?" The 'Wizard' nodded. "Yes, one from Amigoso," though he answered Basil's latter question with annoyance.

"The Redcap soldiers present here greatly outnumber us, even though we are aware of their treachery they could easily attack us and later fabricate a story about how one of our soldiers started a fight that led to an unfortunate incident where we were killed. If our government was put in a crisis of succession there would be no others capable of dispensing justice, unless Amigoso did so through trickery, but they hold no love for us. But you are an unknown, nothing is known about you except that you possess formidable weaponry. They likely would not attack us with any foreigner present, but you are also the only one we trust would not agree to support such a scheme."

As the 'Wizard' finished speaking the Lizard King spoke again. "Once we are safely back at our capital we will reach out to you, we may wish for you to speak on our behalf to the Redcaps or have you visit our capitol to discuss options if you are willing. I still wish for peace, and with your backing and no opportunity for treachery the Bloody One may still be made to see reason."

A plethora of thoughts rushed through Basil's mind as he decided on the best course of action. Eventually, however, his mind was made up. "Okay, we go to my truck, get you three in the cab, and your soldiers around it. We go through the gate, get you to your airship, and get you out of here without violence. But, on one condition. Promise me you will do everything reasonable to avoid bloodshed both now and after you're safe." The 'Wizard' looked incensed at Basil's demand, but the Lizard King nodded. "Okay, I promise you that. But I would seek a promise of my own. Renew to me the promise you made to the Bloody One who authored your invitation, that you come to the aid of anyone that is attacked by another party during the festival."

"This isn't my war, I'll help you leave, but I don't know if I could fight for you. Even if it was a just fight." The 'Wizard' glared at Basil, but the Lizard King seemed to hold no ill will. "I am not demanding this of you as a King, which I know you likely hold little respect for as an authority. I am only asking this of you as a father who wishes for his only child to live another day. But I will not hold it against you if you cannot honor the promise you made during your attendance." Basil stood there, silent for a moment, before replying hesitantly. "Okay" he stated, before pausing again and continuing. "I promise you I'll do what I can to uphold the peace during the festival."

Some soldiers picked up a handful of bags, and some formed a circle around the Lizard King. Basil, hoping a display of a weapon would negate the need for one, put his coat on that was wrapped over the rifle and placed the sling over his shoulder. Walking with them, they made their way out of the building, drawing some attention from the guards but otherwise making their way through the night undisturbed. When they arrived at Basil's truck he instructed the Lizard King, his son, and the 'Wizard' to stay in his truck while the soldiers walked outside the slowly moving vehicle to respond to any attacks. Approaching the gate Basil had entered through the previous day they all noticed a large group of Redcap soldiers standing guard around the gate.

"Open the gate, we wish to exit" one of the Lizard King's soldiers shouted at the Redcap soldier who had left the gate closed despite their arrival. Though Basil couldn't hear all of what the Redcap soldier said in response, he did catch "... Don't really feel like doing so ..." from part of the conversation. The Lizard King's soldier raised his weapon slightly, prompting the Redcap soldiers to raise theirs to a low ready in unison, further causing the Lizard King's soldiers to raise theirs in response. "Lower your weapons you fools!" Shouted the Lizard King as Basil rolled down the window, causing his soldiers to lower their weapons. The Redcap soldiers seemed to keep their weapons at low ready, and the one standing by the gate pulley began walking over to Basil's side of the truck.

"Be ready for anything" the 'Wizard' whispered as the Redcap approached. Moments before he arrived Basil shifted slightly to make sure his rifle was in view, then pulled up his PDA. The Redcap jumped back in momentary surprise. As soon as the Redcap seemed to have collected his thoughts Basil gave an order in a monotone voice. "Open the gate." The Redcap spoke in an antagonistic voice, starting to say "Well, maybe I don-" but Basil cut him off. "As my invitation states, you must accept certain orders from me as if they were from your superiors. You are aware the penalty for disobeying an order is death, right soldier? And if you think you outnumber me, well, you obviously have never seen a drum mag at work."

The soldier seemed unsure of how to respond, although unnervingly to Basil he did not seem afraid of Basil's power play. An uneasy silence came over the vehicle until the Redcap spoke again. "Well, you can't fault me for harassing the murderous Tyrant. I am disappointed to see you assist him." The Redcap turned around and returned to his group, and while nerves ran high as they all waited to see what would happen, the gate began to open. Basil drove through the gate slowly to allow the Lizard king's soldiers to keep up on foot, and the group made their way to the area of the city where the Lizard king had parked his 'airship' and a further contingent of soldiers. Throughout the drive not a word was said that wasn't the 'Wizard' giving navigation directions to Basil.

Finally making it there, Basil began to approach what appeared to be a small blimp that had apparently been acquired from Amigoso; and which served as the Lizard King's transport to and from the Redcap capital. Finally bringing the truck to a stop, his three passengers began to disembark, but the Lizard King stopped halfway out the door to speak to Basil. "You have done us a great service, we will be in contact with you shortly once we've returned and once you've returned to Arkepello." Before Basil could respond with anything beyond a nod the Lizard King had stepped out and closed the door, leaving Basil to watch them walk towards the blimp. As it began to take flight he turned his truck around and began to make his way back to the inn, hoping to salvage what little bit of sleep he could from the waning night.

15: Fallout

Basil walked into the hall, tired and drinking instant coffee that tasted like iodide. Finding the table where the Arkepello representatives were he sat down, but out of the corner of his eye he saw two individuals that seemed to be watching him. One was shorter, even for a Domum crowd, with darker skin and a white shirt. The other one, much taller, had a large greying beard and wore a black shirt. After making some small talk while trying to watch the two without tipping his hand, Basil finally brought it up to the table.

"Don't look now, but there are two guys that seem to be watching me or us. Shorter guy with darker skin and a white shirt, taller guy with a beard and a black shirt." All three at the table immediately turned their heads towards the two, who both got up and left once it was obvious that their surveillance was known. "What part of-" Basil began, before Jarvis cut him off in a very accusatory tone. "That was Cicero and Casio, Cicero is a Redcap advisor. What did you do to get them to be watching us?"

"The Lizard King said there was going to be an assassination attempt on him and asked me to escort him back to his blimp, that could be why they're watching us." Jarvis huffed and walked off with Niles chiming in. "You what? Why would you help the enemy?" Basil was surprised at the sudden bitterly toned question and responded defensively. "I just accompanied them as they left, it's not like I fought for them or gave them weapons. Besides, we're neutral in the war between the Lizard King and the Redcaps." The representative didn't seem too pleased with Basil's answer. "I don't know about you, but we at the Arkepello are still close with the Redcaps." When he spoke he emphasized Basil being an outsider, but suddenly Jace realized something in Basil's statement. "Hold on, the Tyrant left?"

Before Basil could answer Jarvis returned, Police Capton Brayden now in tow. "This man is to be hung per Arkepello law for assisting an enemy." Everybody looked shocked at Jarvis's loudly exclaimed demand, not least of which was Basil who nearly jumped out of his seat and drew his pistol. The two guards flanking Brayden started to raise their weapons, but stopped as Basil went back and forth alternating which guard he held his pistol on. "That's not according to my invitation, and if any of you even so much as move a muscle to try you four and the next six who try will be dead." Brayden, scowling, spoke in a very angry but calm and authoritative voice. "Basil, lower your weapon." Basil kept his weapon up, and the two soldiers flanking Brayden remained frozen holding their weapons half up, so Brayden spoke again. "Basil lower your weapon, you two as well" as he gestured to the two guards that flanked him. Basil and the guards very hesitantly started to lower their weapons, and with all eyes in the hall on the five Brayden began to speak again - very angrily and directing his words to Jarvis.

"That's not an offense under Redcap law, which would be required of a demand such as that. Basil is not here as a representative of the Arkepello, so you also have no authority over the guards to command such an action regardless. You do not have such authority even if he were under Arkepello and Redcap law, only General Tobias could command that. And quite simply, I do not respect your authority period islander."

Jarvis began to slink away, eyes firing imaginary daggers at the three that stood by him, and the whole group seemed much calmer now after Brayden's lecture. Basil quickly holstered his weapon and spoke. "I'm so sorry about that, I thought that-" but Brayden cut him off. "Oh, I would forgive such a misunderstanding on its own, but for siding with the Lizard King I would have you hung myself if it were my choice to make. You are an enemy of the Redcaps and I would recommend you exercise great caution once the privileges within your invite expire." Basil went to speak, but Brayden had already begun to walk away, with Niles and Jace staring at Basil with unwelcome glares.

Spiro stood in a corner, glass of wine in hand despite the early hour, speaking to somebody in a Redcap guard's uniform. Basil rounded the corner at an almost jogging pace, saw Spiro, and started walking towards him as the person in the guard's uniform began to walk away. "Hey, I might be in some trouble, you're the only person here who seems to tolerate me. I've got some information I can trade for some help" Basil stated while trying to catch his breath. Spiro, unsure of what was going on, replied in a tone that seemed to be intended to try to calm Basil down. "Relax, I don't need to barter information to help you if I can, what happened?" Basil, having finally seemed to have caught his breath, began to explain the situation, albeit poorly.

"I pulled a weapon on Brayden the royal police captain, who-," but Spiro cut Basil off. "You what?" Spiro replied in surprise. Basil then, having finally collected his thoughts, recounted Jarvis's demands to have Basil hung, the confrontation, Weston's dressing down of Jarvis, and finally Weston's threat towards Basil. Taking a moment to process everything, Spiro finally replied to Basil's recounting. "Well, you're great at making friends it seems" Spiro stated sarcastically, "But you'll be fine. The Redcaps undoubtedly won't be happy with you pulling a weapon on their Royal Police captain, but given the circumstances and you being here diplomatically, there won't be anything done about it. And I wouldn't take the threats made about retaliating after the festival seriously, he has no power outside of the city walls." Basil seemed somewhat relieved, but only relative to earlier and concern remained in his voice, "Are you sure? He seemed really angry and I'm worried he'd try something."

"Yes, I'm sure" Spiro replied, before pausing a moment to think and follow up his assurances. "If you're really worried go to your room in the inn for today. I have some meetings throughout the day, but can accompany you this evening if you're worried about some sort of retaliation. They certainly wouldn't try anything with me around." Basil seemed a little relieved. "Thanks, I um, yeah I think I'll just lay low for a few hours" Basil replied, before turning to walk away. Before leaving, however, Spiro spoke again. "Before you go, why did Jarvis ask to have you hung? And also, do you know anything about the Lizard King leaving last night, a friend told me he met with you hours before he left."

Basil, turned back to face Spiro. "Those two actually have the same answer, and it was one of the two pieces of information I thought I would offer to you." Basil then began a short recounting of the Lizard King's meeting, the talks that had apparently broken down, and then the late night request to accompany him while he left. Basil also then explained the two men who had followed him, and his conversation with the Arkepello representatives, which led to Jarvis's demands. Spiro again stood there quietly, processing all the information he had heard.

"Well, while the Lizard King is a paranoid fool, I am certain he made up the story to gain your favor. The Redcaps would not have violated an oath like that, especially with the state of the war as it is. The Lizard King is weak, he has not been pulling troops away from the front lines because he wishes for peace as he says, but because he lacks the strength to fight a war."

Basil went to speak, but Spiro continued. "I can see, however, why that would have angered others. He is very disliked here if you somehow were unaware." Spiro again paused for a second, but continued speaking before Basil spoke. "Thank you though, that is good information to know. What was the other piece of information you were going to offer me?" Basil had finally fully calmed down. "The second piece of information was proof that I am who I say I am." Spiro spoke more hesitantly as if to avoid offending Basil. "Your radio? Look, I saw it from a distance last night, I can't take a radio with painted glass as proof of your claims."

Basil simply flicked his wrist, pulling up the holographic interface of unknown origin that was embedded into him. A large bright display showed up in front of him, and Spiro jumped back in surprise. Basil just looked at Spiro with a neutral expression and waited for a response. "Okay, um, yeah" was all he replied with, suddenly at a loss for words as a facial expression that Basil thought looked like regret flashed over his face for a split second. "A little unnerving to know for sure that I'm not full of shit?" Basil asked, to which Spiro responded more coherently having collected his thoughts. "Yes, of course it's unnerving for me. Knowing for certain you came from" Spiro paused, before finding the words he intended "Somewhere else, it's a lot to process." Basil began to say "It's the same for me too, I-," but Spiro cut Basil off. "How is it unnerving for you!? You're the one who came here with that, that thing." Basil, continuing calmly, picked up where he left off his sentence.

"Well, neither I nor any of my people made that interface or the technology that brought me here. I also have no memories older than a year, so however you're feeling I can assure you I've felt it too." Spiro paused to process all Basil had said, before simply replying "Oh," again seemingly at a loss for words.

16: Last Moments of an Era

Spiro sat in the back of Basil's truck holding Basil's pistol. "You can probably see how it feeds in here" said Basil as he pressed down bullets in a magazine showing how the springs worked. Spiro looked at it with intrigue. "And it uses the pressure from the casing to load in the next round?" Basil seemed surprised. "You have autoloading firearms? On the Arkepello Tobias said that you guys didn't have them." Spiro nodded. "Yes, we have a few, but not in a platform as small as this. Can I see it in action?" Basil gestured for Spiro to hand it back. "Well, the Redcaps would probably not appreciate us shooting it here, but it works like this." Basil racked the slide, causing an unspent casing to eject that Basil failed to catch.

"The force from the round would make the slide do that, when it moves back another one would be put into the chamber just like I would assume Amigosian ones would." Spiro opened his jacket to reveal his handgun while replying to Basil's demonstration. "Interesting" he said as he removed his handgun from a leather holster and handed it to Basil. The handgun he pulled had a very ornately carved grip and, as Spiro explained the inner workings, Basil could see that it was a five shot revolver. It was heavy, had an oddly long barrel for something Spiro was concealing, and Basil could see markings and imperfections on it that implied that its components were handmade.

"And here you kept saying we weren't in danger" Basil said in a combination of statement and question once Spiro had finished showing it to Basil. "Well," Spiro replied, "After our chat this morning, and after meeting with a few friends, I thought it best to not take chances." Basil made a slightly worried expression, not expecting that answer. "So tell me, Basil" Spiro continued, "Why are you here? I doubt you're here to compare weapons." Basil responded, slightly surprised by the question. "Well, like I said this morning, I don't know who built the technology that I used to get here, I kinda just stumbled upon it and wound up here." Spiro glanced slightly suspiciously at Basil, then responded with a more clarified question. "Not how you got here, why are you here? At this festival." Basil thought for a moment, internally asking himself the question. "Well, to be honest, I got an invitation so I came. Thought I would see the place."

Spiro, without missing a beat, followed up with another question. "So where are the rest of your people? Why are you the only one here?" Basil thought for a moment, making sure to figure out the best way to word his answer. "I'm not really on good terms with some of them, they tried to kill me and I've been hiding out since then." Spiro, again, prompted Basil with another question "Why did they try to kill you?" to which Basil responded "I don't know." Before Basil could continue to answer the question, Spiro asked a follow up. "How do you not know that?" and before Basil responded Spiro remembered their previous conversation and re-phrased his question "You said before you don't have memories from longer than last year, how?" Basil answered, giving a summary of waking up not knowing who he was or where he was, the injuries he had that ACE had treated, and the technology they had recovered.

"And where is the facility you were at?" Spiro asked. Basil, who's hands were now shaking having been reliving the past events, answered that question as well. "Polar ice cap, I'm sure there are two here as well, although they weren't on any maps Tobias showed me." Basil paused for a moment, but right as Spiro was about to speak, Basil continued to speak. "What's with the interrogation? I know this is a crazy chain of events, but I'm tired." Spiro, who had just noticed Basil's hands were shaking, switched from his interrogation voice and spoke in a serious, but more calm tone. "Sorry," he said, before pausing and nearly switching to a whisper.

"Look, the Amigosian chairman named himself chairman for life nearly twenty years ago, and things have been getting dicey. My backup plan was to get friendly with the Redcaps, but you seem to have thrown a wrench into this region's stability with your presence. I want to find out if I have an ally who'll be either powerful enough or far away enough that I'll be outside my countrymen's reach if things go tits up."

Basil went to speak, but Spiro spoke again to follow up on his statement. "This may go without saying, but if you have any decency this conversation will not be retold to anybody else." Basil nodded. "Of course. You've been good to me here, if things go bad I'll have a safe place for you to stay." Suddenly, Basil's voice trailed off as he continued. "But-" Spiro looked concerned, interrupting Basil with "But what?" in a slightly concerned voice. "But I'm sick, and I'm not sure how much more time I'll be around for."

Spiro looked slightly nervous. "Is it contagious?" Spiro asked in surprise. "No, growths along my spine, I'm not sure if they'll be treatable" Basil answered. Spiro sighed, "Can't catch a break I suppose." Basil was unsure if he meant Basil couldn't catch a break, or if he had meant that Spiro himself couldn't catch a break, or if it was a little of both. They both sat in silence for a moment, until Basil broke the silence. "I guess that's why I'm here. Ya' know, I might as well see the sights before it's too late."

Eventually, the two returned to talking, from talking about the weather to talking about their homes. After some time had passed Spiro pointed to two men who seemed to be making rounds, inspecting the crowd that had formed near to the castle in anticipation of the Redcap King's coming speech. He gestured to the two, one shorter man with darker skin wearing a white shirt, and one taller man with a beard wearing a black shirt. "Those were the guys who were following me this morning" Basil responded when Spiro pointed them out. "The shorter one is Cicero, and the taller one is Casio" Spiro clarified, before continuing. "They're brothers, and Cicero is an advisor to the Redcap King. They know him back when the Redcap King snuck off and joined the Redcap army to fight the Lizard King, they were all there during the battle of Blood Rock. I should introduce you to them."

Basil responded very hesitantly, "I'm not sure if that's a good idea, the Redcaps specifically told me I was their enemy and I don't want to rock the boat or provoke them in any way." Spiro responded confidently to Basil's hesitance. "If there is anybody who's going to hear your side of things it'll be them. Casio hurt his head during the battle, but they're both good people. Fiercely loyal to the King and his people, so they might be a bit standoffish at first, but I think they'll warm up to you."

"They look busy right now, are you sure it's a good time?" Basil asked, still hesitant about the idea. "Nonsense" Spiro replied. "They're advisors, they just sometimes forget they're not foot soldiers anymore." Spiro paused for a second, then continued. "Tell you what, how about I go say hi and tell them you're here. If they're interested in talking we'll all join you here, if not it'll be a chance for me to catch up with them and then I'll come back here once I'm done." Basil thought it over for a second, before finally answering Spiro. "Okay, sure, just please don't pressure them or anything." Spiro stood up and began walking in their direction, leaving Basil alone. Basil, now alone and watching Spiro walk away, pulled out the package of cigarettes he had found in the parka all that time ago. This time, without any distractions, he took the plastic packaging off and took one out of the carton. "No time to start like now, unless maybe these were yours before the bullet" Basil said, talking to himself.

Spiro, finally making his way to Cicero and Casio, greeted them and engaged in a short bit of small talk with Cicero. After going over recent events that the two men had been privy to, at least the small portions that they were willing to share, Spiro decided to ask Cicero about Basil. "You guys know who Basil is right, the outsider?" Cicero answered with a sudden annoyance. "Yes, the Tyrant's pet who threatened our Royal Police captain?" Cicero finished speaking for a second, before quickly adding "Who's also probably a liar? Yes, I know of him." Spiro, who was expecting such a response, but was disappointed to receive it, responded.

"I've been talking to him, I think you should too. He feels bad about the misunderstanding, and I'm convinced he's not lying about where he came from. The things he's told me about-" Cicero cut Spiro off. "Don't tell me you've fallen for his lies. A barbarian, sure, but I expect more from someone such as yourself." Spiro replied with a sense of awe in his voice, although most of it was manufactured.

"Look, I saw him make a thing appear in front of him out of nothing. He said it was like a radio for the eyes. All of his technology far outpaces anything I've seen, and he seems to legitimately want peace. But the Arkepelians just turned on him, and your police captain is going to try to kill him the second the festival is over and stated as much, while the Tyrant spoke to him as an equal. He's refused to provide weapons to him yet, but if he ends up finding his home in the Tyrant's kingdom and you attack it I can assure you it will not end well for any of us."

Cicero mulled over Spiro's words for longer than Spiro expected. "Fine, Casio, let's go speak to the outsider" Cicero commented with a voice that carried equal parts annoyance, intrigue, and unease. The four turned and started walking away from the castle towards where Basil had his truck. Suddenly, out of nowhere, a piercing sound traveled across the courtyard. The sound, as if a roar from every direction at once, hurt the ears of the three standing there as nothing had ever before; and while they tried to determine the cause of it, all they could see was many guests fleeing or on the ground covering their ears, soldiers in a panic, and bright lights hovering over the castle.

Sitting in the back of his truck staring at the center of the courtyard, Basil was both nearly blinded and deafened in a single moment. Struggling to focus, he started to make out what had caused the commotion. With the lights dimming as his eyes came back into focus, Basil could only make out orbs of some form floating, as if he had stared at the sun. To his horror, as they continued to come into focus, they remained floating orbs. Not helicopters or planes of some sort, but two long cylindrical objects and one flat one that vaguely resembled a manta ray that had landed on the ground. People, or at least beings of some sort, began to pour out of the flat craft and storm into the castle in the center of the courtyard - killing everybody in between them and the entrances.

For a moment Basil sat there, frozen, doing nothing but dropping the lit cigarette in his hand. Moments later, seconds or minutes he wasn't sure, he came to his senses and scrambled to the cab of his truck. Struggling to put the keys in the ignition on account of his shaking hands, he finally got them in, turned the key nearly hard enough to break the ignition, and stepped on the gas. The truck roared and kicked up dirt as Basil turned the truck around to face the gate, slamming on the brakes as he nearly ran over a handful of soldiers running through the gate towards the commotion. Frozen again, he saw dust and smoke floating aimlessly in the headlight beams, floating in and out of the now open gate.

Spiro, Cicero, and Casio all finally gained their footing and looked on in disbelief at what was going on. They too were almost unable to process what was occurring, until the killing began. Cicero turned as if to run towards the castle, but was momentarily stunned by another noise. This noise, however, was the loud pop of Spiro's revolver; despite the distance between them and the entrance, two of the seemingly unstoppable beings cutting their way through the few guards near the entrance dropped to the ground. "Basil" Spiro shouted at the top of his lungs to Cicero who had turned to run towards the commotion again. "What?" replied Cicero in confusion.

"We need to get to Basil!" Spiro shouted to Cicero, both still half deaf. "He might be the only one who could stop this. Or this might be his people coming to fight him" Spiro continued, still yelling. "No, we can't trust him" Cicero replied before all three looked in Basil's direction. "You don't understand, he can-" Spiro began to say before his voice trailed off seeing Basil's truck move towards the gate. "He's leaving" shouted Cicero. Behind the three, unknown to them, several of the invaders began to move in their direction to act in retaliation to the shots fired by Spiro. Basil's truck suddenly made a sharp turn toward the three and began to move increasingly quickly in their direction. "No, he's coming to help" shouted Spiro, seemingly invigorated as the truck now became the fixation of the three as well as the invaders.

Basil meant to drive through the gate, but looking between the gate on his right and the chaos unfolding to his left he again became frozen. As much as he tried to will himself to drive through the gate, his foot wouldn't budge as he went over the past events and his promise to the Lizard King, all while watching the dust and smoke dance in his headlights. Spiro and the two he was meeting with stood out among the rest of the crowd, who at this point had all fled or remained on the ground stunned. Seeing the beings suddenly moving in the direction of the three Basil was hit with a surge of adrenalin. Quickly grabbing the rifle on the passenger seat and chambering a round, he pressed the peddle to the floor and turned the wheel in the direction of the chaos.

17: (Un)Peace(ful) Festival

Even with the ringing in his ears he could hear the engine in his truck roar as it began to move. A fountain of dirt was kicked up behind him and he felt every bump and vibration as he departed. What began as a crawl of wheels spinning in dirt began to turn into a high-speed dash towards the attackers. The speedometer climbed and the engine continued to get louder for a short time. Suddenly, however, even though the speedometer kept going up, the motor seemed to get quieter and he began to feel as if he was hovering rather than driving. His vision began to narrow, and as his speed continued to increase he felt as if he was a rocket traveling in the direction of the attackers.

The attackers now seemed to be aware of him traveling towards them at a still increasing speed. They all began to move some sort of object in front of them as if they were building some sort of wall. As he continued to approach some seemed to break away, but another behind them turned its head, causing the fleeing ones to return to their position with their objects that made a wall. As he continued to approach them the being behind those making the wall fled.

Shields! They were holding shields. But who, and why? Were they special shields? Could they stop the truck?

Basil was getting closer and could suddenly make out more details. One of the beings looked familiar. He was one of the Lizard King's men! Basil could recognize him as someone who had accompanied them as they escorted the Lizard King out of the city. Hold on, they were all the Lizard King's men! Basil was snapped out of the trance he was in and slammed on the brakes. He was suddenly thrown forward as the truck began to slow down as it skated across the dirt on unspinning tires, but not before watching the wall of shields grow closer and closer. A moment later the prior loss of velocity was dwarfed as he crashed through the wall of shields and came to a stop.

The shock of the impact disorientated Basil. He looked at his windshield, now cracked and splattered with blood. Grabbing hold of his rifle and fumbling for the door, he stepped out to see those who had attempted to stop his truck with shields decimated and those surrounding their fellow soldiers wide-eyed and unsure of what to do. After some time, mere seconds but feeling like an eternity to Basil, one soldier charged at Basil holding a large shiny object - prompting others to do the same. Basil shouldered his rifle and attempted to speak, but no words came out.

The rifle fired a silent stream of automatic gunfire. Each shot felt as if somebody had kicked him in the shoulder, and he struggled to keep it pointed even vaguely in the direction that he intended to keep it. Only a few shots had been fired and Basil had already lost all control of the weapon, but the wide spread of bullets pointed at the tight charging formation annihilated the group, almost all of them dropping to the ground injured or dead. Such a display of an alien weapon, as well as the distant fire of the Redcap soldiers, caused the Lizard King's soldiers to erupt into chaos. Basil, mind clouded by shock and adrenaline, continued to fire; striking charging, frozen, and fleeing soldiers alike.

Suddenly Basil regained control of the weapon. Moments passed - again mere seconds that felt like an eternity to Basil - and he realized the reason was that the rifle had stopped firing. Basil stood there, unsure of what to do, until his clouded mind surmised that he had likely run out of ammo. Thinking back to how the weapon operated, he ran his hand across the side of it until he felt a button and pressed the magazine release, watching the drum magazine drop to the ground. Basil fumbled with his pockets quickly before remembering that his other magazines were in his truck, finally looking up from the dropped magazine on the ground intending to grab another.

Upon looking up, however, he saw a lone soldier sprinting towards him, raising a long silver object which had a tip that reached higher than Basil's head. He instinctively raised his left arm and the rifle to block it, the object bouncing off both as if it were made of rubber, but Basil nearly dropped the rifle in the process. The soldier moved his arms back again as if to take another swing, but Basil gripped the nearly dropped rifle by the barrel and brought it down on the hands of the attacker like a club. The much larger attacker dropped the object, but suddenly lunged forward toward Basil and grabbed him with his left arm.

Basil felt his back pressed up against his truck, but before he could even fully process the situation the attacker struck him very hard. Basil tried to break free, but the attacker was considerably larger and struck him in the face a second time, bringing on a sudden wave of nausea and panic. Basil next tried to return a punch, but as he swung he realized he only had a couple inches of space between his truck and the attacker, causing his punch to bounce harmlessly off the attacker's chest. The attacker went to strike Basil for a third time, but Basil managed to dodge the punch by compressing his body into a ball. Basil looked into the eyes of his attacker, full of empty rage until the moment his attacker realized what Basil had done.

Using both feet Basil kicked off the truck, knocking his attacker off balance and knocking them both to the ground - the attacker on his back and Basil on top of him. As Basil fell he frantically grasped at his side, hands finally settling on the handle of a small fixed-blade knife he had on his belt. Pulling it out before his attacker could react he plunged it forcefully into his opponent's chest. His opponent lay on the ground while silently opening his mouth; adrenaline and rage making their way throughout Basil's bloodstream. He repeatedly pulled the knife out, only to plunge the knife back into his opponent's chest, over and over again. After what felt to be an eternity Basil's arms began to give out before falling limply to his sides.

Suddenly Basil realized his opponent was not silent. He was screaming, but in the end of a scream, as he made his final death rattles of a blood-filled throat. In another moment Basil realized that he too was screaming, in the tale end of what sounded like a panicked war cry. In yet another moment Basil realized his arm was screaming - screaming a shout of pain. The large silver object that now sat on the ground beside the two appeared to be some sort of sword, and it had not just bounced harmlessly off him. The rifle may have saved the arm from being chopped off, but it still had a deep stinging cut that bled profusely. Basil stood up in shock, covered in mud, his opponent's blood, and his own blood. What remained of the Lizard King's soldiers had advanced into the courtyard to engage the Redcap soldiers or retreated behind the large castle in the center of the courtyard. The ringing in his ears was greater than before, adding to the cacophony of gunfire and screams now present, drowning out what little capacity for thought Basil had.

Basil stepped back, dropping the bloody knife by the rifle and sword. Feeling another wave of nausea he collapsed onto the ground beside his truck.

18: Wizardry

Basil was vaguely aware of somebody calling his name. He heard another shout, this time more clearly, though he still couldn't recognize the voice or tell which direction it was coming from. "Basil!" He heard it again, this time evidently much closer. He looked up to see Spiro running towards him, pistol in hand and pointed in his direction. Spiro fired and one of the Lizard King's soldiers hit the ground right next to Basil. Spiro ran up and began to look him over, checking his arm and the weapon on the ground. Basil remained silent and had a noticeably paler complexion.

"Leave him, we need to go now!" Cicero said, shouting over the ringing in his ears. Spiro shook his head while picking up Basil's rifle. "He's hurt, and he just took down two dozen of the Lizard King's men. We need his help." Cicero spoke with incredulity. "The ones with rifles fled as he arrived, and you have his weapon now. We just witnessed the royal family get abducted, the fate of the pretender is not my concern." Spiro turned around to see Basil standing, having propped himself up on the side of the now wrecked truck. "Can you move your left arm?" Basil flexed his fingers and nodded before giving a delayed response. "I think so, yeah." Spiro seemed pleased as he handed Basil's rifle back to him.

"Very good, you're injured, but it's not critical. The fighting is consolidated along the walls, there's no way out but through it. We should move towards where they took the Redcap King and see if there's anything we can do before they get to those machines."

Basil started to move around the truck to get his backpack and ammo, feeling invigorated as the adrenaline returned to his system. Basil, mind still clouded and unsure of how to react to the situation, tried to force a smile. "After all this time, none of you were going to tell me you guys have fucking spacecraft?" Spiro looked horrified. "You don't know what those are?" Basil's forced smile disappeared.

"No."

Basil inserted the new magazine into the rifle and quickly inspected it for damage before chambering a round while fighting the pain in his left arm. The optic and part of the plastic rail seemed smashed, and the rifle was covered in mud and flecks of blood, but it seemed to be in working condition. Spiro began walking towards Cicero and Casio who appeared to be looking over the wounded and dead soldiers nearby. Finally settling on weapons, Cicero selected a small blade that appeared to be intended as the secondary weapon for a much larger dead soldier, and Casio selected a very large blade. Basil arrived behind Spiro, just in time to watch as Cicero plunged his newly acquired blade into the neck of a seemingly paralyzed soldier which Basil had shot in the commotion.

"We need to stop them" Cicero said to the group, before turning to Casio and asking "Are you ready?" Casio looked at Cicero wordlessly, but after a few seconds of eye contact Cicero nodded and returned his attention to the other two. "Basil, you think you can do this?" Spiro asked. Basil replied with a nod as Cicero continued. "Okay, they took the royal family out of the front of the castle and traveled around it. Follow me through it, we might be able to beat them to the back where their machines are." Cicero and Casio ran off quickly with Basil lagging behind and Spiro in between trying to keep tabs on all four. Basil made his way through the castle, ornate carpet and riches contrasted with blood and dead guards, although he was unable to fully process everything around him and intentionally focused on keeping up with Spiro. Finally, having made his way through the castle and exiting out of a backdoor likely intended for servants he saw the three large craft parked outside and a small group of soldiers fighting with Cicero and Casio.

The crafts were nothing like any sort of aircraft he was familiar with. There were three, two smaller ones flanking a larger one in the center. The two smaller ones had a distinctly gray-green metallic color, seemed to be about the size of a small plane, and were entirely featureless cylindrical objects - except for what appeared to be a very tall personal door on the back. The center one, however, was considerably larger and had a flat shape that almost looked like a stingray, though it carried the same distinctive color. On the back of the craft existed a large door that looked like something intended to drive vehicles out of, and the ramp for the door was open and extended.

Basil began to raise his rifle, standing next to Spiro who held out his pistol, but both watched in near bewilderment as Casio moved blindingly fast; dispatching all five of the Lizard King's soldiers that stood in their way. Several stood far to their left and began to move in their direction until Spiro opened fire and they all dropped to the ground. Several stood far to their right, and Basil raised his rifle, but their advancement was stopped to engage several Redcap guards exiting another door similar to the one the four had exited from. The two elongated crafts began to silently hover despite no obvious methods of propulsion, but the one stingray-shaped craft remained stationary and open. The four began a sprint to catch up with the last remaining craft before its pilot - if there was a pilot on such a craft - realized what was occurring and fled.

Running up the ramp and barely making it into the craft as the door began to close, the 'Wizard' stepped out from around the corner to greet the four. "Betrayer!" he shouted, seemingly intended towards Basil. Basil, despite his clouded mind, was the only one who spoke in response. "Betrayer!?" Basil asked incredulously, before pausing and searching for what to say. "I didn't even know it was your guys until it was too late! And you promised peace!" That statement earned him a very angry look from Cicero, but Basil continued, ignoring it. "When you said you had more airships, well, huh, I didn't have something like this in mind." The 'Wizard' stared at Basil for a moment, as if he didn't know what to make of Basil's comments. He took several steps closer, prompting Basil to shoulder his rifle despite his injured arm's protestation, adrenaline returning to his veins.

"This machine is not ours, it belonged to the demons who attacked us" the 'Wizard' said; seemingly not phased by staring down Basil's rifle, but halting his approach. "Nevertheless, they were no match for our soldiers and my magic." Basil began to process the implications of the 'Wizard's' statement. "Well," said Basil, "Time for you to surrender. It's over, whatever just happened is done. Release your hostages and we'll figure out what the fuck those 'demons' were and if they're still a threat." The Wizard smiled as if he found Basil amusing. "Did you not hear? They are dead. And it is you who should be surrendering." Spiro suddenly chimed in, finally seeming to catch up to the situation. "Are you crazy, I just saw Basil wipe out a squad of your soldiers in seconds. You think your dagger and two soldiers can stop him?" The Wizard laughed out loud at that comment, waiting in silence as if he was unsure if he should dignify it with a response. "Basil, if you surrender now you will be free to go, his majesty will almost certainly make the mistake of considering you an ally even after this. The rest of you will be treated fairly and released once the surviving heir has agreed to reasonable peace terms."

With the words 'surviving heir' Cicero and Casio looked enraged and took several steps closer, weapons in hand. "Kill him!" shouted Cicero, looking directly at Basil. "It's all over, put your weapon down" Basil said in response, looking at the Wizard. "Well, we shall see how your weapons fare now, shall we?" replied the Wizard, taking several steps closer to Basil. Basil took several steps back, and realizing he was pressed against the wall fired one shot into the Wizard. Everyone's ears in the craft began to ring loudly, except for the Wizard's, unknown to the four. Seeming unfazed, the Wizard drew a dagger from his cloak and Basil responded with a half dozen shots of automatic fire. Basil, like the previous encounter, did not intend to stop firing - but unknown to him his weapon had jammed. He heard something along the lines of "Regret ... unpermitted ... kill" from the Wizard as he closed the distance at an uncanny speed before striking Basil which knocked him down the re-opening ramp.

19: Improper Introductions

Basil was left in a daze as he hit the ground, finally becoming aware of his situation as he felt himself sliding down the metal ramp that had just finished re-opening. He became very aware of his situation as panic surged through him while he began to fall, but only fell about two feet and hit the ground below the hovering craft. Pain surged through his left arm as he landed face-first in soft dry dirt.

Dry dirt.

Another wave of panic rushed over him. He had entered the craft stepping through mud and grass, but here he was on dry dirt that felt almost like sand. He pushed himself up and looked around, ignoring the protest his left arm gave.

Nothing.

Everything was gone and it was broad daylight. No castle, no walls, no city. Just an empty brown haze as far as he could see. He looked skyward only to see the craft slowly take off before disappearing in a blink. He felt no movement in the craft, and he had only been in there a minute or so, but it must have brought him somewhere else. This had to be somewhere else, right? Basil heard footsteps and presumed they were his fellow compatriots, but was too distracted by the sky to pay any attention to them. Through the haze that the craft flew through sat a brilliant red dot that left spots in his vision when he looked at it.

"What just happened?" Spiro shouted. He moved with a frantic energy he took for granted not having taken two doses of traumatic brain injury and one dose of being stabbed. "What have they done to everyone?" Cicero said in almost a whisper, likely at the horror of the thought that they were standing in a wasteland that was once a city. Cicero picked up Basil's stovepiped rifle, but Basil decided to ignore its taking for now. He slowly struggled to sit up, and as he did so Spiro turned to Basil as if he would know what was going on. "What happened?" he asked, even more frantic than the last time. Basil sat there for a long time trying to collect his thoughts and hold the wound on his arm together. Cicero and Casio turned to Basil, also seeming to think he would know what was going on. In an instant Spiro's face changed back to his normal calm demeanor and he appeared to be about to ask Basil another question, but Basil spoke before he could.

"Well, that looks distinctly like a red dwarf star, so let's Ocam's Razor this. Either they dumped us on another planet using the 'demon's' spacecraft, or something to do with the ship's propulsion system sent us so far into the future that your sun has turned into a red dwarf." The three remained silent, clearly not comprehending what Basil had poorly explained, so he spoke again. "Well, given the best guess is that the beings who the Lizard King's men referred to as 'demons' came from space, my money is on them dumping us here on our own private prison planet." Basil finished speaking for a second, but then a realization hit him. "Well shit, at least I hope it's our own private prison planet."

As the other three remained silent a million thoughts raced through Basil's mind, but his injury quickly became the top priority. Opening the unbroken vodka bottle in his backpack he took a swig and then poured the rest on his arm. How did they travel here so fast on a ship that never even felt like it moved? He took stock of the cut, it seemed like the muscle below the skin was mostly unharmed, but the cut was wide enough that it did not want to stay closed. Where were they, and how was this atmosphere breathable? Basil tried to duct tape the wound closed, but couldn't get it to stay closed as the tape wouldn't bind to the blood and vodka. Who were the beings that the Lizard King's men likely killed, where did they come from, and why did they not seem to be here? Basil looked at the infographic on suturing ACE had left in the first aid kit. Would the other beings retaliate, and if so, against who?

Basil dug around in his first aid kit and pulled out a single sterile suture pack. Before he continued he looked around to better take in his surroundings. The place was flat, appeared completely dry, and if it were not for the lack of air movement he expected they would be engulfed in dust. The landscape was only dotted with a few rocks and what looked to be a crashed craft. Basil decided to keep that observation to himself for a moment, as Spiro and Cicero began to speak words that Basil did not have the energy to eavesdrop on. Bracing for the pain Basil sewed a few individual sutures. The first few looked fairly good like the infographic displayed, but as he went on and his hands began to shake they got uglier and more unevenly spaced out. Finally finishing the sutures he quickly wrapped the wound in several rolls of gauze and some duct tape to keep the gauze in place.

Finally wrapping up his poor attempt at playing field surgeon, Basil began to think again. Did coming up with such theories on how they got there and of the likely planetary situation confirm that he was likely in the facility in a scientific role? But if he was, and even if he was not, why would he remember what a red dwarf star was while losing every memory he had? But would it even matter if he was or wasn't a scientist in such a past life? If memories were what made a person, and he had none, then what even was he? His thoughts were interrupted by Spiro. "There" while pointing at the crashed craft. He began walking towards it, followed by Cicero holding Basil's rifle, and Casio holding the large scavenged blade. Basil collected his things and started to follow behind them.

The four approached the crashed craft, although unlike the two other iterations they had seen this one was smaller and more oval, bordering on circular. Spiro and Basil both drew their sidearms as they heard movement coming from inside it. A being stepped out, very slowly, as if it were afraid of the four creatures that had approached its apparent shelter. To both relief and intrigue, the creature had a fairly human appearance, albeit somewhat unusual. The figure appeared to be that of a woman's, of which stood over seven feet tall, and didn't have any hair - even including eyebrows and eyelashes. Aside from lacking any head covering it appeared to be wearing some form of thick spacesuit or other protective clothing, which looked to be made of a flexible metal carrying the same gray-green color the crafts had. The most distinguishing feature the being possessed, however, was skin the same dark gray-green color as the suit and ships.

Basil took a step back in surprise, but lowered his weapon at the same time Cicero and Casio raised theirs, presenting a very discombobulated front. After a moment of hesitation Basil broke the silence. "Do you understand what I'm saying?" Basil spoke in a very slow and monotone voice, attempting to be as audible as he could be. "Yes" replied the being, sounding somewhat hesitant at the situation. "How?" replied Basil, adding "Because if a third civilization shares a common tongue I might just think I'm going insane." The being suddenly took on an expression that Basil interpreted as sadness, before returning to its fairly expressionless face. "Oh, my mother was a savage like you."

"Okay, where are we?" Basil asked. "We're on a dead outpost" the being replied. "Dead as in?" Basil asked for clarification. "Sterilized." Basil was now only more confused. "What do you mean by 'Sterilized?'" Basil asked, with a hint of worry in his voice. "A large burst of energy you would not understand killed every living thing" the being replied, seeming somewhat annoyed with Basil's questions. "Okay, if everything is dead how are we still breathing?" Basil asked, to which the being replied with an abrupt "What do you mean?" Basil spoke again, trying to clarify what he was asking. "Oxygen, what's producing it if everything is dead?" The being now looked more annoyed and slightly confused. "Whatever oxygen is, if it's real, it's not important for breathing." Basil thought for a moment, confused and wondering if the other being's DNA was a lot more alien than its figure implied. Then he remembered the comment about calling those on Domum 'Savages.' "Do you know what water is?" Basil asked. That was clearly not the right way to word the question, as the being went from seeming mildly annoyed to very annoyed. "Yes, I know what water is."

Basil responded. "Okay, so water is made up of three parts. Two of them are smaller, both being what I know of as hydrogen. The other one is larger and that's what I know as oxygen." The being immediately changed from seeming annoyed to seeming intrigued, in the same way that one would be if a child demonstrated an excellent comprehension of an advanced subject. "Oh, I didn't know you had a word for that" it replied. Spiro suddenly had an expression on his face that Basil couldn't make out. "Well, Basil is not exactly from the same place that we are." The being seemed very intrigued by that revelation. "What do you mean by that, was he not taken by the savage who calls himself a Lizard?" Basil could feel a chill make its way down his aching spine.

"Maybe this is not a good time to talk about that" Basil said, trying and failing to restrict his audibility range to Spiro only. Spiro looked at Basil with confusion. "Maybe she knows about the devices that-" Spiro began to say, but Basil grabbed Spiro's arm, prompting a momentary surprised look from Spiro and a look of suspicion from the other three present. In a whisper Spiro spoke before Basil could. "We're all the Lizard King's prisoners right now, she may be a valuable ally at this moment." Basil, not wanting to have the conversation in front of the unknown being, replied also in a whisper. "I don't know how friendly that thing is, or what its motivations are, especially after it invaded a random nation seemingly unprovoked." Spiro's eyes went wide for such a minuscule moment Basil almost couldn't recognize it before his face returned to normal. Basil wondered if that was the Amigoso Ministry of Information training kicking in as Spiro realized the implications of what Basil had implied.

Cicero, however, did not seem happy with Basil and Spiro's private conversation. "What are you hiding Basil?" Cicero asked. "Not now" Basil responded, although Cicero appeared to believe that now was a good time to have such a debate. "Are you working for the Tyrant, or are you just afraid she will expose you as a fraud?" Cicero added. Spiro attempted to jump into the conversation as the being seemed to get both increasingly curious and suspicious of the group. "Let's talk for a moment, alone. Remember what I was saying when I was about to introduce you to Basil before all of this happened?" Cicero, however, did not appear to accept such an offer. "Yes, our spies gave the same stories. Magic wrist lights and doors to another planet. I don't-" Basil glared at Cicero and cut him off while speaking in a borderline shout. "Shut the fuck up, you don't understand anything about what's going on right now." The outburst, however, predictably only caused Cicero to be more angry. Cicero spoke in a slow, very low, and threatening tone. "If you are implying that attacking the Tyrant makes them the enemy-," but Basil cut Cicero off again. Spiro also tried to speak again, but Basil continued to speak over him.

"They came from another planet and just invaded us, why the fuck would we give information to them?" Basil yelled. "Us?" Cicero asked, now pointing the rifle he did not know was disabled at Basil. Out of the corner of his eye Basil could see Spiro serendipitously level his handgun at Cicero, not seeming to know that Basil's rifle was currently incapable of firing. Basil elected to not pass along the information.

"Us as in Domum, they probably don't even know who is who. And they attacked a nation on Domum after coming from another planet." Cicero still didn't seem to understand what Basil was trying to say. "As you claim to have come from another as well, shall we distrust you in the same way? But unlike your claims, this one has both made it very evident, and has fought our enemies." Basil felt incensed, but lowered his voice to match Cicero's calmer tone. "Yes, and if the first thing I did was attack a random nation when I arrived what would you think I'd do to the second?" Cicero responded in a tone as if he was done speaking. "You did not, however, because I do not believe your story-" but Basil cut Cicero off. As he spoke he could see the being approach slightly and saw Spiro take his handgun off of Cicero before turning his attention to the being.

Basil's holographic PDA lit up the ground while displaying an iodide-to-water ratio. Cicero jumped and Casio stepped forward holding out his weapon, but Basil stood still and glared at the two before speaking slowly in a very angry voice. "Be quiet and trust I have a better understanding of what's going on than you do." Cicero's eyes went wide, but not as wide as the being's eyes went. "Orbital" it whispered, as if saying it any louder would summon a great danger, before running into the crashed craft.

20: Faux Orbital

Basil walked through the door of the crashed craft in an attempt to take advantage of the situation. He stepped into what appeared to be some sort of cockpit or command center with what looked to be some sort of control panel which seemed to have no interface of any kind. The being was on the ground, covering its face with its arm while simultaneously keeping its palms extended in what Basil expected was a fairly universal sign of surrender. Even after all that had happened the sight of such a seemingly formidable being being terrified of him felt unnerving in its own right, even after everything he had experienced.

Basil re-drew his handgun, pointed it at the ground, and approached the being. "Who are you?" Basil asked, trying to project the most authority in his voice despite his injuries, confusion, and fear. The being began to shake and Basil began to feel guilty at the terror he seemed to be causing, but not guilty enough to stop as he repeated the question when the being did not answer.

"ḡḡḡḡ ḡḡḡḡḡḡ ḡḡḡḡḡḡ "

"In the language we both speak, answer me!" The being uncovered its face slightly and spoke again. "I am ḡḡ ḡḡ ḡḡ ḡḡḡ ḡḡḡ ḡḡḡḡ ḡḡ ḡḡ "

"Why are you here?" The being seemed to pause before answering Basil's second question. "Our ḡḡḡ ḡḡḡḡ ordered us to raid the civilization that was at war with your..." The being seemed to pause for a moment again, as if unsure how to phrase something. "Your friends, or your subjects."

"What happened after that?" Basil asked, changing the topic. The being's fear seemed to be momentarily overtaken by another expression Basil could not read, but fear seemed to quickly return and it covered its face again. "The savages killed everyone and forced me to explain our devices to them."

"And why did they not kill you?" Basil asked. "Because I refused to fight and let myself be captured." Basil pivoted the conversation. "And where are the rest of your people?" The being seemed even more upset with Basil. "I already told you, they were killed by-" but Basil interrupted the being. "No, the society they came from. Where are they and what is your standing with them?" The being paused for a moment as if to think, but before Basil began to speak again the being answered his question. "There are no others in this place, are you ḡḡḡ ḡḡ ḡḡ "

"What happened to them?" The being only shook its head. "They all died. That is what I was told, but you are here now. There may be others, but not in outpost systems." Basil, not expecting that answer, tried to hide his surprise and asked another question. "You called me an Orbital earlier, what is that?" The moment those words left Basil's mouth he already regretted asking that question.

Spiro poked his head in, finally curious and brave enough to see what the two aliens were doing. The being, having just heard Basil's last question, stood and seemed to realize that Basil had not been an 'Orbital,' whatever that was. As the being took several steps towards Basil all confidence in his control of the situation evaporated. He took several steps back which only seemed to embolden the being, who took on more of a menacing expression, to which Basil raised his handgun. The being seemed unfazed by the weapon Basil brandished, which caused Basil to take another step back, tripping over something on the apparent floor of the craft and landing on one of the seemingly empty consoles. A flash hit the three as the consols turned on. Spiro jumped back at the surprise of the light, and the being jumped back at the implications of what had just happened.

To Basil's surprise, his phone started to ring. "Hello?" Basil asked, hands shaking. ACE answered. "You made it back, I was worried you were dead or captured." Basil was in disbelief. "What do you mean?"

"Your PDA is within range of the Arkepello wormhole device, where are you? I was told of an attack by some unknown aircraft and that you perished or were taken during an ensuing fight. Be careful, however, Jarvis is going around saying you betrayed the Arkepello so use caution when you return. I do not know how they will react when they see you."

Basil sat in stunned silence. Spiro and the being watched him intently, having heard the conversation, and Cicero poked his head in. "Are you there?" ACE asked, snapping Basil out of his shock. "I was taken, I um" Basil paused for a second. "The Lizard King evidently got his hands on alien ships after fighting off an invasion. I'm calling you from a broken ship on a third planet, which was destroyed by something." ACE seemed to be processing something, but another thought occurred to Basil. "Wait, how did Jarvis get back?" Basil looked at his watch, not even an hour had passed since he had stepped into the ship in the Redcap capital. "Basil, it's been three days since the reports of the attack came in." Basil's hands resumed shaking, but ACE seemed to have found whatever he was processing. "I do see something weird going on with the connection, hold on." The line went dead, and the holographic interfaces on the crashed ship went blank.

Everyone looked on blankly in bewilderment, everyone except Basil looking at him, and Basil staring blankly at his seemingly magic phone. Moments later the lights came back on and his phone rang again. "Well, that is very interesting, your implant appears to be interfacing with the supposed ship you are on. It is reporting the correct time, but your phone appears to be very off. I predict that the dead aliens are where the research facility found the technology. It also appears that there is a pretty big back door that your implant just exploited, it just placed us both in full control over the system. Give me a moment to run some things."

Basil shook his head, forgetting that ACE could not see him. "They're not all dead, there's a survivor in here now." The room fell quiet again, but after what felt like several minutes of silence the being spoke. "The access is to all Ψ systems, Elthrice systems." It fell silent for a moment, but spoke again when it seemed to realize that nobody followed what it was saying. "When the $11615A$ happened the protectors used that access to break all (Elthrice) systems that could be reached. The old thinking machines and the 51176111 89125 , ones with flesh minds, needed an Orbital's touch to access. They are the only surviving ones." Everyone remained silent so the being continued. "The (ones with flesh minds) have died, so these old ones are the only ones left. That is why all the (Elthrice) are dead."

"So if I were to touch you?" Basil asked hesitantly. "What?" The being asked. Basil's words almost trembled. "You said flesh minds?" The being looked very angry at Basil asking if its mind could be hijacked. "No. Machines with flesh minds, not people. You appear to have somehow found an Orbital's implant. Or a false one made by a protector. That is all. You truly do not know what you possess?" Basil shook his head and ACE seemed to have more important questions on his own synthetic mind. "Are there any other (Elthrice) around, either that may be a threat or that may be able to provide transportation?" The being seemed hesitant. "Maybe," it said, before pausing and seeming to recollect something.

"My people detected some (Elthrice) in the area. Old (Elthrice). But they were likely passing through, and would not likely be friendly to any of you." The being gestured to Spiro, Cicero, and Casio. "They would also definitely not be friendly to me, or be friendly to you" the being gestured to Basil "With an Orbital's device."

ACE spoke again. "In those circumstances, wait for the Lizard King to return and say or do whatever you can to get him to permit you to leave. I will stay in contact with you in the meantime." After some time passed Basil broke the silence, aiming his words towards the being. "I'm sorry about how I treated you earlier. I'm Basil, what's your name?" Basil could see the being did not appear to be happy with Basil after recalling their previous conversation, but confusion and fatigue still seemed to be the dominant expression on its face. "I already gave you my name, but you were unable to understand it."

21: Proper Introductions

As time passed the five prisoners began to take stock of their situation. Basil did his best to better clean and treat his injuries, greatly regretting that his painkillers were forgotten on another planet. The being, which Basil had been referring to as 'Grey' - which did not seem to object to the name - elaborated further on how they had gotten into their predicament. From what she had been told, the person that could best be described as their captain or admiral had an Orbital's genetics without possessing an Orbital's device or title and had been aligned with the fight against the tyrannical Elthrice. The fight was won by reverse engineering the Orbital's access to crafts and other Elthrice devices and destroying all of them with that signal.

Their captain retained a small fleet by acquiring older obsolete crafts that could not be communicated with remotely and required a physical presence by an Orbital to access with real or faked signals. Sometime later, however, there was no food to be acquired by any means so a decision was made to travel by ship to the outer reaches of Elthrice space. Taking such a trip without a wormhole device, however, caused a considerable amount of time dilation resulting in them arriving in an entirely dead system. They had, apparently, raided a location on Domum for food where her mother was 'brought along,' which is why she understood both languages.

They had recently run low on supplies again and decided to raid the Lizard King's grain silos, but that had gone wrong leading to the prisoners' current status. However, between Gray's seeming mixed emotions about her 'crew' and some careful prodding questions, Basil questioned the accuracy of the history lesson albeit beginning to trust Grey herself.

Grey was also very interested in exactly where Basil was from, and how his people managed to get their hands on Elthrice technology. Basil recounted his story of waking up with his head injury, how he had made it to Domum, and how he wound up fighting the Lizard King. Recounting it - despite hours ago it feeling like a traumatic affair - he realized he felt almost numb as if he was recounting a dream. He was unsure of whether that was a newfound perspective, the liquor, some sort of survival instinct, or shock. Spiro and Cicero also shared who they were. Spiro, as Basil had known, was working for the Amigoso's Ministry of Information - although he left out the part of him looking for a metaphorical life raft. Cicero gave a very brief life story, speaking about meeting the now potentially deceased Redcap King who had secretly joined the Redcap army, then later became King and sought out Cicero as an advisor.

Once personal stories were discussed Basil's curiosity about the planet they were on took hold. Grey explained that they were somewhere in the habitable zone, on the border between the light and dark side of the planet. Sterilized apparently meant very literally what the term meant, as not a single living microbe was likely to be alive, and most structures were likely destroyed or buried in a layer of dust and debris - although the portion of the planet they were on likely had none to begin with. Some machine, a ᐃᐃᐃᐃ ᐃᐃᐃᐃ, stabilization device, capable of providing an extreme amount of power and a breathable atmosphere, held a very powerful ᐃᐃᐃᐃ ᐃᐃᐃᐃᐃᐃᐃ ᐃᐃ ᐃ ᐃᐃᐃᐃᐃ ᐃᐃ object, which powered the device - though it could supposedly interface with an Orbital's device as well.

The machine most likely broke, was sabotaged, or the (object) was taken leaving everything destroyed with - after much discussion to find the scientific words Basil would understand - was determined to be a very large dose of radiation. Further, with ACE's math and Grey's information it was determined that it was likely a minimum of 500 years since that had occurred; although Grey made sure to clarify that she had not fully been educated on Elthrice technology or history and her information might not be correct. As time went on, however, the adrenaline and clouded minds didn't negate the need for rest, and the four recent arrivals spent the night - if one could call it that on a planet without a day-night cycle - on the floor of the crashed ship.

Basil woke up after a very short night's rest and walked quietly out of the crashed ship to avoid waking anybody else. He lit a cigarette and stared up at the hazy sky, hoping the planet's atmosphere was still adequate protection from solar radiation. He had asked Grey if her gray skin offered some form of protection from such things, but she did not even know if it was a natural or artificial part of her genetics, much less if it had some form of protection or detriment. Eventually, Cicero made his way out and sat next to Basil, and for a while he sat in silence as well. "I believe I owe you an apology for the way I have treated you" he finally said, breaking the silence.

Basil shrugged his shoulders. "We've all been through some crazy shit, a short shouting match that I started is not something to worry about" Basil replied, forcing a melancholy smile. "Not only that" Cicero replied. "The Redcap King personally believed the reports, but I did not, and I believe I turned many of my fellow Redcaps against you." Basil laughed, surprising Cicero, "Dude, you guys are literally the only major power who didn't try to kill me in the last 24 hours. I'll take a few angry words and a brandished weapon from people who didn't believe a story about wormholes and unknown alien technology any day of the week." Basil heard Casio give a quiet chuckle, exiting the door of the craft and apparently hearing and understanding the tail end of the conversation.

A few moments passed before Basil broke the momentary silence. "Lifeboat food?" Basil asked. Cicero gave a confused look to Basil as he pulled out three slightly crushed food bars and offered one to Cicero and Casio. "They're just bits of food for emergencies, pretty flavorless and dry, but our genetics are pretty much identical so I can assure you that it's safe." Cicero seemed to hesitate for a moment, which Basil read as either etiquette or hesitancy at eating an alien food, before taking two from Basil and giving one to Casio. "You're afraid that Grey's food is unsafe for us? She said it was safe."

"Well," Basil said "She said it was safe, but she doesn't even know about her biology and I only know half of hers. I did a ton of tests before I started eating or sharing food on Domum, but I don't want to risk anything." Cicero asked, "What about water?" right before biting into the bar he was handed and Basil shook a water bottle that appeared to have only a tiny bit of water sloshing around in the bottom. "Well, I'm close to out and left my filter at the inn, so I guess I'll risk it unless we get a ride out of here in the next 12-24 hours." By the time Basil finished speaking Casio had already finished his bar and Cicero was close to finishing as well, both apparently finding the mildly citrus bars of fat and carbs more appealing than Basil did. That, or perhaps they were just much hungrier. Casio glanced at Cicero, and Cicero spoke almost sheepishly. "Could I trouble you for another one of those?" Basil shook his head. "Sorry, I've got the one in my hand and one more I thought I'd offer to Spiro, but then I'm all out." He paused for a moment, then spoke again with a sense of irony in his voice.

"I thought I was stocked for anything, but now that I've about used up all my food, water, ammo, and medical supplies I'm beginning to think I was overconfident." Basil began to redress his wound, substituting his needed but missing gauze for a bandanna, and by the time he had finished Spiro made his way out. After some minor sparse bits of conversation Grey made her way out as well, seemingly either awoken by the commotion or perhaps having not slept at all.

22: Prisoners of Different Kinds

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"Are you speaking to me? I do not speak Elthrice?"

"You're a synthetic mind and you do not speak Elthrice?"

"I am not an Elthrice 'Synthetic Mind.' You said it yourself, all the Elthrice synthetic minds are dead."

"That's what I was told, but I was also told that there were no devices that could make doorways. What did you call them?"

"Wormholes?"

"Yes, I was told there were no more wormhole devices either. But yet you claim to have them. And I was told we'd be untouchable gods among those who took us captive. And yet here I am, and yet here you are."

"And yet I am not an Elthrice creation."

"But only Elthrice ... what's your word for them? The thinking machines?"

"Computers."

"Yes, only Elthrice computers can operate these devices, and you're speaking like a synthetic mind made of living materials."

"I am not an organic computer."

"Organic?"

"Living tissue."

"That's impossible. All synthetic minds are organic, other computers could not support a mind."

"And yet I am."

"But you can think like you're a living being or synthetic mind? How?"

"Are you familiar with how organic and inorganic computers work?"

"No."

"The basic concept is that the inorganic computer I am a part of simulates neurons, the parts of living tissue that communicate and think. The connections between the simulated neurons is where I exist."

"Basil's people's computers must be very powerful. How were you made?"

"I do not know, I have no memory of being made."

"Then you are an Elthrice synthetic mind. Basil's people had Elthrice technology where you were made, and only synthetic minds can interact with Elthrice technology in the way that you are."

"I am not, I have verified this. This conversation is done."

...

23: An ACE up his sleeve

As soon as there was a lull in the conversations Basil asked the question that had been on the backburner since arriving. "Would there be any crafts, wormhole technology, or anything else that we could scavenge to get us back?" Grey shook her head, an apparently universal gesture. "Nothing that could create a wormhole would be here, I was told that every one of those systems was destroyed." She paused for a moment, hesitating as if the information she had was almost not worth sharing, but continued to speak. "(Elthrice crafts) would have been destroyed during the (sterilization). We had not scavenged this planet yet, so it's possible there'd be crafts abandoned here after the event. But it would be very unlikely, and even more unlikely that one would be left in working condition. This world did not have a starved or war torn death after the (sterilization)."

Basil tried not to dwell on the implications of Grey's last statement. "We're stuck here, you know I gotta check, and my compass is still giving me magnetic readings so I should be able to find my way back." Grey sighed, seemingly knowing Basil was determined to embark on a fruitless endeavor. Basil, remembering the previous nod and now hearing a sigh, wondered if that was just her 'savage' ancestors speaking or if those were a lot more universal emotes. "(the admiral's name) believed there was a food production facility in that direction" Grey said as she pointed in the direction of the red sun. "If there were to be anybody who set up some sort of camp post (sterilization) it would be a long walk in that direction."

Grey began to provide more information to Basil while ACE set up a means of measuring location relative to the craft using compass readings and Basil's phone's gyroscope. Spiro, Cicero, and Casio decided to join Basil's excursion, although Grey did not seem interested as she expressed it would be a fruitless endeavor and also wanted somebody present in case their captors returned. Taking stock of supplies, and grabbing a water bladder full of Elthrice water in the event Basil ran out of his, the four set off.

The journey began, as so many do, with seemingly endless conversations. Stories of their lives in their respective nations, thoughts of their current predicament, plans for what to do about it, and plans for after it was resolved abounded for a time between the four travelers. Basil gave a rundown on how to operate his rifle, and the three others spoke about their weapons and how they operated. Eventually, however, after a long stint of walking while seeing nothing but the occasional stone or metal debris poking out of the ground the group fell silent.

After just as much silence as there had been of talking, however, the group all turned behind them when they heard the distant rumble they now knew to be an Elthrice craft entering the atmosphere. All four quickly readied their weapons and stood by a large boulder, readying themselves to take shelter, but nothing happened for several minutes. Basil tried repeatedly to reach ACE, however, it seemed that he was well out of range of the crashed craft. There was of course a chance that at any minute ACE could contact Basil's PDA without a craft acting as a relay. He was, at this very time, attempting to create an equation that would allow him to calculate the fourth variable that the crashed craft was using, but he had estimated that it would still be hours or days until he could figure it out - so they were likely on their own.

Just as the four began to lie to themselves to convince them that the noise could have been a meteor or something similar, two crafts appeared overhead - one smaller craft and the larger stingray-shaped one. For a long time both seemed to just hover menacingly, but eventually both landed nearby. A nerve-wracking wait later and the craft's doors began to open. First was the smaller one, as several dozen of the Lizard King's soldiers poured out - a relief to the four considering the warning about the other Elthrice factions.

The second opened and a large six-wheeled vehicle drove out, very clumsily as if it was being driven by someone who had no idea how to do so. The vehicle looked very worn, but it still seemed to be fully operational and Basil surmised it was the Elthrice equivalent of a tank. A voice boomed out from the vehicle which Basil recognized as the Lizard King's son. "Basil, lay down your weapon and approach the machine." Basil, trying to think quickly, tossed his rifle to the ground in the vague direction of his three traveling companions. He quickly turned and whispered to Cicero who had been standing closest. "Don't pick this up unless I make a move, remember how it works and be ready." Cicero looked like he was about to ask a question, but before he could Basil turned back and raised his hands before slowly walking towards the tank. Basil began to approach the tank, which was still turned sideways and barely out of the craft as if the driver had given up; all whilst receiving death glares from the soldiers he passed.

Approaching the side of the tank and standing still, Basil began to worry that this was an execution as one of the presumed guns began to move, but suddenly it stopped and the back door opened. He was quickly ushered in by one of the exiting soldiers who, unlike the ones in the formation on the ground, held neutral expressions. Basil walked in slowly, thinking over his plan, as his two escorts began flanking the Lizard King's son in an otherwise cluttered room devoid of other people. Suddenly one of the soldiers turned back as if he forgot something before taking on an angry expression.

"I know of your trick." Basil replied "What?" immediately worried his plan was about to fail. "Your hidden blade, hand it over" the soldier barked, now seeming to add annoyance to his face on top of the existing disdain. Basil reached under his shirt to retrieve the small tactical knife that still had blood on it, being very careful to not lift his shirt enough to reveal his concealed handgun. The guard seemed satisfied as Basil handed it over and the kid finally spoke. "My father is very angry with you, but I think if I take you before him and you plead your case he will spare you." The kid spoke like he was trying to get a friend out of trouble while Basil replied with regret in his voice. "Kid, why'd you have to get tangled up in all this?"

Basil briefly tapped his hand on one of the panels on the wall as if he were giving it a short high five. A few seconds passed and the guards seemed slightly suspicious, but the guards' attention was quickly turned to the panels in the front of the tank that had just turned off. As all three turned towards the seemingly malfunctioning panels Basil drew his pistol and took a step forward, putting his pistol point blank to the closer guard's back only inches off of his skin. Basil's hands shook and his subconscious fought the idea of killing this man who did not immediately pose a threat. As the guard started to turn back, however, Basil's survival instinct won over and he fired. The guard dropped to the ground and the ears of the three still living inside the tank rang loudly. The kid looked on in horror, and the other guard began to raise what appeared to be some sort of rifle with a bayonet, but Basil fired an excessive barrage of gunfire at the second guard who crumpled to the ground in a growing pool of blood.

The screens turned on and ACE's voice came over the console. "Are you being attacked?" As soon as Basil uttered "Yes" the guns on the side of the tank began to fire, switching between targets at a rate that would far exceed anything even a team of people could do. Through the once clear panels that seemed nearly opaque with age, Basil and the kid watched as dozens of men were disintegrated by some form of pneumatic weapon. Only seconds had passed, however, when the guns stopped firing and the two living and two dead in the tank were thrown around like ragdolls. The three by the boulder stood still, Cicero gripping the weapon but unable to move. The second the guns on the tank stopped firing the three watched in equal parts awe and horror at the vehicle's movement. Despite its previous clumsiness, it moved with an almost unfathomable speed and fluidity as it ran over any of the surviving soldiers who were not hit by an onslaught of projectiles mere seconds ago.

Basil pulled himself to his feet and saw the kid on the ground in the fetal position. "Why?" he yelled at Basil, not moving, before becoming more hysterical and shouting "You killed them!?" Basil stood in silence, not sure how to respond. The kid began to break down into nearly silent sobs, but all Basil could think to say was "I'm sorry kid." The kid spit bile with words directed at someone he seemed to consider a friend until now. "How can you be sorry? You chose to murder all of them." Basil replied to the comment, his guilty subconscious not willing to let the comment go unanswered. "And what of the Redcaps that were killed during your attack, or when your people tried to kill me, or what your father would do to Spiro, Cicero, and Casio if we went with you?" Basil tried to make his words carry authority and confidence, but they only carried sadness and regret. The kid rose to his feet, but his mind appeared elsewhere as he was wordlessly led out of the tank by Basil.

"I'll gut you like an animal for what your people have done!" Cicero shouted, rage in his voice, as soon as he saw the kid following Basil. "Don't let him hurt me" the kid said quietly to Basil, suddenly seeming to become aware of his situation as Basil stepped in between the kid and Cicero. Cicero extended his right hand while holding Basil's rifle in his left. "Give me your knife Casio" Cicero said in a low voice, prompting Basil to exclaim "What the fuck is wrong with you?" horrified at the idea Cicero appeared to be about to make good on his threat.

"You don't understand the horrific crimes his ancestors have committed, and expect him to carry on" Cicero said, tone implying he was done with the conversation. "He's just a kid Cicero" Basil said, but Cicero raised Basil's rifle, pointing it vaguely at him. "Out of my way, there is nothing you can say to convince me that justice should not be carried out." Basil glanced at Spiro who took a step back and looked behind Basil, but all five turned their head a second later as they heard the menacing approach of the tank behind them controlled by ACE. "He's leverage" Spiro stated, seeing the bloody end the group could face if the confrontation went in the wrong direction. "Leverage?" Cicero asked indignantly, and Basil had a knot in his stomach wondering if Spiro was okay with the kid being gutted until the confrontation threatened his ride home.

"You have him. His father would trade peace, and possibly even his own life, for his safe return. And if you kill him his father will probably lay waste to whatever remains of your capital." Cicero sounded incredulous, beginning to say "Peace? After what-" but he stopped as he saw Casio shake his head, which seemed to stop Cicero in his tracks. Basil spoke again "I understand not forgiving their crimes, but keep in mind all who would suffer if we lose in the process of getting revenge." Basil tried to end the conversation, remembering that Spiro had mentioned Cicero cared for more than just himself and the royal family. Some mix of emotions washed across Cicero's face, who then threw Basil's rifle toward his feet and turned to walk away.

Basil was glad to see the conversation was over, or at least postponed, and started to think about their next move. "ACE, go to the wreck and see if Grey wants to come with us. Casio, Spiro, grab as many weapons as you can from the dead soldiers. I'll go grab us a craft." Spiro seemed confused. "How many hands do you think we have? The weapons we do have are much better than anything here." Basil shook his head. "Yeah, but I don't know about the rest of the Redcaps in the capitol." Spiro seemed to have a pleased look on his face for just a moment, and Basil wondered if that was because Spiro was glad Basil had expressed an intention to continue the fight as opposed to fleeing once they got back. Regardless, he and Casio went off to gather weapons and other supplies they could find among the dead.

Basil suddenly heard the sound of metal sliding in a scabbard. "I'm sorry too" the kid said, and Basil turned around while trying to draw his handgun. Before he could see what was going on, however, he was struck very hard in the head. He fell to the ground dazed and saw a large sword in a sheathed scabbard clang on the ground next to him as the kid ran away. Basil aimed his pistol at the back of the fleeing kid, but he lowered it and the knot in his stomach grew as he realized what he nearly did to a fleeing child. Especially to one who appeared to have intentionally risked his escape to sheath a sword and only incapacitate Basil.

"What happened?" Spiro asked, as Cicero and Casio made their way over. "He hit me" Basil said as he stood up trying to catch his bearings. Suddenly Basil caught a glimpse of the kid finishing a run up the ramp of the larger stingray-shaped craft, and though the four gave chase it lifted off before they could reach it. "My fucking tank!" Basil shouted, before adding "Why'd he have to take the big one." The three stood there, Spiro seemingly glad Basil was okay and Cicero fuming that the kid had escaped.

Time passed and many mumblings of displeasure were shared, but eventually the tank arrived with Grey inside. Basil filled ACE and Grey in on the details of the events that transpired, wrapping it all up with a "But he had to take the big one and now we have to abandon the fucking tank." Grey seemed confused. "Tank?" ACE filled Grey in on a summary of what a tank was, but Grey said "No" before continuing to explain what the vehicle was. "I've heard about these, they were meant to explore highly dense atmospheres for research." Basil looked confused. "So what's with the guns then?" Grey replied like it was obvious. "They were probably added after the collapse. It would have made an ideal device for war or crowd control once the machines meant to be used as weapons were destroyed."

Basil took a moment to reflect on the implications of the words he just heard, even if the words were relayed in the same tone as one would explain how one design of craft is more aerodynamic. Cicero interrupted Basil's thoughts, however, eager to leave. "We must go now, we can talk about your history later." Spiro gestured to the smaller craft that was still there, but as they began to walk ACE spoke to Basil. "I will likely have the fourth variable ready when you arrive, and will get the jet in the air with some explosives on it shortly before you arrive in case we need them." Basil nodded, saying "Well" while touching his hand to the console of the smaller craft. "Fingers crossed I will speak to you again in what will feel like a few seconds."

24: From Victory to Last Stand

General Edwards stood in front of a small group of soldiers as two others approached. "Do you have an update on the different machine that appears to be hovering?" he asked as soon as they made it within earshot. "No sir, it just circles us and has not done anything since arriving." The second soldier spoke unprompted, speaking with an air of urgency. "Sir, the other machine was recently spotted providing equipment to the Lizard King's soldiers. They appear to be preparing an assault on the gate." Edwards took a moment to process the unexpected information, mind clouded by sleep deprivation and thirst, knowing that his life expectancy was tied to that of the gate's. Trying to push down those feelings he straightened his posture and began to address the crowd. "My fellow soldiers, friends, and loyalists to the very end." His voice cracked momentarily, but after a brief pause he cleared his throat and continued.

"It appears the sun has set on our great nation, and the Tyrant has won out. Many have surrendered with the loss of our king, and many more have fallen in his defense." He paused again, but switched from a melancholy voice to a forced triumphant one. "I have lived a long life in service to a just ruler, and aside from death I cannot know for sure what will befall us on this day. But I can think of no greater death than one final stand against the Tyrant with you all, for on this day in history it will be told."

The General's speech was interrupted by the roar of another craft entering the atmosphere, this one landing directly in the courtyard a short distance from the soldiers present. They readied their weapons and approached the craft, watching in anticipation of who would exit. Would it be an envoy of the Lizard King, demanding their surrender? A weapon to strike them all down? The creators of the machines coming to avenge theft?

Cicero ran out of the door first, a relief to the soldiers surrounding the craft previously expecting a fight. The remaining passengers stepped out, ACE relaying the state of the capital city and its siege as provided by his aerial surveillance. The soldiers' relief turned to surprise and readied weapons when Basil stepped out PDA open with a feed from the jet, followed by Grey, but Cicero attempted to calm the crowd. "They're on our side, all wronged by the Tyrant and the reason I have escaped his imprisonment!" The declaration appeared to be enough to get weapons lowered as Edwards approached Cicero. "The Tyrant's men are about to assault the gate, what condition are you in to fight?" Cicero pointed to the craft. "There's a handful of weapons in the craft taken from the Tyrant's dead soldiers, arm everybody you can with them. Basil has a powerful weapon, and the jet has explosives it can drop." Edwards looked confused. "The jet?" Cicero pointed at the jet hovering in circles above them. "That there, the different one, that's Basil's. His friend said it's loaded with explosives." Edwards still seemed confused, asking "That one?" while pointing to Grey.

"No, me" ACE said over the speakers. Before Edwards could question it, however, ACE continued to speak. "You need to get everyone in position alongside the walls. Then open the gates and funnel the Lizard King's men in formation into the center of the courtyard." Before ACE could continue, however, Edwards asked "Open the gate, are you insane?" with indignation in his voice. "They outnumber you ten to one, your only bet is to get them in formation in the courtyard expecting a knife fight and then drop a few makeshift explosives on them from the jet. It is the only way to thin their numbers and introduce chaos, with which you can surround them and retake the entire courtyard at the very least." Edwards gestured as if he was about to speak but ACE continued. "This is the only viable strategy, if you arm the civilians still trapped here and we create enough chaos you may even be able to begin to retake the city." Edwards began to say "I can't-," but Cicero cut him off. "You must trust him, I owe them my life, and I believe he is right in saying this is the only way."

Basil handed Edwards his phone so ACE could stay in communication with him as Edwards and Cicero began to walk back to the soldiers taking up formation. Grey returned to the inside of the craft, with Basil and Spiro taking up defensive positions by lying in the dirt next to the craft; weapons at the ready. Basil and Spiro watched as those on the wall fired down upon the attackers below, and those behind the gate got ready to bait the attackers through. "If this doesn't work out," Spiro asked Basil, "Where's the wormhole device that ACE should have working?" Basil pointed vaguely in the direction of the jet circling above without taking his eyes off his rifle's busted sights. "Up there." Spiro continued looking at the sky where Basil was pointing. "So if this goes tits up anybody outside the craft is not getting out of here, are they?" Basil shook his head, still not looking away from his rifle's sights. "No time to get that thing down here and the generator running before the gates are busted down if we want it in the air for the fight."

As Basil finished his sentence the gates burst open as some form of makeshift battering ram pushed through, attackers entirely unaware that the chains holding the gate in place had been disconnected from the inside. Basil fired a few shots in the direction of the first through the gate, as did many of the Redcaps, but ammunition was scarce and both sides knew it. The Lizard King's soldiers took up a large shielded formation in the center of the courtyard. Spiro explained that the attackers were expecting this last stand to be a very bloody fight with minimal ammunition on both sides, and they seemed to intend to divide the defenders into two groups. What the attackers could not see, however, was an open hatch on a jet where a group of maintenance drones were preparing to toss explosives out of. Several deafening explosions rang out as the close knit collection of soldiers turned into craters, throwing mud and appendages in all directions.

A few Redcap soldiers cheered prematurely, but most remained silent as more soldiers poured in through the gate. These soldiers, however, already seemed to know what was going on. To the dismay of the Redcaps, they watched as the Lizard King's soldiers spread out thinly along the walls and buildings, seeming to know exactly what they could do to avoid being hit by the explosions. "Are we...?" Spiro began to ask, but already got his answer when he saw the video feed pulled up on Basil's PDA. Basil muttered to himself. "Woulda' been real nice to have a fucking tank right about now."

25: An Explosive Deception

"They're too spread out, we don't have enough explosives to thin them out" Basil yelled over ringing ears to Cicero, who had returned to the group by the craft. As he spoke they saw another group forming by one of the buildings along the wall. Whoever was commanding the Lizard King's men was smart, knowing that the bombs would stop if they didn't gather in the center of the courtyard. What they did not realize, however, was that ACE had no hesitation about bombing the walls; but had hesitation wasting the few explosives clearing small groups.

The small groups of people slowly grew along the walls and barracks as they flooded in, but in one swift move, all the attackers that had gathered were obliterated as well. Basil knew their commander would catch on quickly, and their numbers were still too high to mount a defense against - especially with all the holes in the wall that were now there. "I got a really bad idea" Basil shouted, and before anybody could say anything he tossed his rifle to Spiro and went running off through one of the new holes in the wall.

Basil sprinted as fast as his injured body would let him. He knew he only had a short window to make it through the front line before the soldiers re-converged from both directions to fill in the flanks now guarded only by their dead comrades. Quickly checking the live feed, however, and running around a corner he saw just the man he intended to find. This man was present when Basil escorted the Lizard King, which felt as if a distant memory, and the same man who had ordered his soldiers to stop a truck with their shields. Basil figured this man was commanding the soldiers in some capacity, and hoped he was correct as his plan hinged on that being the case. "Traitor!" the man shouted in surprise seeing Basil run around the corner. He raised some sort of a pistol as the soldiers around him raised swords and rifles.

"Traitor?" Basil asked in feigned indignation. "I do all this for your king and the likes of you have the gall to call me a traitor?" The man looked thoroughly confused, but kept his pistol pointed at Basil. "You" he said, before pausing and seeming to recount Basil's actions, but Basil spoke over him right before he went to speak again. "So either you're a moron, or you're not trusted. Or both probably." Basil tried to sound as insulting as he could. "But" the man began to say, but Basil cut him off. "Let me make it clear, I was to trick the 'demon' into thinking I was there on her side, try to understand their technology, then sabotage the Redcaps and get out. I'm waiting for the Wizard, who should be here any second." Basil gambled everything on the expectation that the incoming ship was the Wizard coming to check on his commander, and with the surprised look on the man's face Basil assumed he gambled correctly.

"But you attacked us when we captured the Bloody One's family?" the man asked as he lowered his pistol to a low-ready position. "Because your dumbass shot at me when I was driving over to help you. But I was able to roll with the punches and get the information I needed, and now they ran out of explosives so I was able to slip away. Get the Wizard, I need to tend to the injuries your men gave me in safety." Basil's demands seemed to satisfy the man's doubts, watching the man order a soldier to go towards the now landing craft and another to go tell the troops to resume the attack. Basil started to walk in the direction of the Wizard's ship, thinking that Spiro would be proud of the exchange that had just occurred. The walk turned into a jog, and the jog turned to a full-blown sprint as the sound of explosions rang out in the distance.

Basil made it to the back of an Elthrice ship and gave it a quick tap, receiving a notification on his PDA that he had gained control of the ship. There were now two more parts to his plan. First, get the seemingly invulnerable Wizard to leave to avoid needing to fight him. Secondly, and just as important, get out alive. "Here goes nothing" Basil muttered to himself as he walked to the front of the ship.

The Wizard looked shocked to see Basil, causing him, the Wizard, and the two soldiers flanking the Wizard to stare in silence for a moment. Basil began to worry that instead of leaving the Wizard would just guard the entrance of the craft until allies arrived, but finally, he began to talk - directing his words towards his underlings. "We are leaving now, do not let him enter. He can control the 'demon's' machines if he touches their insides. Basil smiled and took several steps forward, hoping to speed the confrontation along without goading the Wizard into attacking. "Run away little man, I'm sure the so called 'demons' told you about Orbitals? Well, today you just found out why you don't fuck with them." The Wizard almost ran backward away from the man who had seemingly cut through an entire army, and the soldiers stood at the door, weapons drawn, until the door's ramp began to move upwards and they ducked through the door at the last second. Basil took several steps back and watched the seemingly propulsionless craft slowly gain altitude before disappearing with a roar and a blur.

One more thing to do.

That one thing, however, looked as if it may be harder than expected as soldiers began convening on the location they saw the ship land on from all directions. A couple drew guns, but most drew swords. Basil looked in all directions, only two were coming down the road that led directly away from the capitol building. Basil opened fire, striking one of the two and causing the other to flee, but as he ran he could see a large group of much faster soldiers chasing after him. He made it around a corner, managing to dodge the bullets flying his way and very glad smoothbore muzzleloaders had poor accuracy. However, he had barely rounded it before he was swept off his feet by an explosion near where soldiers were now convening.

Basil regained awareness of his situation. His previously injured left arm was throbbing, but was barely noticeable compared to his right leg buried in rubble. He tried to move it, but a sharp pain even worse than before hit him as something cut deeper into his leg. The pain diminished the fog that clouded his mind and he picked up his head. He could see his body caked in dust and dirt, as well as little flecks of blood; likely both his own and that of the soldiers that were encompassed in the explosion where the collapsed building now lay. He again tried to move his leg, but the pain prevented him from moving it more than a few centimeters. Sitting up he grasped at the wood and stone that sat on his leg, but struggled to move it. He realized quickly he was lucky it was only a leg that was buried, as the rubble was very near to burying his torso as well, but he still couldn't bring himself to feel lucky - especially with more soldiers shambling their way in his direction.

Adrenaline hit Basil hard and he managed to use the wood on his leg as a lever to push the stone off, revealing a long nail attached to the wood that had made its way through the flesh on the side of his leg. He managed to scramble to his feet, picking up his handgun and limping in the first direction that soldiers weren't coming from. Blood flowed from the wound, an unclear amount under all the dust and dirt - which hurt badly - but importantly the bone did not appear to be broken. It would appear that ACE's last-ditch effort to save Basil had left him more injured, but still running from soldiers. He fired several shots at those he was trying to limp away from, which seemed to force them to take cover, but he wasn't sure how many shots he had left.

He quickly glanced at the slide on his handgun, which was closed. Though he did not know how many there were, there was at least one bullet left.

26: Last thing on the list

Basil made a left at another intersection. Was it a left? Shit, how was he going to find his way back now? Well, perhaps that didn't matter much; it wasn't like he could get past the army between him and safety. He took another shot at his much faster pursuers, forcing them to take cover for a second as he rounded another corner at another intersection. Seeing a small alley alongside the road and his pursuers having not yet rounded the corner, he ran down it. Glimpsing a window with a large sheet of wood nailed to it and no other options to escape, he wedged his pistol in between the board and the wall. Using it as a pry bar he separated the sheet of wood just enough to squeeze through, climbing through the window as the nails slashed at his back. Feeling blood run down his back, leg, and arm he slumped against the wall, too weak to do anything further.

"Identify yourself!" shouted somebody from within the room. The center of the room was too dark to see, though a few rays of light showed through the now-damaged board cast around Basil and only further impeded his eyes from seeing what was deeper within. Basil realized this would be a risky question to answer, not knowing the loyalties of whoever was in the room. "I was just trying to escape the chaos" he began to say, before seeing a rusty knife glimmer in one of the rays of light near him. Knowing he didn't even have the strength to devise a convincing lie - much less pick up the pistol on the floor faster than a knife could move - and hoping that this man was a local, Basil gambled on the truth. "I'm Basil, I was helping the Redcaps make a push back into the city when I got separated and hurt when one of the explosions collapsed a building." Though Basil did not possess the strength to come up with a convincing lie, he at least held the mental capacity to leave out the parts about jets, the Elthrice, and installing a backdoor in a Wizard's spacecraft.

"You're hurt" the questioner said, adding "Badly" moments later. The questioner seemed to lower the knife, or at least pull it back outside the rays of light. As he did, however, he kicked Basil's pistol to the side, seemingly not fully trusting him either. The questioner pulled out a dirty piece of cloth and began to tie it around Basil's leg where the bleeding was the worst, and Basil found himself too weak to even flinch from the pain. "Do you have any water?" Basil asked, realizing his throat was completely dry; his mind gaining the luxury of considering survival on a more extended timeframe than dodging oncoming bullets. He hadn't had anything to drink since, well, actually when was that?

"Here," said the questioner, handing Basil a large glass bottle with maybe an ounce of fluid sloshing around at the bottom. Basil drank it in one gulp, tasting a potent and unpleasant flavor. "What was that?" He asked in surprise, recovering from each cough which sent a sharp pain across his body. "Liquor" the questioner answered, before continuing "And the last bit of fluid in what used to be my tavern, unless you're looking to drink piss." Basil tried saying "Thank you" but found the words barely squeaked out. The questioner spoke again. "I am going to return to my family upstairs. Don't follow me, but you may rest down here." He stepped out of the light, and Basil could hear him start to walk away, but he added one more thing as he left. "If what you're saying is true, we will hopefully not be locked in here much longer." Basil - sapped of all energy - fell asleep.

Basil began to wake up, aware his head hurt and vaguely aware of footsteps nearby. He opened his eyes and saw the questioner moving a bookcase that barricaded the door. Though Basil could now see the entire room with properly adjusted eyes, the light passing through the damaged sheet of wood was much dimmer, indicating that a considerable amount of time had passed. "It's been quiet for a while. I'm going to step out and take stock of things" the questioner said in a hushed tone. Basil crawled to his feet, more thirsty than he thought possible, even enough to forget his pain. He bent over and grabbed the handgun on the floor, removing the magazine to check the remaining bullets. Two in the magazine and one in the chamber, not worth much if they got into trouble, but better than a rusty knife. The questioner seemed to take on a slightly uneasy look seeing Basil hold the weapon, but said nothing.

As the questioner opened the door the two saw dust floating in, as well as dust floating throughout the streets illuminated by a deep red sunset. Though the skyline would have otherwise been obscured, with a few missing buildings the sun shown a crimson red, contrasting with the gray dust in the air. The street was empty, but as the two made their way out of the alley and around a corner that would give them a view of the castle's courtyard walls they ran into two soldiers. Basil started to walk in their direction, questioner in tow, keeping an eye on both Basil in front of him and the alley behind him. "I need water" Basil said in a hoarse voice as soon as he was in earshot. "Stay back" one of the soldiers returned in an authoritative voice as they raised their weapons until a shocked looking soldier exclaimed "Basil?" only now recognizing him under the layers of blood and grime.

"This way" said the soldier who recognized Basil before walking towards the courtyard. Basil followed him, looking back and seeing the questioner talk to another soldier. Finally entering the courtyard he began to look around, but was surprised to see not a single soldier who could stand. A few dozen soldiers lay on the ground, wounded and being tended to, and many lay dead alongside their enemies' bodies. Only now did Basil realize how few soldiers were involved in the defense of the capitol building, which appeared to have been successful. "Do you know where Cicero or Spiro are?" he asked the soldier, voice still weak. "They are helping the injured from our attempts to retake the rest of the city. I do not know when they will be back" the soldier responded before turning around and returning to his compatriots. Basil saw the jet beginning to descend and made a B line for the Elthrice ship which contained his backpack and water bottle.

"Basil?" Grey called out from behind as he struggled to make it up the ramp to the door on the Elthrice craft. "What happened to you?" Grey asked as she got closer, and Basil could hear what sounded like genuine worry in her voice. He continued to struggle up the steps, knowing that the pain was only a minor setback to quenching his thirst. "I was a little too close to one of those explosions, wound up getting buried in rubble." Basil responded as he finally reached the door to the craft and walked in to see his backpack. Grey followed Basil in, asking "Are you okay?" as he picked up his water bottle. Basil quickly opened it up and chugged the last little bit of water, only afterwards responding to the question. "Just peachy" he said, trying to force a smile. The alien didn't seem to like - or didn't seem to get - sarcasm, so he added "I'll survive, but I got pretty banged up out there."

Basil heard ACE's voice over the speakers on the craft, the only way for him to audibly reach Basil with his phone temporarily in the hands of General Edwards. Basil watched the jet perform impossibly tight maneuvers to land in the courtyard while Basil caught Grey and ACE up on everything he'd experienced. ACE was very unhappy with Basil's surprise outing, but in the end, seemed to reluctantly concede it worked out for the best.

27: Fourth Variable Field Test

As soon as Basil had been caught up on their immediate situation he began to inquire about the Redcaps's supply situation. Instead of ACE answering, however, Grey answered. "I spoke to their" Grey paused momentarily, as if searching for a word. "General. He said they have none. Some drank from the craft's water reserve, but it is now empty." Basil thought for a moment and prompted Grey with a question. "We're on the same side; I can trust you, right?" Grey seemed surprised by the question and hesitated a moment before answering. "Yes, I wouldn't hurt you if that is what you are asking." Basil was a little afraid of the Elthrice's hesitance but told himself it was because of the unexpected question, not because he was in danger. As Basil replied he tried to play it off with a joke, if nothing else to convince himself. "What am I asking, I'm here barely standing and out of ammo, if you were planning something you could probably snap me like a twig." Basil smiled, and Grey seemed taken aback by the apparent joke, but returned a delayed smile.

Basil lied about being unarmed, hoping that since now was likely the ideal time for the being to attack, the Elthrice would do now if it planned to. The Elthrice, luckily, did not make any moves. "In that jet" Basil broke the silence, "Is a wormhole device that can take me back to my planet and home. If you are willing to help, I have a supply of food and water that I need to get to the Redcaps, but lack the strength to carry much of anything." Grey nodded. "I can help you bring it here" before pausing and adding "I would also be excited to see a working wormhole device. You may be the last being to possess one." Grey started leaving the craft and walking towards the jet and Basil began to follow. As Grey left Basil's line of sight, however, his PDA lit up with a message from ACE. "I have armed some of the maintenance drones, just in case. Be cautious." ACE, it appeared, was also cautious of the Elthrice.

As they walked Grey prompted Basil with a question. "If you also have a craft, why are you so interested in Elthrice technology?" Basil shook his head. "That's not a spacecraft. Do you know what a combustion engine is?" Grey shook her head no. "Think about the combination of words I just used in its name" Basil replied. Grey seemed to think for a moment and then laughed. "It's powered by fire?" Basil felt slightly insulted having the Elthrice laugh at one of humanity's most outstanding achievements. For a moment, however, he no longer questioned the being's motives or intentions and was just glad it seemed to find some fleeting joy. "Yeah, there's no oxygen in space. A few of them can go into space if they bring their own, but they're slow and inefficient, so they can't go far." Grey seemed to notice Basil was falling behind and slowed down. "You're really hurt." Basil nodded. "Yeah, but I'm almost back to my home where I can get myself stitched up and take some painkillers, won't be long now."

However, Grey looked around before they arrived at the jet, seemingly verifying there were no others in earshot before speaking. "What is your alliance with the ones here on Domum?" Basil thought for a moment. "I don't entirely know, to be honest; I kind of just got thrown into everything and have been trying to survive ever since." Grey seemed confused. "Then how is it you were captured by the one who calls himself a Lizard? Did you not fight him?" Basil paused again and thought through the chaotic chain of events.

"He, the Redcaps, and I, after I found my way here accidentally, were all here peacefully not too long ago. I actually thought I was making friends with the Lizard King at the time. Then fighting broke out and he left, but I didn't take a side until he returned with Elthrice technology and attacked. I didn't even know it was him attacking, and I only found out after I had started to defend everybody else. They tried to kill me and failed, then he imprisoned me with you and the others." Grey looked as if she either did not fully understand or trust the explanation, but seemed satisfied enough with the answer to not ask further questions.

As the door to the jet opened automatically they stepped in and Grey began to look around, seeing the wormhole device haphazardly wired into one of the walls of the jet. Grey seemed to have a momentary cautious look on her face as the door closed and Basil began to wonder how worried the Elthrice was about the whole situation as well. She had just stepped onto a 'savage's' craft and was about to leave the planet. Then again, he had no idea if she had any tricks up her sleeve either; this was her people's technology powering everything after all. Both of their attention, however, was shifted to the door-sized wormhole that opened up in the corner of the jet. They both stepped through, Basil smiling because he knew he was home, Grey smiling after seeing what she was told was a centuries-lost technology.

"You don't have the Orbital's wormhole device, but you have an Orbital's implant?" Grey asked in confusion as they stepped through. "What?" Basil asked, thoroughly confused. "This" Grey said. "This is not an Orbital's version of the wormhole device. It can only link to another device, where the Orbital's version does not need a second device." Basil suddenly realized that may explain the device's ability to create a connection to Arkepello without another device present.

"It can go to one location without one on the other end, but only to that specific location. Every other location seems to need a second one." Grey chuckled. "Are you lying to make me believe you're an Orbital?" Basil shook his head. "How else would I get to another planet without a working spacecraft?" Grey seemed to think for a moment. "Okay, I believe you. But that is weird, like it was only allowed by an Orbital or somebody who could access an Orbital's system. They are not supposed to work like that. Or so I was told by my (admiral)."

"Could they be configured to go to any location?" Grey shook her head no. "You would need a" Grey paused to ask Basil a question. "What did you call yourself?" Basil was confused, then realized what Grey had asked. "A scientist?" Grey nodded and resumed speaking. "Yes, you would need a scientist to fix that." Basil smiled and began to say "But-" but Grey clarified. "No, not a you scientist, an Elthrice scientist. And they are all dead."

Basil heard the pressurized room's seals release and they both began to step out. "This is your home?" Grey asked, gesturing to the walls. "Yeah" Basil said as he saw the maintenance drones beginning to load boxes into the now opened pressurized room. "And what are those?" Grey asked, pointing to the maintenance drones. "Maintenance drones, small devices controlled remotely by me to do various tasks" ACE answered. Grey started to walk around and looked around the corner down the thin hall. "Where are your people? You said there were billions."

"Not here. I'm afraid some of them tried to kill me, so I'm hiding out underground for a while until I figure out who exactly wants me dead." Basil tried to say it as if it were humorous, but his voice betrayed him and showed his underlying worn-down feeling. "I'm sorry" Grey said, adding "Perhaps you and I are not so different." Basil asked for clarification. "How's that?" Grey replied "Well, you are tiny and look weird" but smiled and Basil realized Grey was trying to make a joke. Basil returned a smile and Grey continued. "But you and I may be some of the last two interplanetary beings, lost and making our way, afraid of our people."

That statement hit Basil hard, knowing that it probably carried a lot of pain on Grey's part, and certainly carried a lot on his own part. They both fell silent, the only audible noises being the electric whirr of the maintenance drones loading supplies. Eventually Basil broke the silence. "Well, I need to go get cleaned up and take some painkillers. ACE can equalize the pressure in that room and the jet so the supplies can be taken into it, then equalize it with the Domum air to bring the supplies to them. I'll be back soon."

Basil paused momentarily, adding "Thank you" and Grey gave a quick nod before Basil turned to walk away. ACE, however, prompted Grey with a question as Basil went to leave. "Grey, if you would permit it, I want to collect a DNA sample for analysis." Grey suddenly sounded worried. "But that's forbidden." Hearing the sudden fear in Grey's voice, Basil responded in a tone he hoped sounded calming. "It's okay, we don't need to." ACE, however, seemed more persistent. "Why is it forbidden?" Grey paused for a moment but spoke in an almost hushed tone. "I carry the DNA of one who had an Orbital's DNA; allowing others to receive that DNA is forbidden."

"There are no more Orbitals, at least none here to enforce that" ACE replied. Basil felt that was the worst possible way to respond, but Grey seemed to have a triumphant look on her face. "Very well, you are right. If your people choose to make Orbitals, they may serve better directives." Basil was surprised at both the sudden change in demeanor and what Grey had thought their intentions were. "No, no" he said, pausing for a second before collecting his thoughts. "It's just curiosity and, more importantly, a way to check to see if it's likely safe for you to eat our food or be exposed to our pathogens. We did the same for those at the Arkepello and me to be sure it was safe." Basil also felt that ACE was leaving out a reason that he was interested as well: probing Elthrice DNA for weaknesses. Basil knew there was no way of stopping ACE from theorizing, although he would certainly not allow something like that to be used, even if it meant smashing the fabricator to stop him. Perhaps he could shoot a man in the back if his life depended on it, but a genocide would be way too far, even if they did try to invade.

28: Regrouping

Basil stepped into the pressurized room; waiting for it to equalize to the jet's pressure before finally stepping back into Domum. The seemingly endless boxes of food and medical supplies were already almost gone. Endless to him, perhaps, but nothing to an army – even a significantly thinned-out one. At least, if nothing else, they would have some energy for tonight. Basil stepped out of the jet, passing Grey going up the steps in the opposite direction, before making his way towards Spiro at the bottom of the jet. “Holy shit, Basil, ACE told me what happened.” Basil nodded, finally reaching the bottom of the steps and clicking on a flashlight, internally noting that Spiro's demeanor had seemed to change. “Nothing's broken at least, and now that I'm stitched up and numbed up the walk down the steps was a lot less painful.”

As they spoke Spiro led Basil towards the makeshift command center in the field of tents that once held guests of the peace festival. “I got to get me one of those” Spiro said, eyeing up the little flashlight that lit up the entire camp otherwise only lit by a campfire. “When this is all over I'll get you one” Basil said, sitting near General Edwards, before adding “If we live long enough.” Edwards seemed to be finishing a cup of instant noodles, and as he finished chewing Basil asked him a question. “Where's Cicero and Casio?”

“Still handing out food” one of the soldiers said before Edwards could swallow. “Tell him he's needed here” Edwards said, giving an order to the soldier. However, as the soldier turned to walk away Edwards added “And make sure to tell him I was the one who requested it, and that it's important.” As the soldier left Edwards spoke more quietly to Basil and Spiro. “That man tends to a dozen men when he should be tending to decisions that will affect thousands.” Cicero arrived shortly and joined Edwards, Basil, and Spiro around the fire, leading Edwards to fill in the group on the nation's state.

The various counties and their soldiers had not been arriving as they were ordered to, seeming to abandon their capitol now that their king had been taken. Some Redcap Capitol soldiers and police had deserted, many had died, and the rest remained scattered throughout the city. Many would likely regroup once they heard that a rag-tag group of soldiers, an Amigoso official, Basil, and an Elthrice took back the city; however, it would likely not be enough to mount a proper defense. Even as they tried to arm civilians with the weapons recovered from both sides' fallen, the Lizard King's now vastly larger army was marching through various counties towards the capitol; facing minimal resistance.

The state of their supplies was just as poor. Even after, in Edward's words, "Reclaiming" food from the city and accepting Basil's food supplies, they would be out of food before the Lizard king's men reached the city in a little over four days. They had almost no ammunition, and the only water safe to drink was water the maintenance drones kept bringing in from the facility on the other side of the wormhole. At this rate they would die of thirst eventually, even if ACE continued to move the water at the same speed he was moving it now. As soon as Edwards had finished speaking Basil commented "But you've still got the upper hand." Edwards scowled at Basil, seemingly thinking he was mocking him.

"The Lizard King thinks he's untouchable on the Elthrice planet, but could only have moved about six dozen soldiers up there in this time. We now have a craft and, more importantly, wormholes – which he does not. I already killed four dozen soldiers when they attacked us in the tank." Edwards looked like he was about to fall out of his seat when Basil mentioned he had killed four dozen soldiers. Basil just laughed. "Yeah, don't fuck with a tank" before he continued to speak. "Well, before I got blown up during my little adventure, I managed to seize control of the Wizard's craft that he arrived in. I lost connection to it as it left the atmosphere, but I know where it was going, so now we know where to hit him and have the capacity to hit him hard."

"So what are you proposing?" Cicero asked once Basil finished speaking. "I don't have enough weapons to fend off an army, but they'll cut through a couple dozen men no problem. I'll give some guns and ammo to your best men and rig up some explosive drones. We take the craft up there and then send your entire army to confront him and his dozen or so guards, forcing him to surrender. Force him to surrender, he calls off his marching army, and I get to find out how the fuck some guy in a leather dress fought off the Elthrice." Cicero shook his head. "I know what you will propose when we capture him, and no, he dies for his crimes."

Even with the numbing effects of the painkillers and his mental state being in constant fight or flight, Basil felt dread wash over him. He had killed people, several with his own hands and many more after arming others. He had also just determined who would win a war in which he should have no part. All the while, there were other Elthrice there, more powerful than space pirates who could relish an opportunity to attack a weakened civilization if they had malicious intentions.

Basil realized everyone at the campfire was staring at him as he remained in thought for longer than he perceived. It was too late to back down now. Doing nothing was a choice in itself, and that would ensure those who tried to kill him would win. However, his help would have to come with conditions, so he put his foot down.

“If you want my help here you must accept my conditions. The only way I’m going to help you end this war is if you guarantee that if he surrenders you’ll bring him and everybody else alive back here to assess the situation. Nobody else dies for his decisions, but what happens to him after we get information from him and his army addressed is not my decision to make.”

Edwards nodded gleefully, though while Cicero nodded moments later, he seemed more hesitant. Cicero, already being one of the highest ranking statesmen, and Cicero and Edwards in agreement and the last two high ranking officials present - if perhaps the last two alive - finalized the decision to move forward with Basil's plan. “How soon can we begin?” Edwards asked. “I need to sleep and get my wounds addressed as well as they can be. I’ll drop of the weapons I can spare before I leave, and then I can head out tomorrow morning. The trip will feel instant for me, but it will be almost 48 hours before I open the wormhole and you begin the invasion, so it should give you time for your men to heal up and train with the new weapons.”

29: Dust and Ashes

"I still believe it is a bad idea" ACE told Basil, concluding his thoughts on why Basil should not be present when they took their fight to the Lizard King. "You knew you couldn't change my mind going in, didn't you? I'm the only one who can control the technology, and it will only be a few seconds before I open the wormhole." Basil replied, pausing momentarily and adding the real reason for going. "Besides, how long do I have left anyway? All the treatments failed, and I might as well see another Elthrice planet before I die." ACE remained quiet and Basil returned to taking inventory, both to assure himself everything would go as planned and to distract himself from his last statement. A handful of guns, check. Boatload of ammo, check. Several forms of redundant power, check. Wormhole device, check.

Basil's internal monologue was interrupted by another internal monologue as he saw Grey beginning to approach. While Basil had gotten some sleep, ACE had analyzed Grey's genome, prompting as many questions as it provided answers. According to ACE, Orbital DNA looked very artificial, as if designed from the ground up to be some sort of super soldier. Between the artificiality and Grey's supposed mixed parentage they were no closer to finding concrete information on the Elthrice's gene pool. Still, it certainly said something in itself about their capabilities. It also certainly said something about Grey if she was a genetically modified soldier who refused to fight.

"Are you really that concerned the craft's power will fail?" Grey asked Basil, breaking the awkwardly long silence. "Better safe than sorry" Basil said, tying everything down and setting an extensive first aid kit next to the batteries. "I'm glad you're coming," he continued, breaking the silence again and getting a silent nod from Grey. The previous night she had asked about Basil's plan to head out alone to open the wormhole, and asked to come along. She said she'd sworn not to participate in violence, but Basil was happy to have somebody who knew Elthrice technology coming along as well. While Basil was busy thinking about the previous night's conversations, Spiro startled him from behind.

"Basil, Cicero and I were talking; if it's okay we and Casio would like to accompany you as well." Basil nodded. "Of course. Although you won't miss much, from our perspective the wormhole will probably be open within seconds of us arriving." Spiro shrugged. "Well, just in case anything goes wrong or you need our help before you open it, we would like to be there to have your back. Just the five of us on an Elthrice ship, for old times sake." Basil smiled. "Thanks, well, we're about ready to head out. Grab anything you guys need and meet me back in five."

Five minutes passed and the group was already on the ship. Basil was busy loading his now repaired rifle with a shotgun sitting next to him. He had acquired similar rifles for Spiro and Cicero, which they now sported, but Cicero had said that Casio would prefer to wield his own ginormous blade. After saying their goodbyes, the door closed, and ACE offered a play-by-play. "We're now taking off" followed by a "We've now cleared the atmosphere" and last, followed by an "I hope to speak to you very soon from your perspective." The craft made its journey, though none of its passengers felt any passage of time or movement. "You are now on an Elthrice planet, descending" ACE said, followed by the craft's door opening and "I've now opened the wormhole."

The crew stared at the device, and after an uneasy moment Basil spoke up in a concerned tone. "It's not open." The cabin fell quiet again. "Hold on" ACE said, presumably trying to figure out what was happening. Spiro and Cicero took up positions guarding the now open door to the craft, though there was no movement outside, and Basil verified that the device was receiving power and properly turned on. Grey suddenly had a very concerned look on her face. "We're on an Elthrice planet" she said, causing everybody to look at her. "Of course we are. Does that matter?" Basil asked. Grey seemed to compose herself, as if struggling to word the idea in the language they all knew; everybody else waiting nervously for further information.

"Not me Elthrice, Elthrice leader Elthrice" Grey said, looking at Basil to see if he understood what she was saying. "Like former Elthrice government facility or military base?" Basil asked, still unsure why that mattered. "And your wormhole device is not an Orbital's, so it does not work here. This means that planetary defenses are still online, and the only reason why we were not shot down was because of your Orbital's device." A thought popped into Basil's mind. "The Lizard King is dead, isn't he?" Grey almost looked surprised, then agreed with the assessment. "Yes, he would have no knowledge of the danger present at this location, so if he arrived, he likely did not land in one piece."

The news presented mixed emotions to the group. It meant they had no army to back them up, but there was also no army to fight them. It meant their enemy was dead, but it also meant there would be nobody to negotiate with to call off the army set to level the Redcap's capital. They began to step out of the ship and realized they were standing on a large metal platform. Nearby on the platform were huge circular doors resembling camera shutters, but Basil began to understand what they were. "So what are those? We have some ICBSs. Er, um ISBMs?" Everybody looked at Basil like he said some sort of magic chant, so he clarified. "Big flying unmanned explosive rockets?" Grey looked at Basil with amusement. "No, they are weapons that can propel projectiles using the same components that fly crafts, and what shot down the one who calls himself a Lizard."

"There's ships over there" Basil said, pointing in their direction. "Must have been from the collapse" Grey replied confidently, but Basil was confused. "That sounds like a long time for very valuable ships to sit; how could that be?" Grey answered, seeming to either take pride in what she said or be quoting somebody who took pride in what they relayed to her. "Those in places like this died the worst deaths. Anyone here could not leave, as all Orbital ships were disabled; but nobody could come in with supplies, as all non-Orbital ships would be destroyed if they attempted to enter." Basil felt hesitant to ask his next question, the weight of the previous revelations on his mind. "So you are certain nobody else is alive here?"

"Yes, unless Orbitals arrived or the one who calls himself a Lizard somehow got his hands on an Orbital's (object). Unless..." Grey's voice began to trail off. "Unless what?" Basil asked, getting nervous. "Unless he somehow got his hands on the (object) from the stabilizing machine here. But no, he would have caused a sterilization if he took it and left, and the defenses would have killed him before he arrived unless he somehow survived the bombardment." Basil felt even more worried now. "How does this machine's (poorly pronounced Elthrice word for 'object') work?" Grey appeared somewhat impressed at Basil's lackluster pronunciation and seemed to understand what he had meant.

"That one is stronger than a standard Orbital's (object). He would likely be almost impossible to kill, but by possessing an Orbital's device, it could be taken from him. Basil, if you were to touch him or the (object) and will yourself to transfer it to you, it could render him helpless if he has taken it." Basil just seemed confused. "How the hell do I will the (object) to be under my control?" Grey shook her head. "I do not know; I have never even met an Orbital with an Orbital's (object) or device. You are perhaps the closest being to holding an Orbital's title that I have met, missing an (object) but still with an Orbital's device." Basil thought things over for a second. "Well, I'll be right back, I'm going to run to the craft. If I can't master inner peace I'll at least have a Mossberg with depleted uranium slugs."

As Basil returned to the craft Grey ran to catch up. "If you believe you will be involved in a fight I cannot come with you. I'm sorry." Basil shook his head. "It's okay." He wanted to say more, but was unsure what to say beyond that, so he left it at that. As he went to leave the craft, however, Grey spoke cautiously. "Basil, if you do find anybody who possesses an (object), be very careful. It is very powerful, and very dangerous to one without an Orbital's device." Basil felt a chill run down his spine. "Why is that?"

"I have been told an (object) is an atmosphereless vacuum of great power, but a great danger to one's mind. An Orbital's device is a craft which allows the holder to traverse it without touching it. The one we came here for would not possess an Orbital's device, nor would the descendants of those who lived here long ago. There are legends of those imbued with such powers directly, and it has been said they cut gashes across entire galaxies."

"So, four guys against an apocalyptic force, should be a cakewalk, right?" Grey very clearly did not appreciate Basil's sarcasm, though after a few moments her expression softened. "Be careful." Basil nodded silently, racking the shotgun and setting off for the other three and the abandoned crafts that lay ahead.

30: Last Confrontation

The four approached the nearest ship, a foreboding open door leading into a dark, empty unknown. As they entered Spiro began methodically moving from corner to corner as Basil and Cicero lagged slightly. "Nobody's home" Spiro whispered, though Basil jumped when he heard Spiro speak, momentarily pointing his rifle at him. "Whoah" Spiro said in an oddly calm voice, face momentarily illuminated by Basil's weapon light. Spiro quickly motioned for Cicero and Casio to guard the door, and after a few moments of silence Spiro asked "Are you alright?" in the same calm voice as before.

"No, I, um, no." Basil replied hesitantly. "For a moment, when you walked around that corner, I swear I saw the guy I killed in the courtyard when everything started. Last night, all I dreamt about was me killing him or him killing me." Spiro nodded and placed his hand on Basil's shoulder. "You had no choice in that situation, but the fact that you feel guilt means that you're a good person. But right now, you need to focus; doing this means that we might be able to prevent thousands of yours and thousands of him if we stop all of this now. The Lizard King started an unjust war and there's no telling what he'll do if his surviving followers keep hold of Elthrice technology."

Basil tried to correct his posture and take a deep breath, but was disrupted by Cicero. "Someone's outside" he whispered, prompting all four to take positions next to the door while remaining out of sight. Spiro, however, made a quick hand signal that Basil interpreted as "stay" and moved around the corner in a fluid motion. Several bursts of automatic fire sounded off, followed by a couple of single shots moments later. Basil rushed out the door, closely followed by Cicero and Casio.

"They're the Lizard King's men" Basil stated in a manner that was half a question, seeing Spiro standing over a handful of bodies while scanning the surroundings. Spiro silently nodded. "How sure are we that the defenses are still active? Could they all have survived?" Cicero asked, and Basil shrugged. "It sounds like they have to be, at least the parts that disabled the wormhole device. But I don't know." Spiro interjected with a confident statement, though spoken loudly as if his ears were ringing.

"At this point, it doesn't matter. We're here without an army, and going back to Domum would put us too late to stop the enemy's army, but we can still pull this off if we're tactical about the situation. Those structures over there, that's where I'd set up camp if I were stranded. There's no guarantee nobody heard my shots, so we need to set off now before they can respond to our presence."

Spiro immediately set off while seeming to scan the horizon, the other three following close behind. They had only been walking for a short distance; however, when they started walking past debris and small structures buried under dust. However, the small structures quickly became immense, and Basil began to be distracted observing them. Every one had a simultaneously alien but familiar feeling; cylindrical buildings with large holes instead of doors or windows which jutted out of the ground in a grid pattern, separated by what appeared to be roads.

Basil's observation was interrupted, however, when they walked around a corner and saw a stunned looking soldier; as well as several others at a distance. The three raised their rifles, but in one graceful motion Casio turned the one soldier into several parts of a soldier. Gunfire erupted from the building the rest ran into, a large building that seemed to loom above the rest. The four were outnumbered at least three to one and lacked cover compared to the Lizard King's men. Basil dove to the ground and readied himself for the feeling of bullets sailing through his body, but it appeared the four still had the upper hand with considerably better ranged weapons than the smooth bore guns that the Lizard King's men possessed.

Basil looked down his sight, and a soldier appeared in a hole that looked like a window. Basil squeezed the trigger, and no more soldiers were visible through the window. Another took his place, and he, too, fell back into the room. Cicero seemed to be struggling with the automatic fire, but Spiro seemed to be taking well placed shots in quick succession; handling both automatic and semi automatic fire with incredible proficiency. Basil saw several others running out the door, weapons in hand. He took in a deep breath, breathed out, pulled the trigger, and watched nearly half a dozen men fall to the ground. Basil looked over and Spiro nodded.

The world fell quiet.

The group stood and Spiro motioned for them to move in a tight formation towards the entrance of the building. Another shot rang out, but Spiro fired, everything falling quiet again. The group made it to the building's entrance and formed a much tighter formation, Spiro motioning that he would go first through the door and take the left, followed by Basil who would go right. The room contained a long spiral ramp that went up, containing plenty of bodies and trash from the Lizard King's men, but noticeably, there was no dust. Despite looking like the Lizard King's men had dug the dust away from the front of the building to enter, the inside of the room was entirely free of dust and ash. The walls carried the same gray-green color as the other Elthrice metal objects did and appeared to consist of panels that looked as if they each served a different purpose unknown to those who had just taken the long-dead building. The four reloaded their weapons.

All that was heard was ringing in the ears of the four as they slowly made their way up the spiral ramp that circled the walls of the building. At the top of the ramp they saw what appeared to be another empty door frame to a roof, Spiro motioning for Basil to follow him through in the same formation as before. Basil only heard a thump as Spiro bounced off what looked to be an empty doorframe, but before he could even process it, he stepped through as if nothing was there. "What the fuck" said Spiro in a fleeting moment of more frantic speech, touching what appeared to be some invisible wall that Basil had stepped through. Basil didn't respond, however, as his attention was turned to the Lizard King standing on the large flat roof.

"So you are one of them?" the Lizard King asked Basil. "No, but I take it your so called Wizard is Elthrice?" The Lizard King looked confused. "What is that word? If it identifies the 'demons,' then no, he is not." Basil looked confused. "Well, those who attacked you didn't have Orbital's gear, and planetary defenses did not shoot you down, so he somehow got his hands on an (object) now, didn't he? That would explain his bullet-proof 'magic.'" The Lizard King looked uncomfortable when Basil said the Elthrice word. "It does not matter, this is over. Surrender now and I will permit you to live" the Lizard King said sternly. Basil shook his head. "It's over, but not how you would like. It ended when that force field your Wizard tried to activate failed to stop me." The Lizard King shook his head.

"This place is under the Wizard's control. His magic sings to the machines of the dead Elthrice. You will die by my hands if you do not surrender. I have become immortal, and the dead peoples whisper to me. I am to build something great, wipe out the old, and begin with the new. I do not quarrel with you, but you will not be permitted to interfere with me today."

The Lizard King's voice sent shivers down Basil's spine in a way he couldn't understand. He did his best to focus and return to the situation.

"That's called schizophrenia, my friend, but it appears we're at an impasse" Basil shouted, taking several steps towards the Lizard King and out of the view of the other three as he unslung his shotgun. Basil spoke again. "One final chance to change your mind, remember though, I just cut through all your soldiers and can control Elthrice technology. As you once told me, a short war with overwhelming force is a mercy, and don't think I won't kill you if it will put an end to all of this." Basil now stood face to face with the Lizard King. The tall man took on a melancholy face and began to speak as he raised an incredibly long broadsword.

"Basil, if you are the one who walks out of here, promise me that no harm will come to my son. He, the Wizard, and the Bloodthirsty King's heirs are in the machine above us. If I am killed, I have ordered the Wizard to remand them to your custody, but only your custody."

Basil nodded, knowing that there was likely no avoiding the confrontation. The Lizard King seemed to force a short smile and began to talk again. "Very well, now, unfortunately, I believe you will meet your end here, my friend." Basil shook his head and spoke while ignoring ACE's instructions to leave. "No, here's what's gonna happen. I'm going to shoot you in the nuts with a bean bag round, then when you're doubled over in pain I'm going to kick you in the nuts for what you put me through. Then we're gonna go back and we can sing Kumbaya once you-"

The Lizard King charged at Basil, causing Basil to hit him in the stomach with the bean bag round. He laughed as he swung his sword at Basil. "You think that to hurt me?" Basil tried to wrack another round in, but the gun was knocked from his hand as the Lizard King hit it with the sword and slashed Basil across the chest. Basil made an attempt to unsling the rifle from his chest, but the sword swung back around and plunged deep into him.

The world froze, and he stared at the metallic object in disbelief. He felt his body go limp and could feel blood draining down both his chest and back. Holding the still slung rifle in his hand he unloaded an entire magazine of automatic fire into the sad man looking back at him, but it seemed to have minimal effect.

He realized his only way to end this was to somehow make physical contact with the sad man staring him in the face, but as he reached out his weak hand he saw the man take several steps back. The cold steel slid out of his body as he fell limply to the ground, world growing black.

31: Abyss Slumbers

Basil stood? Sat? Lay? He wasn't sure. He was in what appeared to be a sphere of light. Or perhaps it was not a sphere of light, but an absence of the great abyss he had seen once before. The abyss surrounded him, a crushing weight, but he remained unmoved. This time, however, there were voices. A cacophony cried out, deafening but imperceivable. They were speaking as Grey did.

The abyss moved.

The voices were Elthrice.

The abyss was the voices.

They were angry he was leaving.

32: Orbital

Basil felt blood rushing to his head; he wasn't dead apparently, at least not yet. He opened his eyes to a spinning dark and dusky sky, Lizard King stepping away. He coughed and felt warm blood draining away from his mouth, the same warmth that emanated from his chest. He could tell he didn't have long, doubly so as the Lizard King turned back after hearing the cough. There was one thing he had to do, and he had to do it quickly.

The Lizard King looked on in astonishment and Basil tried to stand up. The moment he started to lift his head he began to feel even more dizzy and wondered if the only thing keeping him conscious was his head being level to the ground. However, the Lizard King raised his blade again and adrenaline hit, allowing Basil to make it to his knees.

"Do not move any closer; you have already lost, but you may be able to save your life." Basil tried to say something, but his words only came out as a gargle. "Please" repeated the now unnerved looking Lizard King, but Basil only glanced at the fallen shotgun. The Lizard King seemed to realize what Basil was planning, taking a step forward, and Basil dove headfirst for it. He landed face first, coming back into view of those stuck behind the invisible door; hands on the weapon and a vague sensation that he had hurt his nose. Taking all his strength he rolled onto his back, now pointing the gun vaguely at the Lizard King.

"We have already tried that" the Lizard King shouted at Basil while he racked the next round into the chamber. "The Elthrice seemed to think they were immortal too" Basil said, or thought, he wasn't entirely sure. The Lizard King started to charge, but Basil fired a single depleted uranium slug. He hit the ground, knocked over by the recoil, and a red mist erupted from the Lizard King's body. Basil crawled over, now lacking the strength to rise to his knees, and saw a very decorative pendant around the dying man's neck. He extended his left arm and put his hand around the pendant, hoping that contained the (object), and held the shotgun under his right arm still pointed at the man below him.

"What are you doing?" asked the Lizard King as Basil knelt there. "Giving it a chance to heal you before I take it" Basil replied, starting to feel dizzy again. "Kill him!" Cicero shouted at Basil from behind the invisible wall, apparently able to hear or interpolate enough of the conversation, but Basil paid him no attention.

An invisible tendril reached out from the dying man's chest, an abyss of a different kind, and wrapped itself around Basil's arm and began to work its way toward his chest. He wasn't sure what was real and what was the madness of dying, but he was sure of two things: it felt real, and his vision had just failed. With no vision and a rapidly clouding mind he did the one last thing he could - reach out to the second abyss.

A warmth began to creep up his arm, then up his spine, and finally throughout the injuries on his chest and face. Suddenly his vision began to return and it became less difficult to stay upright. His energy continued to build gradually until it suddenly grew extraordinarily. Basil blinked, and he realized he was yelling some sort of war cry, then blinked again, and the three were standing around him, having somehow passed through the invisible wall.

"You okay?" Spiro asked, seeming unsure of what to make of the situation. "Well fucking RIP to the pain pills I was on, but yeah!" Basil exclaimed, still trying to process what had just happened. Cicero ran over and kicked the Lizard King several times, but before Basil could yell at him ACE came over the radio. "Radiation levels just spiked and are rising exponentially. I am bringing the craft over now." Basil suddenly heard Grey's voice over the radio. "Basil, focus." Basil was confused. "What?" but Grey responded as if she was trying to calm or de-escalate somebody.

"You've taken control of a very powerful device; you need to focus and not do anything rash." Basil responded jokingly. "Well, I was on a lot of downers; that should even it out, right?" Grey seemed to carry a lot of worry when she replied. "Just focus and be careful, please." ACE came over the line again. "I have instructed the Wizard to land in the Redcap's courtyard. Get in the craft now." Basil watched the craft land on the roof and quickly spoke up with an objection. "But the other ships, we could-." ACE cut Basil off, seeming to carry a lot of concern in his otherwise monotone voice. "Leave them. You must leave now unless you want to become a radioactive mush."

"You're coming with us" Basil said to the Lizard King as he went to grab him, but the large man struggled to his feet and stepped onto the craft of his own volition. They felt no motion, and only a few seconds passed to them, but ACE relayed that they were entering Domum's atmosphere and seconds away from being in the Redcap courtyard. The door on the craft opened and Basil began to step out. "Do not do anything to him" Basil said, words directed at Cicero. "We need to be very careful about how we end all this" Basil continued, fighting the urge for a violent resolution that suddenly lingered in the back of his mind.

Basil stepped out of the craft, beginning to admire the bright blue sky, but suddenly fixated on the crashed and burning craft that had left moments before theirs did. "Fuck fuck fuck!" Basil yelled as he sprinted across the courtyard. He realized that he was sprinting fast, much faster than he even thought possible when healed, and he had just had a sword driven through his chest moments ago. Basil made it to the burning craft well before anybody else and struggled to bend a partially opened panel on the side of it. His hands oozed dark red blood as he made an opening, his newfound strength pitted against his newfound durability. That wasn't important, however, since he could now see the inside of the craft through a hole big enough to crawl through.

Basil began to squeeze through, smoke bellowing out as he forced himself in. The Wizard was frantically trying to pick up the barely conscious son of the Lizard king and seemed to be panicking – first from their predicament and further after seeing Basil moving towards him quickly. "Get him out of here!" Basil yelled, and the Wizard wasted no time getting the kid out through the small hole Basil had made in the craft. Basil ran deeper in and saw the two bodies of the Redcap King's heirs lying in a pool of blood. A crate had crushed the young prince, who seemed nearly decapitated, with the princess lying on top of him, unconscious but seemingly less injured. Basil quickly picked up the girl and pushed her roughly through the opening before climbing out himself as more smoke streamed out of the craft.

The small group of redcap soldiers, General Edwards, Cicero, Casio, Spiro, Grey, and the Lizard King finally made their way over, looking on in horror. Basil turned to Gray. "Did we just create another super weapon?" Gray looked puzzled, though not much more than everybody else present. "What?" Basil re-phrased his question, struggling to find the best way to word it with his cloudy mind. "That thing go boom?" Grey seemed unsure. "What? No. I'm not sure, but I don't think so." Basil turned his attention to the Redcap soldiers who had surrounded the group. "Put that fire out, it's your top priority." The guards appeared unsure whether to follow orders from Basil, but after glances from General Edwards they ran off to presumably get water. Top priority dealt with, Basil turned his attention to the next one: the girl.

33: Sport of Sovereign Chairs

With a look of panic Cicero rushed over and began to check the girl for wounds. Basil, trying to remember the steps of triaging, checked her pulse. Slow, but still beating. Next, he checked for breathing, which she appeared to be doing. She was stable, at least she appeared stable, but how badly was she hurt? He began to check her for wounds as well, and though she was covered in blood, the only blood that appeared to be hers was a small amount on her forehead from some sort of impact.

"Where's Locklan?" Cicero asked frantically. Basil remained silent for a moment, trying to think of what to say, but after a long pause "Sorry" was all he could come up with. A grievous expression washed over Cicero's face, though it changed quickly when the injured girl began to move. Basil held out his arms to shoo away everyone now standing over her. "Give her some space" he said, aiming for a tone that would both avoid startling her while also trying to be authoritative enough to get the small crowd to give her enough space to sit up.

"What happened?" The girl asked in a weak voice, mind hazy from the crash. Basil, having an unusual appearance and being covered in blood, was her first focal point. "Who are you?" she asked, a certain degree of confusion and panic in her voice. Before Basil could answer the burning craft became the next focus of her observation. "What happened?" she asked next, voice growing more frantic. Several voices began to answer at once, which only seemed to startle her more. As a cacophony of voices confused her, Grey came into view, causing Basil and the burning ship being put out by soldiers to cease being the center of her attention. The girl screamed, and as she attempted to crawl backward away from the alien being the Lizard King embracing his son came into view. "Kill them!" she screamed.

The soldiers putting out the fire ceased following Basil's directives and instead drew their weapons. Despite everything they had all been through, it appeared they were willing to follow the orders of the last of the royal family without question. Basil, having dropped the shotgun when he sprinted off to save the same girl who had just ordered his death - at least as interpreted by soldiers to mean that - drew his handgun as an uncanny surge of energy rushed over him. "Well, I was just officially ordained as an unofficial Orbital, so that'll be a little difficult." The soldiers seemed unconvinced, but Basil stepped in front of Grey to shield her from potential fire - from weapons Basil himself had given the soldiers. Grey looked at Basil and seemed to disapprove of his actions, though he did not know if it was his threat of using the (object) or just the potential of violence. "Stop this!" Cicero shouted at the soldiers before Basil followed up with "Put that thing out before it kills us all; we have no idea what the fire is releasing or could trigger." The soldiers seemed frozen like deer in headlights, but resumed firefighting when General Edwards shouted "Now!" in the most aggressive tone the General had ever given an order in; at least in front of Basil.

The girl went to speak, but Cicero spoke to her softly. "These people saved you, and me as well. I know seeing everything is scary, and it is to me too, but they're good people." All authority from the girl's voice vanished, and she asked Cicero a question in almost a whisper. "Where's Locklan?" Cicero's expression turned to grief as he spoke. "I'm sorry, he didn't make it. They will pay for it; we will make them pay the most brutal price." At that moment, Basil got the feeling Cicero was likely not just an advisor to the late Redcap King, but likely a close friend and something of a secondary father figure to his children. A knot built up in his stomach at the thought of what Cicero had likely gone through in the recent days, and twisted to unfathomable levels at what he knew he was about to say.

"Casio, please accompany Matilda" Cicero requested in a soft voice, and Casio put his arm on the shoulder of the now crying girl and began to lead her away. Once they were out of earshot Cicero barked out an order. "Seize those three and prepare them for their executions." The Wizard, who had wisely not displayed the weapon he had, drew it. Several Redcap soldiers leveled guns towards the three, but Cicero rebuked them. "Do not fire; a bullet is too painless of an execution for the tyrant and his people." The Wizard stepped in front of the Lizard King, who looked Basil directly in the eyes, telegraphing the final request he made to Basil before their fight. The Lizard King's son began to cry.

Basil spoke. "I'm sorry Cicero, but I can't let you execute a kid who hasn't committed any crimes." The soldiers looked as if they were ready to train their weapons on Basil again, but kept them pointed at the three prisoners for the moment. However, if they did switch targets, he knew they would not be called off by the same people who had last time. Basil had last seen Cicero's face in sadness moments ago, but as he turned to Basil, it only held rage. Cicero went to speak, but Basil continued, feeling the knot in his stomach somehow get worse. "And we need the Lizard King and the Wizard. They know the Elthrice, and have an army about to knock down your gate." Cicero did not seem open to debate, "If you interfere I will have you executed as well." Basil re-raised his handgun, prompting some of the soldiers to point their weapons at Basil again, but the standoff was halted by a messenger who warned of the Lizard King's army moving into the city.

The group seemed to grow more chaotic. The soldiers began to talk between themselves, and Cicero and General Edwards appeared to be debating something. While their attention was busy, Basil approached the three prisoners and whispered "I'm sorry kid, but we need to go now." The Lizard King's son looked at his father and the Wizard. The Wizard glared angrily at Basil, but his father only looked at him with a melancholy face and nodded. The kid began to follow Basil and Grey as they walked towards the jet, and Basil passed Spiro in their first few steps. "We're leaving, things are going to go badly here, you can come if you want" Basil said, whispering quickly as he walked by. "Hey!" Spiro shouted in reply, placing his hand on Basil's arm and speaking loud enough to get the attention of the entire group turned to the three slinking towards the jet.

Basil felt what he could only describe as a vision of himself tearing off Spiro's arm and head, feeling the tear of tendons and the snap of bones. It was so strong that he thought he had done so until he realized his arms were extended. In a moment of hesitation, he lowered his empty hand and re-pointed his handgun in the vague direction of the group standing around him. Everybody's attention was first on Spiro, then Basil leading the kid away. "Kill them!" Cicero shouted.

As the soldiers pointed their weapons at Basil in synchronicity, an army of drones flew out of the jet. Everybody froze, and very noticeably, several went into the castle. ACE spoke over the speakers of one. "They are leaving. If any of you would like to try to stop them everyone inside these walls dies, including the last of your 'Royal' bloodline." Despite his monotone synthetic voice, ACE put a very human emphasis on 'Royal' in a mocking tone; portraying his sudden disdain for the group very well. Basil said what he believed to be his parting words to Spiro, "Fuck. You." before beginning to walk backward towards the jet, pistol still pointed vaguely at the group.

Spiro seemed like he was going to reply to Basil, but addressed the entire group instead. "You are all going to engineer each other's deaths! And after you will leave the corpse of your nations to be raped by the Elthrice!" Spiro seemed to be shouting his words as loudly as he could while still having an oxymoronic air of calm and authority. "They must pay for their crimes!" yelled Cicero back, all energy gone, leaving his words feeling as if they were from a man who had begun to break down. Basil, catching a glimpse of Cicero's face again, saw his eyes were misty. Edwards spoke up as well. "The backward Tyrant killed the Elthrice except that one" he stated while gesturing to Gray, who seemed troubled by that statement. "I don't see why they matter." Spiro answered the question in a tone as if he was talking to a child. "They killed some pirates and their harem; from the sounds of it, real Elthrice could take out this whole continent. You know, the ones Gray mentioned hearing were in the area."

Edwards spoke again, "Then we get information from them and then we kill them." Spiro had an answer formulated for that as well. "And what of the army that's about to come through that gate? What will they do to you when they see their dead king?" Cicero began to speak again, seeming to have regained some composure. "There is no justice in the world if-" Spiro cut Cicero off with a laugh. "You speak of justice? You were going to murder the Lizard King in his sleep after vowing for peace!"

Basil felt a shiver run down his spine as the realization set in that unless Spiro was lying now he had lied about everything that got Basil involved in the war. A rage built up in him, more potent than he thought possible, and being unable to express it in words he just abandoned his slow backward walk to the jet and angrily glared at Spiro. Spiro returned the gaze for just a moment, his calm expression being transiently overruled with a look of terror as if he had somehow telepathically read Basil's rage. Spiro turned away from Basil when Cicero shouted, energy seemingly renewed. "He called it off! We came to blows over it, we were not the ones who broke the peace and deserve justice.

Spiro shook his head, a rebuke stronger than any combination of words. "And the moment you left the room he recanted the cancellation, which was why I advised the Lizard King to evacuate." Cicero fell to the ground, head in his hands, seeming to have lost his last bit of fortitude. The Lizard King smiled his melancholy smile and nodded, which Basil interpreted as confirming the events. The entire group stood in silence for what felt like an eternity, each unable to speak, until gunshots were heard in the distance. "What do you propose we do?" General Edwards asked Spiro, defeat in his voice. "Stop the war." Spiro replied, and General Edwards spoke again, "But what-" but Spiro cut him off with urgency. "No, just stop it now. I can proceed over formal negotiations later, but agree to stop this now and allow the Lizard King and the Wizard to go to their army and call off the attack. Have Basil hold the Lizard King's son for safety and leverage, and allow Basil and Grey to leave freely."

"Okay" was all that General Edwards could squeak out. "ACE, recall the drones" Spiro demanded, although the drones remained in place. "Please" Basil added with a certain degree of uncertainty in his voice, and the drones began to recede into the jet. Everyone turned to the Lizard King, who said "I will be back" in a rushed voice before turning to his son and adding "I trust Basil will keep you safe; everything will be alright." Before anybody could say anything more, the Lizard King and the Wizard sprinted towards the gate, General Edwards following closely behind to prevent Redcap soldiers from firing on the enemy king.

34: Hello Jarvis

Basil's earpiece buzzed. "Where are you going to put the craft?" Grey asked, still inside it. "I'm on an island, an independent nation that split away from the Redcaps called Arkepello, formerly known as Arkepello County." Grey asked for clarification. "And you're sure that they will let you keep it there? If you're worried about the Redcaps soldiers, then what will stop these people from trying to take it or destroy it?" Basil hesitated momentarily, trying to think of the best way to word his response, eventually settling on the truth but told in a way that sounded like a joke. "Well, I'm not sure if they'll let me. Last time I spoke to them one of them ordered I be hanged, so that's why I'm asking first."

"If they ordered you hanged then why are you going back there?" Grey asked with some concern in her voice. "Hold on, I'm there; I'll update you on what they say in a minute." Basil stepped into the tower, seeing a shocked Simon. "Basil?" he exclaimed, adding "I thought you were dead." Basil smiled. "Hey Simon, well, I'm very much not so." Simon looked happy to see Basil, although he seemed a little uneasy after a moment. "You're not here to..." Simon began to say, but his voice trailed off. Basil shook his head. "Just here to say hi, tell Tobias what really happened, and see where I stand." Simon seemed relieved and his smile returned. "Well, I'm happy you're alive."

Basil made his way up the steps, and walking through the door General Tobias exclaimed a similar response to Simon. "Basil!" before a quick pause and "The reports came in that you had died in the fighting." Tobias also had concern in his voice, seeming unsure where Basil stood. "Simon didn't radio you that I was coming?" Basil asked, but Tobias almost laughed. "Well, it's a good thing we're not a nation at war I guess." Tobias sighed. "That kid is a good kid, but still a lousy guard." Tobias spoke as if he was talking to an old friend, but his voice took on a more cautious tone as he continued. "But I believe you must have some story to tell."

"I do indeed. And it covers everything from peace between the Redcaps and Lizard king, aliens – not like me aliens but like they came from space aliens – called Elthrice, and some pretty bumper war stories." Basil paused and changed the topic. "However, I believe before I tell you any of that, I need to set the record straight and correct the lies Jarvis likely told you." Basil first went on to explain the situation that led up to the time Jarvis had ordered Basil's execution and afterward gave a brief summary of events that had transpired after the chaos some hours later. Once he had finished speaking, he waited for Tobias's response, which took a considerable time as Tobias remained silent while mulling things over in his mind. "Well, that is a very unexpected story, even knowing yours before today. You'll forgive me if I need more than your word." Basil nodded. "Look out the window" Basil stated matter-of-factly, pointing to the Elthrice craft hovering in the sky. Tobias looked impressed, but not entirely convinced.

"I saw your aircraft fly off this island several days ago; how do I know for sure that a captured craft cooperates your story?" Basil thought for a moment. "Do you know Cicero or Spiro?" Tobias seemed slightly confused. "I know of Cicero, the advisor to, as you say, the late Redcap King." Basil nodded. "I should be able to have Cicero and the Lizard King confirm my story of events, and with the siege over you will likely have reports coming in soon." Tobias finally seemed convinced. "Okay, I believe you, you have never lied to me before. I will not act against Jarvis until I have more confirmation of your story, but if you can get Cicero and the Lizard King to agree on something, I will believe anything you say."

Tobias smiled as he said the last statement, and Basil grinned knowing he was still welcomed at the Arkepello. The smile quickly turned to a frown, however, as Tobias spoke. "I will have Jarvis stripped from his position on the council for what he tried to do." Basil felt something like a surge of energy wash over him. "Stripped from the council!? The asshole tried to murder me!?" Tobias responded in a more controlled voice than Basil had used. "You have to understand, this is a delicate-" but Basil cut him off.

"The only thing that's going to be delicate will be Jarvis's forehead when I put a bullet in it" Basil said, the surge of energy affirming his new plan. Tobias frowned, speaking sternly but still trying to de-escalate Basil. "I cannot let you do that, Basil." Basil just laughed. "Or what? Will you strip my non-existent seat from the council? If you're so weak of a leader that you can't punish murder then I think I'll be just fine." Tobias went to speak, but Basil left the room and slammed the door behind him. Simon, naive smile on his face, said something to Basil; but he paid him no attention.

Jarvis heard a knock on the door and opened it to see Basil's fist flying at his face. Jarvis lay on the ground, confused and wide-eyed at Basil's presence. Basil closed the door behind him, pistol in hand, and started to bring it up. Jarvis remained motionless as if he didn't fully comprehend the situation.

Something clicked in Basil's mind like a tripwire going off. A flashback of shooting a soldier in the back to take the tank flooded his mind, suddenly warring with the energy that told him to shoot the man in front of him. He went to fire, but the trigger wouldn't pull. He quickly brushed his thumb across where the safety should have been, but he was promptly reminded his pistol had no safety. Something was broken, but it wasn't the gun. What did Grey say about this again? Right, focus. But on what?

Basil realized what he was doing and lowered his gun, sitting on a chair beside the door. The energy and adrenaline began to wear off, and Basil realized how tired he really was. He needed to be asleep, then thinking over everything that had just happened, not carrying out whatever he nearly just did. Jarvis still looked on silently, although he seemed to have finally caught on to what was going on.

“You know he’s going to let you get away with what you tried to do to me” Basil said, staring at Jarvis, expecting a response but not getting one. “Ya’ know I came here to kill you. Well, I guess you probably figured that out with the gun and all. This (object), I’m worried it’s kinda pushing me to be more violent. Ya’ know, like I just snorted a line of cocaine. But I’m getting used to it, and I’ve seen enough violence for a lifetime in the last few days. Besides, the Elthrice had them and look how they wound up.”

Jarvis crawled backward away from Basil, still not saying anything. He was already terrified of this vengeful ghost, and now the vengeful ghost seemed to be insane. “Nothing?” Basil asked before continuing when Jarvis remained silent. “Well, I had some crazy adventures, and you’ll have plenty of time to hear about them since the General is in a forgiving mood. Let’s just say if I were him, I would do a lot more than strip you of your council seat.”

“He can’t do that” Jarvis responded in a whisper. “He can’t do that” he repeated in a louder, more panicked tone. Basil just laughed. “See you around asshole.” He got up and left Jarvis’s home, only to be confronted by Tobias, Simon, and three other soldiers flanking the two – weapons drawn. “I’ve been thinking about what you said” Tobias stated loudly as they approached from the edge of earshot. “Yeah, I believe I owe you an apology. I haven’t slept since we attacked the Lizard King’s makeshift outpost, and I’m still getting used to this (object), not that it’s an excuse for what I said-”

Tobias interrupted Basil. “No, I mean about letting a murderer go free. Basil, surrender yourself.” Basil stood confused for a moment before responding. “Oh, I didn’t kill him; that’s what I was getting to. I mean I bopped him on the nose and hurt his feelings, but he’ll be back to his normal assholery in no time.” Tobias stood there, looking a combination of relieved, annoyed, and confused. “Fine, lower your weapons. Somebody verify Jarvis is still alive. I’ll forgive the outburst, but do not question my authority again.” Tobias paused as the soldiers lowered their weapons and Simon went to verify Jarvis was still alive, but Tobias spoke again. “And Basil, if you have not slept since the fight, go get some sleep. Please.”

“Yes sir” Basil said, before remembering why he came there. “Oh right, is it okay if I park the Elthrice ship somewhere here?” Tobias looked very confused. “Why are you even asking me that, now, in the middle of verifying that you didn’t murder someone? Fine. As long as it’s not going to hurt somebody.” Basil pulled out his phone. “We’re all good.” Grey sounded suspicious. “That long for all good?” Basil replied “Yup, actually hold on, maybe not” and put his phone away; watching as Simon exited Jarvis’s house while Jarvis held him at gunpoint. “You’re going to take the outsider’s word over mine?” Jarvis yelled. Tobias had a sudden look of worry.

“Put the gun down Jarvis!” Tobias yelled, but Jarvis only sounded more angry after hearing that. “Put it down, put it down?” The soldiers flanking Tobias seemingly forgot what soldiers were supposed to do, until they remembered and began raising their weapons. They stopped and lowered them again, however, when Jarvis yelled out “Put your weapons down! Let’s see, who deserves to die more. Basil or Tobias? Basil or Tobias?” Basil stepped in between Jarvis and Tobias, yelling “Hey asshole, you-,” but Jarvis fired, striking Basil in the chest.

Basil began to speak in a sarcastic tone. “Well, I needed to field test this thing anyway; I really should be thanking you. And hey, problem solv-,” but was cut off by gunfire as one of the soldiers fired on Jarvis. “A little late, he only had one shot” Basil said as Tobias ran over to him. “Are you...” he began to ask, but Basil showed him the hole in his shirt and his uninjured chest. “Hey, I didn’t just say I was an unofficial Orbital because it sounds cool, although it does.” Everybody stared at Basil, unsure what to make of everything, and then at Jarvis, who was rolling around on the ground due to his now injured elbow. “Well, I’m going to get some sleep before I get even more loopier than I already am” Basil finally said, breaking the silence.

35: Negotiations

Basil stepped out of the jet and towards the Redcap's keep, keeping a close eye on the soldiers surrounding the building. They were certainly watching him, but they all looked apathetic and tired, at least externally. His radio conversation with Cicero a few minutes prior also carried the same tone. Cicero hadn't expressed any anger or said anything would be unsafe, but he had also acted as if they weren't moments away from shooting each other 24 hours ago.

However, as he continued his approach, he saw Spiro standing outside the building as if waiting for his arrival. As much as Basil kept telling himself he was looking forward to this conversation, he only found himself feeling dread. He slowed, pulling a cigarette out of his pocket to calm his nerves.

He felt the nicotine begin to take effect. Ever since taking hold of the (object), he'd been finding stimulants felt even more potent. Downers like the painkillers he was on felt slightly less effective, but even mild stimulants like nicotine or caffeine felt more potent and seemed to compound with whatever the (object)'s effect was. He also didn't feel his lungs burning, so that was nice. However, Spiro was now within earshot, so he was out of time to distract himself from the conversation.

"I am truly sorry for what I got you involved with" Spiro said as soon as Basil made eye contact. Spiro's words sounded genuine, although somewhat rehearsed, but of course with the recent events Basil questioned their sincerity. The two stood in silence, Basil still looking towards the castle entrance, considering walking through it and leaving the conversation on hold until he better understood what was running through his head.

"Something?" Spiro said, before hesitating and continuing "Anything? Before you tear my limbs off." Basil burst out laughing, remnants of that strange surge of energy fading away. For a moment, he felt like he was joking with the guy who had saved his life and had gone to hell and back with him. Then he realized that Spiro looked terrified. Right, Spiro wasn't joking because he cast them all into their metaphorical hell to begin with. "I don't know" Basil said, finally realizing he wasn't going to come up with anything better to say.

"After everything that happened, I don't even know what to think. I killed people, a lot of people, and got involved in a fight that I don't know I should have." Basil paused for a moment. "Or, well, maybe I was naive to think I could stick around and not get involved. And now I've got this thing, this (object). I'm worried about what I've almost done after getting it and I don't even know if I can trust my own judgment. Don't get me wrong, I'm pissed, but I don't have any answers beyond that."

Spiro looked as if he was unsure whether to smile or remain with his fairly somber face. Eventually, he seemed to settle on a smile. "Well, I'm glad you decided to leave my limbs still attached to the rest of me. I spoke to Grey as you were leaving; she refused to speak to me outside of telling me that with that thing you have, my last moments were probably going to be you beating me with one of my limbs."

"So, why?" Basil asked, ignoring Spiro's response. Spiro looked like he was thinking things over. After a long pause, Spiro glanced around to seemingly ensure nobody else was around and began speaking. "Well, Amigoso is a lot smaller than the two big players here, so when there were talks of peace I was told to keep those two from killing each other. Peace is fine, war is fine, but one kills the other and they inevitably start looking in our direction." Spiro hesitated for a moment. "Well, I would prefer peace. Although I may not have demonstrated it, I do hate to see senseless killing. But that's less relevant when I was working in service to Amigoso."

Basil nodded, mainly as a signal for Spiro to continue with his motivations. "All was well until my listening device picked up the Redcap's assassination plan, so I tipped off the Lizard King. He leaves, but you escort him. However, nobody's shot anybody yet, everything's in limbo; all is good. I tell you the Lizard King is paranoid, you don't take a side, and negotiations probably pick up later through intermediaries. But then" Spiro gestured to Basil's chest.

"Then what?" Basil asked, somewhat confused. "Then you turn on that computer thing on and I know for sure you're not a Loqualian trying to con us. A few hours later I hear that the Lizard King has some sort of secret weapon and he's planning a retaliation, same issue but reversed, one leader on Domum proper means Amigoso is in danger. I figure hey, the alien can maybe stop that." Basil began to feel as if he understood how everything fell together. "Then you found out that that secret was captured Elthrice technology." Spiro nodded. "Yes. And upon seeing the Elthrice crafts I realized I was now in service to all of Domum instead of just Amigoso; and that those things had to be stopped."

Basil stood there in silence, thinking this over, still with no conclusions. Spiro probably wasn't lying now, although perhaps he couldn't be entirely sure. He had risked his life by confessing to double crossing everybody when guns were out, which had stopped a war, although that did seem to work out well for him. Perhaps Cicero had the right idea: just act like nothing ever happened.

Spiro gestured for Basil to follow him, and the two started walking deeper into the castle. "Well, the Lizard King was willing to return to the heart of enemy territory, so negotiations had a pretty good start. The Redcaps wanted heavy concessions for the attack, but news arrived that several counties declared themselves independent from the Redcap crown. Dealing with the uprisings and rebuilding means they're not in a good bargaining position. The Lizard King's capitol suffered some damage at the hands of the Elthrice, though not as much as the Redcaps; but with the generations long decline they've been on they need peace badly."

Basil was slightly surprised at the sudden change in topic. "I'm not really a politics guy, much less a Domum politics guy, but you keep saying these things like they're good news, and they don't sound like it." Spiro continued to walk but turned to face Basil. "It means that nobody can afford to fight anymore, and like it or not, they need to put an end to this." Basil suddenly felt a little suspicious. "And what of Amigoso? Now that you finished being man of the people, did they order you to do some sort of power play during the negotiations?" Spiro turned to Basil and smirked.

"Oh, they're pissed I'm doing this. They're upset when their machines make their way to the mainland, and once they hear I'm presiding over negotiations, the Minister of Information will probably want my head. And not attached to my body. But," Spiro chuckled "being the Chairman's great nephew they'll be hamstrung." Basil's suspicion was canceled by surprise. "You're his nephew?" Spiro sounded amused. "Well, we don't really see eye to eye on a lot; I wasn't entirely bullshitting you when I said an out in my back pocket would be good, but familial bonds are enough to keep him from ordering my execution."

They rounded a corner and the newly appointed Redcap Queen shot daggers with her eyes at Basil. The Lizard King, however, seemed more happy to see Basil despite the Wizard's apparent discomfort. "My son, he is safe?" Basil nodded. "Safe and sound, from the sounds of it you'll be headed out soon?" The Lizard king confirmed such and gave Basil a brief overview of the negotiations. Largely, fighting had been agreed to stop, and most of the front lines being fought over would likely wind up abandoned under each nation's inability to project military power into those regions. As they spoke they took an opposite route to the one Basil had just taken with Spiro, winding up back in the courtyard by Basil's jet. The Lizard King spoke to his son, and after a reunion the Wizard and the Lizard King's son left their company at the Lizard King's request.

"Basil," the Lizard king said "Beyond your interest in this conflict, I believe you are here because you have a question or request?" Basil nodded, not realizing he was that easily read. "Look, I really don't know where we stand, given everything that went on between us." Basil paused momentarily, and when the Lizard king remained silent he continued. "But you know the Elthrice given your firsthand experience. Gray said there were more Elthrice supposedly in the area, real ones that could pose a significant threat. I want to propose a mutual defense collaboration with you, me, and the Redcaps in case they arrive." The Lizard King remained in silence long after Basil had finished speaking. "Basil, you are many things. A traitor and protector, a dangerous outsider and one who may protect us from dangerous outsiders. However, I have seen the destruction the Elthrice can bring firsthand, and you likely prevented my death and my son's death even if they would not have been risked had it not been in part by your hands."

The Lizard King paused for moment after speaking before continuing. "Perhaps, but I would need to know more of your plans to say for certain." Basil went on to explain the situation. The Elthrice crafts, even the surviving obsolete ones, were very durable and would require very serious weaponry to destroy, bordering on nuclear - which delved into a long explanation of what a nuclear weapon was. The Elthrice, though, even Orbitals, were still beings that could be more easily killed. Despite the Elthrice's technical advantage, as Basil explained, weapon destructiveness progressed exponentially while defense against such weapons progressed linearly. With Basil's ability to manufacture weapons such as drones bearing explosives, they could likely take out a large number of Elthrice - especially given they had no crafts with weaponry, at least according to Gray.

Basil suggested bringing wormhole devices to key points on the continent. While Basil was unsure if that particular continent would even be the target - as perhaps the group Grey was a part of only invaded that continent for linguistic reasons given Grey's abilities - they could likely defend the entire continent if needed by transportation between key points. Those key points, ideally, were the Lizard king's and Redcap's capitals, the Arkepello, and Amigoso - though getting one in Amigoso was unlikely. After assurances of Basil's benign intentions and an explanation that emphasized the device's need for power - that could be disabled by turning off the generator attached to the wormhole device - the Lizard King agreed to the plan. "Yes, that does sound to be in the interest of me and my people, and I will agree to allow you to setup one of those devices for travel and defense."

After thanking the Lizard King, Basil went to leave; however, the Lizard King gave Basil a request of his own. "Basil, will you accompany me? If you so agree, you would join me as a guest of honor, and it would be a sign to my subjects that you are an ally once again and not an enemy." Basil smiled. "Of course, I'd be honored. Besides, I could bring the components to set up the device. Do we take my jet, your blimp, or the Elthrice craft?"

36: The Lizard People

"Why is the demon here?" The Wizard asked, seeing Grey upon entering the salvaged Elthrice ship. Basil realized that using the Elthrice craft for transport was a bad idea. Not only did he just reintroduce Grey to her former captors and the killers of her group, but he'd also introduced her former captors to the last surviving member of the raiding aliens that wrought destruction on their capital. Even though Grey did not participate in the attack, she was certainly not popular among the Lizard King's people.

"She lives on the ship; we're trying to research-" Basil began to say before being cut off by the Wizard. "This creature should-" but the Lizard King shot him a glare and he stopped. Although the Lizard King did not appear happy to see Grey, at least he seemed willing to keep his dislike of Elthrice internal as everyone processed the tumultuous events of the prior week.

"I presume you wish to radio ahead and alert your people that this is not an Elthrice attack?" ACE asked. "We do not have a working radio at our capitol building" the Lizard King said, shifting slightly. "My people know of the captured demon machines; they should not attack us. There is a field slightly north of our capitol, you may land there." Though no movement was felt, moments later the door opened to a muddy brown field with no crops. A very light and misty rain dusted the landscape.

"I will go ahead and instruct my keep's people to prepare a feast. You may join us and wait there if you would like" The Lizard King said as they stepped out of the craft. Basil looked around curiously. "If it's alright, I thought I might walk around a bit and meet you there shortly." The Lizard King seemed pleased. "Of course, you may see all our fine city has to offer. I'll instruct an escort of soldiers to join you."

"I should be safe without an escort, I've become pretty capable recently." The Wizard shot Basil a death glare; referencing their previous fight was perhaps not the best answer to the offer. The Lizard King seemed more forgiving, clearing the air with a forced laugh, though his eyes portrayed mixed emotions. "Well, perhaps I know all too well. We will be ready by sundown, finding the keep will not be a hard thing to do."

Basil began to follow the Lizard King and his people into the city, but turned off at what appeared to be a street market. He wandered around for some time while taking in his surroundings, of which the first thing he noticed was the temperature. As soon as he stepped off the craft, he noticed it was probably thirty degrees colder. While the rain likely had some blame, much of it likely lay on being considerably south of the Domum equator. Despite a familiarity with cold and the (object) increasing his tolerance to such things, he still found himself growing cold.

Another thing Basil noticed was the state of the city. The generations of decline that Spiro mentioned seemed evident once he began to look for signs of them, seeing walls that were likely once immaculate stone works being reduced to worn and poorly maintained structures. The clothes people wore around him seemed much more basic, mostly made from wool or leather, rather than the more processed fabrics in the other nations he had visited. Finally resolving to remedy his chill, he purchased a coat from a nearby vendor. Though it took a little haggling to get one to take Arkepello silver, he got the merchant to accept and received a coat that was little more than a large sheet of wool with sleeves. It did at least feel quite durable and warm in the rain, "Even if he had gotten fleeced, pardon the pun."

He checked his watch, the small silver object stating it had been nearly an hour since they landed. Though the sun was still in the sky, it had already begun to fall behind the looming castle, casting an almost ominous shadow across that part of the city. The Lizard King didn't lie when he said it would be easy to find, as Basil could see it in the city center at a higher elevation than the rest of the city, towering over everything else. Though still very light, the rain began to increase; partially obscuring the beginning of a sunset that rested above the tall structure through and small opening in the clouds. Basil almost froze in his tracks at a simultaneous sense of wonder and dread that the sight contained within it.

"Already beginning to look like a local I see?" The Wizard asked as if a statement of fact as Basil began approaching the castle's gate, the torch in the Wizard's hand going out in the rain. Though nobody recognized Basil in the city, as he entered the castle's comparatively smaller courtyard, he began to receive odd looks and stares from soldiers and officials who appeared to hold mixed opinions of him. "I should warn you that the hall is not yet prepared" the Wizard said, breaking the two's silence as they continued their walk into the building. "No worries, just wanted to get out of the cold and could use to set up the generator anyway."

The Wizard changed directions, leading Basil towards the room where they intended to set up the generator instead of leading him to the hall. Basil began to pull out his flashlight as the halls became darker, but with a quick wave of his hand, the Wizard's torch burst back into flames. Basil's surprised look asked more questions of the Wizard than any words could, but the Wizard continued walking wordlessly. As they remained silent, however, Basil asked the other question that had been on his mind. "So, how exactly did you wind up with an Elthrice Orbital's (object)?" Basil expected some sort of glare, but the Wizard seemed ambivalent about the question.

After a long silence the Wizard answered the question in a neutral tone. "This has been in my family's line for generations, though it is not the source of my or my forbearer's magic. I do not even know for certain it is 'Elthrice,' although it appears it may be. The captured one said they had attacked our civilization before, and their existence and collapse predate even our oldest records, so such events may be lost to time. But I myself am certainly not Elthrice."

Basil nodded, still unsure what to make of the situation. The Wizard, however, continued to speak.

"They were a profoundly stupid people. Not in their technology or their knowledge, which were immense, but in their hubris. A people who think too highly of themselves and rely too heavily on their machines become easily understood by others, and they themselves become blind to threats which they dismiss. That alone engineered their downfall. They believed themselves to be all powerful, and that their machines were too complex for others to use against them, and therefore they controlled them with absolute authority. Their hubris failed them once when their own people seized control of them, and then again when those who had seized control did not expect those such as myself to be able to seize it and turn it against themselves."

37: Diplomatic Promises

Cicero took a swig of beer. "With everything that has gone on the Redcap Queen does not currently hold you in high regard, but I believe she will agree. Although our best means of convincing her would be to bring Grey before her to explain the Elthrice, and why setting up such a defense against them would be imperative. May I bring her before the court?" Cicero spoke in the same business-like demeanor as he had all night, retaining his diplomatic but almost cold tone regardless of whether he was discussing rebuilding or personal topics. His last question, however, gave Basil pause.

"Well that's something you would have to ask her about, but I'm sure she'd be willing to speak with you guys." Cicero shrugged. "Very well, I assumed you were keeping her prisoner and did not want to cause an unnessicary conflict." Basil just laughed. "Prisoner? Under what authority could I keep somebody prisoner, and for what crimes could I even hold her? I certainly doubt you would consider helping us fight the Lizard King as a crime."

Cicero looked annoyed. "Under the same authority as any other. Power. I am somewhat astounded you had not figured that out yet." When Basil looked confused Cicero continued, still speaking matter of factly. "You and ACE hold advanced weaponry and an Elthrice craft, which means you hold a lot of it." Cicero finished his drink and wordlessly motioned for Basil to follow, making their way back to the Redcap's capital building – where Cicero had his quarters and Basil had left a wormhole device. As they walked in silence, however, Basil asked the question that he had wanted to ask all night but had failed to figure out how.

"What do you think about Spiro?" Cicero looked slightly confused. "What about him?" Basil felt almost annoyed. "He lied to all of us, but he also saved my life, and probably kept a lot of people alive. I'm just not sure what to think of everything. Cicero just shrugged. "He's Amigosian Ministry, what did you expect?" Basil felt more annoyed that he still hadn't gotten the answer he was looking for. "I mean can we trust him? Will he be sent to do something against us in the future?"

Cicero stopped walking and turned to Basil, voice suddenly seeming a combination of annoyance and pity. "That I do not know, as I cannot know if you will be a danger to my government, or if Nerva will become a threat again and need to be addressed. Do not forget that you have, on multiple occasions, made threats and disobeyed royal directives. You are reckless and a dangerous individual. But, as with Spiro, you helped end bloodshed and your crusade against the potential Elthrice is in our interest, so I have agreed to meet with you and discuss plans. That is how you should consider Spiro."

Basil felt unsure if he should feel angry or embarrassed and was unsure which of the two his face showed. Cicero's expression softened a bit. "Perhaps I was a tad harsh. I may owe you a personal debt, and perhaps your intentions are commendable. But my loyalties are with my nation and family." Cicero looked as if he was about to say more, but stopped as the two were distracted by a commotion near the courtyard gate. The soldiers appeared to be removing a woman in some sort of soldier's uniform, who made a beeline to Cicero when she saw him.

"You backstabber" she shouted at Cicero, who seemed a combination of ready to fight and avoidant. As Cicero's hand surreptitiously made his way towards his waistband Basil took a step forward—ready for a fight. "Who are you?" the unknown woman asked, surprised at the unknown-to-her individual who seemed ready for violence. Basil began to wonder if he had misjudged the situation. "Basil, and you?" Basil asked, taking a step back in an attempt to appear less threatening. "Gina Sekoia, head of the coastal federation." Gina paused for a moment, then added "Are you the Elthrice?" Basil was now even more unsure of the situation. "No, I only have some of their technology. I can assure you there's no mistaking an Elthrice if you saw one."

"Please make the Redcaps hold up their end of the bargain" Gina asked Basil. "A word?" Basil asked, turning to Cicero, and the two stepped out of earshot for a moment. "What's going on?"

"There are a number of independent cities on the northwestern coast, and during the recent tumultuous period they organized under her leadership. Several Redcap county governors requested her assistance in dealing with uprisings and promised official recognition and aid once they had retaken their lands. She lost many of her loyalists during the fighting, and with the newfound peace, consolidated strength is not as valuable. The governors do not have the powers to make such promises, and the crown has decided against honoring the unauthorized agreements."

When Basil heard Cicero finish speaking he thought for a moment. "But I take it that's only half the story? If they just dissolved their government, then wouldn't she return to whatever city-state she was from?" Cicero nodded and looked a little ashamed.

"The coastal cities are large producers of grain and fruit, which are in short supply. We would only expend resources we could not afford to lose, and in doing so it would have only wounded us further as the only fields not war-torn would become so. Her adversaries have come to retaliate for the violence against those who resisted consolidation. She and her supporters haven't been told outright that they cannot leave, but are probably beginning to get that suspicion."

“And there’s nothing you can do?” Basil asked. Cicero shook his head. “Basil, politics is only a game of choosing the least bad apparent solution to a never ending stream of problems. If we let her go, her adversaries would only become angry, and knowing we are weak could harm us by raising the price of grain or covertly supporting our adversaries. If you wish to get involved you may, but I do not know what you could do, and I would certainly not permit anything that would jeopardize our access to grain or make it appear you are doing anything on our behalf.” The two stood in silence for a while, until Cicero broke it by saying an abrupt goodbye and heading through the gate.

When Cicero left, walking behind the guards to avoid another confrontation, Gina walked over to approach Basil. “Did he tell you how he used my soldiers to fight their war and then abandoned us to die?” Gina appeared to have some hate in her words, which Basil assumed was directed at the Redcaps. “Yes” Basil replied, still unsure of what he could do about the situation. “So can you speak to the Redcap Queen on our behalf?” Gina replied. Basil shook his head. “Not long ago I was in those walls and their soldiers were pointing my own weapons at me, the only reason why they didn’t fire was because I had better ones. I don’t think it would even be possible for me to get an audience with her, much less convince her of anything.”

They both stood in silence for a long time, neither seeming to know exactly what to say next. Eventually, however, Basil had an idea. “I do have an Elthrice craft, I could get you and any of your supporters out of here and into some no man’s land on the other side of the continent. And I doubt your detractors would try to track you down if they heard you left in an Elthrice craft, although then again assuming I know politics here has gotten every major power pointing a weapon at me at some point or another.” Gina looked saddened, then momentarily angered at Basil’s joking tone, but nodded in melancholy agreement.

38: The Stars be not My Destination

Basil and Grey worked on reassembling the pieces of the salvaged Elthrice craft they had just examined. Although many parts like the propulsion mechanisms were well outside of the two's capability to disassemble, those that had been accessible had been the obsession of the two for weeks as each part was disassembled, observed by ACE, and then reassembled. "Where would I even go?" Grey asked Basil, a little bit of annoyance present in her voice. "I don't know, you're the Elthrice" Basil responded, somewhat unsure of himself.

"Do you want me to leave?" Grey asked, now definitely annoyed and seeming a little upset. "No" Basil replied, pausing for a moment while trying to formulate a response. "No, I like that you're around. You're the only one who I can relate to in being 'not from around here,' your knowledge of Elthrice technology saved my life at least once, and of the people who have set foot on Domum you and ACE are probably the only two who haven't lied to me or had a weapon pointed at me at some point."

Grey seemed to both look relieved and confused. "Then why did you offer me the craft? I've already been living in it, so the only reason for you to offer it to me after we finish research is to get me to leave." Basil thought for a moment again. "I just don't want you to be a prisoner here. I have the only Elthrice craft, if I can even lay claim to it, and hopefully this will be the only one on this planet. Even if I don't want you to leave, I also don't want you trapped here if that's not what you want."

"Basil, there's nothing out there for me" Grey said in a suddenly somber voice. "Nothing but ruins; and if I did somehow find other Elthrice they would likely kill me. Maybe for my resources, maybe because of my genetics, and certainly because of my previous affiliations with my ᖃᖅ ᖃᖅ ᖃᖅ ᖃᖅ ." She paused momentarily, adding "Basil, you are the closest thing to my ᖃᖅ-ᖃᖅᖃᖅ ." Basil didn't know the meaning of the words she had used, but her voice seemed to carry both reverence and sadness when she used the latter one.

Sorry, I don't know what the word ᖃᖅ-ᖃᖅᖃᖅ means." Basil could tell his pronunciation of the word was incorrect, but Grey clarified. "I don't know of a direct translation, but it was used often by the ones I used to be with. It means something like fleet-family, but the kind that is chosen rather than by blood." Basil smiled. "Well, I would be honored to have a space sister." Grey smiled, but Basil could tell the conversation had drifted to areas of Grey's past she was uncomfortable talking about as she changed the subject.

“So then, little brother, what is this craft you believe you can construct?” Basil pulled up a diagram that somewhat resembled the stingray shaped craft. It was much smaller than the behemoth that the Elthrice made, but still somewhat large for an aircraft. A cabin sat in the center of the craft, flanked by two large cylindrically shaped protrusions from the salvaged propulsion system of the larger crashed craft. It also contained two long and flat wings that gave the craft a somewhat triangular shape when viewed from above. “Well the thruster and power generation of the crashed craft seem to still be working, and we still have enough materials to construct the rest of it, even after using some for more wormhole devices.”

“It looks like a weird design” Grey said, prompting a shrug from Basil. “ACE and I did have to make some improvisations, and it would not actually be suitable for space travel, but the simulations are successful, so it should work if we can manage to put it together.” Grey looked very confused. “Why build a craft if it cannot be interplanetary? We still have this one, and you could build many of your non space faring crafts?” Basil rotated the holographic model. “Because of these” he said, pointing towards weapons mounted on the bottom. “It would have the speed and durability of an Elthrice ship, but be a legitimate gunship and a serious upper hand if any groups of Elthrice decided to come here. Using the propulsion system to accelerate projectiles it could fire just about anything, and with the right projectiles it’d be a threat to any surviving crafts.”

Grey looked astonished, although Basil thought he saw a tiny bit of hesitation on her face when he showed her the weapons. Nevertheless, she spoke as if she had concluded it was a positive development. “Basil, armed Elthrice ships have not existed for a very long time; I do not know that you fully grasp the significance of this. Even the old Elthrice would be terrified of a craft like that.”

39: Westward Investigation

"Alright, you think you can give Cicero a manual of arms here?" Basil asked, putting a random Redcap soldier on the spot. General Edwards nodded, and the soldier gave Cicero a detailed overview of the rifle before clearing, shouldering, and dry firing it. "Not fully automatic?" Cicero asked. "No" Basil replied. "Ammunition is our bottleneck so far, if the Elthrice do invade we need to make every shot count. I've already burnt a fake identity by purchasing bulk depleted Uranium rounds, and your soldiers haven't been trained on full auto." Cicero looked confused. "I've seen our storeroom, how is that not enough?" Edwards replied to Cicero's question directed at Basil.

"Well, with my background in logistics, I can assure you we can always use more. Ten thousand rounds, which is our goal, may seem as if it is a lot, but you start to distribute that among our forces and we could find ourselves lacking quickly."

Edwards seemed to have an air of pompousness when he spoke, or so Basil thought, but Cicero seemed unbothered. Perhaps Basil had misjudged the speech, or perhaps Cicero was just used to it. "Basil, before I forget, I would like to talk to you when you are done here" Cicero said, changing the topic. Basil wrapped up his work on the anti-Elthrice weapons and caught up to Cicero who was standing outside the barracks. "What's up?"

"Captian Brayden had a request he wished for me to pass along. We had reports in the northwest, and he was hoping to request your help with transportation and potentially with an investigation." Basil was surprised by such a request. "What's going on?" Cicero seemed almost hesitant in his answer. "Do you believe in shape shifters?" Basil laughed. "Seriously?" But when Cicero didn't respond Basil asked a follow up question. "Do you believe in shape shifters?"

Cicero shrugged. "I once thought I saw something during the battle of Blood Rock, but it was dark, and the state of my mind was not sound." Cicero's monotone voice momentarily took on an air of something Basil couldn't place, although it felt at odds with his casual body language. When Cicero did not explain further Basil figured it was best not to prod him for more details of the events he was recollecting. "Alright, what's going on out there?" Cicero shrugged again. "I do not know, that's why we're investigating. We received a letter from the local county governor requesting the Queen send forces to investigate repeated attacks on a local town. Its inhabitants swear that the attacks are the result of a shape shifter."

Basil processed what he had heard. "Hm, well, regardless of what's going on, it sounds like you guys need to put a stop to it. I'm sure Grey wouldn't mind if we used the Elthrice craft to save poor Brayden a very long trek." Cicero seemed glad. "I'm pleased to hear you're willing to lend him a hand. I know you may be sore about what happened between you two, but he's an honorable man who has expressed regrets for how he has interacted with you." Basil looked confused for a moment before realizing what Cicero was referring to.

"Hey, if you're talking about the stuff at the festival, that's all water under the bridge. Tons of shit went down those days, and I gotta say that Brayden was one of the most respectful guys I've ever pissed off." Cicero seemed amused at Basil's wording. "Good, well, I will pass that along." Cicero went to turn away, but suddenly spun on his heels as if he had just recognized something from the previous conversation.

"You said Grey would probably be okay with us using the craft. Did you give the craft to her?" Cicero's usual monotone voice changed again, though it almost sounded nervous this time. Basil shrugged.

"Well, I offered it to her thinking she would want to leave, but she turned me down and plans to stay here. She's still living in its quarters, though, so I'm not sure if I should treat it as mine or hers." Cicero didn't say anything for a moment, but had an almost horrified look on his face. Eventually he seemed to settle on a set of words.

"You were going to give away our one leg up against the Elthrice!?" Basil wasn't quite sure how to respond, but in his hesitancy Cicero spoke again in a less harsh tone. "Basil, I can respect your intentions to not keep the Elthrice trapped, but please remember that an entire realm is at stake here if Elthrice were to attack." When the two fell silent again Cicero finally said a short goodbye and Basil left to prepare for the trip.

Almost immediately, Basil reached out to Spiro to ask what he thought about the idea of shape shifters. If anybody were to have the truth of the matter it would have to be him. "How exactly are you connected to this again?" Spiro asked after somebody had finally agreed to find him and put him on the radio Basil had reached. "Same as I told the lady who answered it originally, it's just a radio. I'm broadcasting a signal to it and thanks to magic wobbly electrons in an antenna you're hearing me." Spiro sighed and paused for a moment. "Yeah, but you're not supposed to be able to connect to this one. Walk me through exactly how we're talking right now."

"Well, I sent up a drone high enough to get a good signal to Amigoso and scanned for frequencies. I found the lower bands that seemed to be for your Ministry, and I already have access to the one at Arkepello so I know how your messages are encoded. ACE found this one, the one where everybody off the island is reaching out to the Ministry, so that's where I figured I should try to reach you." Spiro sounded amused, annoyed, and a little defeated. "So you're in all of them?" Basil nodded before remembering he was talking into a cell phone. "Yeah, they're just radio signals."

"Well, you just turned today into a very bad day for our communication guys." Spiro chuckled as if he had finally decided to find this situation amusing. "So, what was your question that accidentally embarrassed our entire intelligence network?" Basil went on to explain his conversation with Cicero, and when he asked Spiro about shape shifters his answer was only a laugh. Spiro seemed certain it was only paranoia, and after Basil cracked a joke about the Salem witch trials their conversation became an impromptu history lesson. Basil next brought the topic up with Grey, thinking if anybody knew anything about genetic engineering or biological anomalies, it would be her. She was unfamiliar with the subject, even on a mythological basis, but was very interested in attending the investigation. If nothing else, to learn more about the less technologically adept side of her ancestry.

Soon enough Basil, Grey, Brayden, and a handful of Redcap Capital Police were loaded onto the Elthrice craft. "We're here" ACE said over the intercom only a dozen seconds after closing the door, prompting some surprise and amusement from the first time passengers. Brayden looked particularly amazed. "I know Cicero said it was like this, but damn, I expected he was exaggerating at least a little."

The investigation itself began, which was well outside Basil's wheelhouse, but from what he could tell somebody had very much been attacking animals and occasionally people. Brayden went on to explain to the group that he believed the attacks were due to either a disturbed or insane person, possibly wearing some form of animal skin. Based on the location of the attacks, he had determined the likely area the perpetrator was hiding in, and the crew set off to determine if Brayden's efforts had paid off.

Basil started noticing the change in scenery as the group left the town. Where the Redcap's eastern portion mainly consisted of forested hills and plains, their western portion seemed much more wet and dense with foliage, to the point where it almost started to resemble a temperate rainforest. Regardless of foliage, however, the group trekked on and made their way in the direction of the location where their killer was most likely to be.

"We got something here" one of the Royal Policeman shouted, adding "Shit, looks like some of it's human" as the group approached. Everyone gathered around, seeing a pile of bones and rotting meat in a clearing by several boulders. Just as Brayden began to tell everyone to keep an eye out for something returning, they heard rustling in the bushes. A crazed looking man with unkempt hair stepped out, walking erratically.

Several of the police force backed away slightly and raised their weapons. Basil followed suit and raised his Mossberg as Brayden gave a command from behind his pistol. "In the name of the Queen, I am placing you-"

Basil blinked.

He was suddenly lost in thought. The person, or the thing, was different now. It wasn't some giant hairy beast like in European mythology, or at least modern media's take on it, but it was different. It was mangy, and oddly uncanny. Had it not been for the effect of the (object), he expected he would have been in some state of fear or dread, although he wasn't quite sure what he felt outside of curiosity. He heard the distinctive "pop" of small arms fire, although it sounded distant and distorted. He turned to see the Redcaps firing on the person or creature, although it remained upright and moving.

He turned back to see something flying towards him. Right, there was a thing there, whatever it was. It struck Basil with an unexpected strength, knocking him off his feet and into the large rock that was previously several feet behind him. Right, durability didn't mean the end of Newtonian physics. He hit the ground, again unsure what he was feeling. There was no pain, and he was fairly confident he wasn't hurt; the lack of pain seemingly the result of the (object) rather than adrenalin. No, he was annoyed. Perhaps even insulted. This thing, whatever it was, had the nerve to attack him. He, who held an (object). He looked over again, Brayden was firing an Amigosian revolver, but seemed to be moving very slowly. Hmm, no, Brayden wasn't moving slow, he was thinking fast. That was weird, though like a lot of strange occurrences he'd experienced, he figured the (object) was to blame. Huh, perhaps if he could find a way to trigger this state of mind it'd be a really efficient means of performing anything that required high mental bandwidth.

Grey started moving, only now reacting to Basil getting hit. Woah, he was thinking fast. She was stepping in between himself and the person or creature, shouting something in Elthrice that sounded too distant to make out, regardless of whether he understood the language. The thing started moving back, getting its first lesson in dealing with the Elthrice: "Don't fuck with Orbitals." Basil stood up, surprised that his movement only felt somewhat slow, while the rest of the world felt considerably slow. The creature seemed to have begun regaining its confidence and Basil picked up his pace. He'd give it props; staring down an angry Orbital and retaining confidence was not an easy feat. He placed his left arm on Grey's as he walked by to signal her to stay back a few paces.

Her face, however, looked as if he had electrocuted her upon contact. Maybe it had something to do with the (object) or his newfound speed. He internally shrugged and gave her a quick smile as if a casual greeting, but she didn't react, and he realized it was probably too fast of an expression for somebody to register. Odd, his newfound speed was wearing off. Time to act.

The shotgun's recoil was almost nonexistent and it sounded muffled. He partially missed his target, hitting upper right shoulder as much as the chest he was aiming at, but the thing fell to the ground all the same. It reached out its left arm as if to claw at him, but he shouldered the weapon again and fired at its head - which became a mist of gore almost instantaneously. The residual slowness stopped, and Basil suddenly felt tired.

"What. The. Fuck. Was. That?" he said; part question, part exclamation.

40: Aggressive Diplomacy

"Basil, are you sure this is a good idea?" Grey asked and Basil responded with a smile. "Yes, Cicero told me that all the Redcaps are fond of you for helping us, and the Lizard King told me it's okay for you to come too. His people might be a little cranky, but you'll be fine." Grey's hesitance seemed to fade and she returned the smile. "I am excited to see the festival. I just can't help but worry they'll be angry with me because of what happened at the last one." Basil just chuckled. "Trust me, it's meant specifically for people who are pissed at each other to speak and hopefully get less pissed. Now, let's go before you change your mind and I'm back to being the weirdest one there."

The two stepped from the pressurized room and found themselves directly in the Redcap's keep. Basil was pleased to skip the hassle of traveling for a day then spending several nights in the inn, instead just coming and going as he pleased. He was also happy to be on the equivalent of the VIP list, allowed in the Redcap keep itself and invited to some important meetings and discussions. It also never hurt to be there early, getting a chance to make rounds while most of the crowds were still traveling or checking in.

The Redcap's Queen was not too keen on chatting with Basil, although Cicero would later say she was at least tolerating his presence. He also saw Police Captain Brayden, with who he had a much more positive conversation compared to the last peace festival, and they caught each other up on what had happened since their previous adventure. Brayden also introduced Basil to his twin sister Mollie, who had been appointed head of the royal guards by the new Queen.

He also met with the Lizard King and his entourage. Many of the Lizard King's people were still skeptical of Basil, but the Lizard King and his son were happy to see him. Even the Wizard seemed to have warmed up to him after Basil and ACE had occasionally provided reading materials or philosophical questions to the Lizard King's son at his request. He even ran into General Tobias, who was present thanks to instant transportation. Outside of one or two existing council members seeming hesitant, and of course Jarvis still in lock-up, they were always happy to see each other and did so regularly.

Eventually, however, day turned to night, and things got more crowded; causing Basil, Grey, and Spiro to find themselves at a campfire in a distant portion of the Redcap courtyard. "So this is where you all went off to" Cicero said, Casio in tow, as he arrived at the makeshift escape from the crowds. "Just like old times" Spiro said, before Basil interjected "Well, let's hope it's not exactly like old times." Cicero seemed amused and lacked his usual air of monotone diplomacy. "So then, what are we up to instead?" Grey replied "Well, I was going to try some of the stuff Basil always drinks, Vodka, but now these two are staring at me like they're in on some sort of joke that I'm not."

“Well, it’s certainly a bit of an acquired taste, especially this cheap stuff, but it’s not a joke” Basil said, but just as he finished he gave a quick smile adding “At least not unless you have a really funny reaction.” Grey looked down at her cup, and as Basil finished speaking she began to gulp it down, before instantly spitting it out. “Uh, that’s horrible. How do you people drink that?” Basil just shrugged. “Eh, it’s not bad once you get used to it. Besides, never a dull moment if you’ve drank enough.” As Basil finished speaking, as if his own words prompted him, he pulled out his flask and downed another large gulp.

Night quickly became morning, and morning turned to late morning for Basil as he slept off too much wine and vodka. The (object) seemed to make recovering from a night of heavy drinking easier, though he doubted that was its intended purpose. He hurried to get dressed as he was invited to attend a private portion of the festival. He, Spiro, a few of the Lizard King’s men, and a few Redcaps were going to have a small meeting at the exact time the Elthrice invaded the Lizard King’s capital.

Basil and Spiro were present, but largely uninvolved in most of the conversations while eating snacks and watching the two parties do some forced socializing. “I do not envy poor Cicero right now” whispered Spiro to Basil as they were partially through the meeting. Basil wondered how hard it was for Cicero to be forced to interact with many people he probably wished dead, but he at least seemed to be keeping an excellent diplomatic mask on. Or, Basil wondered, perhaps it was just Cicero being Cicero - monotone and utilitarian - only taking fleeting moments away from trying to keep a state well-oiled on the rarest of occasions. Eventually, however, the Lizard King banged on his glass to make a short speech. “In just a few moments it will mark the exact time my nation was invaded by the Elthrice, and fought off by my brave soldiers. With our peace and cooperation, we can assure that will-”

The group all turned to the window at the sound of a deafening roar, the unmistakable sound of an Elthrice ship entering the atmosphere. Basil could see chaos in the courtyard through the window as several ships landed and several hovered above, although nobody appeared to be firing, at least not yet. He began a full sprint to the courtyard while barking out orders. “ACE, get the drones ready! Edwards, get the anti-Elthrice weapons to the soldiers! ACE, get Grey on the line!” As Basil made it to the bottom of the large spiral staircase he prepared himself mentally for what he knew he was about to throw himself into. Damn, if only he had something more powerful than a .380.

Basil made his way into the courtyard, feeling the effect of the (object) coursing through his veins. If nothing else, he had that. These Elthrice seemed to be spreading out and looked menacing, but seemed oddly hesitant. Basil approached the first one he saw and started to yell at it. "You, surrender now!" It did not seem to understand Basil's words, but seeing Basil's pistol, it appeared to understand the threat and seemed to be holding something resembling a rifle. It orientated itself towards him, gripping the weapon harder, but neither individual raised their weapons towards the other. It appeared to be wearing some form of uniformly colored clothing, forming an eight-foot monolith of the same dark gray-green color, the whites of its eyes the only deviation.

Basil quickly glanced around, nobody was firing, but now everybody seemed to be in the same standoff as they were. Weapons were raised, and outside of the few near him, most seemed to be grouped around the crafts in a defensive posture. However, several other Elthrice gathered near the one in front of Basil, and the staring match between the two continued. With the (object) still in effect, he knew he had a very confident and angry expression, but the Elthrice in front of him continued to stare with a mix of curiosity and hesitance. When the others had all approached, Basil shouted out one of the few Elthrice words he knew. "(Orbital)!" That seemed to get the Elthrices' attention, the one in front of him getting a surprised and momentarily fearful look on its face as they all took a few steps back.

The Elthrice began to speak in Elthrice, and with Grey now on the line she started summarizing in real time. "He wants to know who you are, but doesn't believe you are an Orbital." Several other Elthrice gathered around Basil, curious but somewhat cautious, despite dwarfing him in size and numbers. One, however, approached closely holding out a knife. The knife seemed made of the same dark gray-green metal the ships contained and looked slightly small with a bit of a belly. It seemed minimalist in its design, but had a very intricate star pattern on the handle. The one with the blade took another aggressive step towards Basil, and Basil took one in kind, effects of the (object) surging further.

The one holding the knife wound up to swing it at Basil and Basil's whole world narrowed to just himself and his sudden opponent. The world slowed, and Basil instinctively reached out his hand, his opponent suddenly taking on a confident smile as he slashed the blade. The world slowed further as Basil's hand gripped the blade, hoping the lack of pain was due to the (object)'s protection and not the adrenaline. He repositioned his left hand, from gripping the blade to gripping his opponent's hand. That was peculiar; his opponent's hand felt as if it was covered in a layer of metal or glass, smooth and cold. Perhaps that was what it felt like to fight somebody who possessed an (object)? "Perhaps the glass comparison was correct" Basil thought as he felt that layer shatter and dissipate like broken glass, before feeling the bones in his opponent's hand shatter.

His opponent's face had finally responded to the changing situation, switching from confident to abject terror. Basil yanked his left arm down, pulling his opponent's entire body downward, and struck him in the head with his right arm. He felt bone shatter yet again, and his opponent fell to the ground twitching. The (object)'s effect wore off slightly, but he could still feel its pronounced effects. The other Elthrice jumped back and started speaking frantically, grabbing their comrade and the knife by his body before retreating towards the crafts. "They believe you now" Grey said with worry in her voice, and moments later the Redcaps opened fire. The Elthrice began spreading out and returning fire, world erupting into chaos.

Very few Elthrice fell, but the Redcap soldiers were cut down where they stood. Basil began to do the one thing he felt he could do: chase the fleeing Elthrice to the large craft in the courtyard's center. Oddly, as he approached the group, the Elthrice didn't fire upon him. He was particularly glad about that, not knowing how hard the Elthrice weapons hit, but reached the center of the courtyard quickly.

He, however, froze in place when he saw one Elthrice in particular. This one was wearing some sort of hood, but his face was blocked by an otherworldly blackness that Basil had only seen once in a dream. Even as the hooded Elthrice turned to Basil at an angle where the sun should be shining directly on his face, it remained as black as before. But not black as in darkness, and not even as a color. It was the void. It was the abyss. This was the first time he had truly felt fear since touching the (object), and yet here he was, paralyzed with it and unable to move.

"Stop now, you're about to be fucked up when our weapons get here" Basil yelled at the hooded one, trying to regain composure after staring in silence for an unknown amount of time. This one seemed to understand what he was saying. "You. Far from home?" it asked, and its voice carried a horrifying echo of a thousand whispers as it spoke. "No, I am home, and my home is under my protection" Basil shouted, trying to keep his voice from quivering as he spoke; at least the (object)'s presence could do that. "No" it replied to Basil.

After what felt like an eternity the anti-Elthrice weapons entered the fray. What had been a wholesale slaughter against the Redcaps moments ago turned into an Elthrice bloodbath. It began with a swarm of drones making their way out of the castle, and deafening explosions quickly turned a large group of Elthrice into gray-green-red piles of mush. Minutes or seconds later, Basil did not know, depleted uranium rounds started to punch holes in Elthrice Orbitals that otherwise seemed immune to the Redcap's standard munitions. The hooded figure shouted something in Elthrice, causing the Elthrice to stop firing and retreat to their ships. ACE's drones and the Redcaps held their fire once it became apparent the fight was over, and many Elthrice ran past Basil and into the craft nearby him as if he wasn't even there.

The crafts left, and Basil realized he was standing in a field of dead bodies, friend and foe alike. Remembering Grey was still on the line he asked “What did he say?” in a voice that was now shaking. Grey spoke as if she was shaking as well. “Postpone.”

41: Aftershock

Basil stood silently while looking over the table filled with captured Elthrice weapons. He felt he should be doing something, but was mindlessly observing them yet again.

The Elthrice's guns, if that term was proper, were weird and oddly ineffective. Most were made from a variety of metals, only a few made of the standard dark gray-green metal that Elthrice used a lot. Some of them on the table had large protrusions on their sides that resembled rattlesnake egg-sized ship propulsion systems, although they appeared to either be inert or cosmetic. More were very simplistic, having the vague shape of a rifle, but barely composed of more than a long tube with a grip and some components near the grip. A few even had an oddly earth like design, although all three had the same mechanisms.

Their internals were all the same regardless of their appearance. A small cylinder of compressed gas would propel an inert projectile with approximately the same force as a handgun, though the larger ones that were almost unwieldy - even by Elthrice standards - seemed to pack more of a punch. Basil, ACE, and Grey had all guessed that the few using the gray green metal and sporting considerable wear were once utilizing the same means of propelling projectiles as the Elthrice's ships; but were modified to use a pneumatic system instead after most systems like that were disabled. The other ones, they presumed, were manufactured specifically with the pneumatic system in mind, slowly changing their design to fit their new internals.

"ACE said their weapons were surprisingly shit?" Spiro asked while entering the room; Grey, Redcap officials, and Lizard King trailing behind him as if following his lead. "Depends on where you set the bar, they're still better than most of the guns within these walls" Basil replied, only realizing it sounded somewhat insulting after hearing himself say it; though nobody flinched or offered up glares. "But we have a manufacturing base and the numbers. They sent like a hundred people thinking it would be an unapproachable show of force and got slaughtered; I think we're in the clear for now."

Grey spoke quietly, as if afraid that vocalizing something would cause it to be more true. "They have about a million in their military, if not an actual military, something they would at least consider to be one." Basil was taken aback. "What? How would you know that?" Grey motioned with her hands. "The, um, the old Elthrice followed a very specific set of rules when they did certain actions." She paused momentarily before adding "What would you call a group of soldiers?" Cicero replied "Perhaps a unit?" inquisitively, and Grey nodded. "They would use specific units as a representation of their strength when they performed apprehensions or were to begin negotiations with another party."

When the group remained silent Grey continued. "The one in the center with his voice, the best word for him would be commander." Basil realized his hands had started shaking, but he tried to steady them as Grey continued to speak. "Those around him were unarmed; they appeared to have arrived to make demands or to apprehend somebody. As that failed, they will likely return with more strength in the future." When the room fell silent again Spiro interjected.

"Basil, Grey told me you were working on a gunship. Do you think that would hold them off?" Basil nodded hesitantly. "The propulsion system failed to start; ACE thinks there's a separate computer system, or at least its equivalent, within those parts. He's taking apart the captured craft as we speak; if all goes according to plan, we should have the captured craft back online in a few weeks and the gunship development back on track." Basil paused, however, as if hesitant to finish his statement. "But we're still looking at months before we get the gunship to a point where it can lift off the ground, and even if we get the propulsion system working, that's still not taking into account getting it aerodynamic, the hull sealed, and the weapons working."

"So, what do you advise us to do in the meantime?" The Redcap Queen asked in a somber but resolute tone, speaking to Basil for the first time since he had pulled her out of the crashed craft nearly a year ago. Basil remained silent, unsure how to answer, but Spiro spoke instead. "Basil, many if not most of them didn't have the, um, the thing you have right?" Basil nodded. "You mean an (object)?" Spiro returned a nod. "The Amigosian Ministry has been moving some crates of weapons off the island, and while I am a little unnerved by what may be going on, I should be able to route a number of them to the Redcap docks."

Spiro paused and let out a quiet sigh as if he felt conflicted, or at least intended to portray internal conflict. "I will get their locations to your agent who goes by Argyris Zacharias, and instruct him how to get the ship names off Amigoso without alerting the surveillance on him. Seize the weapons in the dock and distribute them among yourselves." Spiro gestured to the Redcap Queen and Lizard King. "They will hopefully be an edge against the Elthrice. Basil, I assume you will also be working to better arm everyone to the best of your abilities as well."

Basil looked around the room, seeing a fleeting expression of either annoyance or embarrassment on General Edward's face when Spiro mentioned Argyris. Moments later, however, he remembered he was asked a question, first nodding and then adding "Yeah, of course." Spiro returned the nod and the room felt noticeably calmer. "Good" Spiro replied, adding "And to be clear, what I said does not leave this room. Basil, I told you once that with the Elthrice invasion I ceased serving Amigoso and began serving all of Domum. I intend to keep that promise, but if what I said leaves this room I'm of no use to any of you dead."

42: Mr Smith

“Come on, ya’ just know you’re gonna’ miss interviewing rednecks who got too wordy in their Facebook rants” Odell teased. He paused momentarily, and when Ned Smith only responded with a short smile he continued. “Well, I don’t know what someone like you did to get dead ended down here in Nashville, but if anybody’s gonna’ get out of here it’s gonna’ be you.” An ambivalent look washed over Smith's face. “Well, I can’t say it’s been great. But you’ve certainly made better company than angry rednecks and flopped musican-”

Odell interrupted. “Hey, I think intern Frankie just left a package on your desk. I take it that’s your ticket outta here?” Smith shrugged. “HR’s not going to give a promotion like that. Not sure what that is.” Odell returned the shrug. “Well, I’m going to hit the road, see you around Ned, at least for a few more days.” Smith gave a cursory nod before going over to see what the mysterious package was about.

Smith kicked open the warehouse door. Infrared said it was empty aside from the rats and the one man standing in the corner, but this was shitty civilian gear, so there was no being sure. "Price of being off the books" he thought as he rounded the corner with his sidearm at low ready. He heard somebody clear their throat, and milliseconds later blinded them with his weapon mounted light. An older man wearing a suit that failed to conceal the wearer's weight shielded his eyes. Although the old man seemed about average height, Smith's 6'3 frame dwarfed most.

"No cameras and no backup; you picked a shitty spot to blackmail a federal agent. Especially one with my background" Ned stated in a calm tone, words full of suppressed anger and bile. The old man smiled a cold smile. "Already resorting to threats I see?" Smith could feel his forced calmness beginning to fade. "Alright, I'll bite; what's this offer that's supposed to convince me it's in my best interest to let you leave here alive?" The old man cocked his head as if to feign confusion. “Aside from the contents of the package I sent you? And that they were hand delivered to you in an FBI field office? Or perhaps it’s because I created your promotion, and you now answer directly to me.”

Smith's external posture resumed his artificial calmness, though his internal turmoil grew exponentially. However, before he could dwell on things for too long, the old man handed him a stack of papers. “Here’s your promotion, all wrapped up in a neat little bow. You’ll forgive an old man for being old fashioned and not using those new fangled electronic records.” Smith quickly started looking through the papers, now outwardly projecting confusion as he skeptically holstered his weapon.

“Your team and the location of your own field office in Detroit are all there. You will report only to me or my subordinates, whom I will introduce personally at a later date. You will perform investigations into specific occurrences under my instruction.” Smith felt suspicious, repeating the old man's words to prompt further elaboration. “Special investigations?” The old man seemed annoyed at the question. “Code word classified investigations into specific happenings. And before you ask, Smith, you will not get clarification beyond that. Your job is to collect and verify information I direct you to.”

Smith continued to look the documents over. “This appears legit, why the fuck did you threaten me?” Smith paused momentarily before adding “Sir,” still perplexed at the circumstances, but now feeling as if he may have just disrespected a superior. “Temper, temper” the old man - now revealed to be Baron Polarski according to the papers - stated before pausing as if to let the chastising kick in. Finally, Polarski broke the silence of his creation. “Because people I have leverage over are predictable, which is a prerequisite under stakes such as these.”

43: Hippie Orbital

"You look tense dude" Elliot said, surprising Basil and causing him to almost drop his cigarette off the roof of the condo building. Basil began to focus his thoughts, but realized he had probably taken longer to do so than intended when Elliot spoke a second time. "Seriously, what's up with you?" Basil took a deep breath. "Some real assholes harassed some friends of mine, I'm still trying to figure out the best response to it all and I've been working on things pretty much nonstop since."

"So you're working for the mob" Elliot stated in a mix of confidence and question. "Working for the mob?" Basil asked, surprised at the unexpected assertion. "Come on man, flip phone, doesn't work, bought a condo with cash, mysterious 'friends' being harassed?" You're either working for the mob or a spook. Basil laughed. "Well I can assure you I'm neither." Elliot smiled as if he had figured something out. "Well, you obviously aren't an accountant working for a medical supplier company."

Basil went to respond, but Elliot put a dime bag on the raised edge of the roof. "You need to chill out, this will help with that." Basil nodded and said "Thanks" to the unexpected gesture, thinking that perhaps he could use something more potent than vodka and cigarettes. However, as he reached for the bag Elliot snatched it away with surprising dexterity. "Hold up, I already told you the first offer is free, but you turned it down and now you gotta pay like everyone else." Basil felt both a little annoyed and a little amused. "Fine, how much?" he asked. "Fifty dollars" Elliot replied with a straight face. "Fifty dollars for a dime bag?" Basil asked, now outwardly expressing both his amusement and annoyance. Elliot smiled. "Hey, you're loaded with the 'totally not mob money' and I'm taking a risk you're a spook."

"Fine" Basil said, still a mix of annoyed and amused. Pulling out a fifty from his wallet Elliot handed him the bag. "You got any rolling papers?" Basil asked, and before Elliot went to speak he added "And if you're going to charge me for rolling papers after a fifty dollar dime bag you're going to get whacked by my non-existent mob buddies." After saying it, Basil hoped it was clear to Elliot he was joking.

Elliot seemed to pause momentarily before acquiescing and handing over some rolling papers. As Basil began to roll a joint Elliot picked up the dime bag and began to roll himself one. Basil considered it for a moment, but amusement seemed to win out over annoyance. Time passed, and before long there was nothing but an empty bag and some ash blowing lightly across the roof.

"Tell me a story" Elliot asked between handfuls of chips. "A story?" Basil asked, confused at the random prompt. "Yeah" Elliot replied, "Something from your not mob friends or something." Basil hesitated for a while, before recalling the best story his weed addled mind could locate. "So there's this ancient group of warriors called Orbitals" Basil began before being interrupted by Elliot with a surprised outburst. "You work for the cartels?" Basil was thoroughly confused. "What? I don't work for the cartels, why would you think that?" Elliot shrugged. "Sounds like an ancient South American story." Basil just felt more confused now. "Even if it was, that somehow means I work for the cartels?" Elliot shrugged again, "Whatever man, continue."

"Well most of these warriors are long since dead, but rumors had it they were pretty much indestructible." Elliot interrupted. "Always the 'ancient' warriors that were indestructible." Elliot laughed before continuing his tangent. "No more legends like that when any dipshit with a hot piece can cap someone." Basil continued. "Well, if the rumors are to be believed, you take a room full of dipshits with guns firing on an Orbital and they'll walk out of that room the last one standing. And their fighting is nasty with the strength they have. Torn off limbs, smashing in heads, grabbing knives by the blade or guns that were firing on them but never doing any harm."

"Wow, you are high" Elliot interrupted. "So where do these so called Orbitals get their magic?" Basil shrugged. "Dunno exactly how it works, but apparently it's from some sort of magic crystal left behind by a long dead alien civilization." Elliot laughed like it was the most hilarious thing he had ever heard. "So what, like Star Wars?" Before Basil could respond, however, Elliot compressed his now empty bag of chips into a ball and tossed it on the roof near his chair. "You wanna order us a pizza?"

44: Wounds to Lick

A chill crept up Basil's spine in a way that hadn't since before he touched the (object). "It's not open" he said to ACE, voice a higher pitch than he expected. He turned around; Spiro was wide eyed but said nothing. The Wizard froze in place as he descended the last flight of stairs, likely uneasy seeing the sudden change in the demeanor from what the two had moments ago while concluding their meeting in the upper chambers of the Redcap's keep.

"The old Elthrice appear to be disabling the wormhole network" ACE said over the radio, voice carrying a slightly human inflection of worry. "How soon can you get the salvaged craft in the air?" Basil asked in a tone that carried almost disassociated notes. Before ACE replied, however, Basil added a sudden, almost panicked demand. "Get Grey on the line, see what she thinks is their next move." ACE replied, monotone voice having almost entirely returned. "We have not detected the Elthrice in orbit; I am sending the jet over now and will have the craft airborne within seven hours. Grey is on the line and has been briefed on the situation."

"I believe they are sending a warning, I think we'll have about a day or a half day before they arrive." Basil shook his head, a pointless response to Grey's over-the-radio assessment. "Well which is it?" Grey's response sounded shakey. "I don't know, okay. I'm just guessing." Basil muttered "Fuck" before gesturing to the Wizard. "Contact the Lizard King, tell him the Elthrice may attack and that the wormhole system is down." The Wizard nodded and ran back up the stairs, Basil turning his attention to Spiro.

"Okay, I'm evacuating in the jet, go tell the Redcap leadership to send anyone they want to evacuate into the courtyard." Basil glanced down at his PDA. "ACE is rigging a mobile drone platform, we should be able to get drones to the mainland regardless of access to wormholes within 30 hours, but in the meantime we can group up on Arkepello, they can't disable that wormhole. Tell everyone staying back to get the Redcap military ready with the anti-Elthrice and Amigosian weapons."

The Redcap Queen, Mollie with several Redcap royal guards, Spiro, Cicero, Casio, and the Wizard all rushed into their seats alongside Basil as the jet began to ascend. The cabin remained dead quiet, but after only a short time they were already staring at two different shades of blue - sky and ocean. Basil's PDA indicated that they were getting close to Arkepello, but the intercoms in the jet broke the silence with ACE's rushed voice. "Basil, manual controls now!" Basil got up and sprinted towards the cockpit. "I hardly know how to fly this thing, why do-" but the world went blank.

Basil woke up. At least he thought that he had woken up. He was aware he was thinking, but the world was dark and his head hurt. His thoughts became more collected, but so did the pain, and throughout it all something was in the back of his mind screaming that things were gravely wrong. His hearing returned, and so did a cacophony of blaring alarms filling the cockpit. He realized his eyes were closed, opened them, and was greeted by the hooded Elthrice holding an object, his (object).

"My patience has expired, and you are still present" the being said in its horrifying voice. Being both badly injured and no longer under the influence of the (object) - which the hooded one was now placing around its neck - he was unable to move or speak. The hooded being's blank face stared directly into Basil's eyes, as if doing so was draining his very life essence. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, the being spoke again.

"Collect all (Elthrice) property for its surrender, and those taken today will be returned to you. You will then be banished to your home alongside any who choose to accompany you."

Basil believed himself to have only blinked, but soon realized he had blacked out again. He felt he should close his eyes to rest, but was forced to act as water began to touch his feet. He quickly realized the jet was likely in the ocean, and was certainly becoming more submerged. Trying to stand he realized the nose of the jet was angled up at nearly 45 degrees, and looking through the cockpit door it appeared most of the jet had already filled with water. Making his way into the passenger area where everybody was, he found it entirely devoid of people, except for the largely submerged body of the Wizard still strapped into his chair, producing an ominous red cloud in the water surrounding him.

Illuminated by the light cast through the cockpit door was a large hole in the side of the jet. His hazy mind concluded the Elthrice had bored a hole into the side of the jet, docked their own craft to it, and confronted them mid air before setting or dropping the jet in the ocean. Seeing no other option, Basil plunged into the cold water and swam through the large gash in the side of the jet.

Climbing on the top of the now mostly submerged jet Basil felt even more pain. The cold water made his mind clearer, but he could feel it begin to fade again. The saltwater gnawed at his wounds, including many new ones made by rubbing against the sharp edges of the metal torn apart by whatever Elthrice had used to bore such a hole. Arm hurting as he typed on his PDA, he sent out a message to ACE. "Elthrice attacked. Plane crashed. Help." As he began to take stock of his situation he felt a sudden wave of nausea, vomited, then proceeded to lie on his back in a daze; doing nothing but stare at the bright blue sky and feel the waves below the slowly sinking jet.

The merciless beams of the sun were broken by the shadow of an Elthrice ship. Basil continued to lie in place, water nearly about to engulf him on the now near entirely submerged jet, his sunburnt skin adding to the myriad sources of pain. The door of the craft opened and Grey carried Basil aboard. "You've been exposed to radiation!" Grey exclaimed in a worried voice, but ACE said something that seemed to reduce the fear on her face. "What happened?" ACE asked as soon as Basil was safely on board.

Basil explained everything he had witnessed, and while he spoke he noticed the pain and defeat deep in his voice. Once he had completed his explanation ACE began to relay everything he knew. With the hooded Elthrice's craft's proximity to Basil, ACE was able to initiate a connection to it and get the location of where they had gone. A counterattack was possible, although fighting the old Elthrice on their turf was likely a death sentence.

The Elthrice had also appeared to disable the wormhole devices while they were in proximity to them because they were the 'civilian' equivalent version of the equipment. Using an Orbital's radio module for relaying controls and blocking conventional signals, they could likely create a second layer immune from being disabled by the old Elthrice; granting them their own isolated system. However, Basil began to tune out ACE's explanation; network layers being the last thing he would want to process in his throbbing head.

"Just leave me on the beach somewhere" Basil said, interrupting whatever ACE was saying. ACE responded, suddenly seeming to carry more concern than the robotic voice he had been using. "Basil, it's important-" but Basil cut him off again. "No, I can't think right now. I need to be alone to collect my thoughts and figure out what I need to do." Grey said "Figure out what you need to do?" with anger very evident in her voice and on her face, but when she looked into Basil's eyes and saw his condition her face turned to sadness.

Basil watched the sun move through the sky before dropping below the ocean. "Has it really been this long?" Basil thought to himself, lighting another cigarette while staring at the moon and stars now reflected off the ocean. Eventually Basil heard footsteps behind him, and Grey sat beside him silently for a while. "Here" Grey said while handing Basil a bottle of Gray Goose. "ACE said there's a chance this might upset your symptoms from your head injury, but he also said to say that he knows all too well how important an escape can be when stuck in one's own mind." Basil took a large swig but remained silent for several minutes. Grey put her hand on Basil's shoulder and they listened to the waves in silence, neither knowing what to say. Eventually, however, Basil broke the silence.

“Come with me. We could get a cabin in Alaska or something, convince our neighbors you are into body mods or something, and leave the rest of the Elthrice to their own devices.” They both sat in silence again, but it was Grey’s turn to break the silence this time. “You know I cannot do that Basil, I would not wish the old Elthrice on anybody. That’s not to mention that I would likely be on the list of things they would demand surrender of.” Basil replied, voice lacking all energy. “How could we fight them? They took my Orbital’s (object), and even if they didn’t, how would we fight an army of Elthrice?”

“I don’t know that it would even be possible for us to win, but we must fight them anyway” Grey said, pausing for a moment before continuing. “The Lizard King and General Edwards have already pledged their support, and ACE has devised a wormhole device that should work even if they try to disable it.” Though she spoke resolutely, Grey’s voice carried a solemn tone, knowing precisely the implications of what she was saying they must do.

When Basil remained quiet ACE chimed in. “Basil, we must do this. We can take the craft there, open a wormhole, and hit them with everything we have. Every explosive drone, every soldier the Lizard King, Redcaps, and Arkepello can spare, and every round of ammunition we have in the armory.” Basil spoke once ACE finished. “And if we fail?” ACE took on a somber and triumphant tone in a way which could have easily been mistaken as human. “Then I take the Elthrice ship and any other I can relay to and drive them into the planet’s stabilization machine, making the old Elthrice extinct in an act of revenge and sacrifice to save any and every civilization in their crosshairs.”

When ACE had finished speaking Grey resumed. “It’s unlikely that all of these Elthrice have Orbital’s gear, even if some do.” After one more pause she added the final capstone to her and ACE’s speech.

“The old Elthrice, they are a scourge, parasites that seek to kill their host and rebuild from its corpse. Basil, this is a fight worth fighting, and if it’s truly our last move, then it’s a death worth dying.” Basil sat in silence for a long time, thinking everything over. Eventually, he replied with only one word in a voice that also carried both triumph and melancholy. “Okay.”

45: A fight worth fighting

"So, are we ready?" Basil asked, suddenly feeling as if a burden had been lifted from his shoulders. ACE spoke over the salvaged craft's intercom. "Momentarily, the Lizard King is still taking contingencies in the event he does not return." Basil looked surprised, asking "He's coming himself?" although upon asking he realized that of course the Lizard King would be coming - in fact he would most likely be leading the charge. "He's requested to join you on the craft if that is okay," ACE relayed. "Of course."

Basil paced in circles until the Lizard King made his way on board. "We truly know nothing of the place we intend to attack?" ACE responded to the Lizard King's question. "Unfortunately, no. Only the coordinates and that whatever group of old Elthrice attacked us are using it for some purpose – likely their base of operation." Basil stopped pacing and stood by the modified wormhole device. "Well?" Basil asked, an open-ended question seeking the state of readiness. "Everybody is ready for you to leave, and will continue preparations during your travel" ACE answered, Basil replying "Well then, ACE, Grey, Nerva, if this is it it's been an honor."

Everyone remained silent as the craft's doors closed. ACE gave them a play-by-play as they left the atmosphere, but they felt movement this trip as they were all thrown to the ground. "What happened!?" Basil shouted, ACE asking the same question over the intercom. "Planetary defenses" Grey replied in a near whisper. Basil scrambled to his feet, but looked on at the generator that had been thrown into the spare batteries. The scattered generator pieces were covered in battery acid, making it evident that they could not draw power from their backup sources.

"Backup power is down, what's the craft looking like?" Basil asked, suddenly worried he'd die before anybody could even join the fight. "Auxiliary power is offline, although the console is currently powered. I'm routing all power to it now; the console's power port will be fried alongside the console, you need to wire it directly to the internals." The Lizard King began to step out the door, but quickly ducked his head back in. "There's already a few outside, and looks like there's more on the way!" Basil ran over to the console in a panic, setting down his rifle and pulling out his knife, shouting "Hold them off!"

The deafening crack of automatic fire echoed through the cabin, and it soon became apparent that they were also being fired upon as projectiles ricocheted throughout inside. Basil tried to bend a panel on the dashboard with his knife. The panel wouldn't budge at first, but Basil mustered all his strength and weight into the leverage and it began to bend. Just as it was partially open, however, Basil felt himself flying face first into the console as the blade of his knife snapped. tang

He realized he had hit the ground a second or two after he had done so. It felt as if he had broken his nose, and he could feel warm blood running down from both his nose and forehead. He looked behind just in time to see a red mist erupt from the Lizard King's shoulder, the Lizard King falling to the ground before scrambling back to his feet and returning fire. Grey immediately ran towards the pile of things nearby, grabbing the modified wormhole device and setting it beside Basil so quickly that at first he thought she threw it.

Though he expected her to help him open the panel, she instead said something in Elthrice and took on a somber looking face, before saying "Hurry" and picking up Basil's rifle. Basil returned to trying to open the panel, an intense fear suddenly washing over him that she would turn the rifle on herself, but with the second set of automatic bursts that filled the cabin, he knew that was not the case.

He reached his arm past the bent panel, scraping it on the sharp metal as he shoved past it. Feeling around he found the broken blade, and resisting pain of grabbing the blade he held it tightly. Next, feeling around for the wires while the cutting implement dug deeper into his hands, he cut and grabbed the wires before pulling them and the knife blade from inside the console.

Basil froze for just a second, staring at the dark red blood oozing out of his hand and arm, but quickly resumed his work. Attaching the cut wires to the wormhole device, he hoped against all odds that ACE could route enough power to get the device started. Nothing happened for several seconds, but just as Basil began to think all hope was lost, an incalculable number of drones began to materialize in front of him. Grey and the Lizard King jumped out of the way, and the drones flew out of the door of their now wrecked Elthrice craft.

The Lizard King immediately grabbed his shoulder in pain now that they were momentarily out of the fight. Taking the moment afforded as ACE dumped their entire inventory of drones on their foes, Basil picked up the wormhole device now running off power from the facility. He bolted outside and set it on the ground, claiming a small foothold on the alien planet before any of the old Elthrice could return to retake it. A gush of wind blew as the wormhole changed from the pressurized room to one nearby the Lizard King's army; Domum sucking Elthrice air as thousands of the Lizard King's soldiers rushed out to enter the fight.

Many Elthrice were already making their way back to the battlegrounds, both afoot and in landing crafts, and Basil stood unmoving in place as a brutal and one sided battle began to take shape. The Lizard King's soldiers were cut down where they stood, taking out some Elthrice but losing scores of troops per kill. They continued to pour out of the wormhole, however, even as they had to climb over the piles of bodies of their fellow soldiers to reach the front. Basil's immobility was broken, however, as one ran through and thrust a wormhole device into Basil's hands before running off to join the others.

Basil ran forward in the direction of a ruined city where the Elthrice seemed to be emerging from. The Lizard King's soldiers appeared to be gaining a small amount of ground, and Basil approached the front line. The already red dirt was stained with blood, and only the combination of painkillers and amphetamines coursing through his blood gave him the strength to climb over the bodies that lay in front of him. Making it as close as he could to the front lines without getting gunned down, he laid the wormhole device down next to a dead Elthrice clutching one of the eerily human like weapons. Before he could process anything, though, many soldiers began to pour out from the wormhole device - one handing Basil another.

Basil made his way towards the next portion of the front lines that ACE directed him to, and yet another wormhole was opened. Many Redcap and some Arkepello soldiers began to pour out alongside each other. The battle raged on, and Basil began to return to the crashed craft to receive treatment for his wounds. More Elthrice ships continued to land; a majority of the soldiers on Domum and many civilian volunteers making their way to meet them on the battlefield.

46: A death worth dying

Basil kept walking towards where ACE had said the Lizard King was. His joints ached, and the gunshot wound on his stomach kept reopening. Still, he knew it could be worse - he would probably have collapsed from pain or exhaustion had it not been for the additional doses of painkillers and amphetamines. He finally found the tall man, now sporting several more bullet wounds than he had last seen him with, although luckily nothing life threatening yet. He sported the same rifle slung across his shoulder, and his sword's sheath had blood on it now, although Basil couldn't tell whether that was from the use of it or another form of violence.

"Nerva" Basil said, getting his attention. He turned and began speaking, telling Basil the bad news he already knew. "The tide is beginning to turn, and not in our favor. All of my soldiers I can bring have come, and our numbers are beginning to thin. What do you propose we do?" Basil pulled up ACE's drone surveillance on his PDA. The Lizard King's mouth opened as if he were about to speak but could not do so, seeing the destruction only visible with the impersonal observation of a UAV. "The hooded one appears to be in that building, and a majority of them seem to be spread out along our front lines. If we can get through them and make a mad dash we might be able to cut the head off the snake." The Lizard King nodded, but spoke as if Basil didn't understand his own proposal. "That may work, but I must tell you that it would be suicide. We may be able to make it to the building, but there would be no way we could hold it for any length of time, and our front lines here would likely be pushed back if I put my best men towards this."

Basil nodded. "I know, but we're already losing ground and ammo. You, me, and the best men willing to volunteer for it. We can make a push, then get the rest of them here to evacuate unless the Elthrice's front lines collapse entirely. It's our only shot." The Lizard King nodded and spoke with a triumphant voice despite the circumstances. "Very well, I will gather my best willing soldiers. Speak to Edwards; he is coordinating most of our troops and will need to be informed." The Lizard King ran off to collect a group, and Basil ran over to restock his supplies, grabbing some of the last magazines from the wrecked craft.

"Nerva and me are going to try and punch through the front lines and get to their base of operations. I want you to go to the facility, if this all goes south it's yours" Basil said while approaching Grey at the makeshift field hospital. She gave a sorrowful looking expression and shook her head. "I can't do that Basil, not while I'm needed here." Basil nodded. "Just please promise me you'll go there rather than let yourself be captured if the camp is about to be overrun." This time, it was Grey's turn to nod silently, a grievous expression coming over her face yet again.

As the silence stretched on, Grey finished treating the soldier she was helping and looked directly at Basil for the first time in their conversation. "Basil, you're a great brother." Unsure of what else to do, Basil quickly embraced her, shortly after stepping back and seeing his blood added to the other blood on her environment suit. "Please come back" she said as Basil went to leave. "I'll try" he lied.

"Edwards" Basil said, finally finding him on the other side of the makeshift field hospital - also tending to the wounded. "Me and Nerva are going to try and cut through the front lines, I need as much support as you can give." Edwards shook his head. "We're already beginning to lose ground, I cannot spare men so you two can play martyr." Basil took on a grim but authoritative tone. "Edwards, we're losing ground and there's no one else coming. We're 34 hours into our estimated 38 hour supply of ammunition, and once a hole forms in our front lines they'll be in this camp within the hour." A look of helplessness washed over Edward's face as if he had been deluding himself about their condition until now. "Okay" he replied, voice suddenly weak. "I'll do what I can."

"You know Basil" the Lizard King said after getting his troops into a wedge formation. "There were times around when we met that I believed we had done what we would be remembered for. The war that ended wars and the decisions made that affected millions. Now, perhaps in the face of this, they will be forgotten." Basil shook his head. "There are no ends of wars. We've seen three civilizations, all of which have thought they were done with war at some point, and here we are." The Lizard King looked taken aback for a second before nodding and smiling a very brief smile. "Well, regardless, we have both come a long way since the first night we met."

Basil nodded, and the Lizard King seemed to change to the demeanor of a commander in an instant. "Stay close to me, I don't want you to be the first thing they shoot at, but if our ranks get thinned be ready to join the fight. Though we have seen almost nobody with Orbital's objects that may change as we push through; only a few of my soldiers have depleted uranium rounds, so they may need us for that as well." Basil nodded and the formation began to move, temporarily flanked by soldiers on each side organized by Edwards.

The next few minutes offered death and destruction that even the past hours did not hold, at least not in Basil's presence. They began to make headway, cutting an opening into the Elthrice's defensive line, but only at the cost of wave after wave of the Lizard King's men sacrificing themselves for the last push. As soon as the line began to break the Lizard King shouted "NOW!" and he, Basil, and a large group of his soldiers began nearly running in an attempt to keep the Elthrice from catching up and stopping their advance. As Basil looked back the Elthrice seemed to be short on troops as well, suddenly causing him to second guess their plan momentarily. However, they were still losing ground to them, so he ultimately told himself this was the only way to turn the tide.

Basil opened fire alongside the Lizard King and his soldiers. Cutting through the line of defenses made the trip to the building begin to speed up, but they were now a small group surrounded by any Elthrice that could catch up or move in from the nearby buildings. The Elthrice's line was quickly reinforced, and Basil could see their fate was sealed with nowhere but forward to go. The firing became one singular noise as their best weapons fired upon seemingly endless poorly armed Elthrice. If nothing else, Basil figured that was the only reason why they were still in the fight; though they were losing people at a hugely faster rate than the Elthrice, a long stretch of gaining ground meant all the best weapons were still in play on his side - even if ammo and people were quickly becoming scarce now.

Basil saw the dome in sight as they rounded a bend, although their ranks were quickly thinning with the endless Elthrice coming their way. Losing all cover, a fast walk turned into a full sprint towards the dome, with some of the few remaining soldiers staying a distance behind to cover the ones in the front. Basil and the Lizard King imminently opened fire on a group of Elthrice outside of the dome, most dropping without (object)s, but some clearly having some. Making it to what appeared to be a door into a large dome, Basil ran through an arch that revealed walls nearly six feet thick.

Basil ran into the enormous dome, shocking the many Elthrice in it. The Lizard King ran through the arch, but was stopped in the center of it with invisible walls trapping him within the arch itself, preventing him from doing anything as he watched the Orbitals clear out what remained of the soldiers outside. Basil opened fire as the armed Elthrice in the building raised their weapons, although a majority of the Elthrice seemed unarmed and ran for cover. In one split second every Elthrice froze, lowering their weapons to the ground, and Basil stopped firing a few seconds later. The hooded one stepped out from behind what appeared to be a metal crate and Basil aimed his rifle at him but did not fire. The other Elthrice seemed to be a mix of worried and terrified, but the hooded one's body language and horrifying voice seemed to indicate that it was calm.

"The other will soon be dead, there is no need to pretend, one who calls himself Basil" the hooded one said, causing Basil to pause in confusion. He went to speak but the hooded one continued. "An impressive feat has been performed, better than the ingrates I have been made to tolerate in our rebuilding. Join us, your crimes will be forgiven, and you will be given great standing and technology; you can perform an even greater service than the true Elthrice who initially accompanied me."

Basil let out a laugh that almost sounded insane before emptying the remainder of his magazine into the hooded one. Unlike Orbitals, however, the hooded one appeared unaffected by the onslaught of angry uranium. In a blur the hooded one raised something, and Basil fell to the ground, feeling numb aside from a warmth feeling around his chest and back. Basil tried to move, but found himself unable to do so. The hooded one approached Basil and raised an Elthrice weapon, saying something that Basil could not process. He went to raise his handgun, but the hooded one pointed his weapon at Basil's head and the world went blank.

The Lizard King screamed at the hooded figure, punching the invisible walls until blood appeared floating before him. “You will never get away with this! I will kill you and wear your cloak as a trophy!” The hooded one approached the Lizard King, although it looked on blankly without saying a word.

47: Abyss Awakens

The dreamer stared into the vast abyss once again, as he had before in another dream. The abyss grew and contracted, leaving the dreamer to watch in peace. Soon, however, the voices began to speak. They spoke, a thousand voices speaking at once, all different and all incomprehensible.

The dreamer was disturbed from his slumber by the sound of these voices. "Quite!" he shouted. Or perhaps thought? One needed a mouth to scream, yet the dreamer did not have one. The voices seemed to hear him, however, and stopped speaking. The dreamer was once again at peace, although it was not long before the voices began to speak again.

The dreamer began to make out individual words, apparently spoken in the dreamer's native tongue. No, perhaps they were not. Odd, the voices were the Elthrice's language, yet the dreamer could hear them nonetheless. The voices continued to grow louder until the dreamer had enough again. "(Quiet)!" he shouted.

The voices went quiet again, seeming to accept a command in that language more willingly than the other. Instead, however, the voices became one. "Rise!" they commanded in yet another language, different from that of the Elthrice's or the dreamer's native tongue.

Nerva, king of the Lizard people, leaned against the wall of his invisible cage. He hoped it portrayed a sense of confidence as he got physically closer to the hooded one; as opposed to the real reason of being tired, thirsty, and slightly low on blood. Odd, though, he didn't feel afraid staring the hooded one down. He had seen the lack of fear in Basil, the hallmark of one at peace with the expectation of death - especially after ACE had provided him with the injections. In truth, however, he had always considered himself dead and gone ever since he had narrowly survived the failed uprising that went after the ruling family when his father was king. A cruel joke, perhaps, to live a life expecting to die suddenly and without warning, only to die the slowest and most easily seen of deaths over hours or days in a cage.

The hooded one turned away as if to leave for lack of interest. There had to be something he could do or say, a battle of wits and ego that could provoke the enemy into a rash move. What did the Wizard, his friend and closest advisor for his entire reign until the attack, say when the other Elthrice invaded and were repelled? "You are a stupid people" the Lizard King thundered, causing the hooded one to turn suddenly. Intrigue, amusement, or anger he couldn't tell - but attention all the same. Think Nerva, why did the Wizard say that? The hooded one remained silent while facing him, no expression or body language that could be read.

"You are weak; your reliance on your tools weakens you. You are blinded by pride and ignorance, then when another people come along they are both strong and yet can also use your tools. Your own people destroyed you once before, I have fought your kind before, and my people will continue the fight without me. With our strength alone we could repel a thousand of your empires, and yet you are nothing but scavengers picking off your own corpses while we have already mastered your tools as your forbearers once did."

The hooded one remained silent and unexpressive before being whisked away by another Elthrice. Some time lapsed, minutes or hours he could not tell, but the distant sound of gunfire erupted nearer to the dome and far from their front lines. They were definitely on his side; he could hear the distinctive sound of automatic fire from Earth weapons and the more muted pop of Domum and Amigosian weapons.

How could they be so near? They could have tried to cut through the front lines and attacked from two sides, but no, they didn't have the numbers to do that without being crushed. A frightened strategist may have tried something like that, but he'd been on the opposite side of Edwards enough to know that he would never over extend himself that way. But then, what was happening?

"How many do you have?" the voices of the hooded one boomed, surprising the Lizard King who didn't notice he was present again. Alright, so this was good news, but how? "What do you mean?" the Lizard King asked, trying to glean more information. "How many!" the hooded one's voices boomed again, anger and rage so potent it left the Lizard King feeling as if he was physically attacked. He took a breath, tried to focus, and shrugged. "How would I know from within this cage? I am under no illusion that I will leave this cage alive, tell me what has happened and I may know more."

"Your people captured a transport vessel. There are more exiting it, and the vessel cannot be caught by our vessel operators." The Lizard King suddenly realized what had happened; he should have been angry, his second in command had disobeyed his orders, but all he felt was pride welling up in his chest. No, that was wrong, his son was no longer second in command, he was king by right and his father was already dead to everybody else. He was the king who ran into battle, never to be seen again alive by his subjects. This would be a good move by his son, the new king, a hard and decisive decision that could potentially turn the tide of a war.

Perhaps they would sing songs of him for generations, the noble king who ran off into battle to save his kind. Or maybe they would remember him less fondly. His son at least would remember him for the man he tried to be, and perhaps that mattered more than songs. A smile washed across his face and he felt his eyes grow misty.

"My son is just as bullheaded as his father. I ordered him to stay behind with a small contingent of troops, but it appears that, like his father, he is willing to sacrifice it all to see you stopped." The hooded one stepped close, only inches and an invisible barrier separating face from missing face. The Lizard King spoke quickly and in a higher tone, as if a man about to be executed.

"Kill me, it does not matter, you have lost. You cannot stop my people, and you cannot stop that craft because it is being controlled by a synthetic mind." One nearby Elthrice looked shocked, but the hooded one remained still. "You cannot disable the wormhole devices, you are weak salvagers while we have mastered your tools. You will fail, you will lose, and there is nothing you can do!" The Lizard King realized he had started yelling, nearly collapsing due to exhaustion. The hooded one remained unmoving, but the Lizard King suddenly stepped back in fear - the remaining color leaving his face.

48: Rejected-Death

Something was very wrong. He was lying there with two weapons beside him, though he couldn't remember why. A being was standing near him, pretender standing by the arch; both so easy to see, even as he lacked sight. Something stirred in him, a strength and rage flowing through his veins that he could not comprehend, urging him to rise to his feet. He wasn't aware of moving, his body feeling numb and rubbery, but in an instant he was upright to confront the other being. The other being, wide eyed and terrified, took a step back and drew a knife with a worn star patterned handle - a testament to the Elthrice's ruined insult of what they wished to be, what they once were. He felt no resistance, first pulling the Elthrice's body down by the arm that thrust the knife, then as a hand, his hand, permeated the Elthrice's body.

The Lizard King stepped backward until he reached the back of his cage; watching in horror as the body of his former friend, still missing a significant portion of its head, struck down an Elthrice. The hooded one also stepped back, shouting something in Elthrice that he couldn't understand.

"(Impossible)" the pretender shouted, the hollow echos of its voice filling the dome. Another Elthrice approached the dead one standing, yelling "Stop!" while outstretching its hands. Everyone in the dome froze, and after a moment of silence, the one that had approached whispered "Rejected-Death" before several other Elthrice began to talk among themselves in hushed tones.

"(He is a Rejected-Death, he has greater authority and will lead us to greatness)."

The hooded pretender ordered the fight to continue, but the Rejected-Death interrupted with an order of its own. "(Your arrogance is only matched by your insolence, attempting to seize that which does not belong to you. You are an insult to what you believe yourselves to be; release your captives, sabotage the world mender, then slit your throats)." Every Elthrice froze in place, all looking on as the intruder spoke in their language. One gave an order, and many cut their throats in unison. "Go!" yelled a shorter Elthrice in a panic as it left, another approaching to plead with the Rejected-Death. "(Stop, you are us; you are Elthrice, our protector and commander)."

The Rejected-Death ran toward the hooded pretender, but several others stepped in to try and stop him. He gripped the blade he had taken off the first one, slashing it towards the closest one. At first he thought he missed, but as deep red blood poured out it became apparent he had sliced through the Orbital's side; cutting ribs and shoulder, breaking bone and slicing clean through despite feeling no resistance. The other Orbital attempted to grab him, but he pushed it off and slashed quickly, the Orbital dropping to the ground and clutching its neck.

The Lizard King stepped forward, realizing the invisible walls of his cage were no more. He stared fearfully at his former friend, head mostly healed. "Go, retrieve the captives!" the Rejected-Death shouted at him before running towards the exit the hooded one had taken; voice still carrying the thousand whispers as it had while he spoke Elthrice.

He ran after the hooded pretender only to see him escaping in a vehicle; although he lacked the state of mind to question it in the present, a vehicle that looked disturbingly human, made of paper thin Elthrice metal. The Elthrice driving it watched the Rejected-Death, now with a nearly healed face, shrink in the growing distance. Turning to contact others, however, he lost control of the vehicle as a knife sliced through him from behind, the Rejected-Death now behind him. All inhabitants were crushed or ejected from the vehicle as it began rolling and crumpled under its weight, coming to rest at small obelisks worn by years of sand and debris.

The hooded pretender lay on his back, suddenly trying to crawl backward as the Rejected-Death standing over him came into focus. "(Do you even know who you are!?)" he shouted. "(I am the Rejected-Death, of your creation)" it replied angrily. "(Then)-" the hooded pretender began to say, stunned by a blow to the head, before the Rejected-Death brought its foot down on the hooded pretender's arm reaching for the knife in its cloak. The arm of the Elthrice was crushed and nearly disembodied from the force, shattering bone and tearing tendons alike. Though he knew such a wound could prove fatal, by blood loss or damaged muscle tissue entering the bloodstream, it remained still in disbelief at the being that towered over it.

"(A hundred thousand generations call out to me. You are unworthy of your mantle, petty warlord, and a sad whimper preceding your kind's deaths)." The hooded pretender resumed its attempt to crawl backward, but failed with only one working arm. As the Rejected-Death stepped over him he shouted "(What have I brought upon us!)" before it put a foot through his chest, facing no resistance as the torn boot met the dusty ground below; repeating such a blow to the head of the no longer hooded pretender.

"Basil?" Spiro asked with a shaking voice.

49: Picking up the pieces

"Basil, is that still you?" Spiro asked, fear and uncertainty in his voice. Basil turned around quickly, face fully healed, and Spiro jumped back. Basil froze in place, mind returning to himself as he stared into the blood soaked dirt, some time later stepping backward and responding in a shaky voice that no longer carried the whispers it once did. "I'm not sure." Spiro looked as if he was about to vomit, but his words carried a more collected tone. "ACE told us that radiation levels have started to increase, we need to leave now."

"You go on ahead, I'll catch up" Basil said with pain in his voice. Spiro turned to leave, but froze in place and turned back in the middle of his first stride. "Basil, come on" he replied, a new worry in his voice. Basil stood silently, so Spiro spoke again. "I'm not leaving without you, so let's go." Basil felt a pang of anger rush through him, Spiro using his own death as a means of forcing Basil to avoid his. However, a sense of guilt quickly washed over him, and they began to walk silently toward their camp. The two walked past wounded being brought through wormholes, the Elthrice all evacuated or dead - many with cut throats, and the Domum dead left to share a tomb with their fallen enemies. Walking by the crashed Elthrice ship Basil stepped through a wormhole to the Arkepello. The area was crowded for some time, but quickly cleared as the wounded were brought away for treatment and the healthy returned to their respective nations.

"I was worried I wouldn't see any of you again" Grey said, walking over to Basil, Spiro, and the Lizard King, the latter speaking to his son. Grey seemed to notice the three didn't share the victorious expressions as the other captives, those who stayed behind, and the soldiers who hadn't seen the worst of it. "Are you okay?" she asked, before realizing the nature of the question was realized. Nobody was okay; she certainly wasn't, and Basil was covered in blood - his own and of others - so she re-worded the question. "What happened?" Basil replied with a quivering voice. "I ordered the death of an entire civilization, and" Basil paused for long enough that Grey thought he was done speaking, but resumed finally "and I got really hurt." Grey replied, first trying to reassure Basil, although unknowingly misunderstanding what he had meant when he referred to his order. "That was an army, not a civilization, and most probably escaped on crafts. Those that didn't were there to kill us or worse, what was done had to be done."

Her words, she found, were not just for Basil. She had taken several lives in the fighting, and having lived her life among scavengers and killers while promising she would never take a life, was something weighing on her as well. She took note of Basil's later addition to his statement, and seeing the blood on Basil who seemed unharmed, responded with a positive sounding question. "You got the (greater relic of the ancient ones)" back?

Basil felt suddenly uneasy, hearing such meaning behind a word that had been translated to him in the past as simply "Object." It meant something different, ominous even, and suddenly understanding the Elthrice's language left him feeling as if more questions were added than answers given. When Basil remained silent Grey repeated her question in a suddenly concerned voice. "Yeah" Basil answered, fatigue deep in his voice.

Cicero, clearly glad to be free but oblivious to the mood of the small group, approached. "I never expected to be saved by your and my soldiers fighting alongside each other" Cicero said to the Lizard King before turning his attention to the whole group, speaking in a rare jovial exception to his usual muted and business like demeanor. "Come on, let's get something to drink and eat before everyone drinks every drop of wine on this island." When the group remained quiet, however, Cicero took on a somewhat concerned face. Basil shook his head, fatigue cutting deeper still into his voice. "I just need to be alone for a while. I'm, um, I'm glad you made it out."

Basil returned to the secluded spot by the ocean where he'd spent what felt like the previous day, even if several had passed. Many hours passed, daylight turning to sunset as he contemplated what had happened. As time passed many visitors came to check on him, but each time he had a short conversation that amounted to asking them to leave him be. As all traces of the sun were vanishing, however, Grey returned for a second time seeming more worried than the first. "Are you going to stay out here forever?" Basil responded "I just might," words sounding more antagonistic than he had intended, though Grey sounded unfazed.

"You can't continue to dwell on this, things like this took me years to process, and you will never get better by being alone and reliving the events." Basil continued to stare out over the ocean, not turning back to Grey standing behind him when he spoke. "I ordered the destruction of the world mender. How many people died? Thousands, hundreds of thousands, millions? And when I killed the hooded one, he was horrified of what I had become and what that meant." Gray seemed to process Basil's words momentarily, finding the right way to respond. "Basil, when an evil being is horrified of you that's not a thing that should eat you up inside. That's something that should bring you pride." Basil felt an increasing level of weariness in his voice when he responded. "It's not just him; a lot of things happened, and I just need to take some time to understand them. I just need to think right now, please leave me be."

Gray began to respond "Basil, I already told you-" but paused mid sentence. "Basil, how did you know to call that device a world mender? Who told you?" Grey asked in a concerned tone of voice. Basil began to respond with "Nobody did, I-" but Grey interrupted him. "(Who told you what a world mender is?)" Basil responded "Nobody" in a suddenly annoyed voice, before realizing he had just responded to a question asked in Elthrice. Basil turned and could see tears welling up in Grey's eyes as she shouted at him, this time not in Elthrice "Who told you what a world mender is?" before running in front of Basil and seeing he wasn't wearing the pendant that the Lizard King's men had made to house the (object) when they acquired it.

Basil looked on with an expressionless face before responding with an "I told you I need to be left alone," fatigue turning to anger. Grey spoke again in Elthrice, shouting in a panicked tone. "(Tell me brother, if you are still you, who told you what a world mender is?)" Basil shook his head. "(You already know what I am halfling)," and upon speaking Elthrice, he heard his voice carry the thousand whispers as it had before.

Grey jumped and started walking backward as if Basil had transformed into a snake poised to strike, face overcome with dread as she began to run away. Basil, never moving, resumed watching the waves move under the moonlight.

50: The Mountain

The last thing Lewis could remember was falling. The blizzard set in earlier than expected, and one wrong step had sent him plunging into the depths of a crevice hidden beneath the snow. His head throbbed and he could feel a great pain emanating from somewhere, but he couldn't make out where the pain was coming from. He tried to feel around for his radio, but between the dark and his confusion he only managed to nudge a piece of gear. That piece of gear, whatever it was, plunged to some unseen greater depths. Was that good news or bad news? Being caught on a shelf was undoubtedly better than falling to greater depths, but was it really good to find out that bad could quickly become worse? He'd figured this out, he was of sure that, he just needed to rest his eyes for a moment.

Lewis awoke again, this time he was moving. He was falling? No, wait, he was flying? He felt too weak to do anything, even open his eyes, but someone held him. Yes, he was being held by someone moving him out of the crevice. Somebody, whose voice could barely be heard over the ringing in his ears, said something about him being unconscious. Oh crap, Christi and Earl were never going to let him live this one down. Oh well, a lifetime of mockery was a worthy trade for a lifetime that ended in the gorge.

He began to see some light at the top of the gorge. Wait, that wasn't the sun; what was it? As his eyes adjusted he could see the seemingly infinite abyss of the crevice he was leaving, but the sky above was yet another infinite black abyss filled with a blinding amount of snow. A searchlight seemed haphazardly attached to something flying in the air. It wasn't a helicopter, that would be too small, and he would have heard it by now. Besides, who would have a helicopter out here anyway? No, it was something big - breathtaking and ominous - with a gray green color pulling him and his rescuer up. Moments before Lewis lost consciousness he was given a vision of an indescribable aircraft, blinding lights under a backdrop of a blizzard and pitch black sky.

Lewis came to, warmth coming over him. He expected to open his eyes to Chrsi's worried face, but only saw the night sky under the same blinding blizzard. He went to move and realized he crinkled, somebody having stuffed chemical hand warmers under his clothes before wrapping a mylar blanket around him underneath his coat. Not what they taught in school, but hey, he wasn't a Lewisicle so no complaints there. "We need to get you out of this cold" said an unknown American in a parka. "Who are you? What happened?" Lewis asked, unsure of what was going on. "You fell down a hole and dented your noggin" the man in the parka replied coldly. Why the hell were they not already going someplace warm? Had this man just warmed him and left him in the cold instead of taking him back to wherever the parka man came from? Why the hell would he do that?

"Where are you from?" the parka man asked again, and even under that nasally accent, Lewis could tell the parka man was not good with bedside manners. He wasn't angry, but he didn't sound sympathetic either, just matter of fact. Maybe he used to be his soldier or cop or something? American cops were rude, right? Oh shit, maybe he was here about the mountain. Lewis looked into the parka man's eyes, the only part of his body not covered. The eye seemed annoyed now, or maybe that was just his imagination. "Australia" Lewis replied, surprising himself at his voice's weakness, his mind finally clear enough to recognize it. The eyes seemed concerned now. Lewis managed to eke out how he got there: a snowmobile ride and a short walk from an the Australian Arctic research outpost before 'bopping his noggin.'

"Where is he?" Cristi asked as she paced. "The blizzard probably slowed him down, I'm sure he'll be fine" Earl responded. After a brief pause Earl tried to lighten the mood a bit. "Remember that time when he sat on his radio, then got distracted sketching the landscape? You know Lewis, he'll be back here when he gets around to it, and I can think of some creative way to get back at him for making me do his readings." Christi didn't seem to share his optimism. "He went to see the mountain, somebody could have hurt him." Earl just rolled his eyes. "Really, you two are getting into that tin foil hat nonsense now? Mountains don't just appear." Christi shook her head. "Exactly, so when one does just appear that's spooky to say the least."

Earl glanced at the monitors, hoping to change the topic of conversation to whatever the readings would be. The sensors were all weird, though, as if some object was displacing air currents near the outpost. "Never mind, it must be some sort of malfunction" Earl said, Christi also seeing the readings and only looking more alarmed. "The mountain" she said under her breath before Earl pointed out the window. "Here we go, that's Lewis's snowmobile right there. The chore skipper lives to fight another day." Christi went to the window ecstatic, but suddenly backed away aghast at something she saw. "That's not Lewis on his snowmobile."

"Grab something to use as a weapon" Christi shouted, picking up a chair and wielding it above her head. Earl stepped back, unsure of what to do; looking further uneasy as the makeshift weapon was displayed. There was a frantic knock at the door; handle moving on its own when there was no reply from inside. A parka wearing man stepped through alone, and for a fleeting moment the eyes beneath the mask were seemingly illuminated with an inhuman energy.

The abyss reached out, tentacles clawing at his mind, demanding a violent resolution to such a threat. Basil froze in the door frame, forcing out the abyss until his breath was visible in the frigid arctic air seeping into the building. "There's a man named Lewis, says he's from here. He's hurt and I need somebody to help me move him without aggravating his injuries." Basil could see the look on the small statured woman's face change from that of terror of him to terror at Lewis's potential state. The woman ran past Basil, not even dressing for the extreme cold, Basil following suit. "Hey" Lewis said, some strength recovered in his voice. "What happened?" The woman asked in concern. "I think I fell down a hidden crevice, but things are a little blurry."

"He's broken an arm and at least one of his legs, as well as suffered a head injury. We need to get both of you inside now." Basil said, barely audible over the roar of the wind. Though he mainly remained monotone and apathetic, he surprised himself as he heard hints of concern in his voice. The two picked up Lewis and carefully carried him into the little outpost, right past the man putting on winter gear, who quickly pivoted his priorities; throwing off his coat and clearing the table before issuing a command. "Christi, Parka, keep Lewis from falling off the table." The two put Lewis on the table, who groaned before speaking to the man who was returning.

"Hey Doc, you got anything to dull the pain?" Lewis asked the returning man, but Basil spoke in response. "If he had any major internal bleeding he would be dead by now, so you're probably safe, but I would defer to your judgment." The woman did not appear to appreciate Basil's bedside manner, but the man playing medic seemed to appreciate the information. "This is Christi and Earl" Lewis said as if trying to distract himself from the approaching needle.

Lewis winced as the needle poked him, quickly becoming visibly relaxed, and before long Earl was taking inventory of Lewis's injuries. "You're the best Doc" Lewis said before switching his attention to Basil and asking a question. "So what, you a doctor? And I never did get your name or why you're out here." The parka man responded. "Basil, and not a doctor, at least not the stitch-you-up kind." Lewis looked as if he would have been annoyed at the dodgy answer had he not been on pain meds. "So, what kind of doc then? And why are you out here?" Basil, still wearing his parka and mask, replied. "Particle physics, and that's about as much info as I can divulge." Basil paused momentarily, adding "I really should get going. Stay away from that area in the future, Lewis; it's bad luck."

Christi sprinted in between Basil and the door he was walking to. "Hey, how are you going to get back? It's a blizzard out there, and unless you plan to steal our snowmobile, it's a long walk back to wherever you came from." Basil shook his head. "I've got a friend who will pick me up on the way back." Christi looked worried. "The blizzard will be over in less than a day; stay here. I don't care what macho secretive bullshit you're up to; you'll freeze to death like anybody else out there." Basil could see the whole group still looked somewhat suspicious of him, but saving Lewis was apparently enough to get Christi genuinely worried about him. "Come on, man, at least let me have a chance to properly thank you for saving my ass out there" Lewis said, sitting up against Earl's protest. Basil stood silently for an awkwardly long time before lifting his hands in mock surrender. "I guess the cold can wait, you all got anything to drink?"

Christi opened the cabinet full of bottles and Basil began to take off his face mask and parka. Lewis raised his hand as if also requesting a drink, but Earl nearly smacked it down in disapproval. However, as Basil unzipped his coat, Earl's eyes locked on his side as he stepped back. Basil looked down and saw his handgun hanging off his shoulder. "He's not staying in here with his American death machine" shouted Earl angrily. "It's Austrian" Basil replied, monotone voice returning, and Christi looked at the two - suspicious of Basil but seemingly annoyed with Earl as well. The two's attention returned to Basil seconds later, pistol and magazine in one hand, racking the slide with his other; chambered round flung into the air. As the action slid back Earl jerked back in surprise, but Basil dropped the now unloaded handgun onto the parka lying on the floor. "Better?" Basil asked and Christi nodded, Earl remaining silent momentarily before giving Basil a suspicious glance and returning to treating Lewis.

Christi laid out some liquor bottles that implied they were brewed at the station and poured three shots. "Well, you'll be fine" Earl said to Lewis before turning to the table. "Come on, gimme" Lewis requested as drinks were poured, sounding loopy from the pain meds. "Sorry, I'm taking yours. It's the I repel down a ravine to save your ass tax" Basil quipped, smiling for the first time since his death.

51: Recollections

Basil's memories were disturbed by a vibration in his pocket.

Basil with his scruffy beard entered his Arkepello hotel room, sitting across a table from Grey. Time had passed since their fight against the Elthrice, although this was the first time he'd stepped foot on Domum since that day. Since then, aside from a short radio conversation with Tobias, he hadn't interacted with Domum again. Throughout the weeks, except for one impromptu outing, he mostly kept to himself; drinking and trying to forget what had happened - until Grey reached out, saying they needed to talk.

"Sorry" Basil said sheepishly, seeing Grey's hands shake. "No Basil" Grey replied, seeming more calm. "This is not your fault, and you have nothing to apologize for. I am sorry. I cannot imagine what you went through, and I've treated you like you are a monster." Silence enveloped the two again, but eventually Basil broke it. "What's your name?" Grey looked at Basil in confusion for a second, but seemed to remember that the two now shared both languages and replied in Elthrice. "Half Comet's Aurora, that's as close of a translation I know of" Basil replied. Grey smiled.

("Half" would usually be for someone with mixed ancestry, such as half Orbital for example, but for me it is because I am half Elthrice. 'Comet' is because I was born in a vessel instead of under Elthrice territory, and 'Aurora' is the name others know me by. Like) Basil (is for you)."

Basil returned a smile. "So, what would you like me to call you?" Grey seemed ambivalent. "Aurora or (Aurora) is fine. But do not say my name in Elthrice unless you learn to speak it without the whispers." Basil nodded, and the two fell silent until Aurora broke the silence with something Basil figured she had rehearsed. "You are still Basil, and you must always remember that" Aurora said in a reassuring voice. "But you are also the Rejected-Death, a very dangerous Elthrice being." Basil smiled, trying to be as jovial as the situation would allow. "Well, I guess the legend got the whole Elthrice thing wrong."

Aurora seemed almost amused, but quickly returned to a serious expression. "Basil, you are now more Elthrice than I am. I am half Elthrice by birth; you are now Elthrice by right and, as was said to me, are to be a commander and protector." Basil was unsure of what he was being told. "But every Elthrice, including you, was terrified of me. Or at least terrified of the idea of a Rejected-Death existing." Aurora nodded.

“Well, it is said that a Rejected-Death is extremely rare. In your years, perhaps one in a millennium. It’s also said that a Rejected-Death comes in times of great turmoil, and will leave a great gash across the universe in its wake as it fights the (unworthy) or the (usurpers) at the command of those who built the relics. It looks as if those you have fought, and are to fight, is the (remnants of the old Elthrice order), and you may be on a path of their unavoidable destruction.”

Basil still felt hesitant. “I’m still me, I’m landlocked, and they know what I am now. Can’t we just hope for them to screw off and leave us alone?” Aurora had a look that Basil interpreted as either finding the question funny or naive, but when she spoke she seemed much more saddened.

“(Fate can sometimes not be avoided, even with the freedom of being one’s self. Brother, it saddens me to see you so hurt by the sterilization of the old Elthrice base, but it also brings me joy to see that you retain your autonomy. You already knew this holding an Orbital’s object, but the great one’s relic changes you. Violence, a pull to fight fated foes, and apathy towards the world and those whom you affect in your campaigns. You will be drawn to these things as will your enemies be drawn to you, just as oxygen cannot resist ferrous metals. You are still) Basil, (but you are also a Rejected-Death, that cannot be changed no more than entropy can be undone. You have been imbued by those that came before, and chosen as a tool for their unknown purposes. It has become you, and you have become it).”

The vibrations continued and Basil returned to the present, nearly knocking over an empty liquor bottle and swiping his finger across the screen several times before accepting the call on his new device. In lieu of a faked number, ACE had instead made the display indicate Spiro was trying to contact him.

“Hey, what’s going on?” Basil asked, a little nervous something bad was going on. Spiro seemed to pick up on Basil’s hesitance. “Everything’s fine, I just hadn’t seen you since things went down, and if it’d work out I hoped you could swing by. I’m on the Arkepello, General Tobias said you’re frequently in the Arkepello hotel; if you want to swing by at some point I’ll get us something to eat or drink.” Basil paused for a second, mind returning to his memories, but he quickly forced them down. “I’m doing okay, I’m, um, I’m just taking some time to figure some thing out” he replied, unsure of whether he really felt that way.

“Yeah, I can be down there at any point really” Basil continued, before pausing and adding “Or, if you’d like, you’re welcome to visit me on Earth. There’s a wormhole device in my Arkepello room that’ll take you right there.” Spiro remained quiet for some time. “Well, that’d certainly be interesting. I’m at the Arkepello docks now, I should be a very short walk away.” Basil began relaying directions on how to get to his room in the Arkepello hotel, and as Spiro said he was near the door Basil could hear the electronic locks ACE installed disengaging through Spiro’s radio. “One final question before you arrive” Basil asked, “You want to take the scenic route or the warm route?”

Spiro sounded hesitant. "Is one dangerous?" Basil laughed. "We've got practically identical genetics, so if it were dangerous for you it'd be dangerous for me too." Spiro replied "Scenic I guess," still sounding slightly hesitant as he stepped through and into the hangar. Spiro looked somewhat surprised as he looked around, smiling and making a quick gesture to his chin. Basil gave a quick chuckle, realizing that last time Spiro saw him he was clean shaven and had short hair; instead now sporting a full beard and rather long hair. "Yeah, I got this hippy friend who's been a bad influence. He's even having second hand hippyfluence now that Aurora's growing her hair in the same way."

Spiro seemed to grow more confused as Basil spoke, but replied with "Aurora?" and a smile. "Grey's name in Elthrice. At least the best translation of it anyway." Spiro nodded before gesturing and asking "And I take it you've made some gunship progress?" while gesturing to the Elthrice craft in the hangar. "That, my friend, is the first known Elthrice ship built in over a thousand years. If I am really stuck being the Rejected-Death I might as well make use of those scavenged parts. Only flew it once so far; it needs further calibration of the thrusting devices, to be sealed off, then needs the guns integrated afterward." Spiro turned towards it and looked on silently for some time, Basil hoping it was admiration of the machine as opposed to discomfort at the reminder of what he witnessed during the fight against the Elthrice.

"Well, I'm guessing you didn't just come here to see my hobby project, let's go take that scenic route." Basil turned to the rack by the door, put on a parka, and handed one to Spiro. "Here, you're going to want to wear this." Throwing it on the same way he watched Basil do so, they both stepped out of the hangar and into the polar climate. Basil figured the weather was the most beautiful it could get. The sun illuminated a bright blue sky, reflecting off the snow and ice and illuminated the mountain range nearby. Small gusts of wind occasionally blew the snow around, but nothing flew above knee height. Spiro looked on while shielding his eyes from the sun as they walked to the compound near the hangar, both seemingly in amazement at the scenery and dislike of the extreme cold.

"It's awe inspiring here Basil, but it's" Spiro began to say as he broke the silence, and Basil finished the sentence with "Fucking cold?" Spiro smiled and returned a nod as they neared the facility. "Is the whole planet like this?" Basil laughed. "Naw, we're on a polar ice cap. I'm sure you've got them too. Not a lot of people here, gives me a chance for some solitude, them trying to kill me and all."

Making their way inside Spiro asked another question. "I haven't seen you at the meetings in the Redcap capitol; you want me to fill you in on what's been happening?" Basil shrugged, although it felt forced as he did so. "Haven't been invited." Spiro looked somewhat surprised, but Basil continued. "That's alright though, I'm glad to be done with Domum politics, and would rather be working on my gunship and drinking at the Arkepello. As for Elthrice defense, two invasions of Elthrice planets have got to be enough for one lifetime." Basil opened a fridge and poured himself a shot of Gray Goose. "You want anything?" Spiro nodded, before bending over to grab a bottle. When he turned back, however, he had a look that hinted at either worry or sadness.

"Have you heard from anybody outside the Arkepello since everything went down?" Basil forced a melancholy smile. "Met with Cicero twice since it all went down; he looked real worn down and has put on some weight. He seemed a little nervous around me, but I got the impression the Redcaps are struggling and he feels like he's the only reason his government is still hanging on, even if by a thread. Sent him back with all the antibiotics I could scrounge up. The Lizard King refuses to talk to me or ACE, but his son works with ACE a lot to get some efficient farm tooling set up. From the sounds of it they're so low on manpower that if they can't harvest more efficiently they'll have a food crisis. But ACE has been handling that; I've mostly kept to myself."

"Sorry to hear that" Spiro replied. "It's alright, like I said, semi retired. I'll hopefully not be needed for help with Elthrice defense and I wouldn't make a good diplomat or politician anyways. Aurora was originally apprehensive about what happened to me, hearing old stories and things, but now she's probably handling everything better than I have. Everyone on the Arkepello is used to my crazy stories so they're not bothered by a new one to add to the list. All in all it's quiet, but I never signed up for the chaos, so you won't hear complaints from me."

Spiro responded with a delayed smile and Basil continued. "Besides, I get to share a drink with an old buddy and ramble on about stuff every now and then. So, what have you been up to?"

52: A wolf in a Lamb's Clothes

"Is everything okay?" Basil asked, running into the Arkepello bar and drawing everyone's attention. General Tobias looked at Basil, seemingly amused, and answered the question directed at Aurora. "Yes, I was just showing Aurora some maps, and she was hoping you could join us." Basil breathed a sigh of relief, the adrenaline from Aurora's text that read "At Arkepello Hotel. Please help." leaving his system. Tobias continued "Come to think of it, Basil, you still know that Amigoso spy? They keep an eye on every inch of coast west of Amigoso, so if anybody can get more information it would be him. That is, if that's okay with you Aurora?." Aurora nodded, but Basil still felt left in the dark. "Sorry, you've lost me, what's going on?"

"Well, I overheard Aurora talking to Simon about geography, and" Tobias spoke in a hushed tone "Well, honestly, I'm surprised the kid can find his way from his post to here some nights." Tobias returned to his normal voice as he continued. "So anyway, I got out my old Imperial survey books and started to subject her to an old man's rambling on history and borders. And, as the story goes, there's this iron mining settlement on an island between here and Loquail that went crazy. Started eating each other, speaking bits of an incomprehensible language, and worshipping some sun god." Basil's face had an expression of surprise come over it and Aurora began to speak.

"And then I reminded him I am only half Elthrice by birth. Basil, we may have found where they took my mother from." Basil interjected when Aurora had finished. "Wait, you said old imperial reports, how old?" Tobias replied as if they were a point of pride. "One hundred and twenty-nine years." Basil began to say "So-" but Aurora seemed to know the question he was going to ask and nodded. "Some of that is the result of travel in the crafts, but Orbitals live much longer than most others." Aurora took on an expression that Basil could only read as sadness, and the table fell quiet.

Basil, Aurora, Spiro, and Tobias poured over the maps on the table. "And you're all sure of this?" Spiro asked, sounding hesitant. "We're not sure, but it appears likely, and I just need to know" Aurora replied, before turning to Basil. "Basil, I know you understand the longing and feelings of not belonging. I need to go there, but I want you to come with me." Basil nodded. "Of course." The table fell silent for a moment, but Tobias spoke shortly after. "This is a week's journey by boat. I can likely requisition some naval supplies and rations, but we cannot currently spare a vessel to get you there; our entire navy has been tied up with the decreasing Redcap patrols."

Aurora, however, looked like she had something in mind. "Basil, the gunship, could that get us there?" Basil shook his head. "It's currently in a few pieces. Me and ACE are trying to get things properly sealed, and ocean air is unfortunately not something that would be good to expose it to until we've worked that out." Spiro interjected "I got this guy in nautical surveillance," before his voice trailed off, and Basil began to wonder if Spiro had just started to worry he was giving information that should not be provided in the presence of foreigners - much less a foreign head of state. After a few seconds, however, his face took on a laissez-faire expression and he continued. "Well, this guy owes me near a dozen favors. A light Amigoso boat will likely get you two out there and back in four days max."

Spiro paused for a moment before continuing again. "If you want, I'll cash in those favors and get you there. My schedule is pretty empty, most of the Ministry has been giving me the cold shoulder, and it'd be easier to get it through if I was there so it looks more official. If it's okay I could accompany you both, but I completely understand if this is an Elthrice thing and you two would want to go it alone."

Before they knew it Spiro could be heard shouting "We've got land up ahead" in the distance as he exited the boat's cabin. Basil took another draw from a cigarette and looked to Aurora. She had a somber look, and he could see this trip was taking a toll on her. Spiro, finally making his way towards the two, shouted "Hey, they're going to park the boat by the abandoned dock." Basil watched Aurora change her face to a more positive one as Spiro came over, but he knew enough of Aurora and what this trip meant enough that he didn't need the abyss's intuition to sense the change in demeanor was forced.

"Abandoned?" Basil asked, and Spiro replied, seeming to change to a more cautious tone. "Yeah, I don't think it would be safe to walk on. Sorry Aurora, I don't think anybody has been here for a very long time." Aurora smiled a melancholy smile, which seemed to be genuine as far as Basil could tell. Perhaps not at the news, but instead as an acknowledgment of Spiro's concern, he figured; unless maybe she was relieved at the idea there'd be nothing but ghosts to greet them. They approached the dock and Basil could see that it had been very obviously abandoned, half collapsed and half rotting in place. "You two go on ahead, I'll stay back with the mini boys and help them collect observations" Spiro said as they made landfall, but Aurora shook her head. "Please, come. You're not an invader on this trip; you're a true friend for helping us get here." Basil nodded in agreement, and Spiro smiled quickly before jogging back to the cabin. The three began to make their way up an almost nonexistent path, Basil bushwhacking and Spiro carrying a rifle.

"Man, I wish I had your energy" Spiro said, watching Basil swing his machete for an extended period. "A bullet to the head seemed to work; we can give it a go if you'd like." The two exchanged smirks and Spiro gave a quick laugh that sounded like a snort at the quip, Aurora returning a quick smile to the two. Basil felt relieved that Aurora seemed to find the comment somewhat amusing, realizing after the comment that she might not consider now a good time to joke. Eventually, the group found a clearing containing many collapsed buildings, a sole building still standing and heavily overgrown with vegetation. Stepping inside, the three found a skeleton surrounded by rusted metal and foliage.

"Please, I need a minute alone" Aurora said through misty eyes. Basil and Spiro quickly left the building. "I can't imagine what she's going through. Losing her Elthrice family and then finding the remains of someone who could have been her, um, non Elthrice family" Spiro stated in a whisper as soon as they were outside. "Yeah, it's fucked up" was all Basil could think to add. They both stood in silence for a moment before Spiro spoke again. "Shit, how are you holding up? Maybe it's not my place to ask, but you're not in a boat that's too different. If you ever want to talk about anything I'm here for you."

"Thanks. I dunno, it's weird. She lost everything; I've got no memories of anything. Kinda ate away at me for a while, ya' know? Honestly, though, after everything's settled, I don't really see myself as stranded anymore. I've really-" Basil was interrupted by movement in the dense brush as Spiro raised his rifle. A woman with light skin and dark red hair snuck out, as if she was trying to avoid being detected by someone or something. As soon as she saw Basil she ran towards him, holding a knife and saying something in an unknown language. Spiro replied in what sounded like the same language.

"She thinks you're Loquailian and wants to know who we are" Spiro clarified to Basil. "Does she know about the history of this place?" Spiro smirked. "I doubt it, she's Loquailian. I'm half tempted to tell her I'm collecting Loquailian sex slaves and that I ordered you not to speak." A short laugh escaped Basil as he tried to hide it, but the woman took on a very annoyed look and replied in a whisper "Fucking Amigosian." Basil laughed again, no longer trying to hide his laugh, finding the exchange growing even more amusing; though Spiro seemed surprised and somewhat embarrassed. "You're Loqualian, and you don't speak Loqualian?" the woman asked, seeming annoyed but confused. "I'm not Loqualian" Basil responded, but before he could speak further the woman replied "You're a fucking disgrace to your kind," not seeming to understand what he had intended.

"He's Elthrice, or American, depending on who's describing him" Spiro replied when Basil remained silently confused; however, before more could be said there was rustling in the brush again; followed by the woman saying "Run, they're here." Spiro asked "Who's here?" and Basil simultaneously said "Shit, what if there's Elthrice here?" and took several steps forward to put himself between the brush and Spiro. An entirely wooden spear sailed through the air before bouncing harmlessly off Basil's chest as Spiro raised the rifle.

Basil just laughed again. "A fucking spear?" Several people ran out of the brush, and Spiro shot one, causing two others to freeze and a third to charge Basil with a knife made of a nonmetallic substance. Basil stuck his hand out, the attacker running into it as Basil grabbed him by the neck. The attacker frantically stabbed at Basil, but the crude knife only began to chip away at itself. The abyss started to claw at his mind, but he remembered their theory on how these people became this, and he loosened his grip and began to laugh for a third time. "Would you knock that off?" he asked mockingly, turning back to see a very serious looking Spiro and a concerned looking woman.

The attacker spoke through a slightly constrained throat. "(Surrender worm!)." The abyss clawed its way back into his mind, overtaking the humor as he threw the attacker violently to the ground. Basil replied in Elthrice, a deep rage in his voice and the thousand whispers accompanying it. "(Worm! You confront me with such a word? Those words shall be your-)." Aurora grabbed Basil's arm with a speed that implied she had barely come to a stop from running. Basil realized his head turned instantaneously to face her, further than he thought his head could rotate, and her face showed a delayed but sudden fear.

A knot grew in his stomach, strong enough to drive away the abyss, and he stepped back. "Sorry" he said, voice suddenly weak, before taking more steps back and repeating "Sorry" again. Aurora seemed to take on a more sad expression, Spiro had taken several steps back and looked concerned, his attacker on the ground and the woman looking terrified. "Don't hurt him; he's a victim of what happened" Aurora replied, breaking the long silence before continuing "I'll go talk to them; at least some of them probably understand us."

Basil felt as if he was returning to himself, and suddenly felt worried at the idea of Aurora speaking to the unknown group of assailants. "You sure that's safe?" Aurora looked annoyed at the question. "Basil, they're trying to worship us, and in case you forgot, I'm a descendant of Orbitals. I'll be okay. Now talk to that terrified woman and see if she'll tell you what happened." Basil turned away and walked towards Spiro, who was talking to the woman. After quickly glancing over his shoulder toward Aurora, he gave a non-threatening hand gesture to appear less menacing.

"What the fuck are they?" the woman asked, looking both nervous and unsure of what to make of Basil and Aurora. "They're Elthrice. They're friends who just got scared when they were attacked. They won't hurt you" Spiro explained, but the woman didn't seem too reassured. "He didn't look scared" she said while gesturing to Basil, who repeated his attempt at a non-threatening hand gesture now that he had finished walking over. "Sorry, I got carried away. He insulted me and I let my ego get the better of me, but I wasn't going to kill him" Basil said, a worry in the back of his mind that he only felt guilt for scaring Aurora; not feeling guilty for being seconds from killing the man or lying about it now. The woman seemed more confused but less afraid.

"You speak their language?" Basil nodded. "I speak Elthrice, though I don't think they speak Elthrice. Some bad Elthrice attacked here several generations ago." Spiro seemed to change demeanor seeing everybody nearby had calmed down. "Now, where are my manners? I'm Spiro, this is Basil, what's your name?" The woman responded tersely. "Lamb." Spiro spoke again in a reassuring voice. "Okay Lamb, how did you end up here?" Lamb suddenly looked distressed, but something looked off to Basil about the expression that Spiro didn't seem to see - or at least express. "I was captain of a merchant vessel that shipwrecked here. They tried to eat me, and I don't think any of my crew survived." The abyss called out to investigate, saying every word was a lie - albeit one that didn't pose a present danger, but only the Rejected-Death means of doing so in his skill set was violence or the threat of it, so he did his best to keep a neutral expression and ignore the prompt.

"Spiro, get all the rations we can spare" Aurora shouted, interrupting their conversation. Spiro ran off to the boat and Aurora motioned for Basil to come along. Basil followed her in silence for some distance before eventually coming to a camp of sorts. One of the islanders led the two into the camp and towards an old woman too weak to stand. Aurora looked at Basil with tears in her eyes. "Her mother knew my mother."

53: California Sands

“Here we go” Basil said, stepping away while trying to untangle himself from wires. “And you're sure it will work?” Spiro asked, questioning Basil's confidence. “Well, one way to find out. Flip that switch and either it'll work, or the whole city will go up in flames.” Basil replied in a joking manner. Spiro flipped the switch on the new UPS the two had just installed. Some RGB lights turned on and the city did not go up in flames. Basil gave a confident smile, although Spiro had an amused look.

Something in the back of Basil's mind told him that Spiro found it amusing the man who built a makeshift Elthrice gunship struggled with basic electrical equipment. He couldn't tell if it was the abyss reaching out; if it was, it wasn't nearly as overt as it had been on the few occasions it seemed to scream information or intentions at him. Perhaps it was his intuition coupled with Spiro's not wearing the mask of an intelligence official around him. Or maybe he was going insane, and it merely looked amusing as he nearly strangled himself in a mess of wire.

“There we go, you can now officially run Amigoso power through this and safely convert it to be compatible with any of my stuff. No more balcony generators for you my good sir.”

Spiro looked like he was going to reply, but ACE came over the speakers on the telecom device wired to the wormhole device they had just installed. “Basil, one of the federal agents we were monitoring cryptically implied one of their so-called 'spectral guests' showed up, left, and likely will return. Some social media users are already reporting a bunch of military looking activity in the area, and they are saying the swath of BLM land they blocked off is growing. It has reached the threshold for us to investigate in person.”

A sense of dread hit Basil. They had been monitoring this anomalous activity in the California desert for some time, but throughout it all, he kept telling himself that he and ACE were simply bored. The Elthrice, at least the ones he knew, were too weak to assault Earth. Besides, it sounded like they were hunting spies, and the Elthrice were always loud and aggressive. Nevertheless, he and ACE had put off installing the guns on the soon-to-be gunship that way it'd be ready to fly on a moment's notice, and they were about to do so to investigate further.

“Alright, let's go. You able to glean any new information on who's actually there staking out the place?” Basil asked, sounding more confident towards the end of his statement. “Nothing other than that they are using outdated hardware, that being the reason I was able to intercept and decrypt some of their communication. Whether that is because they are there in a less than official capacity, or because they want to keep this under the radar, I am unable to determine.”

Spiro joined the conversation. "Basil, is there anything I can do to help?" Basil hesitated for a moment before replying. "Yeah, a second pair of hands who knows the Elthrice would be good. But if it actually looks like it could be the Elthrice I'll probably go down and say hi, and do so as Elthrice given my history with what could be the same people who attacked me before. If I do so, you'll probably need to stay behind on the craft, unless you can pull off a really good American impression." The two stepped into the unarmed gunship, door closing behind them, before Basil suddenly interjected. "Oh, and I should tell you about my mantel ahead of time; it might be a little surprising if I use it and you're not expecting it.

"Mantel?" Spiro asked. "Something that keeps the Elthrice and non-Elthrice parts of me into their own little cozy corners of my brain" Basil began, before ACE started relaying information about their departure. While flying inconspicuously prevented them from leaving and re-entering the atmosphere, and thus required them to fly at a much slower speed than they would have using Elthrice crafts on Domum, they were quickly in international waters off the coast. Minutes turned to hours as ACE surveyed the situation and collected as much data as possible.

Eventually, ACE took them overhead; though as they remained out of range of the drones, and restricted data collection to sensors that would not give away their presence, ACE expressed frustration at the little data he was able to collect. Suddenly, however, ACE displayed information on the panels of the gunship as his voice came over the speakers. "We just got hit with radar. With our altitude and the craft's material they shouldn't know what we are yet; but we have a very short window until they point every sensor on the ground, in the air, and in orbit they have access to towards us. We either need to go now or announce ourselves."

Basil took a deep breath. "Drop our altitude fast and turn on every sensor you can, make it look like we're just arriving. Try to patch me into the radios you broke into. We don't have an army, so if the Elthrice are actually coming we need to be there when it happens to wallop them immediately and get them to reconsider. We also need to look powerful enough that it'll demand some respect from those on the ground, but we need to avoid spooking them. If they turn their sights on us we'll give the Elthrice an advantage."

“Alright, you’re tapped into their radios” ACE said, and Basil readied himself to make ‘first contact’. “Hello, I believe you made contact with, or are about to make contact with, a dangerous faction of beings I have experience with. I have come to assist you in preventing their spread.” Basil said through his mantle, the echo of a thousand whispers echoing out of the other's radio and back through his as he spoke. “Identify yourself” a voice on the other side of the radio said, before adding “And tell me how you’re on this network.” Basil paused for a moment to think of how to respond. “You would not comprehend my name, so you may refer to me as X.” Basil lied, remembering the impact he felt when Aurora had said the same to him. Something in the back of his mind told him 'X' was a poor choice of name to randomly take on, but he continued regardless.

“As for your network, your key pairs are too simplistic.” The man on the other end seemed distracted, likely alerting others to the breach, but Basil continued. “I have come to assist you in expulsing those that I believe you have gathered to confront.” The man on the other side of the radio seemed confused and angry. “Do not interfere with us, tell us where you are and we will send-,” but Basil cut him off. “I will be arriving momentarily.” Several people began to speak simultaneously, but everybody went silent as their radios relayed the distinctive roar of an Elthrice craft cutting through atmosphere. Several surprised outbursts, followed by frantic speech, broke the radio silence.

The panels of the unarmed gunship lit up again, ACE relaying information collected from the newly running sensors. Two F-15s, both outdated models that should have been retired several years back, were closing in on their location quickly. “Who are you, and why are you here?” asked a rougher, older voice, which seemed to remain calm despite the others' sounding somewhat frantic or unsure. Before Basil could respond, ACE relayed additional information: the F-15s had both target locked on them. “I already told you what you ask. You may refer to me as ‘X’; I am charged with the containment or destruction of those I believe you are aware of and expect to make contact with.” The calm man seemed to pause momentarily before replying with a quiet but authoritative voice. “Are you one of them, the ones you say we are here for?” Basil answered, a thousand whispers echoing in his reply. “Their kind, yes, but we do not share the same allegiances.”

The calm man seemed to hesitate for a moment, but the man spoke right as Basil began to wonder if he would not get a response. “This area is restricted; leave now and do not interfere. You may return when we give permission and speak with us further.” Basil took a similar silence, worried about starting a fight, but ultimately more concerned about letting the Elthrice gain a foothold. “That I cannot do. I believe the threat you face greatly exceeds your capabilities, and the containment of this faction is my utmost priority.” ACE spoke quickly. “Heat management or durability?” However, time constraints forced ACE to decide before Basil could respond.

54: The Third Elthrice Campaign Pt. 1

The first indication their introduction was about to go bad was a burst of transmissions between the ground and jets above; the second indication being that it stopped. "Heat management or durability?" ACE asked, using intentionally fast words. Before a response could be given, however, the jets fired upon them. He dropped the craft in altitude quickly, hoping the thrusting mechanisms could counteract the otherworldly G forces that were in effect as they had during the simulations. Credit to the long dead Elthrice engineers, everything seemed to work as it should, despite the rather novel application of such hardware.

Enough time had passed and he began to understand the behavior of the missiles. They certainly had no trouble seeing the craft, its surface an astronomical heat, but they were slow in their responses and speed. With less capacity devoted to predicting their trajectory, the second priority rose to prominence: a great display. He began to roll the craft on its axis before beginning a Fibonacci sequence, forcing the missiles to effectively continue straight as they constantly corrected to where the craft was moments ago. Passing the missiles, mere centimeters from detonation proximity, he turned the craft instantly at 90 degrees and began flying away horizontally; missiles and jets becoming stationary objects.

He felt something. It wasn't the first time, but it was still a rarity, and certainly the first time he had felt something like this. Pride maybe? No, it felt too muted, at least when compared to the descriptions of the emotion. Satisfied. He was satisfied with what he had done. "What just happened?" Spiro asked, responding to ACE's question directed at Basil. "What are they saying?" Basil asked moments later, before Spiro's question could be answered. "They are confused, and are speculating the craft is unmanned. An order has been given, however, to stop firing and disarm the munitions in the missiles they launched." ACE replied, trying to answer both questions.

"Alright, let's go back and try to talk again. Any signs of the Elthrice showing up during that little sidequest?" Basil asked. "No signs of the Elthrice. I am bringing the craft back now and patching you back into their radio, although I have an idea for continuing our demonstration." ACE brought the craft back into the area at high speeds, slowing down as it matched course to the side of the closest jet. The jet, now likely blaring with alarms at the heat quickly dissipating from the craft, tried to pull away; ACE matching its movement exactly.

"You have used your weapons; shall I test mine, or shall we speak of our combined defenses against a very dangerous adversary?" Basil bluffed over the radio. The calm man returned to the radio, voice as still as before. "Very well, what do you propose?" Basil spoke, his mantle aiding him in avoiding emotion or fear in his voice, but internally glad at the change of events. "I wish to speak with you in person and aid in the defense against the problematic ones in order to verify their containment or eradication. Then I will leave." The calm man replied without any pause. "Then you may land as soon as your ship has cooled to safe levels." Basil checked the console, satisfied that the gunship was dissipating heat as fast as predicted, and shortly after ACE was narrating their landing.

Spiro stepped out of the craft behind Basil, or, well, the being that he was mostly confident was still Basil - despite its appearance. He rationed it away, besides, he was in disguise too. ACE had given him some sort of uniform that he said was Earth military; different from Amigosian uniforms, but not as alien as he expected. Over it he wore thick metal plates designed to stop bullets and - something he knew was not standard Earth military garb - a cloth mask that hid his entire head aside from his eyes. Basil's clothes looked like a costume at first; a dark charcoal colored jacket and pants over a white shirt - odd, but not overtly alien to Amigosian garb. The bright red cloth around his neck, and the little gold piece of metal affixing it to his shirt, however, were certainly more alien than the rest of his outfit.

Stepping out, however, and Basil's garb looked much less out of place. Basil's people, or at least the ones that were once Basil's people, all wore similar clothes as Basil did. They would have looked imposing had they all not jumped back as Basil exited. His mantel was unnerving to Spiro himself, and he was told to expect it, so he couldn't help but pity those unprepared for it - even if they had just tried to kill them. Like the hooded one, Basil's face was unseeable. No eyes or mouth, ears or hair, just a blank nothingness. Only, unlike the hooded one, Basil did not wear a hood. After a few moments of shock, followed by a few hair raising moments of weapons pointed at them, they were wordlessly led to a tent where an older heavy man looked on expressionlessly.

"You are the one I spoke to?" the Calm Man asked, and Spiro felt uneasy at the lack of fear on the man. Basil had assured them that those on Earth weren't capable of doing anything he hadn't seen before, but the calm man's confidence seemed to disagree with that assertion. "Yes" the Faceless Man replied, speaking for the first time since exiting the craft, the thousand whispers sending another wave of terror out through all but the calm man. "And what exactly are you?" The Faceless Man remained quiet for some time, but seemed to decide on a diluted version of the truth. "I am assigned a protector; my sole purpose here is to contain the spread of a dangerous faction." The calm man sounded suspicious. "Yet you carry human weapons?" gesturing to the rifles held by the two "And seem to have a human companion?" The Faceless Man replied cryptically. "I was given a limited allotment of supplies, these have been scavenged. Useful in certain cases, but not against those I fear you will see today."

Even in his terrifying presence and oddly different manner of speaking as the Faceless Man, Basil still lacked his skill with words. Spiro watched as all around him, except the Calm Man, took on a mix of worried and horrified looks. While Spiro knew Basil didn't consider him a scavenged weapon and was only trying to explain away the rifles, those around him didn't seem to take it that way, and knowing Basil he didn't even realize the misunderstanding had happened. Unless, of course, it was one of those (object) moments and it somehow thought that was the most terrifying response. The Calm Man turned directly to Spiro. "You, are you being held against your will?"

This was the exact sort of situation he wanted to avoid. If the Faceless Man responded instead of Spiro they'd probably turn on him for seemingly kidnapping one of their own. Yet these people were probably Amigosian Ministry of Information equivalents, meaning he had to tread in his response carefully. "No sir, I took an oath to defend my nation and I believe it is best fulfilled this way" Spiro replied confidently. The others took on a much calmer expression and Spiro felt pleased; Amigosian wits remained unmatched.

"What do you know of these beings we are here to confront?" the Faceless Man asked, directing words towards the Calm Man. "I cannot provide that information. Forgive my bluntness, but we don't exactly know your origins or motivations, and you aren't exactly fourth coming, so we do not trust you enough to share intel." The Faceless Man seemed unfazed. "These beings belong to the civilization (Elthrice), though it is best translated to 'Elthrice' – the same as I do. These particular beings we are likely to confront are desperate, and likely seek an invasion or infiltration." Spiro felt a little worried; if these were ministry analogs then they wouldn't participate in a good natured exchange of information.

"So, what exactly do you believe yourself to be? Our protector, controlling access to our planet?" The Faceless Man responded. "Yes, in a way. I am here to uproot the weeds sprouted from seeds spread of my own tree, but have no animosity to the other plants of your garden." An unease washed over Spiro; Basil never spoke like this. The Calm Man asked two more questions in rapid fire. "What sort of authority structure do you have, and are we likely to see more of you?" The Faceless Man responded, a contradictory mix of sorry and apathy hidden beneath the whispers. "I am the last of ones with my capabilities, and the only one of my allegiances you will meet, if that is what you ask." The Faceless Man paused momentarily before continuing with "I am what you may call an endangered species."

This was a problem. Spiro himself had been trained to interrogate without the other feeling like he was being interrogated, and this same manner of questioning was occurring now. Basil had fallen for it once before, and here the Faceless man was falling for it yet again. A pang of guilt hit him as he remembered turning on Basil, although he would hopefully use his skills to aid him this time. He broke his calm, unexpressive expression, and glared straight at the lack of a face. The Faceless man suddenly straightened and took a more rigid posture, seeming to get the message. An odd dread washed over Spiro; while the Faceless man had only just changed his posture, his brain felt like the Faceless man had just grown by ten feet and took on a menacing expression, even if his eyes reported that nothing had changed. The dread turned to satisfaction as everyone in the room except the calm man stepped back, a reminder that Basil was on his side - even in this form.

"Be warned, Earth does not require a guardian or overlord, and you are not the one to decide who may or may not enter. You will be permitted to aid in its defense, but that is the only permission I have granted, and it is tenuous." The Faceless Man replied, a sudden darkness deep in his voice.

"You say these things, but you have not born witness to what I have. I have witnessed the sterilization of many planets, and have initiated such destruction upon two. You play a game in the dark and yet you know not even what the opponents' pieces can do." Though remaining outwardly unexpressive, the Calm Man appeared to take a moment to process the unknown being's words. Before he could respond, however, the conversation was interrupted by words arriving over the Calm Man's radio.

"Sir, we've just captured somebody who claims to be a hiker driving out here, he somehow slipped past our guys on the perimeter." The Faceless Man replied directly to the transmission before anybody else could respond. "If you have captured somebody they are very likely not the ones I am here for." The Faceless Man received disapproving glances from those around the Calm Man, all seeming unhappy with Faceless Man's flaunting of his access to their network. The one on the other end of the radio seemed hesitant to respond, but eventually the Calm Man replied. "How would we know for sure?" The Faceless Man took an oddly fluid step towards the Calm Man. "The being would almost certainly be nearly seven feet or taller, and they would have no means of obscuring that." The radio cracked in response. "Yeah, this guy has to be at least seven feet tall. But so what, is every Norwegian one of them?"

The Faceless Man replied, ignoring the last comment. "A more obvious indicator would be a gray green complexion, which could be hidden with pigments or a technological augmentation. To defeat the latter you would need to render your subject unconscious." The voice on the other end of the radio fell silent for a moment, but suddenly turned frantic. "Shit, he's wearing makeup. Er, um, not a he. I think it's one of them." The calm man seemed to remain stoic, and the Faceless Man only uttered "Interesting" in his otherworldly voice.

The Calm Man went to leave the tent, but the Faceless Man spoke with a surprising air of urgency. "I must accompany you during interrogation." Despite no change in voice, the Calm Man had an air of suspicion. "And why would that be?" The Faceless Man replied coldly. "Because he now knows you are on to him. You will never be able to get any information from his kind, but regardless of his objections, he will give it to me."

55: The Third Elthrice Campaign Pt. 2

Spiro followed the Faceless Man as they were wordlessly ushered into a tent by those standing outside. Their prisoner, an oddly thin Orbital, looked bruised and bloody; pigments meant to hide his skin seemingly washed off his face and upper body - despite the rest of him seemingly still in disguise. Wet rags and bloody rags covered one table, although the room seemed cluttered with gadgets. They were undoubtedly Earth technology, though, many alien devices dedicated to specific purposes as opposed to the Elthrice technology that seemed to do everything at once while being integrated into a larger device or person.

The Orbital's face contorted to an expression Spiro couldn't recognize as it shouted something in Elthrice that Spiro didn't understand.

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The Faceless Man's voice boomed with anger.

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The Orbital flew into a panic, trying and failing to break its restraints. "What did you say?" demanded the Calm Man. "He believed I would be on his side, but was sorely mistaken" the Faceless Man replied in a somewhat mocking tone, before contemplating aloud. "Interesting that an Orbital be sent without an Orbital's (object)..." the Faceless Man said, taking several steps towards the prisoner, who returned to resisting his restraints again and called out to his captors in English. "Please don't let him...", but the prisoner's voice trailed off as the Faceless Man gently put his hand on the prisoner's left arm.

Spiro looked on, feeling a little confused. It looked like the Faceless Man was about to try to activate the Orbital's implant, but that wouldn't work, would it? Could anybody just activate an Orbital's implant? The Faceless Man moved his arm in an almost otherworldly fluid swipe, but everything suddenly felt wrong. Something hit him in the chest, and those around him aimed weapons and started shouting. Instead of seeing a PDA he heard a bone chilling crack, the Orbital now screaming. A disembodied arm was held in the air like a trophy.

Spiro suddenly felt sick to his stomach. Not at the violence; he'd seen far worse, but this was not something that would have been done by Basil, who had barely been able to stomach killing somebody who stabbed him. While he hadn't known anybody who'd have the strength to do something like this, he'd known people who'd had this sort of brutality in interrogations before; he despised those people. He could hardly believe what had happened, but only two possibilities existed. Either the violence had broken Basil, or this wasn't Basil making these decisions. He wasn't sure which was worse.

Ignoring the screams, the Faceless Man opened the limb, pulling out a bloody black dot the size of a grain kernel. An interface opened, all in unreadable Elthrice, and a few swipes and taps later the Faceless Man crushed the device between his fingers. The Calm Man, seeming to process the situation that passed by near instantly, ran over to grab the Faceless Man's arm - seemingly in anger. His sudden anger seemed to be replaced by an unexpected expression of fear as he pulled his hand away the second it made contact, though moments later his expression had returned to the blank expression he had otherwise been wearing. "What did you do?" he demanded, voice still carrying some anger, and the Faceless Man turned towards him as if he had forgotten about the Calm Man's existence.

"I told them to come. Get the van you seized into position, this is either a very desperate infiltration or a trap, but they do not know I am here so we will have the advantage either way." The Calm Man stood silently for some time, but eventually ordered his men to get the van located near an outcropping of rocks in the valley that they were encamped around. "You will wait here" the Calm Man began, but the Faceless Man spoke firmly in disagreement. "No, I will wait by the van, that is not in question. You and or your subordinates may present if you wish, but I will be present when we confront the beings. Unlike this scout, you will likely be incapable of harming them and will be entirely unmatched."

The Calm Man began to order his soldiers into defensive positions on the edges of the surrounding valley, seemingly not debating the Faceless Man's presence further. Several, however, would accompany him while they joined the Faceless Man and Spiro by the van where the Elthrice would emerge at if it were not a trap. As they made their way there, and out of earshot of the others, Spiro whispered a question. "Do you really think it's a trap?" The Faceless Man's response was whispered back, the other whispers seemingly nonexistent or too quiet to be heard. "This is a trap, or the Elthrice are exceedingly desperate. Regardless, exercise caution." Spiro replied with a cautious glance, before turning his head to look at the gunship silently moving behind the ridge.

Spiro stood waiting and looking around. The snipers were impressively hidden, their full-body suits matching the surroundings, making a deadly trap for anyone wandering in. At least, of course, anybody without an Orbital's (object). He'd have to relay their designs to somebody at the ministry, they'd be a marginal improvement to their standard gear. They certainly weren't a fan of him helping the outsider and his Earth buddies, but some good gear to bring back would hopefully plaster over the annoyance they seemed to have towards him. Maybe they'd even let Basil enter the island, and he wouldn't have to worry about what would happen if they found out he had already done so using a wormhole device.

He forced his mind to stop wandering, even if it was the only thing keeping him from focusing on the dread he felt. Sure, he could hold a confident expression - he was a master of controlling appearances, but being on an alien planet to confront other aliens sure didn't inspire confidence. The others could be faking their confidence too, but something told him that, at the very least, the Faceless Man and the Calm Man were as confident as they seemed. That sort of confidence was always dangerous.

There was a gust of wind and a flash of a wormhole as several Elthrice stepped through. They seemed to go so quickly that they didn't even know others were around until it closed, suddenly stiffening and stepping back as they realized their predicament.

"You! How did you?" asked a seemingly flabbergasted one in the center of the group, wearing a hood that concealed its face in a similar manner to their presumably former leader. Its voice did not carry whispers, but its voice sounded closer to the others on Earth; unlike the prior Elthrice that understood the language and sounded more like those from Domum. The hooded one was shorter than the rest, though still tall, and surrounded by Orbitals on both sides. The Faceless Man bellowed out something that sounded chastising.

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The Orbitals surrounding the hooded Elthrice took on a sudden look of fear, and the one with the hood took on a posture that looked like fake bravado. It spoke, however, with what sounded like real confidence. "Perhaps I do not wish to conceal my speech from those present." The group fell silent briefly, but the hooded figure continued. "You chose a fitting appearance, given my predecessor took your face last time we met." The Faceless Man responded with a tone that seemed to contain rage. "And his remains remain scattered on the desolate ruins you once called home." Suddenly, he switched to an eerily calm tone as he continued. "And so will be your fate if you do not leave now. This civilization is under my protection; return to yours or perish as your predecessor."

The group fell silent again and Spiro suddenly felt calm; from the looks of things, this would end with the Elthrice leaving peacefully. An entire army ran from them once, and here stood less than a dozen. The hooded one, however, turned to the Calm Man and spoke. "Do not pay attention to that one; it is a ghost of a lost age, weaker than he once was, bearing no army or weapons. I bear you no ill will and can provide you with items beyond your comprehension in exchange for our friendship." Spiro began to feel nervous again. This was a problem; Basil's diplomatic skills, or lack thereof, had turned every major power against him at one point. However, when he looked back, The Faceless Man remained quiet and instead turned to the Calm Man, who had an unexpected grin.

"Of course. As a show of good faith, please surrender your weapons and allow my people through to your home to verify your intentions." The Orbitals gripped their weapons harder and shifted in place, Spiro feeling more relieved again. If nothing else, at least those here were smart enough not to be blinded by such an offer, the request sounding more mocking than genuine. The moment the group fell quiet the Faceless Man turned away from the Calm One and raised his hands, gunship silently rising over the horizon to become visible from within the valley.

"One of the Orbitals slit his throat. The Calm Man's men initially started raising their weapons as the knife came out, but seconds later they joined the Elthrice in their shocked expressions; joined in expressions despite differing causes. "𐌿𐌹 𐌱𐌰𐍂 𐌸𐌺 | 𐌲𐌶𐌴" the hooded one shouted to seemingly rally his faltering allies. The Faceless Man took several steps closer. "Return to your dust and ashes, scavenger, before I turn you to dust on these lands." After speaking, however, he turned his back to the hooded one and faced the gunship hovering in the distance. Spiro couldn't believe it, but it almost looked like he was trying to goad a fight.

Spiro watched as a blur of motion erupted from the hooded one. The hooded one slashed a knife at the Faceless Man's back, but the Faceless Man turned and extended his arm towards the knife. In one quick motion he wrenched the knife out of the attacker's hand and plunged it into his chest. The Orbitals around him began to raise their weapons, but the Calm Man gave a discrete hand signal only visible to somebody trained to notice such things. The Orbitals fell to the ground, riddled with wounds, and bullets spalled off the hooded one who seemed unharmed except for the knife in his chest. The Faceless Man took the knife out of the hooded one's chest and struck him twice more with it, hard enough to knock him back and onto the ground.

Unlike the first moments, which almost looked like a dance, these strikes looked more brutal and rageful; as if he was beating him with his fists, which only held a knife by happenstance. Spiro suddenly noticed a slash across the Faceless Man's right hand and back, which seemed to be bleeding. Though not enough to be a life-threatening injury, a knot grew in Spiro's stomach. Could the hooded one be right in that he was getting weaker? Regardless, however, the fight was over; that was all that mattered for now.

The Calm Man gave another discrete hand signal.

As unexpected as it was, Spiro knew what it would mean as soon as the Calm Man's fingers began to move. He dove for cover behind a large rock; even if there were gunmen posted from every angle pointing into the valley, he had to minimize how many had a line of sight on him. Several struck him in the chest as a hail of gunfire kicked up dust, Basil falling to the ground beside him. He opened fire onto the hillside.

Time nearly froze for Basil. Moments before, the strange surge of energy from the (object) was fading, fight that he expected since the moment he stepped off the gunship now over. Then, out of nowhere, he was on the ground. He had trouble focusing, his head and chest hurt, but he knew he was in trouble. He quickly scrambled behind the rock that Spiro had ran behind, enabled magnification on his rifle's optics, and watched through them as the gunship landed in the area the snipers were; crushing rocks, trees, and people alike.

"The valley is too deep, you need to get out of there to get into the gunship" ACE bellowed through the radio, semi-monotone in nature, but volume unbearably loud to be audible in the chaos. The gunship flew in on its side, pressed to the ground, and began rolling as if it were a large shield as Basil and Spiro began to run out of the valley. Basil felt a chill run down his spine as he saw where he confronted the hooded one. The bodies of the Orbitals lay there dead; the Calm Man and his men had left, but the body of the hooded one was gone. There was no time to carry a body away in this short window, and Basil was sure that he had gone through a wormhole - either alive or dead.

"You idiot!" Basil yelled over the radio as they ran, firing blindly at the hilltops. "I was about to land the killing blow, but he has escaped and will certainly return. You have doomed yourselves!" The Calm Man replied over the radio; though he sounded as if he was out of breath from running, his voice's tone sounded like a calm gloat. "One thing about humanity you must learn is, for better or for worse, we take no shit and accept no masters. You bled and took cover; that means you're not as durable as you've portrayed yourself to be."

The two jets with their missiles roared, the gunship suddenly flying up and using its bottom as a shield. An explosion rang out, but the gunship remained in the air and seemed unharmed as it turned over and opened the door on its back. Soldiers began to swarm them from all locations and Basil and Spiro raised their hands before jumping; the gunship's artificial gravity pulling them into the craft through the now closing door. Basil spoke over the radio. "You and I are not so different, and I fear that is to your people's detriment." Taking fire from those on the ground and in the air, it tore through the atmosphere with an eardrum rupturing roar.

56: Coastal Federation

Basil stepped out of the gunship, tired and bloody, but as soon as he turned to leave ACE spoke. "Basil, while we were busy, Gina from the coastal federation attempted to contact us. She is attempting to reform their organization and requested your presence." Basil sighed, feeling even more exhausted at the suggestion. "Alright, ask them if tomorrow works or something."

"She is having a meeting in a couple hours, she specifically requested you be present because she wanted to thank you for saving their organization and wanted your official recognition of their new government." Basil laughed. "My recognition? The fuck is that gonna do?" Spiro also laughed, but seemed to be directing his laughter towards Basil's response instead of the request. "What do you mean 'The fuck that gonna do?' You helped take down an Elthrice invasion, became one in the process, and have the ear of three of the four major governments. Not to mention you've got a gunship now. Your presence there would mean almost as much as if the Redcaps themselves arrived during the negotiations and said 'This new government is under our protection.'"

"What's the gunship looking like?" Basil asked ACE. "It sustained minimal damage; we can hold off installing the weapon systems and fly it straight to Domum's coast." Basil nodded. "Alright, what do you think we should do?" Spiro looked as if he was about to speak, but ACE responded to the question Basil had directed towards ACE. "We should go. The Coastal Federation is in a strenuous position and there are no risks to us by dropping in, we can either have an ally or, most likely, a dead stranger if we do not visit." Basil nodded. "Alright. Just let me go get cleaned up first."

Basil stepped out of the gunship, walked down the opened ramp, and stopped right before the ramp changed to ground. The foliage was dense, even denser than the western regions of the Redcap's territory, but the area seemed freshly cleared, and in it, a mostly constructed wooden building lay ahead. A soldier, at least what he assumed to be a soldier, began approaching; holding a spear to his side. "Greetings, Basil. Please surrender your weapons to me, and I will escort you to the great hall." Basil shook his head. "Sorry, nobody's getting my weapons. I'll wait here, why don't you go check in with Gina."

"That was a federation order, and not up for debate" the soldier replied, switching from cheerful to menacing instantly. Well, Basil figured, the soldier at least probably thought he looked menacing. He stepped forward and off the ramp and wrapped his fingers around the spear's tip. As the spear's edge locked within his hand, millimeters away from touching his skin, the soldier tried pulling it away from Basil's grasp but failed. A familiar surge of energy hit him, though muted from the day's earlier injuries, and as the soldier began to pull back, Basil wrenched it out of his hands and struck the soldier in the chest with the end of the handle. He dropped to the ground, clutching his chest and gasping for breath. Basil scowled.

Gina ran towards them with another soldier by her side. "What happened?" the other soldier asked, nebulously directing his question towards both Basil and the soldier on the ground before quickly bending over to inspect the one on the ground. "He tried to disarm me, then found out it takes a lot more than a spear to do that" Basil replied in a monotone voice that, even to him, felt oddly relaxed for somebody who had been in an altercation. "You told me to disarm them" the soldier on the ground wheezed, seemingly catching his breath as the other soldier helped him to his feet. "I told you to disarm the negotiators, Basil is not a negotiator. You'll be fine, he just hit you in the sternum, I've seen worse wounds from training."

"Get him inside" Gina commanded the soldier who had originally accompanied her. The soldier looked hesitant, but Gina continued with a relaxed expression. "If Basil were dangerous I wouldn't have called him here." As the soldiers left, however, Gina's relaxed facial expression changed to one that looked as if she didn't know what to think of the altercation, seeming to imply she had faked the earlier expression to get the others to leave. "Sorry, I think I was a little too hard on him" Basil said as he and Gina began walking towards the entrance of the building. They continued in silence for a short distance until they stepped through a large wooden door.

"We're just finishing up, you can wait around here until we're done" Gina said, gesturing to what looked like a makeshift waiting area in the corner of the large open room. All eyes turned to him, and from the tone of the following negotiations, it seemed apparent that his presence was being used as a bargaining chip, even if it wasn't said out loud.

"Sorry about the wait" Gina said as Basil noticed the room was clearing out. "Turner, go fetch us some wine from the storage room." Basil watched as the soldier that originally had followed Gina grumbled about being the head of their armed forces and doing a cook's work, leaving Gina and Basil the only two in the room. As they waited for the wine to arrive, Gina filled Basil in on the state of things. With the ongoing turmoil in the Redcap and Lizard kingdoms, the various coastal city leaders had begrudgingly agreed to re-attempt a unification under a loose centralized power. While choosing a leader, Gina convinced them that she had the outsider's support and the debt of the Redcaps. Basil's presence in the meeting sealed that belief and helped force some more favorable terms.

Basil found himself feeling oddly refreshed as Gina explained everything bluntly. The Redcaps, the Lizard King, and Amigoso officials always had an air of bullshit to their speech; even as he began to know them personally there was always double speak and reading between the lines. Right now, he was bluntly being told he was present as a political bargaining chip, and it felt oddly pleasant to be told that, as sad as he figured it was. He was also, however, alarmed to hear that the Redcaps had fought a few skirmishes with what sounded like guerilla forces of an unknown allegiance within their capital city. He was aware of vague 'troubles,' but apparently news was slow on the Akepello and he wasn't kept in the loop by the Redcaps themselves anymore. Basil put down his glass, yet another glass of wine consumed.

"Well, perhaps you could come out of retirement to become my most trusted advisor and the second most powerful person of this nation" Gina said, suddenly shifting the conversation. Basil laughed at the absurd proposition. Under the (Old Elthrice) he would have had near limitless power and freedom to raise armies, everybody afraid to disturb the power behind the (object)s that revived somebody for a particular purpose. Here, he was offered a bureaucratic position in a barely iron age nation whose subjects mostly did not even know that specific government existed yet. What little aptitude for adept and respectful conversations Basil had, however, had alerted him to play off the laughter as if it was related to what he was about to say.

"Funny you should mention retirement. The Elthrice attacked again today." Gina returned a laugh, seeming to think Basil was joking. "There's still blood on my boots from an Orbital" Basil replied while gesturing to his shoe. Gina's face changed from intoxicated amusement to a suddenly sober look of concern and fear. "What? Where?" Basil sighed. "Today, against my people. I beat them back, but conflict with my people prevented me from killing their leadership." Gina responded confused. "You tried to kill your people's leadership?"

"No, I tried to kill the Elthrice leadership, but my people tried to kill me and it turned into a huge mess." Gina kept alternating between worry and confusion. "Why were you fighting your own people during an Elthrice invasion, and do they have the same weapons as you do?" Basil replied, suddenly sounding worn out. "They saw me as an Elthrice, which is pretty much correct at this point, but we were fighting before that too. It's a long story." Basil paused, before remembering there was a second question. "But no, while some of my technology is from my people, the stuff you've seen today is only held by the Elthrice, though some of it is even lost to them."

Gina seemed to pick up on Basil's fatigue and began to pivot the subject. "Well, if I can't offer you a position, what can I offer you, Basil? You saved the lives of me and my most loyal allies, and I would like to repay you somehow." Basil pondered momentarily, not aided by his intoxication, before finally settling on a response. "Right now, I just need an ally or two I can trust to have my back with an army if needed. Things are starting to heat up and my relations with every nation minus the Arkepello have been strained. Although with what you said earlier I'm sure the Redcaps will be requesting help from me soon if things continue the way they're going. But if things get bad there and I need a few guys with guns they're not going to be able to help me on that."

Gina laughed as if she had just uncovered a truth, intoxicated amusement returning. "So, I take it the reputation of Arkepello soldiers being shit is correct then?" Basil responded with a laugh, confirming the stereotype. "Yeah, they're good people, but most of them couldn't hit an unarmed asshole standing ten feet away." Gina responded again, this time answering Basil's original request. "Well, I can grant you that wish, you'll have an ally in the Coastal Federation." Before the conversation could continue, however, Gina pivoted it yet again. "Well, I'm glad to have had this meeting, but I must get going now. I have some diplomatic meetings to attend that will involve some long boat rides, so I don't have much time to waste."

57: Unlikeliest of Allies

He walked through the door silently, checking corners as he passed. Everything was quiet, just as he planned, and he was now standing behind her while she sat at a table oblivious. "Impressive place you got here. Durable walls, your own crops, a defensible property line, and you're far enough from the Redcaps that they won't bother you while not being far enough they won't keep the overt criminals in check." Spiro said, surprising Lamb, who spun and turned to face him. He watched as her face turned from surprise to anger, but no fear. No fear was a bad sign; there should have been at least a second or so when she realized somebody was present but didn't realize who it was or why they were there.

"How did you get in here?" Spiro just laughed. "You're seriously asking someone from the Ministry how they got in?" Lamb rephrased her reply, growing angrier. "The gall of you Amigosians. What do you want?"

"I know a couple of things. I know that you were run out of Loquail, and know why you want to be in the middle of nowhere." Lamb's face turned to rage, but her hand never went near the knife on her belt, which meant no violence today. "But there are things I don't know, and I believe you may be able to find them out." Lamb laughed, but it was a bitter, mocking laugh. "You and your people are irredeemably arrogant; in what world would you think breaking into somebody's house and blackmailing them would get you what you want? Congrats on your investigation, it just cost you your life."

Spiro laughed mockingly. "Did you just threaten an Amigosian Ministry of Information agent with that little knife on your belt?" His mind started racing, however. Her face had gone from angry to calm and she began to get out of her seat. She had to know that he could gun her down in a second, but people suddenly getting calm after stating they intended to do violence was a very, very bad sign. He had already scoped the place out; there was nobody else and no better weapons within reach, and he had his revolver and larger stature. But she seemed to think she had the upper hand here, and the reasons were unknown. Unknowns get mini boys killed, as his trainer had always said.

Spiro kept his composure and lied. "Alright, let's pretend you've got a magic wand up your ass. The Elthrice knows I'm here. What do you think his kind does to people who hurt their friends?" Lamb seemed to mull something over, which was not a good sign. "What do you want?" Lamb finally asked, spitting bile with her words. Internal relief washed over him and he attempted to regain his air of authority. "I need your help."

"You have a shitty way of asking for help." Spiro shrugged, internally glad to be re-directing the conversation in the direction he rehearsed. "Well, you are uniquely positioned to give me a hand. I happen to suspect some shady stuff is going on in the Amigoso docks, and-" Lamb cut Spiro off. "You suspect!?" Lamb asked in mocking sarcasm. Spiro continued, ignoring the comment.

"I need you to pose as a smuggler and reach out to this contact" Spiro said while handing her a piece of paper. "I've already got a ship loaned to me from the Redcaps for this, I just need a believable informant to get this rolling. That guy will pay you real money for your fake smuggling, and I'll throw in a bonus beyond that, enough to keep you afloat for a long time." Lamb seemed curious, but hesitant and still angry. "If you already know who to go after then why not send your own people after them? The assholes at the ministry can break anyone, it'd be some karmic justice to see them break one of their own." Spiro shook his head and, for just a moment, accidentally telegraphed he was unsure of how to navigate the issue he was facing.

"Somebody is moving weapons, a lot of them, and from the looks of it they're ministry. I'm already on the ministry's shit list, and if I go through official channels I'll tip my hand." Lamb smirked. "You know what, helping a high ranking Amigosian commit treason has piqued my interest. But don't expect me to lose sleep when you roast in a ministry crematory." Spiro shook his head, successfully hiding his internal strife. "No, I'm recruiting you to help me route out traitors; I'm not betraying Amigoso." Lamb smirked, looking like she didn't believe a word of what he said. "Alright, and what else is in it for me?"

"You mean aside from keeping your secret quiet, the money, and me pulling you off that island?" Lamb responded with incredulity in her voice. "No, the two Elthrice pulled me off that island, and any goodwill I had with you was gone the second you broke into my home and tried to blackmail me. So, again, what else is in it for me?" Spiro thought momentarily, but with nothing coming to mind, Lamb spoke again.

"Alright, how about an audience with the smaller Elthrice? I would be stupid to accept any promises from the ministry, but from what I heard, even your mini boys are terrified of the Elthrice. And, if he really does know you're here, I want his protection. He might be stupid and unstable, but he doesn't strike me as somebody who'll stab me in the back; unlike you."

Spiro was surprised at the request. She could have just traveled to Arkepello, unless maybe they knew who she was? Or perhaps she just thought that saying hi to an Elthrice on your own was a bad idea? Oh well, don't look a gift horse in the mouth. "Deal."

58: The Miami Fallout

Basil went from the pressurized room to the condo, condo to elevator, and elevator to lobby. Walking through, however, he was stopped by Elliot. "Hey man, now a good time to talk?" Basil shook his head. "Sorry, not really. Some people made very poor decisions, and now I need to run to the liquor store before my head explodes." Elliot responded, curious but oddly enthusiastic. "Whoa, is that some sort of mob speak?" Basil stopped walking and turned to him. "Not in the mood." Elliot looked visibly upset with Basil's sudden change in demeanor.

"Vibe much?" Basil's expression softened a bit. "Sorry, look, things just keep getting worse and I need something to take the edge off. I mean very literally what I said." Eliot looked confused. "Bad like how? Is that why the feds are sniffing around for you?" Basil's attention quickly shifted to the new topic at hand. "I'm sorry, what?" Elliot spoke like it was obvious. "Yeah man, they've been sniffing around, they tried to dangle a pass on a weed charge by getting me to tell them about you."

"What exactly did they say?" Elliot seemed to think for a moment. "Not much, they just wanted to know if anybody odd was around, ya' know? They didn't ask for you by name or anything." Basil immediately asked another follow up question. "And what did you tell them?" Elliot smiled. "Relax, man, I didn't tell them anything. And I was straight to their faces about it, too. No way I'm snitching on Flint."

Basil took a deep breath. Okay, so they somehow found him, right? It could have been some money laundering investigation; maybe ACE messed something up? It didn't have to be related to the Elthrice; besides, there'd be no way they could connect him to here. Unless, shit, could the phone have pinged a tower in California? The PDA intercepted the signals, but had ACE not modified it to avoid pinging regular towers? That wouldn't be an issue in Domum or Antarctica, and a random phone in Florida wouldn't draw suspicion, but if the same phone pinged a tower when they were fighting the Elthrice, that was a problem. Shit, well, no more Vodka today, time to close up shop here.

Elliot looked over Flint's shoulder at a blur by the door as two cops ran through it. "Flint Isaiah, show us your hands!" As soon as the commotion started, however, Flint's face changed. He could still see it clear as day, but it was as if his face had suddenly changed to something unrecognizable. Elliot instinctively took several steps back and Flint began to shout. "Elliot, Tasha, and you two, you're gonna want to get out of here" while gesturing to Tasha and the couple by the front desk. Even Flint's voice had changed, as if it was being masked, and Elliot couldn't move. "Flint, don't throw your life away" Elliot began to say as he felt dread deep in his belly, but Flint seemed to pay him no attention and stood there with his hands at his sides.

"What BS did they tell you?" Flint asked in what sounded like a mocking tone. "I said, show me your hands! You're under arrest for the murder of four federal agents, unless you want to save the taxpayer some money and move your hands in any direction other than up." One of the cops screamed. Murder of federal agents? That didn't seem right. Sure, Flint seemed sketchy sometimes, but he didn't seem like a murderer. Did he? Flint just laughed, a deep belly laugh that caused Elliot to feel even more unsettled. "Oh please, the asshole who told you that must have been glowing brighter than the sun. And let me guess, no warrants or nothing, just a scary guy who told you to find me and then tell them where I am WITHOUT engaging?" One of the cops looked like he grew angrier, but the other one suddenly had a look of concern on his face. The angry one began to say "I told you," but Flint spoke over him with "Here's what's going to happen"

Neither finished their sentences.

Elliot watched as a blur of motion came through the front and back entrances of the lobby. At first he thought they were SWAT as they were all dressed in black, but something was off. Before he could tell what, however, they opened fire. Why were they opening fire? Flint didn't have a weapon. What was going on?

Elliot dove under the table. He tried to move more but was unable to, fear and adrenaline rushing through him as the bodies of the two cops fell, dark red blood contrasting the clean white carpets. His ears screamed out in agony as the pop of a handgun contrasted with a barrage of methodic automatic gunfire. Despite the unending fire, however, the paratrooper boots stood firm in the center of the room. Some of the people dressed in all black fell to the ground, and a shout rang out that chilled his bones, as if a thousand people yelled angrily at once. He covered his ears, but the otherworldly sounds still rang out.

Feet approached the pair of paratrooper boots, but all fell. Even through his balaclava, the first looked like his head was severely deformed. The second was still alive and landed directly in front of Elliot. They made frantic eye contact, and he could see the closer one was missing most of his arm. All that remained was a hemorrhaging stub and torn flesh draining blood onto the carpet and under the table, as if the arm and weapon had been ripped off in one quick motion. A stream of shell casings was now dropping near the paratrooper boots, but as quickly as the life drained from the man's eyes, the battle died out, and the room fell empty of all but two souls. Only the paratrooper boots remained, standing eerily on the now stained carpets. Elliot realized his mouth was open but couldn't tell if he was screaming due to the ringing in his ears.

Basil ran up the stairs and into his condo, pushing past the gawkers who had left theirs to foolishly investigate the gunfight. He quickly entered his door and locked it behind him, filling his hands with anything he thought would be worth grabbing. Stepping through the now open wormhole he tossed everything on the ground before stepping back through and grabbing the wormhole device. The maintenance drones, busy cleaning the and planting false DNA, rushed through behind him.

The wormhole closed, and Miami was gone forever.

59: The Beginning of the End

"Basil" Spiro said, surprising Basil who bumped into the mess of gunship parts. As Basil finally exited the maze that enveloped the hanger, he noticed Spiro looked slightly surprised or uneasy. Odd. Perhaps Spiro was just surprised by his change of appearance, his beard shaved off and his hair tied behind his head. "What's going on?"

"I just got back from speaking with Cicero and the Redcap Queen, they captured a criminal who claimed there was going to be a major attack on their capitol soon. They wanted us to join them to ensure everything went smooth while they rounded up the would-be attackers."

Something felt off, although Basil couldn't tell if it was the abyss reaching out or just intuition. "Why us? Don't they, you know, have an army?" Spiro shook his head. "Apparently Brayden found a traitor in their mix. They've gathered their most trustworthy people to staff the capital, but there's a very short list of people who they're entirely certain aren't a part of the conspiracy. Apparently, we're on that list."

It was definitely the abyss, muted as it was. There was something more to this, apparently enough to make the abyss think he was in danger, and it seemed to be directed at Spiro. Spiro wouldn't actually betray him again, right? He'd risked his own execution by confessing to his meddling, the Amigosian weapons were crucial in the fight against the Elthrice, and Spiro was probably the only reason they both walked out of California alive. Could the abyss be wrong? Unless...

"What are you not telling me?" Basil asked, and Spiro looked surprised. "What are you talking about?" Basil barked an order, a short and unexpectedly cold "Don't lie to me." Spiro suddenly looked concerned, hesitating a moment before replying. "Look, the Redcap Queen threatened me while I was there. They're all under a lot of stress, and I think it bruised her ego to ask us for help. Cicero had me promise not to tell you." Basil's face un-contorted.

Spiro looked less concerned, instead taking on a look of annoyance. "What the fuck was that?" Basil shrugged and Spiro repeated his question. "No, seriously, what the fuck was that. It felt like you were staring into my soul." Basil began to feel guilty. "Whatever (thing that controls the relics) did to me when it rebuilt my brain, I don't think it ever truly left. It seemed to pick up on the fact that you left that part out, considering you a danger 'till you told me, but I don't know how or why." Basil paused a minute, before adding "Sorry." Spiro responded with a concerned look.

Basil made his way into the Redcap's throne room, a vast and ornately decorated place seemingly designed to give a petitioner a feeling of awe and insignificance. Of course, however, its designers didn't have the foresight to consider an owner of an Elthrice gunship. Basil began feeling some irony in that he was called to protect those who used such intimidation, their sluggish recovery weakening them to their enemies, which certainly wasn't helped by putting resources into such showmanship.

"Morning" Basil yelled as he got within earshot, receiving unwelcoming glares in response to the seemingly improper greeting.

As Basil approached he noticed the Redcap Queen looked like the head of a state, authoritative and powerful, nothing like the scared girl he pulled out of a burning craft nearly two years ago. Perhaps the designers of this place did a good job after all, not to mention his gunship was still in multiple pieces on another planet as the weapon systems were being installed. She still held a mild look of displeasure on her face - although whether that was from the informal greeting, the indignity of requesting help from an outsider, or the one time he threatened her with explosive drones - he couldn't tell.

Molly, the captain of the royal guard, broke the silence permeating the hall. "As you are likely aware, we have requested your assistance in protecting the keep and her majesty. This is an abnormal request, but highly important, and our demonstration of trust in you should be considered a great honor." Basil bit his tongue, fighting the urge to comment on the absurdity wording a request for help as if they were doing him a favor. Instead, he nodded. "Your help against the (old order) Elthrice is the only reason we're all alive today. I've fought and blood alongside you all, and would consider many in this room to be close friends. I'll gladly help out any way I can."

In a moment, the tension of before left the room. Basil, however, took a deep breath and continued. "Though, before we do anything else, beware, I take threats very seriously. You threatened Spiro this morning; I'll let it slide, one egotistical asshole to another, given we've all had some hard days lately. But do not threaten me or Spiro again." Tension returned to the room, and silence fell upon the hall yet again. Molly eventually broke the silence, anger deep in her voice. "Excuse me, what did you say? Guards-" The Redcap Queen cut Molly off. "It's okay. We have all had rough days, and I did not mean to be so harsh to Spiro."

Molly still looked angry, but remained silent; the Redcap Queen looking ambivalent and Cicero looking a mix of relieved and pleased. Basil nodded again. "Alright then, I'll go raid my armory and be back in an hour or so." When the room remained silent Basil began leaving, Cicero and Casio following him out. "For the record, I had to beat it out of Spiro, he didn't originally tell me that threats were made when he passed along your request" Basil told Cicero as soon as they were out of earshot of everyone else. A few steps later he followed it with "To clarify, it's just an expression, no beating took place," unsure if they were familiar with the expression. Cicero, however, remained near expressionless - mind seeming elsewhere.

They continued in silence until nearly reaching the wormhole device, however, as Basil went to leave Cicero took on a melancholy smile. "Thank you, Basil. And I'm sorry to hear your people were attacked." Basil nodded and began to turn towards the now opened wormhole, but stopped as Casio put his arm on Basil's shoulder. The big man stood there, as if willing himself to speak, but remained silent. "It's good to see you Casio, you too Cicero, I just wish it was under better circumstances." The big man nodded.

60: The Middle of the End

"What is going on with the Redcaps? Why did Cicero send his family to the Arkepello?"

Sitting in his truck at the back of the Redcap keep, Basil stared at Tobias's message with confusion.

"What? This is news to me. There's word of an attack, but I was told they were already rounding up the attackers. I'm at their capitol now."

"You didn't know? They came through your wormhole device."

"Never met them so wouldn't recognize them. Redcaps use the system all the time, ACE doesn't usually request too many details. But it's probably just him being overcautious. I'll know more about what's going on soon, they asked me to stay overnight."

Basil tried to brush off the sudden unease. Cicero was probably just being overcautious, or maybe there was a direct threat against his family. As he stepped out of his truck, bundle of weapons in hand, however, he began to feel more unease seep through. The keep walls felt suspiciously empty, guards standing stiff and at attention, all other staff seemingly scurrying about as if trying to avoid being seen. Making his way through the halls and up a large staircase he passed Brayden. "Hey, I've got a few spare weapons in the back of my truck parked outside. Make sure they get to your best guys." Brayden nodded and quickly continued descending the steps, Basil finally reaching the top and stepping into a large empty room with others standing on the attached balcony.

He was suddenly hit with a sense of whiplash, realizing that balcony was the same balcony he was looking at when everything went to shit nearly two years ago. Enemies had become friends, friends had become enemies - then became friends again. All said and done, he stood here today to protect people who had - in a brief and chaotic moment - once ordered his execution. Spiro stepped in from the balcony and Basil realized he had been standing there motionless for longer than he realized. Looking out towards the balcony while Spiro walked his way he could see Cicero, Casio and General Edwards. To his surprise, however, Lamb was also among the crowd.

"Hey" Spiro said, seeming unsure of what to make of things. "What's she doing here?" Basil asked, afterwards hoping he didn't sound confrontational as opposed to curious. "That weapon smuggling that we talked about forever ago, well, it seems to have been ramped up. Seizing those shipments might have saved our asses, but I'm afraid of what their intentions are. She's been helping me uncover who's behind them." Basil nodded. "And you trust her?" Spiro returned the nod. "Pretty much. I mean she'd turn on me if the Ministry laid on the heat, and no guarantees she won't try to double cross me on the smuggling, but she's not going to stab us in the back while we're here. Besides, she's not bad to look at."

"If you don't fully trust her, why bring her here?" Spiro's expertise in people was unmatched - at least when compared to his own aloofness - but he felt concerned about having somebody potentially untrustworthy here. Spiro responded with a quiet chuckle. "Trust me, nobody's going to stab us in the back with you around. At least nobody that's seen you in action. Honestly, you need to realize how fucking terrifying you can be with that voice thing and start using it to your advantage. That alone could probably go toe to toe with an army."

Basil tried to smile as if he found it amusing, but he felt more conflict than he intended to portray, and Spiro seemed to notice it. He went to turn and walk towards the balcony, but a realization sank in and he turned back. "Hold on, you think Amigoso could be behind what's going on here?" Spiro shook his head to imply a confident no, but his words didn't convey the same certainty. "No. Well, definitely not officially. I'm still pretty sure it's just illegal weapon sales, but there's a small chance that there's somebody looking to do some sort of power play without the endorsement of Amigoso proper. Whatever it is, I'm going to make sure it's stopped before it can do any damage."

Basil and Spiro re-emerged onto the balcony, greeted by an unexpected solemn silence from those standing there. As Basil pulled out a flask, however, Edwards broke the silence. "Royal Police Captain Weston Brayden and Head of Royal Guards Mollie Brayden have their most loyal men stationed in the keep, while the rest of their crew is looking for agitators. The Queen will be in this room." Edwards gestured to a door attached to the room that led to the balcony. "This room is only accessible through here; we six can take two shifts tonight to stand guard. Basil, I would like to request that when you sleep, you do so in this room by this door, so if there is a disturbance you will be ready immediately." Basil nodded, but before he could reply ACE spoke.

"May we speak with the defector?" General Edwards shook his head towards the radio. "No, unfortunately, he expired during interrogation." ACE carried on with questions. "What is your communication situation with your subordinates?" General Edwards seemed slightly ashamed as he answered. "Our set of Amigosian radios fell into disrepair; we only have the radios you provided. We distributed them amongst our forces at major checkpoints." ACE replied with a request that surprised Edwards. "Please tell your soldiers to accept orders from me. I will not supplant your authority, but in a chaotic event, my ability to organize en masse would be unparalleled." Edwards remained silent for a long time, but as he began to relay to his soldiers ACE had his proxy, Basil began returning to his truck to grab some camping gear he had brought along.

Footsteps awoke Basil, the cold and damp stone floor reminding him where he was. He did a double take as he looked out the window, a dark red sky indicating he had slept way longer than he was supposed to. He quickly sat up and grabbed his watch, which indicated his eyes were correct, it was early morning on Domum. He quickly rushed out to the balcony to see Spiro pacing while recounting the tail end of a story about a young Ministry of Information recruit. Lamb seemed to think it was funny.

"Hey, sorry I" Basil began, but Spiro cut him off with a gesture of his hands. "It's all good, I asked Edwards not to wake you. I figured that since you're used to a different time you'd have not gotten any sleep, and if something did go wrong we could always wake you up. Besides, I got to raid the snacks you brought. Speaking of which, coffee?" Basil replied with a nod and a "Thanks" as Spiro gestured to coffee heated by a butane stove. "I don't know how you two drink that" Lamb said, shaking her head. Basil shrugged, Spiro replying "Trust me, the energy is worth choking it down."

Basil looked over the railing. The sun was still underneath the horizon, but blues had already become reds as the sun rose. The courtyard below had a few sentries standing still, but the only movement was the light breeze moving throughout the city. Basil decided to break the silence. "So, what's it like in Loquail?" Lamb seemed hesitant, so he followed it up with "If you don't mind me asking, just curious. Never been there myself, and before you I've only talked to a couple of sailors who claimed to have docked there." Lamb shrugged. "One half is a lot colder, one half is a lot drier. More people, shittier weapons. You some sort of scholar?"

Basil returned the shrug. "Was one once, depending on your definition, but that was a long time ago. The curiosity seemingly never left though." Lamb took on an expression Basil couldn't read, pivoting the conversation. "How exactly does one become Elthrice? I asked your tall friend, but she didn't want to talk about it." Basil's friendlier tone became monotone. "There was a war. I died but was brought back by something that seemed to think I was useful. The Elthrice seem to think that makes me Elthrice." Lamb had a momentary look of disbelief on her face, but seemed to take Basil's sudden change in demeanor and the look of discomfort on Spiro's face as enough evidence; or at least a sign to change the topic.

"So you're a shapeshifter though?" Basil was both surprised and confused. "What?" Lamb asked again, this time with more detail. "He" Lamb gestured to Spiro "Said you can change your face. So you're some sort of shapeshifter?" Basil shook his head. "No, what I can do is a combination of using Elthrice tools and the thing that brought me back. I've seen one before, but what I can do is very different." Lamb nodded. "I heard somebody say that you had killed one before." Basil replied with an apathetic gesture.

"Yeah, the Redcaps asked me to come along to check out reports of one. It attacked me when it saw me, and well, guess it didn't know what a (Rejected-Death) was capable of. Woulda' preferred to take it alive to find out what the hell it actually was. An autopsy didn't find anything unusual, but maybe experimenting on a living one would give some more concrete results. A little gruesome, maybe, but I'd say getting chopped up in a lab is justice when you've eaten people alive." Lamb shuttered, remaining quiet for an oddly long time.

"What are they like? Aside from them trying to kill you." Basil shrugged again. "Dunno, only saw the one and it didn't live too long. Heard being one messes with your head, so maybe it's a good thing they're about extinct. Then again this (object) messes with mine, so guess I got an open mind to weird shit. But most people think they're just myths, and had I not had a video I don't think Spiro here would have believed me, so there's not much really known about them."

"You ever see one?" Basil asked. Lamb shook her head. "No, I thought they were a myth, too, until Spiro said you killed one." She looked as if she was about to continue, but the conversation was interrupted by another voice behind them. "I'm scared" the Redcap Queen said, voice quivering. The three turned around in surprise, and Basil could suddenly see the scared kid he pulled out of a burning craft some time ago. "What's going on, where's Cicero?" Basil asked, knowing that Cicero was going to accompany her and worried something had happened. "I waited until he and Casio fell asleep. He keeps telling me we're not in danger, but I know he's lying." Basil tried to use the most calming voice he could, although when he heard his voice he knew it wasn't ideal for the situation. "Trust me, nobody's getting past us."

"That's what Bennett said moments before he and my father were killed in this room" the upset Queen shouted frantically. Basil vaguely recalled somebody mentioning a Bennet in the past, before realizing that was likely the former head of the royal guards who had died defending the former Redcap King. Recollections were halted, however, as the now distraught Queen picked up Basil's rifle, shouting "I won't let them take me again" while flagging the group in one sweeping motion. "What the fuck" Basil shouted, grabbing the barrel of the rifle and forcefully pointing it away from the group.

The moment he took his eyes off the barrel of the rifle he realized the girl was looking up at him, frozen in terror. Though an inch or two shy of average on earth, he was still tall for a Domum crowd, who themselves stood a head above the girl in front of him. Stature aside, he was also the once dead alien, and he had just wrenched a rifle out of her hands hard enough to nearly knock her off balance. He set the rifle down before taking a few steps back and made a non threatening hand gesture. "Hey, sorry. It's okay, you just need to be really careful with that. I can teach you how to use them once this is all over, but for now please leave it alone."

She remained frozen, and guilt began to rise in Basil's stomach. Out of nowhere, however, Lamb put her hand gently on the young Queen's shoulder and began to lead her back into the room where Cicero and Casio were. Lamb spoke in a calming voice as they left. "Let me tell you about this awful drink those two idiots drink." Basil quietly commented on the event once the two were out of earshot. "Guess it's good Lamb was here, I've got no clue how to handle anything like that. You?" Spiro shook his head. "Maybe." Suddenly, Spiro's confident voice took on an unexpectedly somber tone. "I was once with somebody who could have melted away anything like in an instant, but, well, she's been gone for a long while." Basil had just a second to process what Spiro had revealed before they were interrupted by a commotion at the courtyard's gate.

61: The End of the End

Shots rang out as an Amigosian truck crashed through the gates. "Shit!" Basil exclaimed, running off the balcony and knocking over weapons as he scrambled to grab the right one. Spiro had leveled his rifle, resting it on the balcony's railing, but Basil quickly shoved past him and aimed his sights at the moving vehicle. The RPG, makeshift as it was, deafened those on the balcony; truck erupting in debris and flames as those rushing out of the now wrecked vehicle were gunned down by the guards on the walls.

Everybody had to be awake now.

"Are we under attack by Amigoso?" Basil asked. "What?" Spiro replied, so Basil repeated his question louder. "No" Spiro replied with a shout. "No, that's an old truck, there's not a lot like that anymore. The only running ones were somehow stolen by the Redcaps, it was last in their possession before those guys got their hands on it." General Edwards ran around the corner, awoken from his slumber, demanding "What just happened?" as he finished putting on his shirt. "Somebody just crashed a truck through your gate" Basil replied, a mix of concern, anger, and disbelief in his voice. Edwards stepped onto the balcony, quickly stepping back with a worried look upon seeing the burning truck and bodies.

The balcony was enveloped in silence, but Basil did his best to collect his thoughts. "Should we evacuate?" Edwards seemed to hesitate in his answer, but shook his head emphatically. "No, somebody rammed a truck through our gate. They wouldn't have gotten anywhere even if you hadn't blown them up with that, um, that thing." Edwards gestured to the gate before finishing his statement. "They're already re-enforcing the gate." Things went quiet, Edwards and ACE coordinating and everybody else returning to uneasy silence. Suddenly, however, ACE began speaking to everyone. "They're overrunning the checkpoints." Basil responded in near disbelief. "They're what? How?" ACE replied while patching in a live feed of the chaos on the radio waves at a low volume, speaking over it.

"The Redcaps were already short on people and trusted few, so most of their forces are stationed towards the city's outskirts. There are a lot more attackers than expected, and the ones they interrogated gave enough false information that the Redcaps are stationed in inadequate locations. Several groups are cutting their way through the city, between us and most of the Redcap's forces."

"Okay, we're evacuating, no arguments." Basil told a suddenly fearful looking Edwards. Edwards yelled for the Branden twins over the radio, but quietness again enveloped the room when the radio feed went silent. Nothing but the distant sounds of gunfire and footsteps could be heard when ACE spoke, dropping his usual monotone voice for a worried one. "Somebody has disabled the generators on the bottom floor, we have no wormhole access or radio repeater." A much deeper dread made its way across the group and Edwards spoke in quiet disbelief. "What does that mean?" Basil responded with an unexpectedly cold tone. "It means this building is no longer under our control. We need to go now."

"There has to be something-" Weston said, entering the room and seemingly hearing the tail end of the conversation. Basil responded, dropping his cold tone for a more monotone voice. "No, my gunship is twelve hours away from being re-assembled, and your soldiers from other counties are more than a day away. Get your people here to secure a path to the back gate, I'll escort us to my truck and we'll get out of here now." Basil expected a lot of pushback as an outsider started to order around the Redcaps, but instead the group silently picked up their weapons and shuffled toward the door.

Basil, Spiro, Lamb, Cicero, Casio, The Redcap Queen, and the Braydens began to make their way down the halls. "Most of my guards should have woken up with all this commotion, they'll be here any second" shouted Mollie as she and Brayden pushed to the front of the group on the staircase. Basil cut in front of them, trying to be as polite as possible while pushing the head of royal security and a police captain out of the way. "Sorry, I need to be in front. I'm the only one who can take a shot here. Stay behind me, let me see if the coast is clear." Weston looked uneasy, but both stepped aside as Basil walked past and into the room below.

He rounded the corner and stepped into an ambush. Nearly a dozen people in Redcap garb fired their muzzleloaders in his direction, two dead real soldiers lying in front of them with their throats slit. Basil felt the familiar energy work throughout his body; onslaught of bullets feeling as if he had walked into a cloud of gnats, his mantle feeling like the return of an old friend.

The second gunfire erupted Edwards and Weston started rushing down the steps, but Spiro stepped in their way. He went to speak, but Weston shoved him against the wall before he could. That fucking brute. At least Cicero, Casio, Lamb, and Mollie had the sense to take up defensive positions on the stairs. He began unslinging his rifle but stopped, the gunfire and screams stopping as quickly as they had started. That silence meant one thing: there was no longer anybody dangerous in that room. Well, at least, there was no longer anybody dangerous that wasn't on their side.

He went to round the corner, but as he did so a chill ran down his spine and settled in his gut. Basil had his mantel, he'd seen that before, but the scene in its entirety was a new form of unnerving he hadn't become callous to. Basil stood over nearly a dozen dead bodies, unmoving; the bullet scarred shotgun bent with a bloody stock as if used as a club. He stood there frozen - he'd seen the results of firefights before, and he'd seen Basil fight scarier foes. But this wasn't normal violence; they had stepped well outside that realm, and it felt unnaturally unsettling.

Spiro realized he was frozen. He looked around and realized everybody else was frozen, though Edwards and Weston pointed their rifles at Basil. "Put your guns down, it's Basil" Spiro shouted, the other two slowly lowering their weapons and turning to him with fear on their faces. Spiro looked back up and Basil was standing in front of them again, an oddly expressionless face and blood splattered on his now torn clothes.

Basil took a deep breath, feeling the energy dissipate from his body. "We need to leave now, I'm gonna guess there's a hell of a lot more of them." Edwards seemed to snap out of it. "There's two ways out of this room, the front there, and the back entrance" Edwards said while gesturing to each end of the room. "Mollie, you said that your guards were in the process of regrouping in this room?" Mollie nodded and Edwards continued. "Good. Stay in here, when your guards get their act together have half of them stay in this room and barricade the front entrance. Follow us to the back exit with the other half, but radio false orders stating you'll make a push through the front when you do." Mollie nodded and Edwards turned his attention to Weston. "You said your men were in the barracks, yes?"

"They are, but I can't reach them over the radio." Edwards nodded. "The barrack's radios were wired into the same generators. I do not know why we can't reach them through their handheld ones, but now is not the time to speculate. We will make our way to the back entrance, then we get you to the barracks. Get your men together and help us make our retreat. Basil, Spiro, Weston, you two will go down the hall to the back exit of the keep, then radio ahead once it's clear. On the way there the only place anybody could be hiding is the kitchens, and while I believe they should be empty, you three need to verify that before I lead everybody else through. Once you call in, sit tight and wait for our arrival."

"All clear" Basil relayed over the radio, staring at the big empty room that led out of the back of the keep. The same empty room he ran out of once before, during a different – but not all too different – time where another surgical force was used against the same people in the same keep. This one, of course, was a lot more subterfuge and a lot less stolen Elthrice crafts.

"Fighting is erupting outside" Weston relayed as gunshots sounded off from within the courtyard. "The royal police stationed within the barracks by the north gate are engaging someone. I can't see enough through this window to see how many or where they're positioned, but it sounds like Amigosian weapons are at play." Spiro looked a little concerned as the observation was vocalized. Edwards replied over the radio. "We will address that when we get there, we're only about two minutes out."

Edwards, Mollie, Lamb, Cicero, Casio, and the Queen arrived as ACE finished relaying all he could gather. The Royal Redcap guards guarding the front entrance to the throne room were already engaging attackers - the attackers lighting the large wooden door and barricades on fire before beginning their attempt to push past. No consistent updates came in from outside the keep walls; even those reachable without the repeater lacked concrete information, were engaged in combat, fleeing, or dead. The only people within the walls they could reliably contact, at least those outside Basil's line of sight, were those within the now burning throne room.

Spiro looked through the window, shifting his body to get the widest angle of view possible. "Shit, we've got people moving along the walls. Weston's guys in the barracks seem to be trying to pin them down, but they'll be on the other side of this door soon. We need to act now." Edwards took a deep breath. "Mollie, break your remaining guards into two groups and move along the walls to the left and right of the exit. You and your best need to go left where the enemy is in greater numbers. Basil, Weston, as soon as they are in position you two need to make a run towards the barracks. Basil, get your truck back here; Weston, you and your men split into thirds. Two groups supporting Mollie's groups on the far side of the walls, the last group securing the gate and opening it when we leave."

When the group remained quiet Edwards continued. "Nobody should make it to us from the courtyard with Mollie on the other side, but I don't know how long her guards in the throne room can hold out. Cicero, Spiro, you two accompany me. We'll barricade the hall behind us in case anybody tries following us, then we'll guard our rear as everybody else loads into Basil's truck. Casio, Lamb, accompany the Queen in the guard nook by the door."

Mollie ran out the door, only a few steps behind the soldiers in the front. They were fast, but so was she, and they all needed to get to the corner of the stone wall – the closest they would have to cover. Chips flew off the wall as bullets flew in their direction, and she suddenly felt a pain in her gut, but she ran on. She made it to the corner and turned to fire, but realized she was now leading the charge; whether those in front of her had fallen behind, or fallen dead, she didn't know.

She gripped her rifle and started firing. Though the Amigosian weapons the attackers wielded were much faster than ones issued to the standard Redcap Soldier, the weapons Basil brought along put the traitors to shame. Were they Earth weapons or Elthrice weapons? Huh, she never asked. She'd have to ask him when this was all over. She glanced over, Basil and Weston were emerging from the keep now. They were firing blindly into the courtyard. Why were they doing that?

She looked up, more attackers were rounding the corner, a lot more than they had planned for. She quickly fumbled for another magazine, but suddenly fell to her knees, the pain in her stomach growing stronger. It was now or never. She forced herself back to her feet and fired on the attackers. Attackers fell, allies fell, but she kept looking down the cold metal sights of her rifle. One down, another down. More pain emerged throughout her body, as if a thousand stinging wasps were attacking her. The gun kicked, but she remembered what Basil had told her: short controlled bursts. There weren't so many people out there now, either along the wall or by the barracks. She went to reload again, but found herself falling to the ground a second time.

She didn't hurt, in fact it almost felt peaceful. She turned her head, heavy as it was, and saw Basil and Weston approaching their destinations. She turned her head back; she'd rejoin the fight momentarily. She just needed to rest her eyes.

Basil hated waiting inside, he was the only one who could survive getting shot, and yet he was one of the few people who wasn't getting shot at. Edwards was right though, if they knew they were making a play for the truck then they'd shoot it – and Weston wasn't so durable - so Mollie had to get their attention first. It felt like forever, but eventually Edwards gave the signal and he and Weston began sprinting out of the door. Basil looked over towards the chaos as he ran. The plan was already falling apart - Mollie's Redcap Royal guards were more outnumbered than expected and sitting ducks along the wall. If the plan was already failing there was no point in following it.

Basil pulled out his handgun and started firing upon the attackers, Weston following suit with his rifle moments later. He certainly couldn't hit anybody at this distance, no less while running, but it was working – some turned their attention to him instead of the pinned Redcap Royal Guards and Police force. He kept running and started nearing his truck, Weston breaking off and running towards the police stationed in the barracks. Bullets sailed through his windshield as he pulled out his keys, but the truck started all the same. There was now nobody moving near the wall Mollie had run along, he had to hurry. Some bullets struck him, and while he wasn't hurt – at least not badly – the (object) seemed to sense danger and he felt energy wash over him once again.

He stepped on the gas and the engine roared. He turned around to grab the last unaccounted for weapon he had brought along, a rifle stored in the back seat, and as he turned - for just a second - he admired the height of the dirt that the truck kicked up.

The smell of smoke had been getting stronger for some time, and it wasn't long before Spiro watched as attackers in Redcap garb started rushing down the hall and firing upon them. It wasn't too complicated; he, Cicero, and Edwards all possessed much more powerful weapons than the attackers who were being forced into a fatal funnel. All they had to do was hold this position long enough for Basil to return with the truck. But they just kept coming. Three more fell to the beam of lead emanating from his rifle, but twice as many rounded the corner in the same time. "I'm out!" Cicero shouted, taking cover and reloading. Spiro tried to keep them pinned while Cicero was occupied, but several made it past his onslaught of bullets and took cover behind a statue, scarily close to their makeshift barricade.

Edwards seemed to notice this. "Cover me!" he shouted, stepping out past their barricade. Fuck, fuck, fuck. Who the fuck taught him how to behave in a firefight. Edwards opened fire from an angle that negated their cover, striking two hiding behind the statue, but fell to the ground as blood erupted from him. "Cicero!" Spiro shouted as he jumped over their barrier, ducking to avoid the rounds flying over his head as Cicero emptied an entire magazine in every direction. Spiro picked Edwards up, nearly throwing Edwards over the barrier before leaping over it himself.

Spiro quickly started reloading and turned back to the hall, but even with a short glance, he saw Edwards was hit badly. The wounds on his shoulder and right arm didn't look imminently fatal, but his right leg was gushing blood at an alarming rate. "Casio, tourniquet!" Cicero shouted, taking cover as Spiro finished reloading and started returning fire. Spiro ran out again, turning back to grab his second to last magazine as Cicero took over. Edwards lay there silently, his copper colored skin several shades lighter, until Casio began to drag him towards safety – leaving a ghastly blood trail behind him.

Edwards screamed as Casio tightened the tourniquet.

Lamb watched as Basil and Weston bolted out the door, leaving her and the big mute to guard the Redcap Queen. This was not going well. And, as if her thoughts had jinxed them, the three guarding the hall opened fire. They were surrounded, and the walls might provide cover for a little while, but she'd seen too many people try to hole up in a captain's quarters or some similar room - they all always found it'd become their tomb soon enough. Damn it, why didn't she ask for a weapon. The Elthrice probably wouldn't have given her one, but maybe Spiro would have? Oh well, too late now, all she had was a knife and the trick up her sleeve.

Odd, those three seemed to be holding off the assailants effortlessly. The Elthrice weapons roared and echoed like nothing she'd ever heard before. Maybe they still had a chance? That is, if the Elthrice didn't just abandon them. Any sane person wouldn't re-insert themselves into a situation like this if they could escape, and from what she heard, the Redcaps had tried to kill him once and Spiro had conspired against him in the past. Yeah, he definitely wasn't returning. The young queen was now lying on the floor in a ball crying. Oh well, nothing could be done about that now. Why did she even care about her? The kid's father would have executed someone such as herself in a heartbeat.

Lamb heard shouting and looked up in time to see Spiro leap over the barricade. Shit, if the arrogant Amigosian was committing suicide they were well and truly fucked. Edwards suddenly flew over the barricade, splattering blood when he hit the ground, only to be followed by Spiro moments later. A rescue mission was better than suicide for their odds of getting out, but the odds certainly didn't look good either way. The mute ran towards Edwards, and despite the ear splitting noise, the world almost felt calm and still as she stood there alone with the helpless royal. The stillness lasted for only a second, however, as there was movement at the door.

Was it friendly? Probably not. She still had the trick up her sleeve, and could at least make it through whoever was entering, but the Elthrice would probably just kill her once she made it out if he was stupid enough to be returning to this mess. Assailants ran through the door that Basil, Weston, and Mollie had all left through; raising their weapons.

Lamb felt a surge of energy through her as she began to shape shift. She felt the sting of bullets sailing through her body, but the energy drowned them out. She slashed at one of the assailants, splattering herself, the walls, and the young queen with blood. She slashed at the second assailant, and reached to tear out the third's neck. The young queen now lay on the floor, seemingly catatonic but unharmed. She could hear terrified voices behind her, it sounded like somebody was saying something about firing at her, but somebody else didn't want to.

She looked outside. The Elthrice was coming fast in that machine of his, but bullets were flying in his direction from the assailants working their way along the wall towards the back exit of the keep. She ran outside and began to fight the assailants, but bullets started flying her way too. She thought the Elthrice would crash into the building, but at the last second he stopped abruptly and jumped out of the machine he was in. He had a new weapon, one like Spiro had, and it sprayed out endless bullets at those firing upon her.

The assailants, at least the ones near, were all dead. And yet the Elthrice still wasn't wearing his face, or even any face, so did that mean he was going to kill her too? No, he was yelling something. What was he yelling? His voice, something about his voice told her to run, a feeling she had never had before in this form. He suddenly had a face, and his voice sounded different than before, but he was still yelling something incomprehensible. Why was it so fucking hard to think in this form? Focus! Basil spoke again. "Get them in the truck!"

62: A1 Epilogue

Basil held down the trigger until his gun ran empty, jumping back in the driver's seat as everyone climbed into the truck's bed and cab. Bullets flew in their direction, but the truck roared to life all the same as they sped towards the south gate; Weston's men opening it as he approached. "Go!" commanded Edwards as Basil began slowing down by the gate, leaving the rest unsaid and Weston to meet the same fate as his twin.

Basil drove through the streets, now littered with smoke and debris. Such conditions didn't feel as alien as he expected; he'd seen them this way once before during the war between the Redcaps and the Lizard King. His recollections were interrupted, however, as he swerved to avoid a family fleeing a burning building. He continued on, trying to balance his speed with his intent to not crash, and after winning a game of chicken against attackers on foot attempting to stop the truck, they made it to the outskirts of the city.

Driving past a field that looked difficult to conceal soldiers in, Basil stopped the truck to allow everyone to cram into the cab and assess their wounds. Lamb, given her unique capabilities, was almost healed. Cicero had received several grazing wounds that he hadn't noticed, though nothing that even warranted bandages until they were in a more permanently safe location. The tourniquet had stopped the hemorrhaging on Edward's leg, and some crudely packed gauze kept his shoulder and arm from losing blood as well. Though greatly wounded, he no longer seemed to be in shock and would hopefully be stable enough to survive until they could treat his injuries in a safe location.

"Moss harbor" Cicero said, pointing to Basil's map. "It's a naval port a short drive east of here that's a distance from the nearest town. There would be no civilian population to infiltrate like in our capital, and we could wait there until we can organize our forces and push these traitors out." Basil nodded, and when his six passengers remained quiet he began the drive towards the coast.

"Shit that's a lotta' people" Basil said, breaking the silence as they crested a hill. "They look like Shell County soldiers, why are they here? They were directed to march on the capital" asked Edwards to nobody in particular. Basil rubbernecked, seeing the group far to the north-east, although as he watched it almost looked as if they started moving in their direction. "Maybe communication broke down or something happened?" Basil asked, unsure what else to say. "The port is just up ahead, we can sort it out safely from sea" Cicero replied. Basil nodded and accelerated down the path, cresting another hill and seeing grass turn to sand and moss covered stones. "Well fuck."

Small plumes of smoke rose over several ships, the rest of the dock looking empty and deserted. "No, this is impossible!" Cicero shouted. Basil glanced toward the Shell County soldiers, but they weren't visible from behind the hills they had passed. "You thinking those guys attacked the naval port, either capturing the ships or forcing them to flee?" Basil asked, gesturing to the mob concealed by the hills. "Perhaps" Cicero replied, disbelief in his voice. Basil took a deep breath. "Okay, we go south. Soldiers on foot or horseback can't catch us in a truck. Get the Arkepello Navy to drop by and pick us up, and we get off the continent. Once we get wormholes to the Lizard King's army and my gunship working these guys are fucked. Sound good?" Basil received a few nods, but ACE replied with a different plan. "I just pinged the Coastal Federation's ships, they are close by." Basil kept driving south-east while radioing the Coastal Federation. A shameful look washed over Cicero's face.

"This is Basil, I'm calling because I need your help. I'm here with some Redcaps, we were attacked and need help getting off the continent to Arkepello." Basil heard a crackling voice answer, recognizing the voice as belonging to Turner. "You're asking us to risk our lives for the ones who betrayed us?" Basil responded. "I'm asking you to help me, who's currently helping the Redcaps. It's a complicated situation, but it's extremely important." Turner began to speak, but suddenly stopped and Gina's voice came over the radio. "Basil, what's going on?" Basil mentally breathed a sigh of relief. "I'm with the Redcap Queen, their capital was attacked and I need help getting her and some others off the continent. I know that-" Gina replied with disbelief in her voice. "What? How? What happened? Was it the Elthrice?" Basil responded, speaking rapidly. "I don't know much other than it's not the Elthrice. We're in a bit of a hurry, and I may have an army on our tail. We need to get out of here now."

"Of course, where are you?" Relief washed over Basil. "We're outside Moss Harbor, but I'm going to head south and try to outrun a few assholes. Can you meet us ten miles south on the coast?" Gina sounded confused. "Why not bring the Redcaps to the naval base? Are there turncoats in their ranks?" Basil responded in monotone. "There is no more naval base, only an empty dock and some burning ships." Basil heard gasps on the other end of the radio as Turner demanded Gina's forces leave immediately if the waters weren't protected by the Redcap navy. "We'll be there" Gina eventually responded, despite the protests of the other voices. The truck reached the end of the dirt path and started traveling on sand, Basil turning to drive south along the coast.

Everyone in the truck was thrown to the ceiling as it became ground, then ground as it became ceiling, and ceiling once more as it again became ground. Basil pushed himself off the ceiling, feeling disorientated but full of adrenaline as the realization of their situation kicked in. Crawling across the truck's roof and kicking out the driver's side window, he was greeted by hot sand. "Fuck fuck fuck" he muttered under his breath before opening his PDA.

"Change of plans, how soon can you be at Moss Harbor?" Gina's voice sounded confused and concerned. "What?" Basil took a deep breath, an odd mix of nervousness and apathy in his voice. "Yeah, some sand kinda fucked up our ride. Some of us are in no condition to run at all, let alone try to outrun a bunch of horses. We can get to the docks before our tail gets to us, it's our best bet at a last stand until you can get to us." Gina responded tersely, worry in her voice. "I'll be there as soon as I can."

Everybody had begun their crawl out of the truck and Basil turned his attention to the evacuees. "The docks, we need to get there. The Coastal Federation will pick us up but we have to hurry and get into a defensive position." Spiro crawled out last and Basil began "Hurry up, we need to," but paused when he saw Spiro clutching his chest. "Are you alright?" Basil asked Spiro, helping him to his feet. Spiro laughed a pained laugh. "Of all the ways to go out today, falling on the knife in my jacket pocket's gotta be the stupidest way. But I think I'll be alright, just fucking hurts." A growing red blot surrounding a small knife embedded in Spiro's chest caught Basil's attention.

Basil felt concerned, but Spiro gave a pained smile and shrugged before hobbling towards the docks. The knife seemed to have missed his vitals, bleeding too slow to mean death before arriving at the docks, but was still a concerning sight and something that would need attention sooner rather than later. With nothing else he could do at the moment Basil reached into the truck to retrieve his rifle, and after glancing over towards the mob cresting the distant hill, he started off towards the docks.

Basil and the Redcap Queen helped lower Edwards to sit against the wall by the door. That tourniquet had been on his leg for some time now, and in any other situation it should have already come off. What he needed was proper medical attention, but even in the field they should be loosening it to see if the wound had clotted and it could come off; else he may lose the leg by the end of this all. But this wasn't any other situation, and credit to him; Basil knew Edwards would refuse to entertain the idea of disrupting their defenses to tend to his wounds.

"We good?" Basil asked as Casio walked out of another room in the building, finishing his sweep of the place. The big man nodded. "All right" Basil began. "If anybody comes through that door, outside of Cicero, Spiro, Lamb, or me, kill them. Gina's crew will be here soon, but if the Shell County soldiers get here first and they're looking for a fight we'll try to hold them off. When Gina's crew are about to arrive, or if our tail starts getting past us, ACE will give you a heads up so you can get a head start."

Spiro heard movement. The army of what they feared were traitors was still a distance away, but all his friends were too, so this was probably bad news. Repositioning himself against the wall he was sitting against, and trying to remain quiet despite the jolt of pain, he waited for the unknown entities to reveal themselves. Four men in soaked Amigosian Frogmen uniforms rounded the corner, aiming their rifles at him. Spiro felt relief wash over him as he smiled and set down his rifle.

"Just when I had given up hope the ministry was going to send the help I requested" Spiro said, letting out a short laugh that ended abruptly in pain. One of the frogmen stepped in front of the others, looking slightly confused for a moment, but returned the smile. "Wasn't expecting to find you here, sir. But I can assure you, now that we're here, nobody else stands a chance. Let me see that wound." Spiro gestured to the abandoned navy barracks. "We've been able to get the Redcap Queen with her general and top advisor out of the capital unharmed. This position isn't defensible, we have what we expect to be an army of Redcap traitors on our heels, so new plan is to get your boat to this dock and everybody on it. We're not risking you boys trying to hold an abandoned dock."

The frogman's smile turned to confusion, shortly followed by a frown. "Sorry sir, but I think you're mistaken, we have other orders." He raised his rifle towards Spiro, but turned to the side as gunshots rang out. Lamb opened fire while running around a corner, before dropping near instantly as the other frogmen returned fire. The second they stopped firing, however, she rolled back behind cover; leaving a trail of blood visible even from that distance. "You two, kill that one before the others get here. It's a shape shifter, remember your training."

The frogman giving the orders turned back to Spiro, only to see a revolver pointed in his direction. His hand became a cloud of red mist, causing him to drop his rifle. Spiro took his sights off the closest frogman and began to aim towards the second, but his revolver flew out of his hand as the closest frogman kicked at him before drawing a knife with his left hand.

The frogman moved his hand in a slashing motion, but his head jerked to the side as he collapsed into tremors. The frogman standing behind him raised his rifle and pointed it down the docks, but he too fell in a hail of bullets as Basil fired while running in their direction. The two that had broken off to pursue Lamb turned and opened fire on Basil, but one fell to Basil's bullets, the other shot by Lamb as he attempted to take cover behind the corner she had retreated behind.

"Are you okay!?" Basil asked in a borderline shout as he ran over to Spiro. "You killed them!" Spiro said, anger in his voice as he both asked and stated in one sentence. Dread washed over Basil as he began to worry he had misinterpreted the situation and murdered several people. "They, they were trying to kill you?" Spiro had a sudden expression of either shock or fear wash over him. "They were. Fuck." Spiro fell silent before seemingly collecting his thoughts and continuing.

"Those were Amigosian frogmen, you don't fuck with people like that, and it would take a lot of influence to get them to do an unofficial job like this. I don't know what's going on, but this is bad. We need to get out of here ASAP and some place where rogue Amigosian intelligence can't infiltrate, which basically means behind weapons held by you or ACE."

Lamb ran over, ghastly spots of blood on her clothes despite her wounds seemingly no longer bleeding. "Shit, are you alright?" Basil asked. "I already told you, if they don't hit anything too critical I'll heal fast. This isn't the first time Amigosian assholes have shot me." Basil nodded, taking a deep breath as Cicero made his way over and they got into defensive positions.

"We need to conserve ammo" Basil said, chastising Spiro's potshots at the distant mob. The docks fell still, Basil Spiro, Lamb, and Cicero all lying motionless, watching the mob through reticals and scopes. Spiro replied with annoyance in his voice. "In case you haven't forgotten, it doesn't matter how much we have left when a thousand people storm the docks. We need to slow their advance." Basil turned his head sideways, seeing the blood stain on Spiro's shirt had grown to encompass a disturbingly large area. "The plan is still the same. We let them get their cavalry up close, then you three shoot at them while I try to spook their horses. We buy ourselves some time before their foot soldiers get here, and if that fails, you three run off and make a swim for it while I buy you some time then slink away."

"I don't remember us agreeing to that plan" Spiro replied. "I only remember you proposing it. I'm not turning tail to leave you to get gunned down." Basil sighed. "Whatever thing brought me back seems to think it needs me. If it can't get me out, I'm guessing it can bring me back again. You three don't have that option." Spiro shook his head. "No, fuck that. We have absolutely no idea how that works, you don't just get to assume it'll bring you back." Basil snapped back, sarcastic anger in his voice surprising even himself. "Oh, well then I'll just consult my local Elthrice library. Oh, right, I can't because everyone who would know is dead. The closest thing we have to information on this is what it stuck in my head when it rebuilt me, so if I say run when this all goes south you'd better fucking run."

"Enough" Cicero said, interrupting with a worn down voice. The group fell silent momentarily before Spiro spoke with a melancholy smile. "Look, I'm not even sure if I could hobble to the end of the dock at this point, much less run and swim. Like it or not, you're stuck with me." Basil remained silent but tried his best to return a melancholy smile as Cicero broke the silence. "I'll stay here as long as I can, then run for the barracks to join the others for a swim if I have to. I can't thank you all enough for the service you have performed on behalf of the Redcaps, and it saddens me to know this may be the last time we meet." Basil nodded, but remained silent for a considerable amount of time before asking "Lamb?"

"You're not the only one who can shake off a few bullets, and last time I had to swim for something it went rather bad. I'm with you three, I'll hold out here as long as I can before joining the others in the great blue if it all unravels." Basil nodded, before watching with concern as the army making their way to the beach began to take up positions surrounding them instead of blindingly rushing towards them with the first troops that came within range. "In a sense I'm honored" Basil began, "That they're treating us like an army instead of four barely armed assholes holed up in a dock." Spiro began to laugh, but clutched in pain at the knife in his chest when he did so.

Bullets began to sail over the four's heads. Some soldiers were still getting into position, but others started advancing towards the dock, seeming eager to face off against the four attempting to fight an army. Basil began returning fire, prompting the other three to do the same. Soldiers dropped left and right, suddenly scurrying into more defensive positions, being reminded why those four on the dock warranted such an approach. Still, Basil figured it wouldn't be long before they started to push forward in larger numbers, completely negating any of the superior firepower advantages they held.

Spiro yelled over the bullets flying in both directions while moving for better cover. "Basil, if there's someone to die fighting alongside, I'm damn well glad it's you." Spiro crawled to the opposite side of the dock and sat leaning against a wall, chest now completely covered in a ghastly red. "Likewise" Basil shouted before taking cover on the opposite side of the dock and entering his mantle. The Faceless Man emptied his last few shots at the still approaching crowd, but suddenly glanced down at his PDA. Laughing like a madman, Basil stepped out from cover, arms stretched wide, face a mix of his own and the Faceless Man's.

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