Fanciful Tales and Wild Stories of the Refuge

By Sylae - Aug 08 2008

If you travel along the paths of the Interwebs, seldom shall you find an area free of the pollutants of the Noob. Nowadays, wherever you go., you will find the bleakness of the Noob. From the soaring towers of the Wikipedia Archives, to the dark hallways and glowing portals of Google, it will always be present. Except, there is one place. A place known as Calamity Refuge.

w-dueck wandered into the forum, muttering to himself. He carried a small box that quivered in his arms and made weird shrieking sounds. If one had looked carefully at the side of the box, they would have seen the words stenciled in black paint: *HTML Snippet. Use Caution.* w-dueck headed up the dirt trail to his profile.

Several hours later...

Birds flew out of the trees as a thunderous crack broke though the forum. A black mist crept slowly down the path from w-dueck's profile. Cracks opened in the ground, gushing more of the dark smog. Clouds of it covered up the sky, and lightning streaked down to ignite posts. The forum had become a hell. The mist clung to everything. It clung to the header. It clung to the calendar. But mostly, paramount to everything else, it clung to the posts. The once-pure white posts yellowed, then cracked and turned brown as the mist leeched nutrients out of them.

Flash can do That?

By Vergil - Aug 08 2008

Vergil stepped out of the Mod board coughing. An explosion come out of the top of the admin tower and W-dueck came screaming down. Vergil ran to w-dueck and inquired "What where you trying to do?!" w-dueck hacked up smoke. "I was trying to sow flash into the hem on my robe, ugh, I think I messed up. "Obviously, look, how do we get things back to normal?" w-dueck winced and said "Through the admin tower" "Great" Well, guess I am gonna have to help you." w-dueck suddenly stood up and said "No, you must not see the secrets of the admin" He fell down. "Just help me to the tower, and then I will be fine". "Lets go then" On their way, some raw, twisted creations of html came out of the rubble, looking hungry. Vergil just smiled and disappeared. w-dueck groaned. The first monster raised its sickle, and then it froze, then thin red lines appeared on it and it exploded in blood, then they were engulfed in a small black ball that grew smaller, distorting the space around it when it disappeared, and when it left, there where no monsters. "Stop showing off" w-dueck said, exasperated. Vergil just smiled and continued. Sometime after:

W-dueck was striding towards the tower of the Admin happily, knowing that this box was not going to crash the forums, he was comming back with a box marked with fruity letters: "Cookie Javascript". W-dueck grinned to himself. "Jewels is gonna love this."

W-dueck, paused in the entrance to the main forum and sniffed the air and snapped his fingers. "Vergil!" Suddenly, Vergil appeared behind W-dueck. "Ce qui vous ont besoin?" W-dueck exasperated, sighed. "Cool it with the goddammend french!" Vergil rolled his eyes "Fine". W-dueck kept on walking. "Update." "Nothing much, a few new members and mods, I edited the holy script of law for them" Vergil Paused and crossed his arms "And you have gotta update the mod list ON YOUR OWN. I can't do it everytime a new mod appears!" W-dueck looked back with a sly grin. "Sorry, I was busy making STARCRAFT smilies." Vergil grunted and set off the Annoncments.

Curiosity Ensnared the Maid

By Jewels - Aug 08 2008

A Few days earlier:

Jewels stood outside the door to Calamity Refuge hesitating. She didn't even know why she was really here. These kinds of boards never really lasted long. What did she expect to find?

Jewels decided to do some recon and camped outside in an inconspicuous search cafe. She watched the slow traffic into the building. SW newb, SW newb, SW newb... then a couple she didn't even recognize but they looked pretty young. After a few hours, she was sure this had been a mistake. As she started to get ready to leave she spotted Nikki walking quickly past.

"Nikki! Hey, Nikki!" she called but he was too far away to hear her over the cafe din. Jewels grabbed her bag and started after him. He was walking right towards Calamity Refuge. 'Maybe he's checking it out too,' she thought. 'When I catch up I can tell him what I know.' Jewels was slowly closing the 30 yard gap when Nikki reached the refuge door. She expected Nikki to stop but to Jewels' surprise he walked right on through.

'Nikki is a member?!?' Jewels was astonished. Well, it couldn't be all that bad then... could it? Jewels neared the door and hesitated again. She could always just stop coming if things didn't turn out.

Another Incident

By Vergil - Aug 08 2008

Vergil was appalled. Thousands of posts lay in ruin, and rifts in every topic. It was carnage. Vergil ran to the announcements forum. The holy laws were fine. He ran towards the RP board. It was here where he found carnage. All the books were obliterated, gone. Vergil saw a scrapping of paper fly towards him, it read: "a M15 Titan, a old but powerful ship type." Freelancer Book. Gone. His writings. Gone.

w-dueck came in. "Ah Vergil there you are." Vergil turned around "What happened?" w-dueck grimaced "I was doing a basic spell, it backfired and did some damage" w-dueck looked around "And I see it caused you some trouble too." w-dueck sighed "I want to put you up as an admin." Vergil shot up "Really?!" "Yeah." w-dueck closed his eyes and started muttering a spell. Blue mist flowed into the room, circling like a whirlwind around Vergil. It struck, blue mist flowing into Vergil's pours, his eyes, his ears. Vergil hung in midair for a moment. Then he gathered energy and released. A red shockwave exploded through the air, w-dueck was knocked back. Then w-dueck dashed to Vergil and slapped him "No. Bad. No causing explosions."

"And thats all there is to being an Admin" w-dueck said "And Vergil, I'm gonna need your help to maintain and rebuild these forums. First, lets see you restore the themes" Vergil blinked "But that was the hardest thing!" "Yep and your gonna do it" Vergil concentrated, thunder boomed across the sky, then 6 bolts of blue lightning came down and formed in Vergil's hand, it fluctuated, and then it morphed into a orb the size of a soccer ball. "That's it?" Vergil asked "Yep" w-dueck answered.

Rude Awakening

By Robsta - Aug 18 2008

Robsta awoke. Where was he? He recognized the place, vaguely. Only the place he knew was well structured, filled with walls of posts, themes and lacked red shockwaves awaking people from fifty hour naps. He looked about; carnage. He saw shredded posts, shaky walls, and half a dozen lightning bolts illuminated the sky for a split second. His long sword was still beside him, he heard familiar voices through a doorway. He looked above it, the RP board. He looked beside and saw the General forums. w-dueck teleported beside him. "Try out this tournament, you'll find it in your mail," the familiar archmage said. Robsta replied with a "Looks good, but it's lacking

something. Perhaps you could send it again. Oh and, try to protect the forums when you're experimenting, a bi-weekly backup shared between you and Vergil would suffice - Hopefully." w-dueck grimaced at the remark, he didn't much like being reminded about the spell that backfired. With his work done, Robsta retired for the day wondering whether he should try to replicate the carnage of his posts in the RP board.

08/08/08

By Nioca - Aug 20 2008

Nioca stood in the BoA Moderation Center, examining the display. Despite Vergil and w-dueck's best efforts, everything was still haywire. Green symbols flashed through the computer screen... Most of them said only one thing: "**ERROR**". A few, though, were heavily corrupted comments posted in the BoA forum. All destroyed.

Sighing, Nioca pressed the button to shut off the display.

Meanwhile...

No choice. The damage was too much; even if the repairs could be made, several building faults would remain. Combined with pockets of uncontrolled magic and corrupted topics, the forums were a lost cause. w-dueck had no choice. Save one.

Accessing a miraculously undamaged panel in the Admin tower, w-dueck tinkered with it. The admin tower had the ability to form a bubble of warped time, restoring the forums to a point before the catastrophe. A lot would be lost, but the forums would at least make it out intact.

A date flashed across the console: August 8th.

Grimacing, w-dueck pressed the button.

A jolt of energy shot through the forums, and they instantly started righting themselves. Consoles fixed themselves, corrupted posts either vanished or repaired themselves, and the building itself returned to its former prestige.

However, it also had one unexpected side-effect. The time-warping energy had branched out into every forum, including the BoA forum. The button Nioca was pressing acted as a conduit for the energy, and in the form of a gigantic electrical discharge, it blasted Nioca backwards. He arced through the glass separating the BoA Moderation Center from the forum proper, and then landed six feet below, unconscious.

Calming Fears

By Robsta - Aug 22 2008

Robsta was getting quite a bit of excursive. w-dueck had given him a kingdom to manage, and he was frantically running between the kingdom and the refuge. He was getting tired when he got to the portal where the refuge should be one last time. Or, when he got to where the portal should be. He gasped, it was gone! A brief moment of horror filled him from his head to his long sword before he remembered he could probably find w-dueck in the SW forums, and he'd know what to do.

Not much later, in the SW forums, Robsta found w-dueck discussing one of archmagi Vogel's finest creations. After some brief chatter, Robsta changed the topic to the refuge. "Yeah, some FTP goons attacked and the server is down. Hopefully they'll have it fixed soon." This calmed Robsta. Soon everything will be alright. He settled down to sharpen his long sword and check up on his kingdom again.

The next day, everything was alright.

It's Not Funny!

By Vergil - Aug 22 2008

Vergil was looking for Jewels and w-dueck, he needed to ask them if anything needed to be done. Reaching the Mistletoe, he noticed a mistletoe hanging from the ceiling of the door. Huh, its kind of pretty. Vergil thought.

Vergil heard w-dueck give a sermon; "The new orb today is from a different universe, so it might be a bit overwhelming, but please, try it out." Pleh, putting the whole forum on drugs if you ask me. Vergil thought.

Vergil went into the mod board. Nioca was sitting with w-dueck. "Oh, hey Vergil" w-dueck said, Nioca just snickered than said "So...uh, have you seen the Spam board?" More snickering "Yeah, the plant is pret-Wait a minute!" Snicker. Vergil sighed "Okay, first of all, its not Christmas, second of all,
Its.
Not.
Funny!!"

JEWELS!!!

By Jewels - Aug 24 2008

Jewels walked back into the new Calamity Refuge with high expectations. She'd been gone for over a week and was sure there had to be plenty for her to catch up on. To her surprise there were very few new posts and... hadn't she made a few others before she left? She walked into her office and flipped on the light and stopped with furrowed brow. "Uh," an indignant huff left her lips. Somebody changed her theme back to the default without her permission! Now she was mad.

Jewels stormed out looking for someone to yell at and almost tripped over Nioca lying on the floor is a sea of broken glass. Motherly instinct kicking in, Jewels forgot all about being angry and knelt to help.

"Nioca, Nioca! Wake up Nioca." She brushed away some glass and carefully rolled him onto his back. Nioca groaned, eyes fluttering. "Nioca, are you OK?" Jewels asked. "Is anything broken? Where does it hurt?"

Nioca opened his eyes groggily but didn't focus on anything. "I... I," he stammered. "I don't know," he finally managed.

"Just wait here, then," Jewels admonished. "I'm gonna go find help. Try not to move. I'll be back soon."

Nioca opened his mouth to reply but only groaned again and shut his eyes.

Jewels stood up and ran towards the Administration Tower calling out. "w-dueck! w-dueck! Where are you?"

w-dueck spotted Jewels running towards the tower from his perch. "She's back!" He exclaimed. "It's about freaking time." w-dueck hurried to ground level to meet her.

w-dueck made it to the bottom of the tower before Jewels covered half the distance she needed to. "JEWELS!!!" he screamed wanting to make sure he caught her attention. He walked in her direction while she closed the gap panting too hard to say anything yet. "Jewels, where have you been? We have important business we MUST discuss, ASAP. Like now would be great for me. In private please."

Jewels held up a hand gulping for air. "Wait... first... Nioca needs help!" She took a couple more big breaths. "He's hurt... over by the BoA Moderation Center... we need medical supplies."

w-dueck sobered and held up his staff. "This is all the medical supplies I have," he stated as he started to jog with her back to Nioca. "Let's hope it's enough."

"What happened here?" Jewels managed on the way.

Not So Thirsty for Power

By Sylae - Aug 25 2008

"Well, there was an... error. The database was completely destroyed. I had to reforge it completely. Ah, the only problem was the last survey of the database was a week ago. Oh, and you and Vergil are assistant Admins."

"WHAT!?! I CAN'T BE AN ADMIN!!! WHY THE-" w-dueck rudely cut off Jewels.

"We're here. Now where is Nioca? Bah, why does the BoA board have to be so imposing?" w-dueck waved his staff at the sprawling tile-roofed building before him, and a large red line appeared before him, heading accross the ground and under the double doors of the board, "OK, let's go."

"Now hold on one second. What are you talking about, Adminship? Why would I become an Admin?" Jewels stammered. Thoughts raced around in her head like miniature posts chasing a googlebot. She cleared her throat and told the posts to chill, "Let's get Nioca. He was knocked out over by the Moderation center."

w-dueck shuffled up the wide marble set of stairs leading up to the doors. He pulled on the handle of the right-hand door. And stopped.

Jewels cleared her throat again, "Come on, haven't you seen the BoA board before?"

"When did it get...realistic?"

Inside the doors of the board, chaos reigned. It was not even recognizable as a board. NPCs were wandering about, and Avernumscript lined the walls and floors. The two Authorities stepped onto the floor, and everything flickered. The tiled floor of the forum was replaced with brown grass, and the walls and cieling were replaced with a moonlit clearless sky.

"The database held more in check than I thought. Nioca must have been designing Avernumscript in here. When the Forum crashed, the Anti Ascript safegaurds must have failed..." w-dueck gazed out at the landscape before them.

No Bot's Home

By Vergil - Aug 25 2008

Vergil was tired. REALLY TIRED. While w-dueck had been gone, only leaving him some instructions, Vergil had a whole list of things to do, all at 3 in the morning, and he couldn't leave without finishing!! Not that the work was hard, but it was TIRING. He had just made SC2 and Fire orbs. He thought for a moment. "Yeah, I thing Jewels would appreciate it." He got Jewels Profile scroll, and threw the fire orb at it. It melted into it, leaving behind only a few rusty

streaks. He went on fixing the portals, the main entrances for all sections led to the Whitehall, and Vergil had to fix that. Standing next to the portal, Vergil started muttering incantations, the portal shimmered, runes glowing blue along its sides, twisting to the top, a ball of lightning radiated atop the portal, the ball shimmered and fell into the hole of the portal. The runes died down, and the portal changed color. Vergil stepped in. It worked! While Vergil was working on the themes, he noticed a lone yahoo.bot fly into the forum. Vergil went berserk. Vergil picked up Yamato and flung it at the bot. It exploded. Smiling, Vergil went back to work.

Conspiracy Theory

By Nioca - Aug 25 2008

Nioca groaned. Where did Jewels go? She said she was coming right back... Didn't she? He groaned again, then slowly propped himself up. Yet again, his personal motto was true: rely on no one and nothing but yourself. It'd have to be himself that got him out of this mess. Nioca closed his eyes, then looked down at himself. His body was burned, bloodied, pockmarked with glass, and all-around battered from the blast. He was in rough shape, to be sure. He then gathered whatever scraps of energy he had left and cast a healing spell. He then almost blacked out again; the spell sealed whatever wounds were still bleeding, save for the ones still occupied by a shard of glass, but it also almost drained the infinitesimal amount of energy he had left.

Delirium and paranoia set in, as Nioca struggled to his feet. Jewels arrival now seemed unlikely; she had been gone for so long, was it really possible she had appeared now? Was she a figment of his imagination? An enemy in disguise? Or had it really been Jewels, but with hostile intent? The entire world seemed to boil in hostility as Nioca dragged himself to a concealed corner. Was it a plot by the BoE supporters? It seemed so simple, now. Jewels, w-dueck, Robsta; all having intentions to kill the BoA supporters. A conspiracy! To wipe it out! To remove BoA! But he wouldn't let it happen! They wouldn't get him!

He collapsed a foot shy of the corner he was heading toward, and crawled his way to it. He then propped himself up. A delusive lucidity then washed over him. Silly him. Of course the savages would take him. There was no way. But he wasn't going down without a fight. Reaching into his tattered robes, he pulled a short sword from a concealed sheath. Purple at the hilt with a violet nimbus, he then laid it across his lap. Let them come. He would be ready.

Getting Run Through

By Vergil - Aug 25 2008

Vergil went about killing yahoo.bots. He killed them with Yamato, Beowulf, Chef Brian, and the occasional nanaparty. Boom. Yamato cut a bot in half. Boom. Light gauntlet to the face. Boom. Randomness hitting where it hurts. Boom. Swarms of bananas suffocating. After a good sweeping, Vergil spotted Nioca lying in a corner. He strolled over. "Hey Nioca, why are you sitting in a corner, bleeding with glass embedded in you?" Nioca didn't move "Nioca, you there?" With a lightning quick jab, Nioca's sword plunged into Vergil's chest. "You are not taking down BoA not on my watch!" Vergil paused
"What.....The.....Hell.....I.....Don't.....Even.....Play.....BoA
Fenix.....Tassadar.....I.....Await.....you...Augh!!!" Vergil slumped over.

Vergil woke up wet. He stood on his knees. He rubbed his eyes and looked around him. "Son of a-Not here again." He was standing in a river in a white background with flames. "Dammit now I'm gonna go corrupt and lose all of my handsome facial features." Vergil grumbled "Xel better get me out of here soon."

HellSpawn666 entered the forum, he saw Vergil talking to someone. Vergil then had a blade through his head. "Hmmmm.....That was interesting." And then left.

Can I Get a Witness?

By Robsta - Aug 25 2008

Robsta was just thinking he hadn't seen the BoA board recently. The aura around it didn't indicate any new posts, but he stopped by anyways. Looking in the door he saw the still ruined building with Vergil leaning over Nioca in the corner. He was about to step in and ask what happened when he saw a flash of light. Nioca sat, arm protruded with his sword stuck through Vergil. He stopped his greeting just in time. Reflexively he stepped out of the doorway, back to the wall, hand on his sword hilt. Why? He thought, why would Nioca do it? How did he catch Vergil unawares? He slunk away to think things over.

Dues Ex Machina

By Vergil - Aug 25 2008

Vergil was tired of waiting, he was tired of sitting in hell. With all of his arcane might, he called upon the most powerful spell.....DUES EX MACHINA!!!! He linked himself to the conclave. A thousand voices rang through Vergils head. "I like hanna Montana" "I'm gonna hire Luke to put you in a butterfly box" "NOT THE INFERNAL SCREAMING RYLE BOX!!" ".....Awerd Silence....." "Get out of my room you obnoxious little boy!!" "GOD DAMMIT THIS ISN'T A BRITISH ACCENT, ITS NEW ZEALAND!!!" "Please don't put me in the box!" "I ARE PANT" " Vergil stopped and said "Whoa, I'm stopping there" That should be enough to get myself out.

Life of Its Own

By Nioca - Aug 26 2008

As the last of Vergil's life faded from his body, the sword gained a new hue. Now, it took a vicious, dark, almost evil purple color. The wound took on the same color, and the remnants of life energy flowed out of Vergil, through the sword, and into Nioca. More of his wounds healed. Then, Nioca yanked out the sword and let Vergil fall.

The scrapings of life from Vergil had helped restore his body, but his mind was still feverish. A new bloodlust took Nioca; Vergil had been a powerful foe, but Nioca felled him easily. If he had known what little effort was required to banish these BoE-loving heathens, he would never have feared.

Still, the last energy in him was leaving; the surprise attack took more effort than he had expected, and he felt a need to rest. He fought the urge to sleep, and realizing that his guard was about to fall, he summoned a shade to his side. "Shade..." He gasped, his voice barely a whisper. "Anyone that comes... anyone that approaches us... kill them. Kill them all."

Nioca then slumped into slumber.

Dream? Premonition? It was hard to tell. All he knew was that he was stalking toward Calamity Refuge. The lights in the refuge glowed dimly, betraying only the building's presence and no more. He was no longer injured; merely tired, and for a reason he couldn't discern. He strode purposefully up to the door, finding it open.

Someone rushed past; only a glance was needed to tell him it was Jewels. She didn't see him; she was running toward an object or goal unseen, unheeding of his presence. However, he knew she was panicked.

It was then that he discovered that the dream had a life of it's own; Nioca wanted to strike Jewels down before she could alert anyone, but his body paid no heed. It instead followed it's own prerogative, taking him into the Spam forums. A shout suddenly sounded that caused him to whip about. Unfortunately, he was unable to catch what was said. He then felt himself smile to himself for no apparent reason, then approached a topic. Suddenly, all energy seemed to go out of his body for reasons unfathomable, and the floor rushed up to meet him.

Nioca then awoke with a start. His energy had returned to some extent, and brought with it some of his sanity. However, the delusion was planted; no longer would these infidels try to cow BoA supporters. Now, it was time to extract vengeance. He would pass Vergil's death off as accident, or self-defense. He would bide his time. And then he would strike.

It was then that he realized that something was amiss. It was quiet... almost too much so.

Pancaaake?

By Vergil - Aug 26 2008

Vergil had one last stop before payback, he had already gotten the French Rap from youtube, the poems from yahoo, the information from wikipedia, all that was left was randomness. Logging on to Ctrl Alt Del, he soon found Chief Brian, upon appearance, he said "The kittens of my bone marrow, pancaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaake?" Vergil responded "Beefpotatowheelman" "Ah, a daisy supreme, I burst from the mechanical womb!" The clouds opened to reveal a koala in a bed. "Oy vay! Wake up you tossa!" The Koala lazily opened a eye, and took a denture out of a can of water. After readjustment, he mumbled "Whadda you want Vergil?" "Je veux votre ampoule avec l'arm'e de pieds." "Ce qui ? ! Mon arme plus puissante ? ! Aucun Vergil, non."

"Rappelez-vous ..... Jaex?"

"Le OH, homme, n'appellent pas en cette faveur."

The Koala sighed. "Dur, je l'appelle dans"

"Fin, prenez-les."

Okay, I'm In

By Jewels - Aug 26 2008

Jewels looked dumbly at w-dueck. "I thought the BoA board was made this way by you," she remarked.

"Oh, no," w-dueck responded as he brushed a giant cobweb away, "This was Nioca. Pure Nioca."

"Come on, this way," Jewels urged. She raised a finger to point the way. "The Moderation Center is right over th..." her voice trailed off and confusion clouded her face. It occurred to her that not all the sounds around her were the garden variety drip drops of the Avernum caves. There were also shrieks and grunts and sounds of metal clanging.

They both ran forward to see Robsta locked in combat with a powerful shade. Swing, swoosh, ugh, clang, stab, shriek.

w-dueck glared at Jewels. "You never said anything about a shade!"

"I... there wasn't any before," she shot back.

w-dueck hurried forward with staff raised muttering a dispel spirits spell. A bright sky blue ball started forming at the head of the staff and shot out at the shade. It fell back stunned and Robsta used the respite to run his blade clean through the middle of it. A high-pitched screech left it's non-lips as it dissipated into cloudy wisps.

Robsta lowered his blade panting. "Thanks," he managed, "but I think we were a little late." He gestured closer to the corner where someone lay on his side.

Jewels sprinted forward to kneel by the limp body on the ground and started stammering. "What the... but... I... no, God no!"

w-dueck knelt next to Jewels. "I thought you said Nioca was the one who was hurt. This is Vergil." He eyed the giant purple wound through Vergil's chest and back and checked for vitals frowning. "And he's not hurt," w-dueck said gravely. "He's dead."

"I did... he was... Nioca was right here. I left him not five minutes ago. He was *right here*!" Jewels could hardly contain herself. And she thought life at SW had been tough. "I didn't even see Vergil around. I came straight to you."

Robsta interrupted her by clearing his throat. "Begging your pardon, but Nioca is the reason Vergil is dead. I walked in just in time to see Vergil fall with Nioca's blade sticking out of him."

Jewels tried to make sense of it all. "But he was laying on the floor there. He couldn't even keep his eyes open let alone lift a sword."

Robsta looked sympathetically at her. "Be that as it may, I saw what I saw. I was thinking on how to confront Nioca but before I could that shade started attacking me. I didn't manage to see which way Nioca went."

Jewels turned her attention back to Vergil. She felt utterly helpless. At least at SW she could have summoned an element, or told somebody which one they needed, but here... here she could do nothing. And to think, not a half hour ago she had been mad about her theme being changed. "Can you bring him back?" she managed softly, looking hopefully to w-dueck.

"I can," he intoned, "but we have more pressing matters. Vergil is as safe as he can be in his state... well, that is to say, he can't get any worse. But right now our top priority is to find Nioca. We should probably split up."

"Wait a minute," Jewels snapped. "You expect me to go out there and look for someone who, even though he was badly injured, was strong enough to kill someone else and probably summon a shade... *all by myself?!*" She was beside herself with unbelief. "I couldn't even cast a simple healing spell on Nioca when he first needed it. How do you expect me to do anything besides get myself killed when I don't have any weapon other than a mop or know any magic?"

"Well," w-dueck paused, "I can fix that."

She looked at him incredulously "And just how do you expect to do that?"

"Say you'll be an Admin and the world will be yours. As much magical power as I have... well, almost."

Jewels's face softened as she thought quickly but she still had her doubts. Wasn't this sort of how the devil tempted Jesus in the desert? Wasn't she already in over her head? Didn't Nioca still defeat Vergil with all his own newly Administrative powers?

Robsta and w-dueck both waited expectantly looking at Jewels. "OK," she said, "I'm in."

Headbanging is Fun

By Sylae - Aug 27 2008

w-dueck nodded, "Well then. This may sting a wee bit. Sorry." He brought his staff down, hard, on Jewels's head. A brilliant blue flash blinded everyone for a second, then went away as quickly as it had come.

"There. It's done. Your mind has to work its way into those magical powers, so your head may ache a little, but it will go away after a month or so. Normally, there is more ceremony and a feast, but I don't think we have anything for a feast. Unless..." he eyed Robsta and grinned mischievously.

"No, that's quite OK," Robsta stepped back several feet. Who knows what Admins would do to you? "and hey, what about me? Do I get any magical powers, or do I get stabbed through the chest just like Vergil?"

"Well, I *could* summon the SimpleBots, but, well, they don't get out much. The last time they saw the light of day was the 1.1.5 upgrade, and that was a *long* time ago." w-dueck eye's faded over as he recalled the good, maybe not so good, memories of the old days.

"Well, I might as well, they couldn't possibly make anything worse..."

w-dueck snapped out of his recollections, "Can you speak PHP? They can't speak much else, unfortunately." at Robsta's head shake, he sighed, "this may ache a little." He pulled a small tome out of his robe and flipped it open. After muttering a few select phrases, he snapped the book shut and returned it. He then spun his staff in an intricate arc and brought it down on Robsta's head. The flare of light was of a red-orange this time.

Jewel's spoke up, "Why must you bring that staff down on someone's head to give them knowledge? It seems rather archaic."

"My more civilized spells were disabled by the database crash. And anyways, headbanging is fun." w-dueck grinned.

"require $path . 'Robsta.php'; $fill_source = false; if (isset($_POST['submit']))" Robsta's eyes widened, "global $error_cache, $error_abort;" He gazed balefully at w-dueck, then stroked his longsword, plotting.

"Don't worry, that only lasts for a minute or two. Just be thankful you aren't speaking Plankalk'l. That would not be funny. Well, I will summon the SimpleBots." w-dueck lifted his staff and called out, "if(!bot_exists($SimpleBotsv1.4.3.8)) { echo $bots->come_to_me(BoA_Forum); ... Well, now we will see if they have fared these last years."

"exit("They'd better. This language sucks.");" Robsta muttered.

Ganging Up on Nioca

By Robsta - Aug 27 2008

Robsta took another breath. He had just seen Vergil stabbed by a wounded Nioca. What had happened? Perhaps they had been fighting, Vergil winning, until he was caught off guard. Perhaps not. If he was asked he should just state facts until he was sure.

He closed his eyes to gain focus. Fighting is more than just being able to see your enemy. If Nioca came with hostile intentions, Robsta would hear him coming and respond appropriately.

He felt a pain in his side. Instinctively he jumped back and whipped out his sword. The wound was small, he had jumped aside in time, but there was a shade that had crept up on him silently.

They engaged in vicious combat, Robsta was put on the defensive because the shade didn't care for it's own well being. Robsta gave up some ground, looking for an opening in the shade's reckless attack. Several times he managed to hit the shade, but it showed no sign of dissipating soon.

He jumped back when he heard a voice over his shoulder, a lance of light streaked past him and hit the shade, stunning it. Seeing an opportunity, Robsta ran the shade through with his long sword. Shrieking filled the room as the shade staggered back. Robsta swung his sword with all his might right through the middle of the shade. It dissipated into numerous cloudy wisps. The wisps floated apart, shrinking into nothingness. The Shrieking stopped.

Robsta turned around and saw w-dueck and Jewels racing towards him. "Thanks, but I think we may be a little late." He commented to his helpers. They looked puzzled at finding Vergil. He told them that Nioca killed Vergil, and they began planning to find the culprit.

w-dueck gave Jewels adminship there and, remembering Vergil, Robsta made an irritated comment about magical powers being given out without regard. Before he could do anything, w-dueck hit him with a staff and embedded powers in him too.

"Nioca will probably be hiding in this building," Robsta suggested, "We should search it and try to get to the bottom of this violence." Without waiting for a reply he headed through the door into another chamber in the BoA Building.

The floor caved in and Robsta grabbed for anything to prevent him from falling. He caught a sconce, knocking the torch it held down into the pit below. He looked around, the whole floor in the room had caved in, and the door was a ways away, he could only hold the sconce and hope w-dueck or Jewels could save him. His hands were becoming sweaty and blood was making his grip start to slip. Below he saw a twenty foot drop and a bed of spikes to welcome him at the bottom.

"Quick w-dueck, you know what powers we have better than I, save him." Robsta heard. "I could probably cast a flight spell and levitate him out of there."

He felt his grip slipping, he couldn't hold it. He dropped, above him a ball of flame exploded where he used to be. He drifted into a semi-consciousness, He felt an arm around his chest and he was lifted up away from harm. He thought he heard Jewels uttering a healing spell. Below Nioca looked up. He was right, Jewels, w-dueck and Robsta had ganged up on him. The odds were against him, but he would be ready for them.

Profile Not Found

By Nioca - Aug 27 2008

Nioca, realizing that he was made, screamed "Move Mountains!" A bolt of dark energy struck the wall beneath Robsta's, w-dueck's, and Jewels' feet. As the ground cracked and shattered, Nioca ran through a small tunnel to make his escape. He took one glance back as the spell finished; to his disappointment, it appeared that none of them had fallen into the pit.

Nioca stalked the forums, shaking his head. What a mess. Blood was spattered everywhere, with rubble and glass strewn throughout it. Nioca heldCrusader's Protectorate at his side, ready to attack or defend on a moment's notice.

He had a decided lack of interest in letting the forum remain in such deplorable shape. He headed to the BoA Moderation Center, summoning a shade for support. Thankfully, there was no need for it yet; he made it to the Moderation Center unmolested. He entered and locked the door behind him; while it might not help against a flying opponent who could get through the open window, a land-bound one would be stymied.

Scanning the consoles, he made a few repairs. Buildings righted themselves, the glass to the Moderation Center reassembled, and the blood and detritus on the ground disappeared. Then he looked at the life form console. Over two dozen dots representing life forms rampaged across the screen; an amalgam of three orange dots, two gray dots, a green dot, and more than a dozen-and-a-half red dots.

Nioca noticed that two orange dots and a gray dot were clumped together. Nioca pressed the screen, and three profiles came up, one for each member involved. A full list of statistics appeared for Jewels, w-dueck, and Robsta, but Nioca was only interested in one: Status. Jewels' and w-dueck's profiles both said "Mildly Injured", but Robsta's said "Wounded". Nioca then checked the other orange dot, though he already knew who it must be. Vergil; and under status, it said "Deceased".

Nioca knew the creature life forms were impossible to scan, but something bothered him. Despite checking the roster, it left one gray dot unaccounted for; it was hovering near the injured trio's location, but was far enough away to likely be out of sight. Curious, he brought up the profile for it. But it only said one thing: "**DATABASE ERROR: FAILED TO RECOVER MEMBER'S PROFILE**".

Nioca sighed. He had no idea whether this unidentifiable member was friend or foe, but he noticed that it kept inching closer to the injured trio's position. But he had more pressing matters. Shutting off the console, Nioca left the Moderation Center and headed for w-dueck, Robsta, and Jewels.

The Basement

By Robsta - Aug 29 2008

Robsta had to rethink his strategy. His plan was to follow Nioca and try to get to the bottom of this strange affair, but it wasn't working. He had convinced w-dueck and Jewels that they should stay together for safety. They had agreed for he showed them that either he did not comprehend how to use his new powers or that he was not willing to, and that he might not be able to get out of danger by himself.

They had been wandering through the BoA forum building setting off traps almost every step of the way. w-dueck built the building in the beginning, but Nioca had been renovating it ever since he been put in charge of its maintenance. Without telling anyone he had been setting up traps everywhere he could in this forum, just in case they were needed. Now, Robsta thought, he found someone they were needed against, and has armed them all. Robsta was thinking that continuing to follow the path that Nioca left from would leave them always a step behind Nioca, always in danger and never closer to their goal.

"We need to head him off from his destination. Where would Nioca go?" He asked.

"He has surveillance in his Moderation Centre. He will probably rest there once he's thought he's headed us off." w-dueck replied, remembering how he built the building. Pointing he added, "It's this way, let's go".

They started in the new direction, but the floor under them gave way once more. This time it felt different, Robsta thought as Jewels helped them float gently to the floor below. This time it felt like the floor was struck from below, as opposed to caving in under their weight. Also this time they had a nice surface below to land on, not spikes, lava, acid or any other damaging surface. This time they saw another glance of Nioca slipping into another room and locking the door. They hadn't seen a glance of him lately, not since the spike pit near the entrance.

"That would be the Moderation Centre he just ducked into." w-dueck told Robsta and Jewels. "He'll probably make a stand there." Looking around for something to use as a ram, Robsta thought he saw something move, something that didn't want to be seen, something that was probably his imagination on overdrive after all those traps. He picked up a beam from the caved in ceiling and rushed at the Moderation Centre's door.

Adding Insult to Injury

By Nioca - Aug 31 2008

Thud. Something struck the door. Nioca ducked, then peeked through the window of the BoA Moderation center. Robsta tumbled down the stairs, and, to add insult to injury, had the beam fall on top of him. Even in Nioca's sanity-deprived state, he recognized the folly of trying to ram a door by running *up* a flight of stairs. Especially since an Administrator was available to open the door on a whim. Nioca then panicked. "*w-dueck!*" he thought, trying to conjure up a defense. He wasn't ready for this. But nevertheless, he prepared as best as his glass-cut body could manage. He would give them a battle they wouldn't soon forget.

The Weight of Responsibility

By Jewels - Aug 31 2008

"Robsta, wait," Jewels called. Robsta was only barely able to stop before he rammed the door. "Aren't you forgetting something?" she asked. Robsta just looked at her with a puzzled expression. Jewels turned to w-dueck. "Aren't you like the top Admin of this place?"

"Yeah," he said.

"Don't you have a master key or something?"

"Yes I do." w-dueck checked his robes' pockets and came up empty. "...but I don't have them on me. They're back in the Administration tower."

Jewels sighed. "Is there any way out of that room other than the door he just went in? 'Cause as long as he's in there we at least know where he is."

w-dueck thought for a minute. "Well, this is the basement of the BoA board and that door is the only conventional way into this area since it's supposed to be only accessible to mods, and then there's one door to the center at lobby level, or he could jump out the window again... hey." They all looked up to see the glass of the BoA Moderation Center window floating back up into place and fixing itself. As they watched, the hole in the floor above them started fixing itself, too. "Uh, oh... we need to get out now."

Jewels concentrated. "Fly... fly..." she thought to herself. Her head pounded and her arms ached. She didn't think she'd have to use so much magic so soon after she got it and her energy level was falling fast. The hole was steadily growing smaller. "Faster... faster," she urged herself. Halfway through the hole she became aware of w-dueck raising himself and Robsta just behind her when exhaustion finally took hold and she lost grip on her spell. Jewels shrieked as she started to fall back onto her companions. She felt something slam into her back on the way down only... she wasn't going down anymore. Instead she skyrocketed up through the narrowing hole and a good five feet above it before landing roughly on her stomach.

Jewels turned around as soon as she caught her breath, "w-dueck, Robsta!" But they weren't there, and the last few bricks of the floor were replacing themselves, effectively locking them in. "Oh, no." Jewels was at a loss. She didn't know how to help them now. "Hopefully they'll be able to help themselves," she thought to herself. A quick glance up caught an angry glare from Nioca. "I gotta get out of here," she decided.

Jewels struggled to get herself up stumbling a few times. She only made it a few steps before falling again at Vergil's side. Suddenly she wished she were back at spiderweb with absolutely no responsibilities again. An unimpressive underling with no power and no need for it. The weight of her new life and all it's chaos brought her to tears that she couldn't stem. For a moment she wished with all her heart that she could trade places with Vergil, be at peace, away from all this. She reached a tentative hand towards him. "I wish it were that easy," she spoke softly as if he could hear her, "just to say 'I give you my life.' and have it be yours."

Jewels's eyes closed as her hand touched his. A shock made her draw back and open them again... but she wasn't where she had been before. Fire danced all around her. Fire, sweet fire...

No, the Other Nioca

By Nioca - Sep 1 2008

Nioca crept around the labyrinth under the BoA Forum's floor. He was hunting for someone... he needed to find him, and fast. He was still weak. He just might be able to finish him without much of a fight. Nioca peeked around a corner, and found Robsta. His back was to him at the moment. Carefully drawing Crusader's Protectorate, Nioca whispered "Sanctuary". He then seemed to fade right into the wall he was standing by.

This didn't go unnoticed by Robsta. w-dueck was in poor shape from the fall, and needed rest. Robsta was his only line of defense. When he heard the sword get unsheathed by Nioca, he turned and yanked his own sword out. "Oh no." He said quietly. Nioca's assaults had proved horrifically effective thus far. More so than anyone could have imagined. Now, it appeared that Nioca was about to finish what he started. w-dueck also struggled to his feet, preparing his staff for battle.

Unfortunately for them, it wasn't good enough. Nioca had walked a mere foot from Robsta, invisible to all but himself. Then, with a quick slash, he struck Robsta's wrist with the tip of his sword. Robsta yowled in agony and dropped the sword. Moving quickly, he then grabbed Robsta in a headlock, and yanked him between Nioca and w-dueck like a shield, holding Crusader's Protectorate at his back. The wound on Robsta's wrist glowed with a vicious purple light. This aura drained some of his life, but it soon faded. "Drop it!" Nioca shouted to w-dueck. "Drop the staff!"

Hesitantly, w-dueck dropped it. "Kick it over. Now!" w-dueck gave it a small kick, and it rolled past Nioca. Nioca then pushed Robsta onto w-dueck, and as the two fell into a heap, Nioca ran and grabbed the weapons. "That's more like it." He said, breathing hard. "I apologize for the rude introduction... but it's the only way I can get you to listen. I am not your enemy."

"What?!" w-dueck said in disbelief. "You've been trying to kill us!"

"No, I haven't. I... look, I don't have a lot of time to explain. Something strange has happened. Somehow, when I was working in the BoA Moderation Center, something went wrong in a very bad way. I think, somehow, that I've been split into two different entities."

"You... you really are crazy, aren't you?" w-dueck said. But what Nioca had said struck a chord with Robsta. Right before he tried to ram the door to the BoA Moderation Center, he thought he had caught a glimpse of Nioca outside, watching. Could it really be?

"Would you just listen to me? Right now, there's a deranged lunatic that wants to kill you all! I'm offering my help, considering that I'm specially suited to take care of the situation. Now," he said, getting frustrated, "do you want this to end, or do you want to die?"

w-dueck looked stricken. Such a thing was unheard of. Could it really be true? But his thoughts were interrupted by a beeping sound emanating from Nioca. Startled, Nioca reached into a pocket of his robes and pulled out what looked like a PDA. "w-dueck..." Nioca said slowly. "Where's Jewels?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"Because I don't think she's with us any longer." Nioca said, turning the PDA-like device around to show w-dueck. On it was Jewels profile. But instead of saying 'Injured' under the status field, it said 'Deceased'. "You're running out of time, w-dueck. What's your decision?"

Butterfly Box

By Vergil - Sep 2 2008

Vergil had the ingredients. All of them. From the broccoli toes of Chief Brian, to the army of lightbulbs with feet that he had acquired from the Koala king. Mixing and pouring in the white flames of hell, Vergil looked like a madman, putting the finished result in a bleu box. Happily, he clamped the lid shut. Vergil was suddenly struck with depression. Here he was, sitting in lowest pit of Hell, completely alone, and he was going to stay here for a very long time. He thought of Jewels. She was nice, she had the motherly touch, or so the members at SW said. "Jewels, Jewels, where have you gone?" Vergil thought "Jewels." Then, a small voice said "Vergil." The ceiling ruptured as a pillar of light pierced the roof. He saw some one fall. Vergil rushed over. At first he didn't recognize the person but then, after removing the dirt from his eyes he saw the answer to his prayers. Jewels.

"Jewels! Jewels! Can you hear me?"

But the moment Jewels touched the ground, Vergil found himself unable to move, save his eyes. Small shock waves emanated from Vergil, causing the ground to ripple. A blue ball of energy condensed in front of Vergil. The shock waves where getting bigger and bigger. Vergils eyes turned into blue balls of flame his mouth still open. The incantation beat even louder and faster, Vergil and hovered slightly above the ground. The ball in the center grew and grew until it touched the tip of Vergil's chest. Vergil started swirling around faster and faster. The shock waves where pulverizing, the azure flames dancing and roaring. A spear of light came down on the ball of flame. Vergil were drawn into the ball. The ball then shot up and into the air of life.

Vergil breathed again. Jewels was gone and he was in the center of Calamity. He had the Butterfly box, he had Yamato, he had to beat Nioca's BoA but back to Exile 2 Beta. Vergil failed to notice a small, lone HTML creature crawl out of the box and scuttle away. Vergil marched up

the Administration Tower. "Where is member Nioca?" Vergil demanded to the desk. The letters popped up "BoA forum, unknown district." "Damn"

Vergil ran into the BoA forum, crashing in, he noticed that there was a giant hole in the floor. "Like thats gonna stop me" Vergil jumped and landed in moist soil. "Oh, Nioca there is a WORLD of hurt coming for you." Vergil muttered. While running, he noticed a HTML code. Hmmmm.... He though. It looked strangely familiar. And then it dawned on him. "Oh, no!" Vergil started chasing it. It ran into a room, Vergil followed and saw Nioca holding Robsta by the throat and w-dueck looking grim. Vergil turned his eyes on Nioca. He smiled warmly "Hi, Nioca, how would you like me to mutilate your corpse?"

"One step closer and Robsta dies." Nioca hissed. Vergil kept on going. "I am going to enjoy this." And twirled Yamato.

Babe of Brightness

By Jewels - Sep 3 2008

Bright flashes of blue and white light encompassed her view and when it subsided Jewels took in her surroundings. Fire, fire, and more fire as far as her eyes could see. Good thing she liked fire. It was kinda pretty, almost... beautiful. It wasn't what she'd expected, though. At Spiderweb, death always led to the Misc. forum. A cold, dank place with spam galore. This place was definitely not cold and the air was nice and dry. The snap, crackle, pop of the fire was rather soothing and Jewels walked among the flames marveling at how they danced around her... and on her... and within her. It was almost as if she *was* fire.

"This can't be hell," she thought to herself, "It's the most pleasant place I've ever been. I could stay here forever... maybe it's heaven." It didn't look like any picture of heaven she'd ever imagined, but it sure felt like it, and it definitely didn't feel like hell. She just felt warm, and cozy, and like... like she was... there was only one word to describe it. Jewels was home.

She strolled along casually and began humming to herself as she started noticing images in the flames. Objects in the flames that were made of flames. A wall here, a door there, a table, a chair, a lamp. Jewels chuckled a bit. Why would she need a lamp? The fire was bright enough. She reached for it and it felt substantial, she found the switch and clicked it. Suddenly a large area surrounding the lamp grew dark, almost pitch-black right at the bulb. So, it was an anti-light. Jewels chuckled more as she clicked it back off. She hummed again, a melody that she didn't know and yet was familiar. Like a long forgotten lullaby from a childhood dream.

As she hummed words started coming back to her memory and she began to sing.

" *Babe of brightness, child of light,*
Fear not, dear one, when you take flight.
Rise up and stand, for stand you must.
'Gainst peril upon peril of windy gust.
Prepare, young one, as you grow strong,
To come home to where you belong.
Let not a soul know from whence you came,
Son of the fire, daughter of the flame. "

Wanna Die Again

By Sylae - Sep 5 2008

"Hold on, Nioca. Why should I believe you? For all I know Jewels could be wanderi-"

"w-dueck, I think you should listen to him," Robsta cleared his throat, "When I was trying to bash down the door to the Moderation Center, I saw Nioca...outside of the Moderation Center. Unless he has some sort of teleportation spell, he's right."

w-dueck contemplated his options. Finally he shook his head, "Well, I don't think I have much choice. But don't think that I won't watch you. Now could I have my staff? This bloke seems to be very powerful, and we will need all the help we can get." Nioca picked up the carved piece, but did nothing more, "Robsta's blade, too."

Suddenly the door to the room caved in, and vergil came running into the room. He saw the scene before his eyes, and smiled, "Hi, Nioca, how would you like me to mutilate your corpse?" Vergil drew his sword and started walking toward Nioca.

"One step closer and Robsta dies." Nioca hissed.

Vergil kept on going, "I am going to enjoy this,"

Nioca nodded, "Well then, if that is the way it will be, then I will accept. Are you ready to die, Vergil?"

Two Against One

By Nioca - Sep 5 2008

Vergil didn't answer, but menacingly waved his blade. Taking that as a yes, Nioca then cast Sanctuary a second time. And again, he vanished. Vergil paused; he knew how to combat a lot of things. But an invisible foe wasn't one of them. Holding the blade steady, he listened nervously for some indicator of where Nioca was. Then, just as he thought Nioca had left, he heard the whistle of an oncoming blade. Vergil whirled, parrying the blow. Now visible again, Nioca shouted several new spells. A glow surrounded him as he pounded the now off-guard Vergil. Vergil realized that, despite his nature as a priest, his combat skills were getting heavily augmented by something. It was as he parried another blow that Vergil noticed that Nioca wasn't guiding the blade; Crusader's Protectorate was guiding *itself*.

Bent on gaining the upper hand, Vergil started a masterwork of fighting maneuvers. Parries, ripostes, and bold attacks formed a web of metal. Unfortunately for Nioca, Vergil was still the stronger despite Nioca's enchantments. He started losing ground. Once, twice, and then three times, Crusader's Protectorate was almost wrenched from his grasp. It was all he could do to prevent a total loss. In a last ditch effort, Nioca pointed his blade at Vergil's heart as Vergil swung the blade at Nioca's neck. "SMITE!"

A blast of frost sent Vergil flying backwards down the hall. He promptly got up and turned to attack Nioca a second time, but Nioca took the opportunity to turn and run. Vergil pursued, shouting death threats. Vergil then rounded a corner to see Nioca, staring at something, agape. Vergil walked up behind Nioca, sword poised to deal a fatal strike. Just as he prepared to finish the stunned Nioca, he then leapt out of the way. Vergil briefly caught a glimpse of what looked like Nioca standing further down the hall, and of a shimmering blue bolt, before a second smite spell hit him. This time, it stuck his wrist. Vergil howled in pain, and Yamato went flying into darkness.

A loud cackle echoed through the halls.

Double Take

By Nioca - Sep 5 2008

WHAM! Vergil never saw the second (really the first, since it was the sane one) coming. One minute, he was talking to w-dueck. The next, he was sprawled, on the floor, trying to stem the blood from his broken nose. w-dueck whirled on the pipe-wielding Nioca, but Nioca raised his hands. "Whoa, hey. It's me. I just need to make sure the homicidal maniac here doesn't get to

repeat that performance." Vergil let out a stream of curse words. "You're lucky I didn't take your head off!" Nioca yelled in response. He then shouted, "Essence Shackles!" Vergil's hands suddenly snapped behind his back, and a pair of glowing blue shackles made of energy materialized around them.

Nioca sighed and picked up Yamato. "Finally," he sighed. "It's over." A muffled curse from Vergil resounded through the halls. "Well, almost. Take him back and explain what happened. I'll repair the damage. Have Robsta take Jewels to the Mod board, and give him my apologies for the wrist."

More Insanity

By Vergil - Sep 6 2008

Vergil found it hard to breathe. How? How did Nioca do that? Little did Nioca know he had a little surpize for him. Grabbing the butterfly box, he emptyed its contents in the room. "Let the ass be eated by French Rap" Vergil muttered. The box's contents scuttled across the room. Nioca look surprised "What are those?" Vergil smiled a wide smile "Just the one way trip to hell. Say hi to Jewels will ya?" Nioca prepared a spell. Not much good it will do. Vergil thought. He had seen these nasty things in action before, and they were brutal. Nioca fired a smite. It bounced off the creatures shell. And then, by the thousands, they leeched on to Nioca. Nioca started to panic. The Crusader was not affecting them. "I almost forgot" Vergil gingerly picked up Yamato. "It will return to me, it always does." Vergil threw Yamato at Nioca. It hit Nioca in the center of his kneecap. Nioca screamed in pain. He soon learned that opening his mouth was not the brightest idea. Vergil walked away.

w-dueck came up to Vergil

"What the hell did you do?"

"I made sure Nioca won't be moving, for a looong time."

w-dueck shifted "How does that butterfly box work?"

Vergil smiled "It releases creatures who track by scent, when they are done with its prey they transport it back in the box. Quite useful."

"And then they kill their prey?"

"No, they just break its mind, after smacking it up a bit."

"How many of these exist?"

"Not very many, only a couple and almost none of them are alike."

"How?"

"Depending on how you make it, it can have different affects. Some are for torture, some are for assassination. Mine is for breaking and making insanity. Only one I know of that does that."

"How did you make it?"

Vergil darkened "I dare not tell you, or anyone for that matter. It is the secret of Vergil and will remain that way."

Trying to Make it Make Sense

By Robsta - Sep 6 2008

He had to stop a moment to think over all that had gone on. Nioca attacked w-dueck and him, professed being on the same team as them, been attacked by a dead man, and run away, chased by that dead man in the span of just fifteen minuets.

The dead man, Vergil didn't look in the least dead, and seemed to attack Nioca without hesitating. Robsta had never really figured out why Vergil and Nioca were fighting in the first place, and wondered if Vergil knew that there were two Niocas.

Seeing how quickly things were unravelling, He knew they had to act quickly and try to prevent any more deaths. w-dueck had already seemed to sort this out, and cast a quick healing spell on Robsta's wrist. Robsta felt the pain subside and the saw the cut close. "We have to move" he heard w-dueck tell him, but he already had crossed half the room and picked up the sword and staff that Nioca had discarded when Vergil attacked him.

Screams echoed down the hall that Vergil and Nioca had left from. Robsta ran, throwing w-dueck's staff at him, towards the noise. Robsta and w-dueck ran down the hall and saw Vergil and Nioca frozen, staring at something coming from around the corner. As they neared, Robsta slowed, and w-dueck, seeing what he was doing, cast stealth.

Before they reached the paralyzed figures, Nioca came into sight. That is another Nioca came into sight, sword drawn and poised to strike down the paralyzed Nioca. Screaming a war cry, Robsta leapt forward an slashed at the evil Nioca, who barely parried the blow. An Iceboat spell from w-dueck hit Nioca and sent him staggering back into the wall. Nioca leapt back to a fighting pose and moved around the corner, where he had a retreat rout and was out of sight from w-dueck. Robsta grimaced and stepped forward slashing at his foe with deadly efficiency. Nioca fought with magic as well as might, Robsta found, it seemed that his blade - the name of which slipped his mind at the moment, and he had little time to think of it - was fighting on its own, Nioca was merely relying on and reinforcing his sword as he fought. Never the less, Robsta was an expert warrior, and w-dueck had manoeuvred into a position where he again could help Robsta and cast spells at Nioca.

It soon became apparent that when they were prepared, the combined efforts of Robsta and w-dueck far outmatched evil Nioca. Even when Nioca went invisible, Robsta knew what to expect,

and stepped back so that w-dueck could summon a nephil, which smelt out Nioca and attacked him, turning him visible again. Soon Nioca was cut down.

What a mess. There was blood everywhere, and the bodies of a nephil, an ogre, and Nioca littered the floor. Leaning over, Robsta wiped his blade on the nearest piece of cloth that wasn't too bloody. Turning around, he saw w-dueck in conversation with the good Nioca and Vergil on the floor, bound by some sort of magic. It was likely, Robsta thought to himself, that the Paralysis wore off once evil Nioca died. Nioca, the not-so-evil one was holding both Yamato and Crusader. Yes that was the name of his sword, how could he forget it?

Another surprising turn of events shook the room as numerous white-grey creatures scuttled from behind Vergil's back towards Nioca. Nioca vainly tried to fight them, and screamed as they latched on to him and started draining his sanity away.

Vergil stood up and broken the magical shackles that held him. He was already in conversation, showinc off a small flower box to w-dueck by the time Robsta had yelled at him to stop, again running towards him. Robsta could feel his strength fading again, he had been doing a lot of running and fighting today. "That is not who you want to kill!"

"No?" Vergil asked, his signature smile creeping across his face. "I don't want to kill the man that killed me?"

"That is not the man! The one who killed you is over there!" Robsta pointed to the body in the middle of the hall. Vergil glanced at it and jumped back, astounded. He had not been expecting to see a second Nioca.

"Call them back." Robsta asserted firmly. In shock, Vergil did as he was told. Nioca stopped writhing and slumped over, unconscious. A heavy silence followed.

"Robsta, Go take Jewels to the Mod board, she will need care that we only can give her there. I'll take care of things around here."

Robsta grunted. He had been told to do cleanup work, and his wrist still hurt. Fortunately he had some strength left in him. Calmly, he found Jewels, and careful not to exert himself too much, carried her to the mod board. He was glad that she was fairly light and carried no armour. He was sure he wouldn't have been able to lift his own weight in his current state.

Vietnamese Sock Puppet

By Vergil - Sep 6 2008

Vergil felt like a smut. He had accidentally wiped the sanity off of a innocent person. Phant would NEVER let him hear the end of it. And he was going to have to rebuild Nioca's mind. It wasn't going to be easy, that was for sure. The butterfly box was put away, there was no need of it for now. Vergil was glad that he had brushed up on his languages, if he hadn't, There was no

way he could revive Nioca. Sitting across from Nioca, Vergil tried to put together the pieces of Nioca's sanity.

"Xemnas = Mansex." Vergil inquired. No response. "Pancaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaake of broccoli katsup" Nioca shifted "Blood of a humpbackingsperm whale." Nioca blearily stared at the wall Vergil sighed. This was going to take forever "Vietnamese Sock puppet." Nioca's eyes sprung to life. Nioca said "I didn't know implants where so versitile." Vergil smiled, he now knew what part of Nioca's brain survived. "I celebrate my expulsion from my mothers womb!" Vergil stated Nioca looked downcast and said "Am I Richard White? Am I Drakefyre?" Vergil sighed and left. It was going to take a very looooong time.

w-dueck saw Vergil and walked over. "How did it go?" He asked. Vergil shook his head "I know his the specific language of randomness he is using but I still have to rebuild the rest." w-dueck sighed "Y'know, its your own fault hes like this, all cause of you and that damned box." Vergil mind popped. "The.....box.....Hey! That's it!" w-dueck turned around "What?" Vergil hastily explained "If I manage to extract the mind of the evil Nioca I can take in the parts missing and impalement them in Nioca's mind." w-dueck raised an eyebrow "Last time you used that box it turned out for the worse. How do you know its going to work this time? And how are you going to deal with the other Nioca?" Vergil turned away "Well.....That's where I fall short. You see, when I made the butterfly box, I forgot a important ingredient. The one that causes banishment or death on my command. The blood of a humpbackwhalecomputer."

Déjà Vu

By Jewels - Sep 8 2008

Jewels couldn't tell how much time had passed while she explored her 'home'. Was it really home? Long forgotten memories played at the edge of her mind not willing to be remembered just yet. She found what looked like a bedroom and suddenly felt tired. So tired. The bed of flames flickered like feathers, beckoning her to come and rest. It would feel so good to just lay down, if only for a moment.

Jewels climbed in and snuggled against the pillow. A short rest, just a few minutes... Jewels soon fell into a deep sleep and started to dream...

She was at Calamity Refuge and there was trouble in the BoA forum. Shouts and clanging could be heard in that direction. Jewels ran towards the commotion, her feet not touching the floor. The door dissipated in front of her and she stepped into a battle. A battle between her friends. They were tearing each other apart, unrelenting. Her heightened senses took in every detail of sound, and sight, and smell. "Stop it!" she called out. But no one paid her any mind. She ran in front of w-dueck. "Do something! You're the Arch-Admin. Make them stop!" but he ignored her, not even looking her way. Nioca and Vergil were locked in combat. With their swords they thrust and parried and threw each other back. Jewels took the moment to run in between them and

cried, "STOP!" Both friends lifted their blades and charged straight for each other with her in the middle.

Jewels woke up screaming. Her heart pounded, her mind raced. It took her a moment to remember where she was and another to calm herself enough to think clearly. She had to get out of here, she had to go back.

Jewels jumped out of bed and threw open the door only to be stopped dead in her tracks by the most ominous figure she'd ever seen. Tears sizzled on her cheeks as her breath caught in her throat. Her voice barely audible, she managed to whisper, "Daddy!"

A second later Jewels was in his arms receiving the biggest bear hug a person can get without being squished to death. Jewels buried her face into his smokey beard as she remembered a century's worth of memories and learning. "Oh Daddy," she sighed. "I know I just got here, and we haven't even had a chance to talk... but I have to go back. I just have to. They need me."

Jewels looked up into his fiery blue eyes and saw an eternity of knowledge stare back at her. "I know," he rumbled, his voice low and strong, "You're not supposed to be here yet. Your training is not yet done and your destiny is not complete." Then he smiled, "Go my daughter, my precious Jewels."

A bright light came down upon them and she began to rise out of his arms. She gently held his arms and hands as they passed through her fingertips. "I'll be back, soon," she called. And suddenly she shot up and was away. She was going so fast, too fast. The light began to burn with such intensity that Jewels cried out in pain. Too fast! Too bright! Too much! Her senses overloaded and she fell into unconsciousness.

Jewels's eyes snapped open. She was leaning back in her office chair and everything was eerily quiet. Was she too late? Did she have any chance of helping her friends? She jumped up and out the door heading straight for the BoA forum. As an afterthought she noted that she'd need to get that Fire theme mist back from w-dueck once things calmed down.

Jewels was running so fast that she tripped and fell face first towards the floor. She threw her arms out to catch herself but still slid a foot before stopping. "Ow," she groaned. She got to her knees gingerly and winced at the shards of glass embedded in her palms. "Great," she thought, "I don't have time for this."

Jewels turned to see that she had tripped on Vergil's foot... except he was in different clothes. Nioca's robes if she wasn't mistaken. Wait a minute... It *was* Nioca.

Jewels brushed away some glass... Why was there glass on the floor again? Didn't that window get fixed? She rolled Nioca over to his back. "Nioca?" he groaned, eyes fluttering. "Nioca, are you OK?"

He opened his eyes groggily but didn't focus on anything. "I... I," he stammered. "I don't know," he finally managed.

Something nagged at the back of Jewels's mind. This was all so... so... familiar. Could it be? She checked her watch and could hardly believe it. Not a minute had passed since the first time she found Nioca. "Thanks Daddy," she whispered.

"OK, Jewels," she said to herself."Time to get to work." There was no way she was gonna leave Nioca here alone again, and if she was right Vergil and Robsta should both be along any second. "Don't worry, Nioca, I'm not going anywhere. Let's get you someplace safe."

Jewels managed to get to her feet and struggled with the knob to the BoA Moderation Center door. Once open, she got her elbows under Nioca's arms and dragged him through. She closed the door behind them and cast a heal all spell. Nothing happened. Jewels tried again, concentrating hard. Her hands started to glow with flames, red then orange then white. The glass shards in her hands started to melt and Nioca cried out recoiling from the heat. Jewels stopped but both of their wounds remained. "Crap," Jewels seethed to herself, "I'm not an Admin yet."

"Nioca, I have to go get help. You stay here. *Don't leave the Mod Center*," she emphasized.

Nioca didn't respond. Jewels hoped he understood her. She gingerly opened the door again and backed out locking it behind her. She had to find Vergil, and fast. She only took a couple of steps before she returned to the door. "Better be safe then sorry." Jewels concentrated again. Her hands glowing white hot, she grabbed the doorknob melting it into place. "That should hold for now."

Satisfied, Jewels headed for the front doors in anticipation of Vergil's arrival.

Vergil went about killing yahoo.bots. He killed them with Yamato, Beowulf, Chef Brian, and the occasional nanaparty. Boom. Yamato cut a bot in half. Boom. Light gauntlet to the face. Boom. Randomness hitting where it hurts. Boom. Swarms of bananas suffocating. When Vergil reached the BoA forum he met a distressed Jewels at the door. "Jewels, you're back!" he exclaimed. "Where have you been, anyway? Hey, you're bleeding," he said noticing her hands. "What happened."

"Oh, I'm fine, really." Jewels argued. " I just fell." Jewels wiped her hands against her clothes wincing. "Nioca is hurt more than me, though. He needs real medical attention. Do you know any healing spells?"

"Of, course I do." Vergil puffed up. "w-dueck made me an Admin."

"Really?" Jewels tried to sound surprised. "That's, uh... great." She hoped she sounded sincere.

"OK, then, if you'll come with me." She started walking towards the mod center. "He was all but unconscious when I left him, but we should probably be careful."

"Careful? What do you mean?" Vergil gave Jewels a puzzled glance.

"Well, it's just that, uh... he might..." Jewels hesitated. She didn't know exactly what had driven Nioca to stab Vergil before. "He fell out of the window and I think he hit his head. He might be touchy."

"Whatever. I can handle it." Jewels led him to the door. "What happened to the door knob?" Vergil asked.

"Uh... I don't know," Jewels lied. "Just another reason to be careful huh? You can break it down can't you?"

Vergil grumbled under his breath and took a couple steps back. "Better back up." he warned. A bright ball formed in his hand then smashed into the door. It was blown off it's hinges and opened enough for them to squeeze through.

Jewels stopped at the landing. "Oh, no. He moved." A few drops and smudges of blood went up the stairs.

"Doesn't that mean that he's getting better? Why's that bad?"

"I told him to stay put for one," Jewels mumbled under her breath. Then louder so Vergil could hear her, "Let's just stick together while we look for him, OK?"

"Fine, it's not like we can't just follow his trail of blood anyway." Vergil started running impatiently up the stairs.

"Hey, not so fast," Jewels called trailing a few steps behind him.

Vergil spotted Nioca lying in a far corner. He strolled over. "Hey Nioca, there you are. Jewels said you needed some healing." Nioca didn't move "Nioca, you there?"

Jewels hurried behind him. "Vergil, be careful!"

Vergil waved off her and stepped closer to the limp form before Jewels could stop him. With a lightning quick jab, Nioca's sword plunged into Vergil's chest. "You are not taking down BoA not on my watch!" Vergil paused "What... the... hell... I... don't... even... play... BoA."

"Vergil? Vergil!" Jewels looked at his wound. "Vergil! No!"

He groaned. "I... await... you... Augh!!!" Vergil slumped over.

Nioca cackled and turned on Jewels, lifting his sword.

A Reason to be Brave

By Robsta Sep 9 2008

It had been a while since Robsta had been to the BoA board. True the aura around the building didn't give off any sign of new posts, but he thought he'd dip in anyways. Nearing the building, something struck him as being wrong, really wrong. There was a broken window on the second floor and near it the front door was destroyed. Robsta quickened his pace.

Through the door, Robsta saw Vergil leaning over a ragged Nioca, sitting with his back to a wall. Curios about what happened, he stepped in and was about to ask what happened, when a flash of light indicated Crusader, Nioca's sword, protruding from Vergil's chest.

Robsta stood aghast, his attention focused on the enormity of what had just happened. All sight and sound faded as he saw Vergil limp over onto Crusader. The sword itself turned from its original metallic gray to red, and finally to a malevolent shade of dark purple. Nioca, still

holding the sword seemed to be slowly gaining his strength back. Nioca's new strength gave him the will to stand and turn. Nioca turned and raised his sword, but not in the direction of Robsta.

Someone else was in the room, someone he had not noticed until now. The apparent distortion of time ended when he realized that Nioca was willing to kill, and had just turned on defenseless Jewels. His sword, Stonecrusher, flew from its scabbard, and Robsta jumped between Nioca and Jewels.

Nioca surprised at the new arrival, staggered back a few steps, but soon gained composure. He ran, hitting something near the doorway as he passed. Robsta chased after him, sword in hand, at a vicious speed. By the time he reached the doorway that Nioca fled through, he saw a silhouette exit from another door. He took a couple of hurried steps in pursuit, but the floor suddenly caved in. In one action Robsta threw his sword at Nioca's fleeing figure, turned and jumped back towards the door, pushing off from a crumbling block of granite. He barely managed to catch hold of the ledge. He had managed to reach the doorway he came from in with his jump and caught hold of firm hard ground that had not caved in. Grunting he pulled himself up. Jewels was there, apparently she had shouted him a warning as he ran, but he hadn't heard it. Vergil was still slumped over, bleeding all over the floor, and his sword was quivering in a doorframe across from them, past a pit full of spikes. Nioca was nowhere in sight.

"We need to get w-dueck" Jewels suggested, then muttered something under her breath, but all Robsta could make out was the word admin.

Afterlife v2.0

By Vergil - Sep 9 2008

Vergil wasn't gonna wait in hell, he wanted to make a weapon, and he know what weapon to make. With all of his arcane might, he called upon the most powerful spell.....DUES EX MACHINA!!!! He linked himself to the conclave. A thousand voices rang through Vergils head. "I like hanna Montana" "I'm gonna hire Luke to put you in a butterfly box" "NOT THE INFERNAL SCREAMING RYLE BOX!!" ".....Awerd Silence....." "Get out of my room you obnoxious little boy!!" "GOD DAMMIT THIS ISN'T A BRITISH ACCENT, ITS NEW ZEALAND!!!" "Please don't put me in the box!" "I ARE PANT" " Vergil stopped and said "Whoa, I'm stopping there" That should be enough to get myself what I need. If I recall correctly, number #677341 type should work for this situation.

Vergil had one last stop before payback, he had already gotten the French Rap from youtube, the poems from yahoo, the information from wikipedia, all that was left was randomness. Forming a telecommunication pool to Ctrl Alt Del, he soon found Chief Brian, upon appearance, he said "The kittens of my bone marrow, pancaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaake?" Vergil responded "Beefpotatowheelman" "Ah, a daisy supreme, I burst from the mechanical womb!" The clouds opened to reveal a koala in a bed. "Oy vay! Wake up you tossa!" The Koala lazily opened a eye,

and took a denture out of a can of water. After readjustment, he mumbled "Whadda you want Vergil?" "Je veux votre ampoule avec l'armée de pieds."

"Ce qui ? ! Mon arme plus puissante ? ! Aucun Vergil, non."

"Rappelez-vous ..... Jaex?"

"Le OH, homme, n'appellent pas en cette faveur."

The Koala sighed.

"Dur, je l'appelle dans"

"Fin, prenez-les."

Bigger Fish

By Nioca - Sep 9 2008

Nioca meandered through the BoA Forums's basement, resetting traps. They had all been set to go off whenever someone other than himself, Nikki, or the administration had gone through. Foolish. He tampered with the AvernumScript of the traps, resetting them so that they'd now go off on anyone other than himself. He then found the Blades Nexus, which powered all of the AvernumScript found in the forum. Setting the last trap so that it'd immolate any intruder who approached the Nexus, he then pulled a switch by the wall.

On the main level of the forum, hidden and out of the way runes let off a sudden flash. An alarm went off, signaling that intruders had penetrated the BoA forum. On the runes, insubstantial forms coalesced into solid bodies. Kobolds, Drakes, and anything in-between appeared, hungry for blood. In the BoA Moderation Center, Jewels gasped as a nearby rune formed a rather large and deformed Ice Hydra.

Nioca picked himself up off the floor of the Spam and Posting Games Forum. What had happened? One moment, he was approaching a topic, and the next, the floor was approaching him and briefly knocking him out.

But what disturbed him most were the dreams he had during unconsciousness. He dreamed that he had just cut down Vergil, and was about to kill Jewels as well. Nioca shook his head slightly to get rid of the thought; it was just a dream, right?

"You all right, Nioca?" The voice made Nioca jump; w-dueck had come up behind him.

With a smirk, Nioca exited the BoA Forum. Whilst it might be good to cut down Jewels and Robsta, they were of no real importance. w-dueck was the one that needed to go. But he also knew it was folly to confront him directly. Rather, he had to catch him by surprise. After all, Vergil went down without so much as a fight, and he too was an Admin. Stalking outside the Moderation Forum, he paused and took on an air of exertion. Then, he burst through the door. "w-dueck! You have to help me! Jewels and Robsta are trying to kill me! Pl-"

Nioca stopped. The forum was empty. Cursing to himself, he looked for w-dueck's keys to the Admin tower. No luck; he apparently had the keys on him. Cursing some more, he left the Moderation Forum, slamming the door behind him, and headed for the BoA Forum. He couldn't risk leaving Robsta and Jewels alive to warn w-dueck.

Hey, You're Hot

By Jewels - Sep 10 2008

The room suddenly turned frigid. Ice crystals started forming on the walls and Jewels could see her breath. Movement could be seen out the slowly frosting window.

This was not good. This was not good at all. Monsters in the forums, Jewels without adminship, and Robsta without his sword; Jewels couldn't think of a worse situation than this. She and Robsta backed away from the Ice Hydra that had effectively blocked their only exit. It's back was to them, but the way it was stretching, it wouldn't be for long.

"Got any ideas?" Jewels whispered.

"Well, I *could* try to fight it, but without my sword, I don't know if I could kill it before it kills me." Robsta glanced out the window. "Even if I managed to slay it, I don't think I'd be up for everyone else out there."

Jewels nodded her understanding and took a few more steps away from the slowly arching monstrosity. She wasn't afraid to die, of course, but the whole point of coming back was to *stay* here and help everyone. She had to think of something, and fast.

The hydra sniffed the air and turned towards them. Realizing that it's next meal was only a few yards away, it reared up it's many heads and let out a piercing roar. Robsta shivered involuntarily but Jewels felt oddly warm. The hydra advanced and while one head hissed, another breathed out a foggy sub-zero spray.

"Duck!" Robsta yelled, grabbing Jewels and throwing them both to the floor. Jewels landed hard but only allowed her eyes a momentary glance off of the hydra. The wall where the blast had hit became covered in a thick sheet of ice.

"Think!" she chided herself silently. "There must be something I learned as a child that I can use now." Jewels wracked her brain as she and Robsta scrambled up and back a few more feet.

The hydra grew more bold and covered a third of the distance between it and it's prey before taking aim and breathing again.

"Look out!" came Robsta's voice. He shoved Jewels away from himself as hard as he could hoping that the spray could miss in between them both. Unfortunately he wasn't fast enough and the spray caught his foot. Groaning on his knees, Robsta dragged himself as far back as he could. The bricks on the edge of the spike pit threatened to give way underneath his hands. There was no more room to flee, but there was no way Robsta was giving up without a fight.

Seeing that it had crippled one of it's victims, the hydra focused on Robsta, stalked closer, and screeched in anticipation.

"No!" Jewels screamed and ran to intervene. Her blood boiled in anger at Nioca. All she had wanted to do was help him and now she was less than a minute away from witnessing his second murder. *Third* if you count Vergil twice... Not if she could help it.

Robsta had managed to get to his feet and planted himself in a fighting posture. The hydra was now only six feet from him. Robsta readied to duck and charge as the beast posed for another gout. Just then, Jewels jumped between them stopping Robsta from charging, but not stopping the hydra from hitting her full force with it's icy blast. She was thrown back against the wall and fell to the floor. Shocked and outraged, Robsta threw himself at the beast grabbing it at one neck. His fingers burned with cold and the other heads raked him with their teeth but he refused to let go. Whipping the beast around, Robsta put it between himself and the pit. Then he pushed with all his might. The hydra lost it's footing and tumbled back into the deadly hole. It's wails of agony were a welcome sound and the air almost instantly seemed warmer.

He limped over to Jewels wondering if she could have possibly survived. Her stirring answered his question as he knelt at her side. Robsta tried to check her out when she sat up but he had to shield his face from hers. "Hey, you're hot."

Jewels was startled by his statement and glanced down at herself. Sure enough, her skin seemed to be pulsating with an inner heat. "So I am," she quipped. After a moment she added, "Here, I think I can help with this." Jewels reached for Robsta's ice covered foot. The ice melted away before she even touched it.

"How are you doing that?" Robsta asked, wiggling his toes.

"Honestly?" Jewels paused a moment. "I don't really know."

Out of Reach

By Robsta - Sep 11 2008

Robsta was thankful that Jewels had helped him bind his wounds, even if she was so hot it was hard to be near her.

"There are more out there, I don't think I could take them all, especially without Stonecrusher." Robsta looked longingly at his sword, stuck in the doorframe on the other side of pit of spikes. "It's at times like these that I wish I carried a secondary weapon." The rest of the room was frosted over, ice filled in most of the door. Outside were monsters, many monsters, of all varieties. Little chance of survival lay in notifying them of two unarmed victims in the vicinity. Suddenly he had a thought, Yamato. Vergil's body was still in the room, and he had an excellent sword. Robsta ran over to the body, but the sword was gone.

"I already checked that." Jewels informed him, "Either Nioca took it as he ran off, or Vergil took it with him into the afterlife."

He looked again at Stonecrusher, noting this time that the Hydra that he had pushed into the pit filled it almost to the top with its main body, while the heads stretched almost all the way to the other wall. It's not much to work with, but it might be enough for me to get my sword back, Robsta thought. He checked his foot. It felt a little brittle as an after effect of the ice, and the boot was a little damp, but he expected it would hold out for this stunt.

He launched himself off the ledge and landed on the hydra, slipping a bit on the scales, but managed to get a grip of it and to pull himself onto its main body.

"What are you doing?" Jewels yelled at him, seeing that he was standing on a slippery surface surrounded by long, sharp spikes.

"I'm getting my sword so that we can get out of here alive." Robsta carefully climbed/slid down the other side of the beast, stopping on one of its many heads. Carefully he lifted the necks to build a bridge across the spikes. Soon he was at the other wall of the room, but his sword was suspended a good twenty feet above him. He looked for ways to climb the wall or to get the sword down, but he was desperately short on resources. He could pile the hydra's heads, but that would only bring him three to five feet closer to his goal, still much too far.

He was brought out of his dilemma by Jewels screaming for help. He raced back up the Hydra's necks, and climbed its body with frantic haste, managing not to slip if only due to his momentum. Reaching the top of the hydra, he jumped, grabbing the ledge and pulled himself back into the room with Jewels.

Jewels was backing away from a hulking ogre with a club, and a vicious looking goblin wielding an axe. The monsters were closing in on her slowly, wincing every time they went near her as if they were walking into onto a bonfire. Robsta charged, colliding with the goblin and sending

them both flying to the floor. Viciously he grappled with the goblin, cursing at his wounds, because the goblin was a lot stronger than it looked. With a great heave, Robsta managed to throw the goblin into the wall, dazing it. Quickly Robsta snatched up the goblin's discarded axe, and sliced off its head.

Grimacing he turned to the ogre, still trying to corner Jewels without getting too close to her.

Scripting a Death

By Nioca - Sep 11 2008

Nioca stalked back into the BoA forum with the idea of destroying the forums via the Admin tower planted firmly in his mind. And he had a plan. Turning to face the door to the BoA forum, he muttered a single syllable. "Write". The whites and the irises of his eyes turned a violent shade of green. Bending down, he then traced an inch above the ground with his index finger. A gentle green glow followed where he was tracing, and it formed into script. Eventually, he finished, and muttered another syllable. "Run."

The writing went from a gentle glow to an almost-blinding bright green light. It then seemed to bleed right into the ground and disappear.

A nearby goblin took note of this. With a bloodthirsty yowl, it charged Nioca. Nioca stood and faced the goblin, standing just in front of where he had written the AvernumScript. Just as the goblin closed, Nioca dove out of the way, and the goblin stepped on the space where the script had been written. A blast of lightning suddenly fired out of the ground and into the goblin, fatally electrocuting it and flinging it backward several feet. It landed with a thud, charred and thoroughly ravaged.

Nioca grinned. It'd now be impossible for anyone to exit the BoA forum until it was removed. Nioca then turned and headed to a remote corner of the forum. He reached into his robes and pulled out an emerald key. Bending down, he brushed away some debris and revealed a trapdoor; he inserted the key, unlocked it, then headed down into the basement of the BoA forum.

On the Offensive

By Robsta - Sep 12 2008

Robsta calmly walked up behind the ogre, trying to get used to gripping a goblin's axe as opposed to a long sword. The balance was all wrong, he thought, and the grip wasn't wide enough, but never the less, it was a weapon, and the edge wasn't all that dull.

The ogre stopped approaching Jewels and sniffed the air, it had caught a scent. Twirling around, it roared at a distracted Robsta, who jumped, suddenly aware that his foe was a good four feet taller and over twice his weight. Robsta slashed, managing to catch the ogre's offhand, and drew blood from the huge creature. The ogre retaliated with a blow from its club, a blow that Robsta tried to parry, forgetting that he wasn't using the mighty Stonecrusher. The club smashed the flimsy axe to pieces, and continued swinging as if it hadn't met any resistance at all. It hit Robsta, knocking him off his feet and flying into a wall.

Lightning struck nearby, but that was a detail Robsta tried not to think about, it didn't strike anyone in the room. The ogre was still fine, Jewels was frustrated, as if she were trying to remember a name, but just couldn't put her finger on it, and he didn't feel like electricity had hit him. The ogre attacked again, this time the Warrior of the Refuge knew he had no protection and jumped at the ogre's feet, letting the club soar over his head. Robsta toppled his foe by grabbing its feet out from under it. The ogre responded by flailing about dangerously, and preventing anyone from getting close. It then stood up again, and bent over to pick up its club. Seizing the opportunity, Robsta cut through the skin on the ogre's skull with a stroke of the broken axe head. The ogre reared in pain and charged. Robsta ducked aside, and the ogre ran by, sustaining another cut on the pass.

Robsta turned to face his foe on the next pass, but it never came. Jewels, who had been mostly keeping away from the fight up until now, confidently stepped towards the ogre with an inhuman gleam in her eyes. For a moment he saw Jewel's pupils turn red and start dancing, as if they were flames, not the beautiful hazel eyes he was used to. She reached forward and a stream of flame flew from her palm and enveloped the ogre. As quickly as the look came upon Jewels, it faded. "How did you do that?" Robsta asked after the singed body of the ogre fell with a deafening crash. "And why didn't you do it earlier?" "I don't know." She answered, out of breath "One moment I was trying to keep out of your way, the next I knew that I could end the fight. I don't know if I'd be able to do it again."

Robsta looked at the broken axe head he held. "I've got to get myself a weapon. Perhaps the ogre would make a good ladder to get to my sword." A deafening crack came from the room beside them. Where there was a pit of spikes solid floor once again covered. "there's no way I'm going to trust that to hold me again. Let's use the ogre to test it."

JEWELS!!! II: It's Hotter This Time

By Sylae - Sep 12 2008

w-dueck stood at the top of the Admin Tower, surveying the repairs of the Refuge. The repairs were going along well, but he had a feeling like he had been here before. Where was Jewels? She hadn't been seen in over a week. Had the crash destroyed more than he had thought? He decided to head down to the status panel and check some things out.

w-dueck rushed down the central stairwell of the Tower and stopped at a plaque that read "22nd Floor - Administration Status Monitoring". He opened the door and stepped in.

The Status Panel was a smallish room, with black plastered walls covered with small runes. In the center of the room a circle was marked out in gold engravings. w-dueck walked over to the circle and stood in it. He tapped his staff against the circle and said, "Activate Status Panel and start forum query." The runes on the walls flashed, then disappeared, plunging the room into total blackness. Then ghostly images and lettering appeared floating at head height. w-dueck pointed at one of the images, and it expanded into a listing of all the members. "Check status, member Jewels." Jewel's Listing flashed several times, then rearranged itself into her profile, that only showed that she was alive in the BoA forum. "that's odd," w-dueck said to himself, "there should be way more info."

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w-dueck ran across the grassy field in front of the Admin Tower, headed for the BoA Forum. He had a growing feeling that something was wrong. Nightmarish images flashed through his mind.*Nioca had walked a mere foot from Robsta, invisible to all but himself. Then, with a quick slash, he struck Robsta's wrist with the tip of his sword. Robsta yowled in agony and dropped the sword. Moving quickly, he then grabbed Robsta in a headlock, and yanked him between Nioca and w-dueck like a shield, holding Crusader's Protectorate at his back. The wound on Robsta's wrist glowed with a vicious purple light. This aura drained some of his life, but it soon faded. "Drop it!" Nioca shouted to w-dueck. "Drop the staff!"* He was getting a fearsome headache, and the visions kept coming back. Finally he turned a corner and saw the BoA Forum.

Jewels and Robsta both stood as an explosion shook the windows of the forum, the door buckled. w-dueck's foul tongue could be heard from outside the door.

"Finally he's here," Robsta sighed and wiped sweat off his forehead. He felt like he was in an oven, "Took his time about it,"

Both members jumped as they heard an explosion. A smaller explosion was heard, and the door blew apart. A charred w-dueck stood in the doorway, his staff smoking from the spell he had cast. He limped into the room and broke out in a sweat, "JEWELS!!!! Welcome back! I have an offer for you. But, why is it so hot in here? Haven't you people heard of cooling spells?"

Jewels wondered what had happened to w-dueck. He looked like he had been struck by lightning.

Nioca smirked as one of his monitors flashed, "and there goes w-dueck. Now to finish Robsta and Jewels." His smirk disappeared, however, when he saw a red dot appear on the forum map, "What...How? Nobody could survive that!"

Nice Shades

By Nioca - Sep 13 2008

"What the... what was his problem?" Nioca muttered. One moment, Nioca had been chatting with w-dueck, and the next, w-dueck was storming off to the Admin Tower, muttering to himself. "*Not that I haven't been feeling a little nutty myself...*" Nioca said to himself. Ever since... when? It was as if a word, a phrase forgotten sprung to mind, only to fade away. It was as if he should be somewhere else... as if he was viewing the world from a distance. A wraith outside his own body.

Something was wrong. Very, very wrong. Nioca closed his eyes and focused... "*Aryll... I need you. Protect me!*"

A red shade faded into existence next to him. Drawing Crusader's Protectorate, Nioca headed for the BoA Forums.

Nioca screamed in primal rage, a scream that echoed throughout the forums. Yanking Crusader's Protectorate out of it's sheath, he then started a chant. Purplish shades slowly faded into being around him, for a total of eight. "Kill them." Nioca said to the shades. "Kill them. All of them. Not you!" He shouted at one of the shades, which had already turned to leave. "I have something special in mind for you."

Only Tenty Minutes

By Jewels - Sep 15 2008

At the sight of w-dueck entering the room, Jewels let out a huge sigh of relief. Her heart slowed, her adrenalin subsided, and her heat dissipated. She shivered. Jewels suddenly realized how tired she was. She had used so much energy in the past twenty minutes... had it really been only twenty minutes? It seemed like days. Jewels had to catch herself against the wall to keep from toppling over.

Robsta took note. "You alright, Jewels?"

"Yeah, yeah. I'm good. I just need a minute to process everything." Jewels smiled sheepishly as Robsta nodded. She knew she needed to rest, but she also knew that this wasn't over yet. She had

to be strong... for everyone's sake. "So, w... Can I call you w? w-dueck is so hard to pronounce. Anyway, you said something about an offer?"

"Uh, how 'bout Will?" he suggested. Jewels nodded her accent and Will continued. "I wanted to talk to you in private but under the circumstances..." he glanced out the window at the chaotic BoA forum, "...I'll just cut to the chase. Jewels, I want you to be an admin with me and Vergil."

Jewels tried not to seem too eager though she knew her face belied her desire. "Well, uh... what would I have to do as an admin? I'm not that great at technical stuff. Most of Truesite's fancy stuff was copy'n'pasted and trial'n'errored."

"Oh, you'd do pretty much the same thing that you do as a global mod only you'd have benefits."

"I'd be a mod with benefits? Like what?"

"Access to the Admin Forum, your own suite on a whole floor of the Admin Tower, as much magical power as me... well almost." Jewels had been nodding, seeming to consider his offer. "Did I mention the Ban Hammer?"

Jewels had heard enough. "Done!" she whooped. "And I know exactly who to use it on first." Jewels braced herself for the knock on the noggin that she knew was coming. It didn't hurt any less the second time around.

"There, it's done. That'll smart for a few days and you'll probably have headaches for a couple weeks. Now who were you thinking of using the Ban Hammer on? Just so you know, all hammer using must be pre-approved by me."

Jewels and Robsta looked at each other then turned back to Will. "Nioca!" they said in unison.

Will raised a soot covered eyebrow and looked genuinely confused. "Nioca?! Why in the world would you want to ban Nioca? He is a stellar member of Calamity Refuge, a valuable asset..."

Jewels cut him off stomping her foot. "He killed Vergil!" She pointed to the huddled form that Will hadn't noticed yet.

Will stepped up to the body. "That's impossible! He wouldn't have... Nioca couldn't have..." Will examined Vergil's body as if not willing to believe that he was dead.

"I watched him do it, Will!" Jewels spoke with unbridled emotion. "Right here, unprovoked and ranting something about us taking down BoA. He would have killed me, too, if Robsta hadn't shown up to stop him. Then when he couldn't beat Robsta, he sent the monsters after us." Jewels pointed out the window at the rest of the BoA forum. "Nioca did this... all of this! He was hurt and we were just trying to help him, Will. I'm telling you, he's gone nuts! Banning him might not even be the best solution..."

Jewels's voice trailed off. She knew Will would understand what she meant. Will knelt shaking his head. "It just doesn't make sense. When did all this happen?"

Jewels calmed a bit,"Not more than twenty minutes ago."

"Wait, twenty minutes? Are you sure?"

Jewels checked her watch. "Yeah, it was exactly 27 minutes ago when I found Nioca hurt. It took me a couple to get him into the Mod Center and then I waited about 5 for Vergil at the door. So, yeah, 20 minutes."

Will seemed to be figuring things out while he talked. "Why didn't you come get me right away? I could have helped Nioca."

Jewels hesitated, she didn't want to lie to Will but she didn't think now was the time to try to explain everything. "I... I just had a feeling that I should keep an eye on Nioca." Jewels tried to change the subject. "Why does it matter anyway? Vergil is dead and Nioca is murderously crazy. We need to neutralize him now!"

"Only one problem," Will intoned calmly. "Twenty minutes ago I started talking to Nioca in the Spam forum, and we talked for at least ten. He seemed perfectly fine to me, if not a bit distracted, but then I've been feeling a bit weird myself." Will held up his hand to stop their protests. "I know, I know. Nioca can't be in two places at once. There remains only one logical conclusion. One of them is not the real Nioca."

The few seconds of silence from this revelation were soon interrupted by a cacophony of shrill wails and screeches. They all looked out the window to see a group of shades entering the BoA forum followed shortly by Nioca with sword raised... but which Nioca?

The trio jumped into action. Robsta ran for the fallen ogre to test the floor and get his sword, while Will stood over Vergil drawing together some energy. "We're gonna need all the help we can get for this one," he mumbled.

"Don't suppose you have an energy potion on you?" Jewels asked. "I could really use a boost."

"Yep." Will reached into his cloak without losing concentration and tossed a bottle at Jewels who drank it immediately.

"Whoa, head rush," Jewels steadied herself then watched in amazement as brilliant lights surrounded Will and Vergil. It was almost too much to watch... *too bright, too fast, too much...* Jewels closed her eyes against the light and the memory. When she opened them, Vergil was sitting on the floor blinking. In one hand he held Yamato, in the other a strange box.

Jewels couldn't help but rush to hug Vergil who only halfway resisted the contact. "Welcome back, Vergil."

"Uh, thanks..." Vergil let her help him up. "I haven't been gone that long have I?"

"Only about twenty minutes," Robsta answered walking up with Stonecrusher, "but what a twenty minutes."

"Meaning?" Vergil asked.

"Meaning..." Will recapped, "that there are two Nioca's. One who is as we always knew him, and one who wants to kill us all..."

"And maybe more pressingly," Jewels interrupted, "is that one of those Nioca's is headed towards us with a whole lot of shades and we don't know which one."

Duplicate

By Nioca - Sep 15 2008

Nioca rushed into the BoA forum, only to get blasted back out again. A bolt of lightning had struck him square in the chest, and he was flung backward like a ragdoll. He groaned, then uttered a healing spell and tried again. This time, he paused, and examined the doorway. He then promptly concluded that he was going to kill Nikki; the AvernumScript there could have killed somebody. Bending down, he muttered, "Write". The existing code reformed into writing. Since it was already running, Nioca knew it would be folly to try and erase it. Instead, he appended something to it. The code he wrote immediately started glowing. But there was a deliberate flaw in it; it performed an action it could never complete: an infinite loop in which it tried to make 1+1 equal 3.

The code took on a violent glow, and started emitting more and more light. Soon, it gained the brightness of a searchlight, and then the sun itself. Finally, the glow turned red, and the code suddenly died. The path clear, Nioca walked into the BoA forum, with Aryll following close behind.

Nioca watched the rats in the Mod center scurry. There would be no need for him to go in there. He would wait here till his shade did it's job. Now it seemed Vergil was up... This could be a problem. In an effort to level the playing field, Nioca pointed Crusader's Protectorate at the Mod center and shouted, "Cloud of Blades!" In an instant, dozens of daggers whirled through the air of the mod center, turning it into a meat processor. The quartet ducked and dodged as the vortex of blades attempted to slice them.

Then the shades attacked.

Nioca found the Mod center, and stared in abject horror. Sitting in front of it seemed to be him... or a copy of him. Nioca couldn't tell which. And the copy had just turned the Mod center into a giant potato peeler... with members inside!

Nioca realized what he had to do. Summoning up his strength, Nioca raised his palm and took aim at the copy. A bolt of blue energy fired from his hand, leaving a trail of icy frost behind it. It rushed at the second Nioca's head...

And slowed. It was suddenly as if the bolt was traveling in slow motion. And the closer it got to the second Nioca, the slower it became, until it finally stopped dead about a foot away from him, simply hanging in the air. The air, in fact, seemed to waver around it. The second Nioca turned around, and came face to face with the bolt of energy. The first Nioca ran for cover before the second could figure out who had cast the bolt. The second Nioca then stepped out of the path of the bolt of ice, and it darted past him back at full speed, striking the wall of the Mod center and exploding in a blast of frost.

Blue Blurry Battle

By Vergil - Sep 16 2008

The Admin tower shook.

"What in popsicle's name is that?"

Vergil swore. w-dueck looked out the window.

"The Mod center. Jewels I hope you don't mind a bit more cleaning up."

Vergil ran down the stairs with Robsta at his heels.

"Wait!!"

Jewels threw after them and started after them. w-dueck calmly walked up the stairs to the roof, he would have maximum spell power there. Vergil ran out of the remains of the Mod board in a war cry. Standing in front of him where about 200 shades. Vergil was stunned for a moment and then rolled his neck and cracking sounds came out, his signature smile worming past his shock.

"Hee. This is going to be fun!"

Vergil turned to Robsta, Whose eyes where deadlocked on the shades.

"You ready Rob?"

Robsta gave a small nod. Vergil unsheathed Yamato, and charged with a exilherating war-cry that could be heard all across the forums. Vergil descended on the first shade with a uppercut of Yamato's hilt, which the shade easily twisted to avade. Vergil narrowed his eyes. He followed with a cleave to the arm. It promptly cut of the shades arm. The shade rose its sickle to attack Vergil. Vergil rolled behind it and cut it in half. It disinigrated into sand. Vergil started to have small blue flumes come off his robe, and his eyes where an intense blue.

Robsta had 3 shades in front of him. He grabbed Stonecrusher and with two hands, cleaved across. The shades tried to parry but it was too strong. Their blades broke and they withered. Jewels just came out of the mod board and found a couple shades looked her way. Jewels eyes blazed

"Looks like I am going to do a lot of cleaning, starting with you!"

She took out two cookies and she flung them at the shades. There was a ray of some sort coming out of Jewels hands, distorting the air between her and the cookies. Then they caught fire and metal spinning blades popped out of them. The now flaming cookie-shruikens seared across the battlefield and cleaved a half dozen shades in half, what they did not cleave they burned. A shade snuck up on Jewels and prepared its sword for the death throw when its head exploded, leaving a smoking stump of where it the head was suppose to be. Jewels looked up and saw w-dueck smiling. Anknowleging with a nod, Jewels countinued her fight.

After deafeating a dozen more shades, Vergil was now practically leaking small blue flames, his eyes where replaced by sockets of blue flame. He turned around and saw Nioca, guiding shades

into attack position. Vergil screamed and a blue nimbus of runes came out of Vergil. Spikes pulsed out of his face. He roared then leaped across to Nioca, killing any shade along the way. Vergil was air-borne, coming down on Nioca's head. Nioca parried and cast cloud of blades. Vergil caught them with his fingers and flew them back at Nioca. Nioca cast smite. A blue bolt exploded where Vergils head was a second before. Vergil dispatched a few shades that Nioca had sent to him. Vergil now attacked at Nioca, stabbing and slashing. Nioca managed to get a few hits, but was physically unused to fighting. Vergil smiled and opened the butterfly box. Nioca panicked as he tried to fend off the creatures. Vergil grabbed Nioca and threw him up in the air, then Vergil flew into the air, grinning. Nioca was feeling faint, he was now doomed! But wait, Nioca thought These creatures have no eyes! It must be smell controlled! Using his last reserve of power, Nioca used swap scent on Vergil. The creatures leeched off him and went on Vergil.

"Oh, no..."

Vergil tried fighting them off but was left to writhe in pain. Nioca ran away, cackling.

Key to Strategy

By Nioca - Sep 17 2008

Nioca saw the four BoE supporters scurry out of the Mod center, under the onslaught of the cloud of whirling blades and the seven shades that had attacked. The eighth shade held back, looking almost as if it was watching for an opportunity. Meanwhile, the monsters that had been unleashed all over the forum began to congregate on the four, varying from kobold to drake, but all hungry for a Members meal.

As the four desperately fought off the onslaught, the eighth shade darted off. The incorporeal being ducked on the outskirts, slowly approaching and stalking the Admins and Robsta. Meanwhile, Vergil seemed to be transforming into something else entirely; not human, but merely a vessel for what looked to be blue flame. Nioca decided to take aim. "Facilis descensus Averno," Nioca muttered, before yelling, "Smite!" A bolt of blue energy launched itself at Vergil, who only just avoided it. Issuing a battle cry, the inhuman Vergil threw himself toward Nioca, and opened the Butterfly Box. Odd, white creatures poured out and came scuttling toward him. "What the... Smite!" The bolt struck one of the creatures and exploded in a cloud of frost. However, the creature was unharmed. "Divine Fire!" Nioca yelped, a note of panic entering his voice. Several creatures went up, but were undamaged. "Cloud of Blades!" Nioca now screamed, as the creatures came dangerously close. The creatures were enveloped in a vortex of blades, but were unphased. As one of the creatures leaped at him, Nioca cried out in desperation, "Control Foes!"

The creature that leapt at him bounced off harmlessly. The rest of them froze in spot. Then, in unison, they all turned on Vergil and started scuttling after him. "Oh no. This is not good!" Vergil yelped as the creatures attacked him. Nioca ran off.

"Look out!" Jewels screamed at w-dueck. He had been battling a shade when a second one came up behind him. Jewels rushed to fight off the ambushing shade while w-dueck parried a claw from the one he had been fighting. Sensing the imminent attack, the ambushing shade whirled on Jewels, the claws on it's ethereal fingertips lashing into her torso. Jewels stumbled and fell backwards, bleeding severely. As w-dueck attempted to blast the ambushing shade back to the nether realms, the first shade slashed into him. w-dueck attempted to ward off further attacks, but the ambushing shade then ripped right through w-dueck's chest, shredding the front of his robes and staining them red. The ambushing shade then ran off, but the first one pounced, slashing w-dueck across the face. w-dueck fell prone, and then struggled to get up. The shade stood over him, then raised it's arm and plunged it down to sink the claws deep within w-dueck's back.

But the blow never came. Just as the shade came close to skewering w-dueck, a purple ray of light flew from out of nowhere and annihilated the shade. Jewels struggled over to w-dueck, hoping to heal him. However, someone arrived first. "No... not you. Get away!" Jewels struggled to her feet to face the person who had just shown up.

"Jewels, I'm here to help!" Nioca shouted, hands in the air, with the shade named Aryll hovering behind him.

The shade that Nioca had sent out on the special mission returned, and dropped something at Nioca's feet. "Finally. A bit of good news. Now, go and finish that buffoon Vergil. The last thing I need is him popping up again when we least need it. As for me," Nioca said, picking up the object the shade had dropped. "I think I need to get acquainted with the Admin Tower."

w-dueck's bloodstained set of Administration keys jingled menacingly.

Regroup

By Robsta - Sep 18 2008

Robsta looked around. He had been able to take on the three shades that attacked him, but he saw others not faring as well. Vergil was frantically trying to get a number of disgusting white creatures off him, w-dueck had somehow allowed shades to get close to him and distract him from spell casting. Jewels was helping w-dueck, so Robsta ran over to Vergil. He tried a number of things, but couldn't seem to harm the creatures attacking him.

Frustrated, Robsta left Vergil to help w-dueck. He might not be able to remove the creatures, but an admin's magic might be able to. w-dueck was down. Jewels was wounded and confused and

Nioca crouched over Will's body, apparently healing him. Abruptly, Nioca stood up, holding a key ring. Robsta, not trusting Nioca, rushed at him, only stopping to engage his large shade bodyguard.

"Stop!" Nioca pleaded, "We don't have time to fight each other. We have to heal w-dueck and stop Nioca." Now Robsta was confused also. He switched over to defensive fighting. "What do you mean we have to heal w-dueck. **Your** shade just incapacitated him."

"It wasn't my shade it was Nioca's" "You **are** Nioca." "The other Nioca, the evil Nioca summoned those shades."

By this time, Aryll had stopped attacking Robsta, so they stood, wearily eying each other. Jewels had healed herself, and was trying to naturalize the effect of the box on Vergil. She wasn't having much success getting them off him, but it appeared that she had been able to slow their effect on him.

Barking of wolves was heard and a shade floated into the room sword pointed at Vergil. Aryll helped Robsta as they tore into it with deadly efficiency. It wasn't expecting them and was quickly overcome. Another event happened to further Robsta's trust in this Nioca, w-dueck was able to get up and fully naturalise the creatures on Vergil. Vergil, freed from the agony, managed to take control of the box and recall the creatures.

Nioca didn't have time to get acquainted with the others before a pack of wolves, guided by the scent of blood, found them. The wolves didn't come alone, they came leading goblins, with a few larger beasts in their ranks.

Thinking quickly Jewels pointed her finger and a large field of magical energy separated them from the wolves. A couple wolves jumped at it, but jumped back yelping in pain. "We can't survive in here long, let's get out of here." Jewels suggested, gesturing to a nearby doorway. "Nioca should also explain himself when we get a chance."

They sped towards the doorway.

What in the Blue Blazes?!

By Jewels - Sep 19 2008

The group gathered together uneasily, but Vergil staggered holding his head. "Are you alright?" Robsta asked.

Vergil attempted to communicate but he started babbling nonsense. "Head... cracked," he finally managed. Will and Robsta steadied Vergil between themselves.

Nioca stepped forward "Unshackle Mind!" Vergil looked at him with eyes narrowed but shouted only more nonsense. Nioca sighed, "If that doesn't work, I don't know what will."

"We need to get him someplace safe," Jewels said picking up the butterfly box. "I... I think I can help him but only if undisturbed. My office isn't far but we need to get out of here first."

"No problem," Robsta remarked sarcastically, "All we have to do is get by a few more dozen beasts that want to eat us."

Nioca spoke up, "It doesn't need to be that hard." He set to work casting Mass Sanctuary then instructed, "Now, everyone against the wall. When we get there, Jewels, bring down the barrier." Everyone was still a bit wary, but they followed through. They'd have to get through the monsters one way or another anyway.

When the barrier went down, the wolves and goblins started pouring in. Sniffing the air they soon headed for the smell of blood where Will and Jewels had been attacked. "Stay to the wall," Nioca whispered. "Move towards the door as quickly as you can. This spell won't last that long." They all ambled for the door following Nioca. He stopped only once seeming to disarm an unseen trap.

Everyone reached the door without incident and they slid out silently. Once everyone was through, Nioca started writing some scrip to place at the door. "RUN," he stated when he was done. "That should keep them inside, and dispatch any that try to come out."

"I really need to get to the Admin tower," said Will "We can not only track the other Nioca from there but I can also 'take care of him' if you know what I mean."

"I should go with you," Nioca suggested, "so you don't get us mixed up."

Robsta spoke up. "I should go with you, too. In case you have trouble on the way."

"Very well," Will resigned. "Jewels, you said you can help Vergil. Can you get him to your office from here?"

"Yeah, I think so. It's right over there." Jewels pointed at a near by door and started taking Will's place at Vergil's side. "As long as he can walk we can make it."

Vergil tried to speak again but Jewels couldn't make out anything other than 'pancake' which made no sense at all. "Come on, Vergil, we have to hurry."

Will, Nioca, and Robsta took off at a good clip toward the Admin tower as Vergil and Jewels ambled to her office. Once in, Jewels locked the door and breathed a sigh of relief that the other Nioca wasn't here. She set the butterfly box down on her desk so she could hold on to Vergil better then took some deep breaths.

"I can do this," she whispered to herself. Jewels closed her eyes, "I can do this. Breathe, breathe, concentrate... *I can do this.* Her eyes snapped open burning with red-orange flame.*"TELEPORT!"*

Vertigo sent Jewels stumbling to the floor with Vergil in hand. But the floor was now made of flame... she had done it! She marveled again at the flame of her fingertips for a moment before turning to check on Vergil. She was surprised to find him also embodied in flame, only blue. Jewels had seen him use the blue flame in their last battle, but she didn't expect it to be intrinsic. She was fascinated but managed to tear her eyes away when an angry voice filled her ears.

"Why are you here, and with *him*?" It was her father, Cinaed, and it wasn't hard to see the displeasure in his eyes. They blazed bright white. "Have you forgotten already that you're not supposed to *tell* anyone who you are? Let alone *show* them."

"I... I'm sorry. I... I didn't know where else to go," Jewels stammered. "I thought you might be able to help him." She saw her father's eyes soften a bit.

"Help? Why does he need help?" As if on cue, Vergil spouted out a bout of gibberish. "So, I see... Bring him then." Cinaed started walking briskly away.

Jewels tried to help Vergil up but he resisted. He seemed to struggle away from her. "Come on, Vergil," she urged, "we have to follow him." Eventually she managed to get him to go with her and they stumbled through the halls of fire.

When Cinaed stopped, he turned to Jewels and easily took Vergil from her. "Now daughter, you must leave us while I work. Do not come in until I call for you."

"Yes, father." Jewels left the room and closed the thick door of fire behind her. There was nothing left to do but wait.

Time passed differently here but Jewels was sure she had been waiting for close to a day without so much as a peep from the other side of the door. She paced relentlessly and felt exhausted but she wouldn't allow herself to relax.

An eternity ticked away and Jewels had finally given in to her fatigue. She sat on the floor, eyes closed, head leaning against the wall. Sudden harshly raised voices brought her to attention. Someone was yelling... no screaming, in the room where Vergil and her father were supposed to be.

Without hesitation, Jewels jumped up and ran in.

"...I will do no such thing!" Vergil was standing tall face to face with her father, a defiant look on his blue blazing face.

"You will do what ever I tell you to, Vergil!" Cinaed yelled back.

Jewels couldn't help but interrupt loudly. "You *know* him, Daddy?"

They both glared at her, noticing her for the first time.

"Jewels," her father roared, "I told you not to come in here!"

"Wait a minute..." Vergil interrupted, turning his gaze to Cinead. "Daddy?"

Family Matters

By Vergil - Sep 20 2008

Vergil stared with amazement at Cinead. "Daddy?" Vergil chuckled. "Oh, Cinead.....Trying to branch the family out in two ways?"

Jewels interrupted "Wait a minute." She turned to Vergil "What do you mean by expanding the family?" Vergil put on a forced smile "Oh, that's just like you Cinead, you want the BOY to branch out. Hoping that Jewels would smitten an Air elemental?"

Jewels eyes widened "Daddy, what is he talking about?!"

Cinead roared and ignored Jewels"You ran off when you where young and left me to do all of the responsibilities here, while you delivered pizza and other ***Useless*** things!"

Vergil said nothing, just took Yamato 2 inches above the sheath with a quick motion and snapped it back. Cinead's hand fell off. "Useless? Young? I was 258 years old. I think I can launch. Especially when you had another child, never would assume that it would be her though. But you had to give her the attention, so I think I had the right. After all, wasn't her mother prettier? Never really had a fancy for Ice elementals, eh?"

Cinead stared at Vergil while reattaching his hand "I had to nurture Jewels, and your mother was unpredictable." He scowled " And if you mean that joining the Bluebloods was a smart idea, you are a fool." Vergil stared coldly at Cinead. "Need I take off your head?" Cinead gave Vergil a look "With my keepsake sword?" Vergil smiled brightly and pulled out a bleu box.

"I can use this...A butterfly box." Cinead eyes grew wide and he boomed "YOU MADE THE FORBIDDEN WEAPON?!?!?!?!?" Vergil looked unconcerned and murmured "Guess I should tell you about Bun-Bun."

Cinead sighed "Why can't you just marry Mairleoad and go to war. The elementals could use you, after you have children you can inherit my empire. Whats the problem in that?" Vergil curled his lip "I don't care for her any more than she cares for me. And as for the war..." Vergil chuckled "Yes the elementals could USE me! And right after, discard me."

Jewels finally intervened "What is going on!!!" Vergil just kept on staring at Cinead "I leave it up to you to tell her. Bye, bye now." Vergil let loose a blood-curtling scream. Blue fire danced around him and skin turned into flame. His eyes grew bigger and Yamato now completely open with the sapphire blade glowing. He was a humanoid of flame. Vergil screamed and burst out the door on blue wings. Jewels grasped at him. "Wait, Vergil!" Vergil turned around "Welcome to the truth, Sister." And then he disappeared.

Should be Easy

By Nioca - Sep 21 2008

w-dueck burst into the Moderator forum, closely followed by Nioca, Aryll, and Robsta. "Alright, now it should be a simple matter of locating the second Nioca, locking him inside whatever forum he's located in, and then purging the forum." w-dueck stepped in front of a large steel door, and started rooting around in his tattered robes. "Normally, I'd use the Banhammer, but it could have adverse ef- where'd my keys go?! I could have sworn I had them on me..." w-dueck started rifling through the desks and drawers in the Moderation forum. Nioca joined him, whilst Aryll stood guard by the door into the Mod Forum. Robsta looked about idly, then approached the steel door. "I could bash it down."

"You can't bash down the Admin door, Robsta." w-dueck said. He shifted through a stack of papers. "Okay, so the key isn't here."

"Could you have dropped it in the BoA Forum?" Nioca asked.

"Guys..." Robsta said, examining the Admin door.

"Oh, I hope not." w-dueck said.

"Guys!" Robsta shouted.

"What?" Nioca said, looking in Robsta's direction. He then saw what Robsta was trying to show them. "Looks like a certain someone beat us to the Admin Tower." Nioca said grimly; Robsta had gently pushed the door ajar. "We need to move, fast!" Nioca said, drawing his blade. Nioca charged up the staircase revealed by the door, with the rest in hot pursuit.

Learn

By Jewels - Sep 22 2008

Jewels sat in her office holding her head. Her mind had been left reeling from the rather lengthy conversation she had just had with her father. The war, the war she was expected to join after procreating, *who* she was expected to procreate with and how soon, the truth about her mother... She just couldn't think about it all. And Vergil... *Vergil was her brother*! She couldn't help but smile and still a tear rolled down her cheek. The revelation was all too bittersweet. So much time had passed without her knowing and now she had no idea where he was or even how to approach him... or if she should.

It seemed like she had been gone for days but her watch said only minutes had passed. This was not the time to be a basket case. She couldn't afford to sit here while everyone else was still in danger. Jewels pulled herself together and emptied herself of her torrent of emotions. As a test

she made a couple of fireballs in her palms with the snap of her fingers then let them dissipate. At least she had learned something she could use now. Jewels left her office with a purposeful gait. She was going to the Administration Tower.

Bye-Bye BoA

By Nioca - Sep 23 2008

Nioca examined the display carefully. It showed a bird's-eye view of the entirety of Calamity Refuge. Then, carefully, he reached for it and touched the BoA Forum on the display. It zoomed in, and showed a mind-boggling array of schematics. Several options also came up. Reaching out, he then touched the option labeled "**DEMOLISH**".

A prompt came up. "**Are you sure you want to do this?**" Nioca then pressed "**YES**".

"It's been a blast, w-dueck." Nioca said, smiling.

The runes etched into the top of the Admin Tower took on a violent red hue. Suddenly, the runes discharged a massive red ball of energy, like a miniature red sun. The entirety of Calamity Refuge was tinted violently red as the bolt flew into the sky, leaving a trail of gigantic red sparks behind it, like the tail of a comet. Then it arced back towards the ground, and slammed into the BoA Forum.

An ear-splitting explosion rocked Calamity Refuge. The BoA Forum was instantly consumed in the violent red fires of the explosion, debris blasting out with such force that it punched through the walls of the other nearby forums like bullets. The blast wave then washed against the other forums and the Admin tower, gently searing them and breaking most of their windows. Massive clouds of dust and smoke rose from the crater of burning rubble of the BoA forum. Nothing that had been within the BoA Forum had survived.

Nioca picked himself up off the floor. He knew that whatever leveled the forums would be powerful, but he had no idea it was that explosive. w-dueck apparently had a thing for the theatrical. Still, it had done the job excellently. The display now showed naught but wreckage. With w-dueck and the others out of the way, it was a mere matter of blowing the entire place sky-high. But this wasn't the place to do it. Exiting the room and re-entering the spiral staircase from the 23rd Floor, he then ran up the stairs, hoping to find a primary control for the entire forum. One from which he could destroy the entire island.

Where's Nioca

By Robsta - Sep 23 2008

Robsta hesitated as the others raced by. He was about to enter the restricted sections of the forums. He shrugged, sometimes called for different rules. He ran in after them. "We have to find Nioca and stop him." w-dueck was saying as they searched the second floor. "I don't know what he plans, but it can't be good for any of us. Nioca, what would you do if you were evil and had access to the admin tower?"

As if on cue, a huge explosion shook the forum. Robsta, who happened to be near a window stood agog at the destructive force unleashed on the BoA forum. "The Blades forum. Avernum it's ... How?" Stammered the Warrior. Immediately w-dueck knew what had been unleashed.

"'I know where he is. He can destroy the entire forum in a matter of five minutes; we have to get there before he can demolish the place." w-dueck commanded, followed quickly by a major haste incantation. "Follow me" With redoubled speed they raced up the stairs.

Popsicle

By Jewels - Sep 24 2008

Jewels rolled over gingerly and groaned. She vaguely remembered some sort of beam coming out of the Admin Tower to blow up the BoA Forum. The blast had picked her up and sent her flying into the wall of another forum building. *Everything* hurt.

As she set to work removing a frighteningly large piece of shrapnel from her left thigh she mused to herself. "I sure hope that wasn't Will's solution to the wolf and goblin problem... cause if it was, I'm gonna kill him! No way I'm cleaning *this* up." Gritting her teeth, Jewels struggled to remove another piece of wood that had lodged itself in her side. She gasped in pain when it finally came free and had to lie still to catch her breath. At least she was an admin now. The pain subsided quickly as she muttered one healing spell and then a second. She was a bit drained now and her dress was ruined but she was no worse for wear. "That beam came from the Admin tower so I'm probably headed in the right direction." Jewels sprinted the last bit to the door feeling really warm from the exertion. "I want a popsicle," she said out of the blue to herself. "A big double cherry popsicle. When this is over, I'm gonna sit down and relax and have me a popsicle." Satisfied with her planned self indulgence, Jewels slipped inside.

Ice Water

By Vergil - Sep 25 2008

Vergil was just depressed now. He felt bad for the way he treated Jewels. But he knew where he could find refuge in the flame-lit streets. Looking at a sign Vergil found a list of buildings in the area, one of them read: *Paul's Plushy Pub. Perfect* Vergil thought.

Stepping into the bar, Vergil took a seat at a on-fire stool. Paul came around cleaning a mug. After a second or two, he muffled out a "Hey Vergil, what can I get ya?" Vergil held his head in his hand and said "Ice Water." The bartender's eyes widened. "Vergil man, thats powerful stuff! Especially to a fire elemental! Can't I just get you a normal glass of molten rock?" Vergil shook his head, then stared at him, eyes boring a hole in his skull "Half-Fire elemental, Half-Ice." The bartender's face screwed up "Alright."

After sitting in the bar for awhile Vergil noticed someone only a few tables down. It was Shireran. Half sliding, half tripping, Vergil came over to Shireran. "Hay, 'ere Shireran. How things going for you?" Shireran turned, his eyes sockets of flame "I'm preeeeety good right now. You seem fine," He chuckled "Or, at least you are when you aren't leaking lava out of you, you always melted too much." Vergil turned to Shireran "Aw, your just too much of a wuss, that's why you don't drink." Shireran cocked an eyebrow "Vergil are you asking for a drinking contest?" Vergil just grinned and yelled "Bartender, get us some melts!" Paul sighed but took out the bottles.

*Five **very** drunken hours later.....*

Vergil and Shireran were dancing on tables signing "*Ooooooh.... Yer mother was a rock element in the head, yer father was a scoundrel who Air elementals he did bed! Your sister was a tower standing higher than all, until that little water made her come down in fall! Your brother was a sea-sucker, although he never learned how to swim, your ugly fat uncle tore himself limb to limb! Your crazy grandfather went to war, although the only thing got out of it was a [CENSORED]! Your Great Uncle was a content with farms, until he realized in could make a killing in soprano, just had to cut off his Lucky Charms!* Paul was conflicted. On one hand, Vergil and his friend were increasing the enthusiasm in the pub, yet they where scaring customers too. And the singing was harsh. Out of respect for Vergil, he threw them out. Vergil rebounded on the street. He felt two sharp objects insert into his chest. "Aw ghese, stupid stilettos." Vergil was happy, despite the fact that he was crap-faced, alone, and he needed to get back to help Calamity Refuge. "Let Nioca get eated by Bun-Bun....." Vergil muttered.

A Plan

By Sylae - Sep 27 2008

w-dueck halted his run up the stairs, and staggered forward as the other members piled into him. "Hold on. Why are we heading up there? We can't get into any of the rooms without keys, which Nioca..." his vioce trailed off as he thought, "Second floor. Quick. My backup security won't hold out for long if Nioca is going where I think he is."

Nioca tested another key, and the door swung open, revealing a dark stone hallway barely a yard in length, at the end of which stood another door. "This has to be some sort of trap," Nioca thought to himself. "Who in their right mind would make such a room?" He took a step forward, and the hallway doubled in length.

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w-dueck rifled through a desk on the second floor of the Tower, where the Administrative Discussion Board stood. "Here we go," he said to himself and tossed a large scroll to Robsta, then tossed another to Nioca and Aryll, "We'll have to split up. Rob, I need you to head down to the bottom of the Tower, past the Dump and everything else. The scroll says what to do when you get there. It will disable all of the Refuge security for a short time, and allow us access into the Upper Sanctums of the Tower. Nioca, you will know when to use that scroll. Head with Rob for now. I will head over to the 23rd and deal with this." He stroked this staff and turned around. Jewels stood in the doorway to the board, "What about me?" she asked.

"You're coming with me. We will need as much Admin power as possible to stop Nioca. That includes Vergil. How is he doing?"

Ideal Den for Thieves

By Jewels - Sep 29 2008

Jewels watched as Nioca and Robsta hurried away. "Vergil?" Jewels hesitated trying to think of what to say. "Vergil is, uh," she stammered. "He's, uh... He's, well..."

"He's right here," a loud voice interrupted her. Jewels shot around to see Vergil standing in the doorway, "and doing very well... Thanksh to Jewels," he added with slightly slurred speech and giving her a wink.

Jewels laughed nervously as she hurried over to him. There was a smell wafting from him that she couldn't quite place, but made her ill at ease none-the-less. "Vergil!" Jewels spoke overtly loud to make sure Will heard her. "There you are... uh, are you sure you feel up to this?" Then in a hushed and harsh tone to Vergil, "What happened? What have you been up to?"

"Relax, I'm fine. Fit as a fiddle," he answered taking a few purposeful but unsteady strides towards w-dueck, which made Jewels feel anything but relaxed. "I've never felt better, really."

There wasn't anything for Jewels to do but trust he could handle himself but she whispered to Will anyhow. "He may be a little woozy from the mind restoration, and all that, but he's pretty much back to normal... Well, as normal as Vergil can be, anyway." Will eyed Vergil warily so Jewels attempted to change the subject. "Twenty-third floor, you said? What do we need to do there?"

Reminded of the task at hand Will started for the stairwell and motioned for them to follow as he answered. "That's where the panel for demolishing the other forums is, so that has to be the place where Nioca was last." Jewels felt a little better knowing that Will wasn't the one who had destroyed the forum, but was a little taken back that the Nioca that wanted to kill them all somehow had access to the Administration Panels. She wanted to ask him how that happened but Will's urgency held her tongue. She'd broach the subject later. "He may not know that we weren't in the forum when it was destroyed which gives us an advantage but we must hurry. There's no telling what he might be up to now..." his voice trailed off.

"Give it to us straight," Vergil voiced following the other two up the stairs, "What's the worst case scenario?"

Will stopped his assent briefly to look them both in the eyes. "No more Calamity Refuge Island."

"What!!?" Jewels hissed after him as he started to climb again. "Why would you even have that option?"

"It's my island," he shouted back, "if the place comes to ruin in the future, I'm not just gonna abandon it for anybody to use. That just wouldn't feel right..."

"Yeah," Vergil cut in between labored breaths from the climb, "but now some crazy bastard has the ability to just waltz in and do it for you! How did he get into the Admin Tower, anyway?"

Will shook his head and quickened his pace. Frustration in his voice he hollered back, "He stole my keys, alright?"

Vergil paused a moment before letting out a great big belly laugh. He had to slow his climb to catch his breath. "Stole your keys? *Stole your keys!* Ha, ha, ha! The fate of the refuge hangs by a thread all because you've been pickpocketed?!!"

Jewels glared back at him, "Vergil, that's enough!"

He wouldn't be stopped that easily, though. Waving her off Vergil continued his brash jeering. "Might as well just put up a big sign saying *'Ideal den for thieves.'* We'd be just as safe if you'd handed out a set to every Tom, Dick, and Harry that walked into the joint. Ever hear of retina scanners?"

"Vergil!!" Jewels shouted turning around to stare at him with fiery eyes. Lowering her voice she seethed slowly, "Now is not the time." He rolled his eyes at her but stopped his tirade. She turned back to w-dueck, "Sorry, Will."

"Don't worry about it, Jewels. At least we know he's back to normal. Come on, we have ten more floors to go." Will started climbing again.

Vergil made a face at the floor number hanging on the wall then muttered, "How about an elevator? Would it have killed you to put in an elevator?"

"If I had my keys, we could have used the teleportation pad," Will replied then smirked to himself. "I prefer getting the exercise though, don't you?" Vergil muttered something else the other two couldn't hear. "We don't really have to worry about Nioca blowing up the entire island, yet, anyway. I still have the key he'd need to do it with. I'm not entirely incompetent when it comes to design." Before the others could ask about it, Will sprinted up the last flights of stairs. He waited at the door to the 23rd floor for the others to catch up. Carefully he checked the door knob and found that Nioca had left it unlocked. "Shhh, now. Nioca should be in here and we want to catch him by surprise." Jewels and Vergil were panting but nodded. "Ready your spells."

The orb on Will's staff started to glow. Vergil gained one wicked grin as his palms burst into bright blue flame. And Jewels cast *"Group Haste!"* Will threw open the door and the trio ran in...

Nioca hadn't been able to get anywhere on the 25th floor, so he had started back down the stairwell again. Echoing voices made him stop in his tracks. Will's words resonated in his mind. *"I still have the key he'd need to do it with..."*

Nioca's Demise

By Robsta - Oct 7 2008

He had hardly a clue of what he was doing. He'd not been to the dump since the refuge moved, and everything had been rebuilt since then. Back then, it wasn't in the admin tower, but now, he found himself in the second basement of the admin tower, finding his way through the empty walls, waiting to be filled with discarded posts. Why Couldn't w-dueck have the spiral staircase that connected the other floors to continue downwards through the basements? To make things worse, he had no map, and had to search for the staircase manually. At least he had Nioca to help search, they had split up to search faster, Sound travelled quickly and far down here, as there was little interference. He spotted something on one of the walls. A post. The dump had been built to be able to hold the accumulated needs for a long history of the refuge. So far this history has not accumulated yet, so the dump was fairly empty, seeing something other than bare wall tweaked his interest. He strode over to take a closer look - it was his post. A post he made a long time ago. Taking it off the wall he paused to read it. He was about to put it back on the wall when he

noticed a bump in the cement. w-dueck had build this with magic, perfectly, there should be no bumps in the wall. Using Stonechrusher's hilt he chipped at the bump and withdrew a document. It was hefty, and he had no time to read it right now, he had a job to do. He heard Nioca calling that the staircase was found. Shoving the document into his bag, he hurried off to finish his task.

Nioca knew he had not the strength to fight three admins, especially if they were prepared for him. He also knew w-dueck had the key he needed to eradicate them. His only chance was to hope the admins make a mistake that he could capitalise on. He crept back down the stairs, invisible and careful, below him w-dueck, Jewels and Vergil were preparing to rush through a door.

Vergil. The man was impossible. She didn't know whether to scold him for his insolence, or worry because he thought himself invincible. She had seen him die twice and go insane in a matter of days, or less than days, she had been sent backwards in time. Did he know how venerable he was? Was he tempting death? No time right now, she had a duty. Quietly she cast group haste on her companions and they burst through the door.

There was no one in the room. This was the room for forum demolition. The door was unlocked, he never left the door unlocked. Nioca must have been here. This high in the tower, he had installed a room that spanned the whole floor and was fairly empty. The machines for demolition were at the far end, a couple feeble security measures in the middle, and not much else.

Vergil sensed something wrong. Nioca wasn't where he should be, w-dueck was puzzled and he felt like ... like he was being watched. A small orb rolled into the room and self ignited. Spinning he barely managed to see Nioca before he slammed and locked the door. The flames grew from the orb, even though there was no flammable material around. Quickly the fire grew into a front of flame, closing in on the admins, barring them from the locked door. "even if we survive the fire, we couldn't break down that door until Robsta disables the security." He heard w-dueck warn. Laughing he stepped forward, fire was no enemy to him.

Robsta had found the staircase through the maze of empty cells. With Nioca he ventured down to the fourth basement. This basement was considerably smaller than the others, for it consisted entirely of the control room to some sort of magical device w-dueck had created. There was no stairs going further down. This must be the master control panel he was supposed to use. Quickly he skimmed the scroll w-dueck had given him, handed it to Nioca, and started pressing buttons. Nioca, somewhat lost for a purpose, helped him by giving him instructions whenever he forgot what to do. This turned out to be a fairly common scenario, as the instructions weren't very clear and Robsta had only skimmed them. With a satisfying beep all the cell doors could be heard swing open in the basement above. Apparently w-dueck had hooked up the cells to the emergency security release system. A roar from above also suggested that the cells might not have all been empty. After a quick peek up the stairs, Robsta decided he couldn't defeat the

creature above, and he could feel the effects of the haste spell wear off. Back in the control room Nioca barred the door and he looked for anything that might help him. His list of resources was short. Stonecrusher and Crusader, deadly blades in the hands of deadly people, but they would not be enough. A scroll from w-dueck for turning off the security, useless. A scroll from w-dueck that Nioca would know to use when he needed to ... who knows, but that was Nioca's business. Some ink, black paper and a document found in the dump. Nioca started to read his scroll, Robsta looked at the document one more time.

One thing Nioca was sure about was that he had trapped the admins for good, w-dueck had made this tower so powerfully, even he could not get through the doors. Now all that remained was to wait for them to die and to take the key from the arch mage's dead body. In the mean time he could try to find the controls for the demolition or he could search for Robsta and his clone and eradicate them while he waited. He had gone back to the 25th floor, but this time the yard long room didn't expand. Strange, he thought, but went in anyways. The master controls for island demolition were across the room, and the force field generators around them were inactive. All that was in the way were a couple of shelves holding wooden chests. Ignoring them he rushed by, and managed to knock one off the shelf. The room turned green. Then it turned red. Colours flashed as theme orbs bounced around the room. Trying to ignore the colours, Nioca staggered towards the control panel to end the island once and for all. Through the flashing lights, he spotted a big red button. "typical" Nioca muttered, "w-dueck always seems to take the cliché way out". The tower rumbled and Nioca was thrown to the floor.

Curse Vergil, Robsta thought. He could have made this ultimatum more comprehensible. All this paperwork, all these lines that he had to fill in. He didn't know what most of them did. Trying to ignore the flashing colours, he wished once again he had searched the dump for instructions for this incomprehensible document. Target: _____ It asked - um, is that looking for a name or a place. To be safe he wrote in both, admin tower, Nioca. The admin tower shook, Nioca started sinking in a puddle of beefpotatoes. Nioca finished reading the scroll and began rising again. The puddle disappeared. Nioca was unharmed. The flashing wall stopped, it looked like they were changing, turning organic. Robsta gulped. Maybe he had accidentally targeted the admin tower as well. How did the Ultimatum know to which Nioca to target? Did it get it wrong? The distinctive scream of a maniacal genius thwarted. Reassuring, he hated excess unnecessary randomness, but when it was called for, he could tolerate it.

The evil Nioca screamed as he cowered from the unstoppable might of greats amount of Martin Luther King Junior and toilet paper. The fight got finished with a new Halo 3 brand floor cleaner. Evil Nioca was no more.

A Timely Fall

By Nioca - Oct 8 2008

Nioca rushed back up the Admin tower, Robsta in tow. It was all fine and good, Robsta's efforts coming off flawlessly. But it was still up for debate on whether it worked. And Nioca was experiencing something strange... it felt almost like vertigo, or motion sickness. Shaking himself of these feelings, Nioca rushed past the 13th floor plaque, in a sheer adrenaline rush. Robsta was trailing behind somewhat, sorely exhausted from taking the brunt of recent events. Nioca shouted back to him, "Find out what happened to the Administrators! I'll check on my double and make sure he's dead!" Nioca then picked up the pace even further. 18th floor shot past quickly, yet seemingly in slow motion, like one fighting their way up a downward escalator. Nioca felt disoriented further. It was starting to get somewhat harder to breathe and, disturbingly, think straight. The 19th, 20th, and 21st floors shot by like an arrow, but the 22nd seemed to stretch on forever. Finally, after what felt to be eons, Nioca reached the 25th floor.

Drawing Crusader's Protectorate, Nioca opened the door. Inside, a mere hallway with another door. Intrigued, he crossed the hall and opened the other door. Flashes of light illuminated the room as themes bounced around like ping-pong balls. Annoyed at this insult to his vertigo, Nioca glanced around. No sign of the other Nioca in sight, and the tower didn't seem to be on a destruction spree. Not one to be caught off-guard, he closed the door behind him. Then, with a chant, he cast a whirling vortex of blades into the room. However, they found no purchase on an invisible enemy. Breathing a sigh of relief at the torment finally being over, Nioca examined the room more carefully. "Maybe I should request to be an Administrator," he said to himself. It certainly looked interesting. "And the view probably isn't too bad either."

Nioca walked over to a window. It was indeed a dazzling view. He could see the island, the ocean, and other islands around Calamity Island. He could smell the fresh air, filled with grass, sea water, and smoke... "*...smoke?*" Nioca thought to himself. Then he looked straight down. The entire base of the tower was encompassed by massive plumes of fire. But not just any fire; Quickfire. And it was quickly expanding outward and upward. "Great. I don't suppose w-dueck has any suggestions on how to fix that. Speaking of w-dueck... where is he?" Nioca groaned. The vertigo was reaching unbearable levels, and he was becoming severely nauseated. "*Is this how it's going to end? With me dying with my double? I need to find w-dueck... maybe he can help.*" Nioca turned around and stumbled to the door. He just opened it a crack when a massive explosion of Quickfire blew it open. Nioca was sent clean across the room and out the window.

With a thump, he struck the ground heavily. His entire body was in sheer agony, like having been pierced by hundreds of tiny daggers. There was no way he was alive after that. He lay on the ground with his eyes closed tight. He didn't want to know where he was. He didn't want to know what kind of afterlife he'd experience. He didn't want to know whether he was still alive, with Quickfire closing rapidly on him for the final, mocking blow. "*Though I suppose I'll find that out soon enough.*" He mused. He also noticed, with some cynical amusement, that the vertigo was gone.

As if that weren't enough, Nioca felt something collide with his foot. It bolt of agony raced up his leg, but he was too sore and dejected to react. A few moments passed, followed by someone very close saying, "Nioca?"

Curiosity overtook him. He opened his eyes just enough to see Jewels hunched over him. "Nioca, are you okay?"

Nioca groaned in response. "*You fool. Why aren't you running? Why... wait... where **am** I?*" Nioca took a brief glance at the ceiling, finding it too hard to focus on anything. "I... I... I don't know." Nioca stammered, confused. "*The island doesn't have a ceiling...*" Nioca thought sluggishly.

Jewels spoke again, this time in a reassuring voice. "Don't worry, Nioca, I'm not going anywhere... Let's get you someplace safe." With that, he suddenly felt himself getting dragged somewhere. Nioca still couldn't tell where, but he figured out that there were at one point stairs underneath him. Jewels then stopped dragging him, and for a moment, all was quiet. Then, he felt a burning heat next to him, and groaned. It faded just as quickly as it came. Subconsciously, Nioca brushed a hand against Jewels' hand, for reasons he couldn't fathom.

"Nioca, I have to go get help. You stay here. Don't leave the Mod Center." Jewels stated, starting to get up.

"**NO!**" Nioca suddenly shouted, his hand grabbing ahold of three of her fingers and holding her in place. In that one sentence, everything came crashing into place. This was the BoA Forum. This was several hours ago. This was where he went insane. Nioca's eyes locked onto Jewels' eyes, and he noted fear in them. "Don't... leave..."

"Nioca, I have to get-" Jewels said, starting to panic and attempting to pull away.

"No, don't... go! I... can't... be alone.... Don't... leave me... please!" Nioca pleaded, holding on for dear life. He knew that her presence would be the only thing that kept him from slipping away. "Please... I... need you..."

The energy that accompanied the revelation faded, and Nioca's grip on Jewels hand slipped.

Bun-Bun

By Vergil - Oct 8 2008

Vergil was hastening to the Mod board when he felt the rumble. He felt the shake. He felt the power. He felt...the potatoes. Vergil chuckled "Hope they know how to use it. " Vergil paused for a moment "Hey, wait a minute, I didn't put my Prelude in a cage! w-dueck I swear you are going to to pay for that. Vergil went into an all-out sprint "I gotta find Robsta and Nioca, or Nioca, Gah, whichever one of them." If they say the wrong spell, it could prove very bad."

Robsta charged up the admin tower stairs, reaching the 25th floor. When he burst through the door he found a black man in a suit using a mop as a fork to eat an apparently dead Nioca. The man smiled and said "Hello there, would you care for some..." He looked at a piece of paper. "Nioca?" He smiled again and said "Its very good with toilet paper." Robsta shook his head and declined "Uh, so do you know how to um, *suppress* your master? The black man frowned "Master?" He laughed and said "You cannot suppress master, come out master!" A man in a green-looking armor came into view "See any flood nearby?" *How the hell did Vergil find this crap?* Robsta thought.

Vergil rushed down the Admin tower, panicking. If the Prelude didn't have proper guiding and control, it could do more damage than Nioca. Opening the Dump, Vergil was greetede by a loud roar. "Sheeeeiiit." Vergil took a deep breath and walked towards the room. He found himself looking at a 50-foot black and white furred bunny with red eyes. Another roar, louder than the first time. Vergil sighed "Come on, I beat you fair and square, in your homeland no less! Can't I do a little hunting once in awhile? The bunny growled and opened its mouth, "Vergil you two-timing swine!!! You rightfully owned me for 100 years, then you put me in this coma, to make further use of me?! AND YOU PUT A BINDING CURSE ON ME!?!?!!" Vergil smiled and said "Sometimes tar can taste like a sunset." The rabbit produced another frightful roar. "NO, I WILL NOT USE THAT IDIOTIC LANGUAGE!!" Vergil shrugged and replied "Bien, comment de celui-ci ?" "Tell you what," Vergil said "If I let you back into the abyss, and let the one you slew inherit your body, would you do me a favor and go to Mount Borellis and tell the people there that Alpha Beta Gaga is initiated?" The bunny paused "You would let me back home, after all this time?" Vergil put his hands on his hips "Yep, and I won't hunt you again, in fact, if you don't like some people you know and you have got the molten to support it, I could very well help you...find replacements for your previous job." The Bunny chuckled. "Will all of the power in this bunny stay with it?" Vergil stared at it "Yes" The bunny that gave Vergil a cruel look. "Then how am I to defend myself?!" Vergil twitched "You former power will be returned of course!" The bunny turned around and went into its cell area. "I need to think.....leave me....." Vergil walked out and sped to a run. *"Bun-Bun is taken care of, now I need to find Jewels!"*

When Vergil emerged from the room he found that Quickfire was spreading all over the tower. "Oy Vay, now I am going to combine with Jewels to get rid of the fire!" Vergil headed back to the 23rd floor where he had left Jewels. As Vergil was searching he heard a faint whisper "Vergil?" Vergil whipped around and saw what looked like Jewels with a dead or knocked out w-dueck. "Jewels!" Vergil rushed up and knelt to examine Will. With a sudden grim expression he commented, "He's dying, from the heat. We have to put out this fire.' Vergil closed his eyes and started to murmur, his voice sped up louder and louder. Blue light flashed from his hands and into Will. ""We can do it, but I need your help. He'll be fine for now, I need you to come with me."

Time Heals All Wounds

By Jewels - Oct 9 2008

Jewels stood on the one side of a wall of quickfire. Before she knew it, Vergil had jumped through and disappeared through the other side. There wasn't much time, in a matter of seconds the room would be engulfed. Will started preparing a spell that put up a force barrier in one corner of the room. "Hurry," he shouted, "to the other side!"

Jewels obliged even though she knew it was unnecessary for her. Going through the barrier stung but for the most part caused no harm. The heat in the room was so intense that even on the other side of the barrier, Will started to wince. He leaned against a wall only to pull back in pain. The heat transferred through the wall had severely burned his hand. "I don't think we can last much longer," Will said gasping.

Jewels's survival instincts kicked in on Will's behalf and brought with it some childhood memories. "I can help," Jewels said. "The heat doesn't bother me, I can protect you from it." Will started to ask how but she waved him off. "No time to explain." With that she took a stance in the middle of their tiny corner and started concentrating, but instead of focusing outside of herself, she focused within and started absorbing the heat.

Will noticed the drop in temperature but it wasn't enough. "I'm starting to feel faint. Still... too... hot..." Will's knees buckled. Jewels moved to catch him still absorbing heat, but the process was draining and her energy level forced her to sit with him. She hoped she could keep it up long enough.

After only a few minutes someone burst back into the room. "Vergil?"

"Jewels!" Vergil ran through the barrier and knelt to examine Will. "He's dying from the heat, we have to put out this fire."

"But how?" Jewels asked as Vergil cast a healing spell on Will.

"We can do it, but I need your help. He'll be fine for now, I need you to come with me."

She obediently got up to go back through the barrier. "But I don't know what to do."

"I'll help you." Jewels followed Vergil to the middle of the room and he turned to face her. "Take my hands," he commanded. She did so. "Now, think BIG!"

"What?" Jewels didn't understand.

"You want to put the quickfire out?"

Jewels nodded.

"Then we have to smother it. Our fire has to be bigger than it is."

"OK," she squeaked, "thinking big."

Will had been conscious when he watched Vergil and Jewels walk back through the barrier into the raging fire. The constant crackling ate their words but his eyes strained to make out their profiles standing in the middle of the room. Soon, though, Vergil's figure became a pillar of blue fire, and Jewels became a pillar of red. Time seemed to slow down as he witnessed the spectacle before him. Their individual flames reached to the ceiling then began to swirl together. Within seconds a tornado of brilliant purple fire whipped around them and began to expand exponentially. It seemed so fast, and yet Will could make out such detail as the flames reached out, like fingers, to fill every crevice. It blew threw the room into the stairwell, and shattered windows as it went. The sound of breaking glass was the last thing Will heard before the heat caused him to pass out again.

Jewels knelt by Nioca's now limp form in the BoA Mod Center, uncertainty clouding her mind. She rubbed her temples trying to shake a horrid headache. *Focus,* she chided herself. *Focus on NOW.* She couldn't heal him, she wasn't an admin yet. She had to get help... or did she? Last time she left Nioca he became strong enough to kill Vergil without any help. She had seen it, hadn't she? Or was she just imagining the flash of a blade entering Vergil? Vergil... Vergil was her brother... but how did she know that? Memories of being with her father, twice, flooded her mind. Bringing Vergil to him for help... but when? Jewels strained to remember. Something was missing... Something was not right... Something was different.

One thing was for sure though, she *had* to stay between Vergil and Nioca's blade.

"OK, Nioca," Jewels soothed, "I'll stay. We'll wait for someone to find us here." She kept a running dialogue hoping to keep his conscious with her. "First, Nioca, I'd like to move your sword... to make sure it doesn't, ah... cut you." As gently as she could, Jewels removed Crusader's Protectorate and took it to the closest closet. Nioca seemed to try to resist but didn't have the energy. "I'm putting it right over here for safe keeping, OK? No one's going to take it. It's safe, you're safe... everyone's safe." At least she hoped everyone would be safe.

Jewels returned to Nioca's side and felt herself fall into her motherly routines of caring. She hummed softly as she went to work removing glass from his wounds. She tore a strip of cloth off of her skirt. It was ruined anyway... wasn't it? She looked down to see the rip she had just made as it's only flaw. *Well, it is now,* she sighed to herself as she used the strip to bind his bleeding wounds. When there was nothing left to bind Jewels sat down against the wall next to Nioca and pulled him up to lay on her lap. She clasped both his hands in hers and crossed their arms in front of him effectively enclosing him in her embrace. Jewels told herself she wouldn't let go until she knew Nioca could be trusted again. She rocked gently back and forth as she hummed and set in to wait. Her head throbbed.

Hurry, Vergil... she pleaded to the void, *please hurry.*

Third Time's a Charm

By Nioca - Oct 13 2008

A blurry form was standing over him. Nioca blinked. It was Vergil.

Groaning, Nioca tried to sit up, only to find someone was holding him in place. In a worried voice, someone said, "How are you feeling?"

"Awful." Nioca replied, again trying to sit up. He felt a pair of hands hesitantly let him go. A dull ache wracked his body, but, oddly enough, he didn't seem badly injured. Then, he stood up, and heard someone behind him do the same. He realized that he must have blacked out at some point; the last thing he remembered was grabbing Jewels and keeping her from leaving. Suddenly, he remembered what had happened recently. "What's happening?" he said to Vergil, noting that his voice sounded hollow.

"Other than you deciding to jump through a pane of glass?" Vergil replied with a smile. "I was made an Admin."

"Good for you," Nioca snapped sarcastically. "I'm talking about things of importance. Dying members and such."

"Dying members?" Jewels had walked around to face Nioca. He noted that her face looked sorely worried. "Are you feeling any better?" She said, her tone fearful.

"No, I am not." Nioca snarled, "And I'd appreciate it if you'd actually go do something about our current situation rather than stand around me all day!" His voice ended in a shout.

"Nioca, we're trying to help y-" Jewels yelped. However, she was shoved aside as Vergil stepped toward Nioca so that their faces were inches from each other.

"You act as if I don't have better things to do than heal suicidal mods! You should be grateful!" Vergil yelled.

"Grateful for you getting in my face?!" Nioca shouted back. "I suggest you get out of my face before I remove yours!" Nioca instinctively started his hand toward Crusader's Protectorate. It was too much; everything that had happened over the last several hours was pressing the limits of his sanity. Violent urges wracked him; Vergil was an enemy, Jewels was an enemy... everyone was an enemy.

"No!" Jewels shouted, throwing herself towards Nioca and placing herself between him and Vergil. "Please! Calm down!"

Nioca stared coldly at Jewels for several moments. At first, he considered shoving her out of the way, but the look on her face, one of fear mingled with determination, held him back... a modicum of sanity returned. What was he doing? Attacking two people who were only trying to help? The impulses of hatred and paranoia sank to the back of his mind as a calm demeanor reestablished itself. Ashamed, but not willing to let his momentary slip show, he turned away from them both. "I..." He began hesitantly, his voice low. "I need sleep. Jewels," he said, turning

back around to face her. "Would you mind accompanying me to my citadel?" Jewels shook her head, relieved at the change. "Vergil, tell Will that I'll need to talk to all three admins after I rest. It's important."

Vergil scoffed. "There's only two admins!"

"No, there are three. You, Will, and Jewels." Nioca replied, confused. Vergil walked away, shaking his head.

Nioca and Jewels walked toward an unfinished structure. It looked like the ground floor was complete, made of gray stone. However, the upper levels were naught but scaffolding. Nioca stepped through the entrance doorway (there wasn't a door yet), leaning partially on Jewels. They wended their way through multiple empty chambers, eventually stopping at the only room with a door on it. Nioca opened the door. Inside were a set of furnished bedchambers. Nioca stepped inside and collapsed face-first on the bed. "Jewels," Nioca said, slightly muffled. "Thank you."

Jewels smiled slightly and exited, closing the door on her way out.

JEWELS!!! III: This Time For Sure

By Jewels - Oct 13 2008

Jewels walked towards the Admin tower smiling. Nioca seemed all right, Vergil was alive... Now if only she could shake this horrible headache, everything would be right in the world. She had to find Will. He'd be back to wanting to make her an admin. Jewels had been startled that Nioca had known that she was to be an admin, but time and space were funny things. She supposed they could do funny things to one's memory when messed with. *Speaking of memory...* Jewels thought as she walked, *where does finding out Vergil is my brother fit into mine?* She ran over the events in her mind.

First she found Nioca, left him to get Will, came back to find Vergil dead, switched places with him, and her father sent her back in time. Then... Jewels struggled to remember between the throbbing daggers that wracked her head. Then she teleported Vergil down to her father for help... *But that doesn't make sense. What happened in between?* The flash of Crusader's Protectorate through Vergil's body came back to her mind. And her dress... Jewels's hand instinctively went to her side. *There was a hole in my dress.* Failing to remember why she moved on with what she did know. Finally I stayed with Nioca when I found him and took him to his room when he was healed.

There could only be one conclusion. She was missing memories. Memories that led to another shift back in time? Time and space were definitely funny things.

"JEWELS!!!!" The yell broke her from her thoughts as she saw Will running towards her. "Jewels, I need to talk to you."

"I'd love to be an admin," she responded before he had asked making him look questioningly at her.

"How did you kno..."

"Just go ahead and hit me with the stick. My head is pounding already so another whack isn't going to matter much." Will was obviously confused, and he rubbed his own temple amid a slight grimace of pain. "Please just get it over with."

"OK, then," Will obliged. Jewels could barely tell the difference in the pain.

"Now," she barked with impatience, "I want floor 29... I get a whole floor right?" she continued without his acknowledgment. "I need to lie down, please take me there, now. Anything else you want to discuss will have to wait."

Will was back to rubbing his own head and looked like he wanted to say something. After a moment of thinking he responded. "Yes... of course... I... I think I need to lie down, too. A rest would be good for both of us. Right this way."

Jewels let Will lead her into the admin tower. He turned right and came to a locked room. He brought out his keys and paused to look at them thoughtfully before rummaging through them for the right one. Inside the room was a portal with buttons along the side. He pressed the one labeled 29 and indicated for her to walk through. On the other side Will opened the door into a lavishly furnished penthouse. "I'll make you a set of keys as soon as I can. Until then, I'll leave your portal door unlocked. They are only locked on the outside so you'll be able to get out once you're in. Any other floor will automatically lock behind you, though, so you'll probably only want to go back to the first floor unless you like taking the stairs.

Just the mention of the word 'stairs' sent Jewels's head throbbing again. "No," she managed, "no I don't think I'll take the stairs. Thank you," she smiled weakly at him, "for being a gracious host to a not so gracious guest." Will nodded and after a brief pause took his leave.

It took only minutes to find the bedroom and even less time for Jewels to fall sound asleep.

With Fear in Mine

By Robsta - Oct 14 2008

It had been a long time since he had been to the BoA Board. True the aura around the building didn't give off any sign of new posts, but he thought he'd dip in anyways. Nearing the building, something struck him as being wrong, really wrong. There was a broken window on the second floor and near it the front door was destroyed. Robsta quickened his pace.

Something was wrong, but something was also familiar with all of this. He had done this before ... many times. No, it was impossible. He had always been to the forum when there were new posts, and no windows were ever broken before.

Robsta inched towards the door, Stonecrusher loosened in it's scabbard. Inside Vergil was bent over Nioca. A flash, Vergil crumpled over. Robsta blinked, Vergil was fine. Jewels was there, no one was hurt. Everything was going to be all right. Why did he have a feeling of impending doom? He looked again. There was blood on the ground.

Blood! He had thought as much, death and destruction would dominate the next day. No, never, it's impossible. Nothing like that has ever happened before. w-dueck, Jewels, Nioca, Vergil, they might be capable of destruction, but they would never unleash it without a good reason. Never, Never. Why did he feel a pang of doubt?

Someone was coming. Robsta pressed himself against the wall, hand on his sword hilt. Vergil strut through the door, and walked away. Looking in again, he saw Jewels help Nioca up. A surge of panic came over him and he ran, scaled the wall and was in his hut before he realized what he was doing. Tired and confused he took off his armour and went to sleep.

Filling in the Hole

By Vergil - Oct 14 2008

He stood mighty and tall. He saw everything, he controlled everything. Not having a name didn't matter. He ruled. And he was annoyed. Looking at the 10 percent of the internet that wasn't nudity, he saw an animal on the verge of death, whenever it looked like it could finally rest, the people started whipping it, again and again. This had been happening for weeks now. He was about to judge. But then, surely when the poor beast was to be whipped again, the torturers stopped and looked elsewhere. He opened his mouth and breathed comfort and relaxation into the creature. Its old, clouded, baleful eyes closed and it finally induced itself in the warm embrace of sleep. The animal was resting, and should let to be rested for forever. *If my children at Calamity Refuge ever even think about starting up that poor beast, I shall break them myself. And when I break them, they will not recover for a long time, UBB is still recovering after all these years* He, god of the internet, would personally watch that soul and made sure it stayed in comfort.

Nalyd Joins

By Sudanna - Oct 16 2008

Nalyd sat cross-legged on the edge of a cliff overlooking Calamity Refuge. The upper half of the Admin Tower glittered in the light of the rising sun. The forums and land around it were still dark. The squatter forums of the Refuge bustled with activity even now. Yes this place had potential. And seemed well on the way to realizing it. It would behoove him to join, while it was still early enough to be a member of consequence.

Nalyd stood, his light, diaphanous robes of shifting black and silver billowing as he did so. Drawing his hood around his face and gathering up his Scythe, Nalyd began the short walk down the cliff. The 'net bandits avoided high elevations- he would normally enjoy time he didn't have to worry about them, but he was in a hurry to join the Refuge.

Nalyd stood at the gates, and gave the simple registration bot the required information. After making a quick stop in the preferences, he settled down into the General forum. Laying the Scythe across his lap, he waited for someone to take notice. Shouldn't take long- looked to be fairly high activity around here.

Dreaded Stairs

By Sylae - Oct 16 2008

"So, how was Spiderweb?" Vergil asked as he waited at the top of the next landing, "Any new banishments?"

"It's been getting worse. Ghaldring's back and the mods are being forced to lock topics left and right. The whole place is about to burst into flames," w-dueck answered, "On the bright side, they might start up a new contest. Sounds like BoE will be included. Who's idea was it to take the stairs?"

"Yours. Was there anyth--" Vergil cut himself off, "I've got to go. Someone just registered. Might be a yahoobot."

"Okay, go ahead. I'll just climb the seemingly endless stairs by myself..." he trailed off as Vergil ran back down, then finished walking the stairs to the 29th floor. He banged on the shiny new plaque and yelled "Jewels! It's Will!"

"Come on in, and help yourself to some cookies!" Jewels yelled from inside somewhere, and w-dueck let himself into her newly redesigned cookie-scented chambers. He found the cookies, took two, then found the newest Admin, thanked her for the cookies, and said:

"Jewels, we need to talk."

Tour

By Vergil - Oct 16 2008

Vergil gave a stare of mild amusement "Yours." Returning to a more serious disposition, Vergil asked, "Was there anyth--" Vergil cut himself off, "I've got to go. Someone just registered. Might be a yahoobot." Vergil ran down the stairs, grabbing Yamato out of his coat sheathe but now drawing it. After a few more minutes, Vergil hit the bottom of the tower, into the mod board and meeting hall. Racing out, he dashed to the entrance. On a bench, he saw a man in silver and black robes with a Scythe resting on his lap. He was scribbling on a contract Vergil recognized as a profile sheet. He seemed oddly familiar. Turning a cloaked hood, the man said "Greetings, Vergil, can you show Nalyd where everything is?" Vergil had an confused look on his face "Oh, uh, sure." Vergil strode over, "Lemme take that staff for ya, you can drop it off at the storage unit." Nalyd said "Nalyd wouldn't touch that if Nalyd where you." Vergil paused and then nodded "Alright, let me show you our quarters. And talk to w-dueck if you want a mod position." Vergil put on a big smile "Other than that, welcome to Calamity Refuge."

Never Pass Up Power

By Sudanna - Oct 16 2008

Nalyd lowered his concealing hood. "Nalyd is happy to be here."

As Nalyd followed Vergil around on the short tour, he scrawled out a PM to w-dueck. Folding itself into a little paper airplane, the PM went winging up into the air and zipped through the top window of the Admin Tower, to wait for w-dueck. Never turn down an offer of power. Especially not this early in the game.

"Well, here's the Roleplay forum. Somewhat empty at the moment, but we just had an accident." Nalyd looked forward to the time he would spend there. Nothing quite like a virgin RP board. They passed the Spam forum with naught but a dismissive wave. Nalyd scowled at the latest announcement, still plastered all over the Announcements forum, as Vergil briefly went over the rules with him. The Constitution was an interesting concept that Nalyd hadn't seen before. BoE and BoA, neither of which Nalyd was much interested in, got a more extensive introduction. Nethergate was a wasteland, but Vergil seemed optimistic that it wouldn't remain so. The equally

barren Avernum forum already had Nalyd listed as a mod in glowing letters above the door, as did Geneforge. Speedy, that. Or perhaps he had lost track of time. The Trilogy forum was a nice homely place, with plenty of flagons and ale, though no flagons of ale. That would be troublesome.

"I'm not going to take you through the Dump," Vergil said, pointing at a trapdoor. "You can do that on your own time." Nalyd certainly would. No telling what interesting things might lurk there. Nalyd thanked Vergil for the tour and finished filling in his profile sheet. Next up would be to make some rules for his new forum. Nalyd stopped for a bit, just to take in the new-board smell. The Scythe gleamed in the still-morning light, looking deceptively clean.

The 'Talk'

By Jewels - Oct 16 2008

Even though her headache was mostly gone Jewels still cringed. How much should she tell him? How much did he already know? She feigned ignorance. "What about?" she asked casually seeming to admire newly themed drapes.

"Don't play dumb with me, Jewels. You know perfectly well about what." Jewels just stared so Will decided to spell it out for her anyway. "Well, let's start with how you knew I was going to offer you adminship AND how you knew I had to hit you with my staff to do it AND how you knew admins get a whole floor as a residence."

"Uh... Vergil told me?" Jewels knew she didn't sound very convincing but she hoped it would be enough to satisfy him. He stood looking at her thoughtfully before responding.

"I'd almost believe you, except I made Vergil an admin before the board crash... *before* I was reduced to whacking with my staff so he wouldn't have known about that anyway. Come, on. Is the truth all that much to ask for?"

Jewels didn't want to lie to Will, but maybe she didn't have to. If there was a second time shift... one that she didn't cause... then maybe she could just leave out a few things. "Will, what comes to mind when I say *Nioca*?" She put a stern emphasis on the name.

Will's hand slowly went to his temple. "I... I don't know, Jewels. He's... he's a valuable asset to Calamity Refuge. What did you expect to come to mind and what does this have to do with my questions?"

Jewels ignored his queries and pressed him further. "Think hard, Will. Really hard. Close your eyes and listen to my voice and tell me what you see." Jewels paused, waiting for him before she closed her own eyes and brought up the image in her memory that didn't fit. The memory of watching Vergil die. It was so vivid, so real, so... emotional. Her voice carried with it all the emotion she felt, "Nioca killed Vergil! *I watched him do it, Will!*"

Their eyes snapped open together and they stared at each other. Will didn't need to tell Jewels what he had seen. She could read it loud and clear.

"Something happened, Will. When you reset the boards, something whet terribly wrong. I think Nioca remembers more about it than I do. He remembered I would be an admin, too. He requested to speak with, and I quote, 'all three admins' as soon as he woke up."

Will soberly nodded, "I see. I guess we should round up Vergil and go talk to him then."

Your Goose is Cooked

By Nioca - Oct 17 2008

Nioca looked out from the incomplete second story of his citadel. He didn't get much sleep, but it was enough. Not that he would have been able to get more; his mind became that of an instant-replay, viewing what was happening with what was going to have happened. More disconcerting was the fact that it seemed not to be memory; he felt as though he was watching his insane timetwin walk to the Admin tower even though he had been in the BoA forum at the time. He looked at his watch; it was indeed the time that the insane Nioca had left the BoA forum.

Nioca descended to the first floor and exited his citadel. It was like viewing the incident in real time from his current perspective. "*If I have to live with this from here on out, I might actually kill Will over this.*" He thought. He had no desire to view two different timelines simultaneously... Nioca stepped on a jagged rock and yelped. He had been so distracted that he had left the citadel barefoot. After checking to make sure he hadn't accidentally foregone the rest of his clothing, Nioca took a deep breath and closed his eyes. Then, spreading his arms wide, he twirled on the spot and fell supine. A peace came over him; a detachment from the world and the one of a different time. Nothing existed but him...

"Are you okay?" A voice asked from above. Nioca opened his eyes to see Jewels' upside-down face hovering over him. "What are you doing?"

"Contemplating." Nioca answered monotonously.

"And where are your shoes?" Jewels asked, a note of stern disapproval in her voice.

"Unknown."

"Well, shoes or not, w-dueck wants to see you immediately."

"Fine."

Jewels walked away. However, Nioca didn't follow. A few minutes later, Jewels reappeared in his vision. "You're not going anywhere." She observed.

"Nope."

"This is important."

"Undoubtedly."

"This isn't up for debate. You need to explain to him what's going on."

"Indeed."

"So?" Jewels said, starting to get impatient.

"What?"

"Nioca!" Jewels shouted.

"Coming." Nioca replied, annoyed.

"Good." Jewels said, walking away. However, Nioca still didn't follow. Instead, he muttered something under his breath. Jewels, realizing that he wasn't following, turned around. "Nioca!" Jewels yelled. "This i-" She stopped short. It appeared that Nioca had disappeared. "Of course. Now I have to go chasing him around. Nioca!" Jewels yelled again, heading off for the BoA Forum.

Nioca, unmoved and now invisible, smiled. "*Finally*."

Nioca waited in the Administrative Discussion Board with w-dueck and Vergil. Now with shoes, Nioca had summoned two shades and were making them do theatre. However, it still wasn't passing the time quickly. It had been over an hour since Jewels had run off to find him. Fifty minutes ago, Nioca had sat down with Vergil and w-dueck. And now, patience was running short.

"Where the hell is she?" Vergil muttered.

"I don't know. One minute, I was following her to the Admin tower, and the next, she ran off." Nioca said. While it was not intended, Jewels absence provided Nioca an opportunity to consider his answers carefully. How much to tell them, and what parts to leave out.

"She better be here soon. You both have a lot of explaining to do." w-dueck intoned seriously.

Another fifteen minutes passed. Suddenly, the door to the board swung opened and Jewels marched through. She then slammed the door and leaned her head against it. "I'm sorry. I couldn't find him" She said, slightly muffled. Turning she said, "I don't know where he could have..."

Jewels trailed off as she saw Nioca sitting at the table, facing her with an ever-widening smile on his face. "About time Jewels," He said cheerily. "What took you so long?"

Jewels was livid and shaking. "You... you..." She stammered, unable to contain herself.

"What's going on h- Agh!" w-dueck yelped. Still unable to articulate anything, Jewels threw herself at Nioca, knocking w-dueck over in the process. Nioca leaped out of his seat and ran to the other side of the table with Jewels in hot pursuit. Nioca then launched himself over the table and ran towards the door. Jewels rushed back around the table and also ran for the door. Then, with an electric crackle, both of them were individually surrounded with a ring of energy. Nioca continued to run, only to slam facefirst into the impromptu forcefield. Jewels also rammed into

it, and both wound up stumbling backward. "I'm only going to ask this once." w-dueck said, furious. "What. Is. Going. On."

"Jewels interrupted me while I was contemplating. So I decided to send her on a wild goose chase." Nioca responded, trying desperately to stifle laughter. "I didn't think it'd take her over an hour to give up on it, though." He added, and, unable to restrain himself, broke down in peals of laughter. Jewels looked on in fury and distaste, which wasn't lessened when she turned around and found Vergil laughing as well.

"Can we just get this over with?!" w-dueck said, unamused. The forcefields faded, and everyone took a seat around the table. "Now," w-duck began, "I've come to understand that you know something about what happened recently, and why I seem to remember certain... *incidents* involving you killing and trying to kill members of Calamity Refuge some time in the future. Care to explain?"

"I think you'd best ask Jewels. I think she knows more than she's letting on." Nioca responded. He suddenly felt uncomfortable; he hadn't noticed it before, but it suddenly felt like he had stepped into a boiler. Brushing his forehead with his hand, it came away with sweat beads. Taking a quick glance at Jewels, he noticed that she was glaring at him. Turning away, he suddenly realized that it looked like her eyes had turned a fiery orange. He took another glance, but she was then facing w-dueck.

"She said the same about you." w-dueck responded coldly.

"Well... quite frankly, I only know so much. Right now, Jewels is the one you need to talk to. It appears that she knows the beginning of this tale." Nioca responded with an edge in his voice. "Otherwise, she wouldn't have known where to find me after I was blown out the BoA Moderation Center window."

"Fine." w-dueck said. "Jewels, start from the beginning."

Total Recap

By Jewels - Oct 17 2008

Jewels was livid. That little brat... She tried to remind herself that he didn't know the whole truth, just that she knew something he didn't. She struggled with where to start and found herself staring pleadingly at Vergil for guidance.

"Don't look at me," he huffed. "I don't know nothing."

"But Vergil..." Jewels whined, "You... you must realize..." Her voice trailed off at his icy stare.

"I don't explain myself, I just am."

Jewels's headache was back and she found herself with her head in her hands, rubbing her temples. "Fine!" Jewels resigned herself to explaining."We have experienced a time shift. All of

us have come backwards in time. Here's what I remember..." Jewels went into a speedy recap. "Right after the board restoration, I came back to my office to find somebody had messed with my theme. When I went looking for someone to explain themselves, I found Nioca had fallen out of the BoA Mod Center window and I went to find Will, leaving him where he lay."

"Wait a minute," Nioca interrupted, "no you didn't. You dragged me into the Mod center and locked me in!"

"Not the *first* time! Do you want to know this or not?" Jewels took Nioca's downcast silence as admission to go on. "*As I was saying*, I went to find Will and he asked me to become an admin. By the time we got back we found Robsta fighting a shade and Vergil was dead. Robsta said it was by Nioca's blade. I agreed to be an admin just before Nioca started attacking us. I was separated from Will and Rob and found myself next to Vergil wishing I had died in his stead. Somebody must have been listening because before I know it I'm passing him going in opposite directions through death's gate." She pauses for a moment to look at Vergil. His expression is impossible to read. It's not helpful in deciding how to continue. "While I was dead... I, uh, I had a dream or... a vision. I saw everybody fighting and I wished I could help. Maybe I have a genie in my pocket, I don't know, but I blacked out and came to in my office... in the past." Jewels stopped to look at Nioca. "My memories start to get garbled from here so maybe you have something to add?"

Nioca took a few moments to sift through this new information before moving on. "I almost remember a sliver of a shadow of that timeline... I think the board restoration itself damaged the flow of time. It may have been time itself that brought you back to the past, indeed at the very moment of restoration where it was damaged." Jewels smiled at his theory. "The timeline *I* remember must continue after yours... only I remember being in two separate places during the same timeline. It's really very confusing. I was both in the Spam forum *and* injured in the BoA mod Center... at the same time *and* in the same timeline. There were two of me and I remember the memories of both." He closed his eyes for a moment trying to sort out the images. "The Nioca you found, Jewels, went insane with paranoia, probably both in your timeline and mine. So, second time around, you locked me in the mod center, I killed Vergil in front of you, tried to kill you, was stopped by Robsta so I sprung some traps to try to defeat you. Will joined you and the traps weren't working so I attacked you, stole Will's admin tower keys, destroyed the BoA forum thinking you all were still inside and tried to destroy Calamity Refuge... The last thing I remember from that Nioca's perspective is the walls becoming potatoes and being overpowered by a black man in a suit."

Vergil suddenly stood up, "*My* ultimatum! I'd like to know who's big idea it was to set that loose. Caused me no end of grief that did. You think BunBun cares about a little time loop? Oh, no. A deal is a deal no matter what timeline you make it in."

Will raised an eyebrow at his outburst. "You don't know nothing, huh?"

Vergil sat back down, scowl still on his face. "Nope, nothing."

Jewels sat stifling a giggle while Nioca shook his head and continued. "At the same time, the other me started in the Spam forum with Will, joined in on the BoA Forum fight, and was sent to the Dump with Robsta by Will." Nioca eyed Vergil as he skipped the goings on in the Dump. "After the security had been turned off, I hurried up the tower to confront myself but found

nothing... The last thing I remember from that timeline is being blown out the window by quickfire. After I landed, I realized I was back in the BoA Forum, that time had rewound and Jewels was taking me to the mod center again. I convinced her to stay with me... If she hadn't I would have lost it again, I'm sure. And I think that brings us all up to date."

Silence hovers over the room as everyone soaks it in. Then someone speaks softly. "Quickfire..." The others look around to see Will deep in thought. "Quickfire!" he says louder. "I remember..." He looks up to stare at Jewels then at Vergil. "I remember the quickfire. I... I remember watching you... watching you both walk into the quickfire. The red... the blue... the purple fire. How?! I mean, I knew Vergil was a powerful mage before he showed up here but Jewels, I didn't know you knew any magic. How did you do that?"

Jewels struggled with the memory herself. what she was really capable of... It all came flooding back. She was resolute. She no longer needed guidance. She knew who she was and what she must do. Giving Will a steely stare she replied coldly "I don't explain myself." Jewels lifted her hand in front of her and set it ablaze then stood up slowly. "*I. Just. Am.*" With flames in her eyes, she flung a fireball at Nioca hitting him in the shoulder. "That's for the wild goose chase, you ungrateful little..."

Vergil burst out laughing again while Nioca moaned in pain. Will quickly cast a healing spell then set to chastising Jewels. "There will be no more of that," he yelled, "from anyone! Got it?" He changed his gaze quickly from person to person. "Got it?!!"

"I got it," Jewels muttered cooling herself down. "If we're done here, I'd like to go find Robsta and explain things. He's gotta be as confused as the rest of us were. I think he deserves to be in the loop."

Will nodded his assent and dismissed the others amid the tension. Jewels stalked out, an unseen smirk on her face.

Citra de Nova

By Vergil - Oct 17 2008

Head hurt. Hurt head? Vergil couldn't tell the difference. He felt horrible and it felt wrong yet right, something about drinking and melting and- Wait.... he couldn't of. He could not have been that stupid! Ice?!?! What the hell was he thinking?! *"I'm in deep crap now."* Vergil thought *Need to contact Bun* Vergil summoned a communication cloud. A scaled eye looked back "Have you delivered the message?" Vergil gasped "Yes, and they said that they would inform Class 1 and 5 of it, they also said that Field 7 Section 4 quadrant 3 has been taken. Reports of casualties report minimal." Vergil groaned "Thats not good, Calamity Refuge needs me, but so do the humans. Did they say anything about Section 6?" The eye blinked "No." Vergil nodded "Then its not as

bad as I think it is." Vergil closed the window. *"Cinead, you will pay.....I don't know when but you will pay..."*

Vergil went to his quarters. He rummaged though his pack. Finding a leather jumpsuit, black as the night. He donned the armor and flexed his fingers. "*Haven't worn these since I started out in the 47th Regiment."* Pausing, Vergil suddenly said "*Citra de nova!"* Small blue runes glowed from the edges of the armor and a ball of ice with a raging fire inside of it appeared in front of Vergil. Vergil smiled, it still worked! Vergil was hesitant to try out the other feature but decided to do so anyway. Taking Yamato, he turned it on its side and positioned it in between the gap in his left ribs. He slammed Yamato into himself. He felt an impact, but nothing more than a tingle. Grinning, Vergil pulled his sword out and sheathed it. The war was coming. He was ready. He was ready.

Investigation

By Nioca - Oct 18 2008

Nioca marched back to his citadel. A whole host of shades occupied the halls now, most of them floating upward to the second floor. Nioca got the attention of one of them. "Is it done?" He asked it. The shade nodded gently. Nioca smiled grimly; at last, a sanctuary. Marching to his private chambers, he faced a blank space of marble wall. He felt it lightly with his fingertips, as if examining it for a secret passage. It felt cool to the touch, and extremely solid. He then pounded it with his fist; it didn't budge. Nioca focused and fired a Smite spell from his palm; it struck with a plume of frost and left the stone slightly cracked. Fire, blades, and sheer force were each sent against the wall; each left it's marks, leaving the wall cracked and scorched, and generally worse for the wear. Satisfied with the abuse he had hurled upon it, Nioca then spoke in a commanding tone:

"Sereota emgas phtros!"

The wall seemed to dissolve as the complex illusion weaved upon it restored it to it's original state: A brilliant blue barrier. The barrier then faded, allowing Nioca to pass into a dark, descending passageway. As soon as he had cleared the threshold, the barrier sprung back up, and the illusion restored itself into an immaculate-looking stretch of marble.

Nioca finished descending the stairs into a dark underground complex, which effectually consisted of one giant room. The room was illuminated blue by gentle glowcrystals and by a few computer monitors and sigils. Three doors led off into neighboring chambers. Looking around briefly, Nioca gently called out, "Aryll."

An orange shade floated through one of the doors as Nioca pulled a hard metal chair towards one of the computers. She took up position a few feet away from him, and Nioca sat in the chair,

facing her and sitting perpendicular to the nearby computer. "Something strange is going on, Aryll." He said softly.

"Time distortion is typical in such a manner." The shade intoned softly. It's voice was ethereal and otherworldly, but as it spoke, it's appearance changed from that of a blurry orange shade to that of a woman.

Nioca typed on the computer for a moment, creating a file entitled, ***Jewels/Vergil Investigative Log***. Then he turned his attention back to Aryll. "It's not that. It's connected, but I think there's something else happening. Something to do with Jewels and Vergil." Nioca paused. "During the meeting, Jewels acted strangely. She was more hostile and on edge. And she seemed rather unforthcoming with information."

"The hostility sounds rather normal for someone who's gone through her trauma." Aryll responded.

"But see, I don't think that's it." Nioca rebutted. "You know what, I need to write this down. Read over my shoulder and tell me what you make of it." Nioca turned to the computer and started typing at full speed.

Day 00 of Investigation

Investigation starts. Jewels exhibiting odd behavior at meeting discussing the Time-Fracture Incident. She seemed to keep glancing at Vergil, and at one point started to plead with him about something, implying that he might know more than was letting on. Jewels stated she had found me while looking for whoever messed with her theme. She stated that, during the first loop of the Time-Fracture incident, she had wished to trade places with the then-deceased Vergil, which resulted in her actually doing the trade. She then became sketchy on the details, and claimed to have a vision of some sort of battle right before the second loop of the Incident took place. Also claims that she does not know what caused her to go back with her memory INTACT. Claim is sketchy and likely falsified; the second loop only destabilized after Insane Nioca's death, and the effects of it were obvious. Furthermore, the subject (me) remembered this loop, implying that the subject's memory was temporally disconnected from the Time-Fracture; this suggests that the first reset was artificially induced and somehow separate from the second, and also that Jewels is closely involved somehow, since her memory of the reset was left intact. More investigation into this angle is necessary.

During my explanation of the second loop, Vergil burst out about his ultimatum, and that someone named BunBun wouldn't care, "about a little time loop". He also stated in the same vein that, "A deal is a deal no matter what timeline you make it in". Again, this implies that Vergil knows something about the incident. Combined with Jewels' behavior, this suggests that they both are implicit in something that may or may not be directly connected to the Time-Fracture Incident.

The most damning evidence thusfar, though, is something w-dueck remembered. He stated that both Vergil and Jewels walked into quickfire, and that some other kind of fire was created by them, colors red, blue, and purple. This fits in with something I witnessed during the second loop; Vergil seemed to be turning into some sort of Avatar made of blue flame. At the point of w-dueck's revelation, Jewels became aggressive and threatened w-dueck, somehow creating

magical fire around her hand. Her eyes turned fiery at this point; also worth noting is that they were of a similar shade earlier in the meeting and that the air temperature at this point was considerably higher than normal. After threatening w-dueck, she then attacked me by throwing a fireball at me. Injury moderate, but not mortal. Temperament at this point was extremely aggressive, something out of the ordinary for Jewels. Something else of note; early in the meeting, Vergil stated to Jewels, "I don't explain myself, I just am." This was repeated word-for-word by Jewels during the attack. Instincts say this is more than a coincidence.

Conclusions: Jewels and Vergil know something and are keeping the rest of the CRF in the dark about it, something related to the Time-Fracture incident. Something also seems to be corrupting them both; the nature and cause of it is unknown. Best speculation now is that it has something to do with them both being recently made Administrators. Further investigation is necessary.

"Have any ideas?" Nioca asked Aryll, reclining in the chair.

"Absolutely none." Aryll replied. Her brow was furrowed in a way that suggested she was in deep thought. "What's the next step?"

"The next step," Nioca said, tone dark, "Is to start digging into their background. Very little is know about either of them; that isn't unusual for Vergil, but Jewels has been around Spiderweb for a long time. I'll send out shades and see what they can turn up. As for you, I have an assignment. Whatever is happening here, it may be an indicator of some threat or danger that the future may bring. This means that we can't afford to sit around and wait for something to happen. I want you to tail Jewels. Follow her every move, and see what she does and who she contacts."

"Isn't that risky? What if I'm spotted?" Aryll said in a worried tone.

"Already thought of that. Before I came here, I went to the Geneforge Forum and set up a failsafe. If you're just spotted, make a beeline for the Geneforge forum. There's an unusual 'U' shaped stand of tall stones in there; in the center is a script-powered teleporter that'll send you right into this complex. It's undetectable, and it's fatally trapped in case someone tries to tamper with it. Do not head for the Citadel directly. Contact me and I'll debrief you as soon as I am able."

"And if I can't get away?"

Nioca didn't respond immediately. Instead, he put his index finger to his throat and drew it straight across. "That goes for Jewels, w-dueck, Vergil, or anyone else that gets in your way. I believe you remember how to neutralize threats like that." Aryll nodded grimly to show she understood. Nioca then added, "Is this complex secure?"

"Yes. The sigils are in place; scrying, teleportation, and scans of all sorts are deflected in such a manner that it's like it doesn't even exist." Aryll replied, relieved at the change of subject.

"You mean it shows up as completely blank?!" Nioca yelped, alarmed.

"No. It shows up as dirt."

Nioca exhaled. "Good."

Aryll continued, "The only way in here other than the passage is through the teleportation platform. And unless you have foreknowledge of precisely where and how, you can't lock into it."

"And breaking in?"

"Not without a lot of firepower. More than anyone on this island could muster." Aryll replied.

"Unless they use the Admin tower to do it." Nioca observed.

"Either way, it likely wouldn't be discovered in the first place. It's completely off the grid; any attempts to ascertain your position on the island whilst in here will come up null."

Nioca nodded. "Sounds good. You have your task, and now would be a good time to carry it out. Try not to be seen, and don't take chances. I need to arrange a meeting with w-dueck in the citadel."

"w-dueck?" Aryll asked, puzzled.

Nioca grinned. "Yes. I think he might like a little bit of relief after what he just learned."

Moving Forward

By Sylae - Oct 21 2008

w-dueck shook his head. Grown members acting like little children. At least he had gotten a somewhat straight explanation for what had happened. He would have to look into it, see if what they were saying was actually possible. He'd have some questions if that was what had happened, but oh boy, if they were lying. he wouldn't want to be in his way. The last thing the refuge needed was a flock of lying no-gooders prancing about the forums like farmgirls in a meadow, and his goal, unless matters changed drastically, was for the Refuge to flourish and be well.

He stopped a nearby bot and queried "New posts since last visit?" The bot replied, "27 new posts." w-dueck flinched. 27? How? Spambots?

w-dueck set out among the boards reading posts. Several were by the new member from Spiderweb, Nalyd was his name, he thought. He made a mental note to meet the fellow and learn his name. "w-dueck?" a voice interrupted the post he was writing in the BoE forum, "What? Can't you see I'm posting here?" w-dueck cut off the speaker, "Wait. I'm almost done with this post." He scribbled some more writing and attached an image. "Now, what do you want?"

"Nioca would like to talk to you. He requests your presence at his citadel," Aryll stated.

Essence

By Sudanna - Oct 21 2008

Nalyd stepped into the Geneforge Moderation Centre and locked the door. There were shelves packed with pouches, sacks, and vials of the exotic components used in Shaping. A little Servant Mind slumbered peacefully in a corner. Odd arrays of large equipment cluttered the entire building. Three power spirals were dimly pulsing around a control panel in the corner, their power unused. Crystal conduits ran from them to an odd-looking Shaping platform outside on a patio. It was inlaid with a dazzling array of jewels, to which the conduits fed power. Nalyd stepped over to the control panel and pulled a crystal from his robes, inserting it into a slot in the panel. An irritated squeak sounded from the thing, and Nalyd commenced with the pressing of buttons, occasionally consulting a file of papers in his hand. The power spirals dimmed and brightened erratically for several minutes before Nalyd was satisfied. He folded up several light, fragile peices of magical machinery and set them up around the platform.

Gathering up a stupendous assortment of ingredients from the shelves and tables filling the room, Nalyd muttered while checking off a list. "19 grams of magnesium. . . 0.014 grams of chromium. . . A kilo of calcium. . ." Several esoteric devices whirred to life as Nalyd lumped the myriad piles of elements haphazardly onto the Shaping platform. They would keep the assorted elements stable and in usable states. Nalyd pushed a button on the control panel and the gems in the Shaping platform sparked and glowed brightly. The elements separated themselves into orderly piles, most of them all but invisible. Nalyd pushed another button and the power spirals began to spark and whine while glowing brighter and brighter. The conduits smoked a bit, but the wood around them was all charred already. Invisible forces gathered took shape around the platform. Nalyd hurriedly stepped forward.

He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. He took his Scythe and whispered "Sing for me" before setting it on the floor. He stretched one arm out in front of him, fingers splayed, and began to chant in a quick, breathless tone. Thick, gelatinous essence dripped from his quivering fingers and hung to the floor in gobs and strings. The ropy strands gave off a light sucking sound while they rearranged themselves into a loose, levitating ball of glowing life, dragging the loose piles of elements with them.

As the whining of the protesting spirals grew more insistent, Nalyd's chant rose more and more in speed and pitch, until he seemed to be shrieking a single, impossibly long word. The Shaper insignia on the back of his robes burned a low, dark green. Deep within the slobbering folds of pulsing essence, a tiny embryo took shape and began to grow. It was strange, not like any creation. It's head was far too large in comparison to the rest of it's body. The eyes were huge, and the body was of some strange ten-limbed design. It seemed too complicated to possibly function.

Nalyd's chant, all one breath, had surpassed human capabilities. His lips blurred and his veins bulged hideously. The sound was inhuman. The power spirals had begun to smoke and crack. Flickering lights played all around the platform. One of the strange, spindly machines broke and

began blasting steam. The control panel yelled in dismay and the jewels popped from it and the poor creation inside grew hot. The creature had grown greatly, almost the size of a man while still obviously a fetus. The great black eyes did not shine with life. The Scythe at Nalyd's feet hummed and vibrated, as one of the power spirals cracked down the middle. The emergency measures simply dissipated the power rather than risk an explosion. Or would have, had not the only place to go been the Shaping platform. Splinters of the huge marble slab cracked off and clattered away. The huge ten-limbed shape on the platform was beginning to mature, no almost three meters tall. Another of the intricate machines broke, and Nalyd began to weave a stabilizing spell with his free hand. Waves of soft yellow light rippled outward from his hand, leeching power from the unstable instruments.

Nalyd's Shaper insignia burned with bright, caustic green flames as he struggled to put a rein on the dangerous forces whirling around the lab. The creation began to twitch a bit in it's bubble of essence. One of the power spirals shut down, and then the other. One by one, the delicate machines around him sputtered and clicked to a halt. Nalyd devoted both hands to controlling the essence monstrosity before him. The Scythe turned over and over restlessly on the floor. Halos of rainbow light shimmered around Nalyd's upraised hands.

Then, the essence bubble disappeared. Just vanished, along with the creature inside it. Unfortunately, Nalyd was still directing massive Shaping energies to that point. Energies which now found nothing better to do than wreak bloody havoc in the space of a second.

After the explosion, Nalyd picked himself up and silently thanked whoever had decided to put the platform outside and away from the lab. The only complete losses were one power spiral and some replaceable machinery. Then he picked up the Scythe. Then he began to curse. Yelling his heart out (Or trying to- Shaping of that magnitude simply lacerated the throat). Obscene croaks and whispers plagued the air for hours afterwords as Nalyd cleaned up and did some preliminary repairs.

Later, he went over the procedures. The first failure had been one of the devices reducing and redistributing power flow to various mystical areas. The power spiral, no longer being told the limits on the power it should be giving, gave everything and strained itself too hard. The influx of energy that should have been an explosion disrupted the workings of all the other machines. Perhaps if he reinforced the plasma coolant tubes. . .

He set to tinkering with the broken machines.

Lies and Amritae

By Nioca - Oct 22 208

A few shades were rearranging furniture when Aryll popped through a nearby wall. Nioca, who had been supervising the entire process, jumped slightly at her appearance. Aryll intoned, "I told w-dueck you wanted to meet him here."

"Aryll, are you out of your ethereal mind?!?" Nioca yelped.

"What? What are you... what?" Aryll stammered, confused.

"I didn't want *anyone* to know about you. That included w-dueck." Nioca said with a raised voice.

"You didn't specify-" Aryll began, somewhat indignantly.

"I didn't think you'd be running off to the first CRF member I mentioned!" Nioca snapped. "Would you just watch Jewels? *Without* telling her or anyone else you're there?"

Aryll didn't respond. Instead, her feminine appearance faded, replaced by the shadow typical of most shades. However, whilst most shades had a green or purple hue, her's was a fiery orange. The claws on her fingertips were far sharper than the typical shade's, and she gave off a pulse of magical energy. In this new form, she turned and floated away.

Nioca, in the meantime, headed for the front door. Thankfully, everything was almost ready for w-dueck's arrival. He pulled open the door, and saw w-dueck, in full attire, admin staff in hand. "This better be important, Nioca." He said, marching in without waiting for an invitation.

"Not really. It's why I invited you here." Nioca replied with false cheeriness.

w-dueck didn't respond. He followed Nioca toward a rather cozy-looking parlor. Nioca unceremoniously plopped into one of a pair of plush couches. w-dueck, with far more restraint, lowered himself into the other. "There's no need for formalities, Will." Nioca said. "That robe must be uncomfortable. You *are* wearing clothes underneath that, right?"

w-dueck thought it over carefully before taking off the robes. He was wearing rather plain clothes underneath; nothing nearly as spectacular as the robes themselves. A shade floated over, grabbed the robes, and hung them on a nearby coat rack. "What can I get you, Will? A drink, perhaps?" At this, a shade floated over with a staggering tray assorted with various beverages. Nioca grabbed an already prepared glass of liquid, which appeared to have a bright blue glow.

w-dueck eyed the choices more carefully, and noted that a tall, thin glass bottle appeared to hold a small quantity of the same liquid. "What is that?" he asked warily.

"Amritae," Nioca answered. "Extremely rare. Potent. Non-alcoholic. In fact, whatever it is, it has a rather unusual effect. Instead of dulling the mind, it... well, you'd have to actually drink it. There's no real way to explain it." w-dueck looked at it, curious. "Shade!" Nioca intoned to a nearby shade. "A glass of Amritae for Will." A shade floated over and retrieved a glass. Then, he tipped a pitcher of ice into it, filling it with neatly-shaped ice cubes. The shade then poured water into the glass, filling most of the remaining space in the glass with water. w-dueck gave it a dubious glance, but the shade then grabbed the bottle of Amritae. Removing it's glass stopper, he then poured a small amount of the liquid in. Immediately, a blue glow started refracting off the ice cubes in the glass. Nioca took a sip of his own. Still dubious, w-dueck cautiously lifted it to his mouth and took a small sip.

His first reaction was a gasp. Ale burned on the way down, but this... this was like drinking liquid ice. His senses suddenly seemed to sharpen drastically, and his worries seemed to vanish. For a brief moment, it felt as if he had a moment of pure mental clarity, combined with a feeling of total contentment. Then the sensation faded. Still, a minute fragment of the blissful experience

lingered. w-dueck stared at the glass, dumbstruck. Nioca took another sip of Amritae, then set his own glass down with a crisp clinking sound. "Thus, why it's so heavily diluted. Undiluted, a sip like that would have left you reeling for several minutes." Nioca said. He seemed to take a glance at something before continuing. "I thought it might be nice for you to relax a bit, considering everything that's happened recently."

"Yes..." w-dueck said, taking another, larger sip. "Speaking of which, I wanted to ask you a few things regarding the... um... Time thing."

Nioca, upon hearing this, snatched up the glass and took a large swig of the Amritae. Then, he lowered the glass and blinked a couple of times. "Fire away."

"Well, for one, why did this occur in the first place?"

"Ah. Yes, let's remove the pretenses and get right to the ones I don't know," Nioca replied with a grin. "I have no idea what kicked it off. The only thing I can think is that it was somehow related to the crash we had a while back. It's the only thing that makes sense; everything's a wreck, and that somehow causes time to reset to 8/8/08."

"Wait; 8/8/08?" w-dueck asked.

"As far as I can tell. But I don't know what the significance of that number is. Maybe it's somehow magical?"

"Alright..." w-dueck ventured. "Next, why did the one Nioca go insane, and what inspired his vendetta against Calamity Refuge?"

"The insanity was likely the combined effects of the distortion related to the time shift and to his severe injuries. I had a bit of instability after I was blasted through the window for the third rendition." Nioca paused thoughtfully. "Thankfully, that's gone now."

"And the vendetta?"

Nioca balked. This was something w-dueck didn't need to know. "...I really don't know." Nioca's voice suddenly sounded hollow to him; with a note of panic, he recalled that Amritae also tended to make lying difficult, and lying convincingly nearly impossible. Hoping that w-dueck didn't pick up on it, he took another swig of Amritae to calm himself.

"I see." w-dueck said tonelessly. "And finally, what's going on between you and Jewels?"

"*Here we go again*" Nioca thought to himself. "I was in a contemplative state. She was bothering it. So I decided to make sure she would stop interrupting. That said, I really didn't think it'd take an hour for her to get back." Nioca said carefully. "Come to think of it, I also didn't think she'd try to kill me either." He added. "And that brings me to something I want to ask you, actually."

"Oh?"

"Yes. Does Adminship have any negative side-effects?"

"Not that I can think of. Why?" w-dueck asked, puzzled.

"Well, in her years at Spiderweb, Jewels has never demonstrated either such a temper or such abilities. Yet, the same day she becomes an Admin, she starts throwing fireballs at people that annoy her. And-" Nioca clamped down himself.

"And what?" w-dueck asked with a commanding tone.

Seething at himself, Nioca continued, "And I noticed that she seemed to be projecting some sort of aura. One that I can't quite place."

"Hmm." w-dueck responded, taking a sip of his Amritae. A sigh of relief almost passed Nioca's lips; what he almost let slip had nothing to do with any aura, though that was something he had noticed. Rather, it had been about his suspicions of Vergil. Rattling too many cages too fast was an excellent way to let Jewels and Vergil know he was on to them.

Nioca took a sip of his own Amritae, then stated, "You might want to be careful around her. With this sudden development... she could be dangerous."

w-dueck didn't reply. Instead, he just stared down at his glass.

"Is there anything else?" Nioca asked.

A man in heavy, yellow-painted platemail approached Calamity Refuge's gates. He had one hand securely on the hilt of a sheathed longsword, and the other partially lifted in front of him. A glow emanated from the lifted hand.

Nightmares

By Robsta - Oct 22 2008

Robsta was hanging onto a sconce, he looked down, spikes. He was bleeding, the blood was making his grip start to slip. His strength was slipping away. He couldn't hold it. His grip slipped. He fell.

He awoke with a start. The night wasn't going well. Images of violence kept invading his sleep. He grimaced. This wasn't an enemy he could fight. Why was he having these visions suddenly? His head hurt. It was light outside. It was already morning. It didn't help him much. He didn't feel like he'd been able to sleep at all that night. This could not continue. An enemy he couldn't fight. Or was it?

He remembered long ago when he had annoyed a chief of a goblin tribe. The chief had sent many guards after him, but he had slain them all. Then Robsta had begun having terrible dreams. It did not take long for him to locate the source of these dreams and kill the chief's shaman. Now he had nightmares again.

It was useless trying to sleep. He got up and began sharpening his long sword. This was a mundane task that would help him think clearly. Who would do this to him, and why? It must have been someone at the Refuge, all his enemies were dead. He thought about his past posts, had he insulted anyone? He couldn't think strait, his head hurt, the noise from the smithy wasn't helping. Why didn't he want to stop?

Who had the power to disturb his dreams? Jewels? Jewels was powerless, she had no weapon, no magic, she couldn't be the culprit. Vergil? Vergil was stealthy and skilled with his blade, but not a magician, not someone who had power over the mind. Nioca? Nioca was magical. Nioca didn't have any reason to like him. He didn't know if Nioca was capable of this. w-dueck? w-dueck was the most powerful at the refuge, as the admin here. He would easily have power to do this, but why?

Two suspects, if he killed the wrong one, he could set the forums into a destructive path of death. There was a pounding on the door. He ignored it. This was his hut, he needed to be alone, able to find the culprit and kill them. The door opened, someone stepped in and closed it behind them. Robsta ignored them and continued sharpening Stonecrusher.

"Robsta," Jewels said softly. He ignored her. "Robsta," She repeated, taking a step closer. He kept sharpening Stonecrusher. She repeated herself again, raising her voice and placing her arm on his shoulder. He wield around, Stonecrusher brushing Jewel's throat. Jewels jumped back, reflexively clutching her throat. "Why are you in my hut?" His voice was sharp, he articulated every word.

It was only in sight for a moment, but Robsta saw that he had drawn blood. He cursed at that, he had not meant to draw blood, but in the unstable state he was he must have overshot his mark. Jewels began to stammer something about important news, but more importantly the room was growing hotter. Somehow he knew this was Jewels preparing for battle.

Jewels preparing for battle? She didn't carry a weapon. She knew no magic and she didn't look like an extremely capable unarmed fighter. The thought of Jewels preparing for battle was totally unthinkable. But his combat reflexes told him she was preparing for battle, and his combat reflexes were never wrong.

He pushed forward, sword to Jewel's neck. She stepped back, hands dropping to her sides. The cut was gone. He was surprised by this. He knew Jewels had no magical powers, but healing that quickly was nothing short of magic. There was defiantly more to Jewels than met the eye. He must be careful.

If Jewels was capable of magically healing himself, was she capable of sending him nightmares? If so, why would she. She was here, in his hut, with barely an excuse to disturb him, early in the morning. If she had come less than half an hour ago she might have caught him sleeping. Then what would she have done? He didn't want to think about it.

If Jewels was a powerful mage too, then she could put up a dangerous battle if given warning. He couldn't take that chance, he should strike without giving notice. His sword was by her neck, a swift stroke would cut off her head. His muscles tensed.

But what if she wasn't the one. He still had no firm evidence it was her, and no evidence that it was not Nioca or w-dueck. He couldn't kill her now, for the repercussions would be dire if he was wrong. His muscles relaxed again.

Jewels took a gamble. "I need to talk to you, it's about the visions you've been having." Robsta staggered back, shocked. How did she know? He was having the visions, not her Ã¢â‚¬â€œ or was she having the visions too. Perhaps it was a refuge wide plague. Or, she could be the one

giving him the visions. That seemed the most probable. He stepped forward again, lifting Stonecrusher.

Stonecrusher suddenly became unbearably hot. He dropped it before it burnt him. This was strange, Stonecrusher had a wooden hilt, wrapped in leather for grip, and those materials don't get hot, they combust. But they had gotten hot. There was only one explanation, magic.

Robsta hurled himself at Jewels, hoping to catch her off guard, but bounced off an invisible wall between them. "Robsta listen to reason," he heard Jewels say. He hurled himself at the wall again. Jewels flinched, he knew she could not hold it indefinitely against him. The question was, which would break first? The wall, or him.

"There has been a time shift. Things have happened that you don't remember." Jewels was starting to sound desperate. He contemplated it. If there was a time shift, he might have memories in an alternate timeline that were trying to get out. Yet another possibility for his nightmares. Yet another reason to not kill anyone until he was sure who or what was causing them. Jewels had come in when he had his back turned. She had demonstrated that she could cast spells that could not be heard, at least to him, with the roaring fire and his distracted consciousness. If she was determined to torture or kill him, she could have done it then. He cursed himself for lowering his guard, but he also saw the wisdom behind those thoughts. "Stop trying to kill me and listen to me, there are some things I think you deserve to know."

He hesitated. He could be wrong, Jewels could be carefully manipulating him into a trap. He searched his mind for anything that she could be planning, but came up with nothing. He sighed. "I'm sorry, my hospitality is somewhat lacking. I've been having ... disturbing dreams." He pulled a second chair up to the table and went to the cupboard for biscuits. "Come, sit and let's discuss this shift over some light refreshments."

Jewels picked up Stonecrusher and handed it back to its owner before sitting down. "There's a lot to tell you, but I have the time."

Absolute Power

By Jewels - Oct 22 2008

After a few biscuits and quite a bit of tea, many questions had been answered and even some laughs had been shared. It ended in a heartfelt "Thanks for saving my life, kinda." and a "Right back at ya, I think." followed by another laugh.

Jewels left her meeting with Robsta feeling energized. Could it have really been only yesterday that she was a nobody? Just a name on the wall of a dusty spider's web? And today... She flared her hands for fun. Today she had more power in her pinky finger than she'd had all her life. Actually she'd had the power all along, she just didn't know how to use it. No more! Her first order of business was to learn everything she was capable of, then master it. Practice, practice,

practice... She needed a place to practice. There were plenty of places on the net where she could go and be thanked for using spambots as targets, but what fun was there in that? Just flaming bots would be so boring. What would be fun? Jewels thought for a minute. *It would be fun to show off where people know me... at Spiderweb?* Yes, at Spiderweb she could show them all she wasn't a nobody anymore. Not that she needed their approval, but... Jewels' mood suddenly turned sour and the heat from her singed the grass she was walking on. ...but they had all scoffed at her before. She couldn't count how many jokes she had been the butt of there. They needed to be taught a lesson... taught not to laugh, but to fear! Those pathetic mortals... insignificant humans... she'd show them! *I'll show them all!*

In her rage Jewels grew a huge fireball in her hands then threw it at a tree she was passing. Wood splintered everywhere as a bough came tumbling down engulfed in her fury. Jewels' laughter echoed in her ears but she didn't really hear it. Instead, as she watched the flames feed off it's fuel, she heard what she could only describe as a scream, thought she had never experienced anything like it before. The cry reverberated as though through her very soul. "What have I done?" Jewels raced forward in tears putting out the flames with her bare hands. "Sorry... so sorry," she repeated in whispers over and over. How could she? How could she even *think* about hurting anyone at Spiderweb? Fear of losing her own sanity swept over her. What had become of her... The old adage ran through her mind. *Absolute power corrupts absolutely*... She couldn't let that happen... she wouldn't! No, she needed to go back to the way she was, to return to her roots. She had liked who she was and she wouldn't let herself change. Even if that meant giving up all her powers. *Or at least any that can harm,* she thought to herself as she used a healing spell on the tree. Shriveled leaves became plump and green. She held up the broken bough and healed again, it mended back onto the trunk.

After thorough inspection of the tree revealed not a single cinder Jewels turned around and leaned her back against it. Despair and hope mingled themselves in her mind. She couldn't change what she was. Could she really deny her nature? Was her will strong enough for it? She had never been tempted like this before, not even close. *I need to meditate. I'd better get back to my room.* Jewels got ready to push herself off the tree but found herself stuck. "What the?" She looked down to see her legs halfway blended into the trunk. A cry of surprise escaped her lips as she set her hands against the tree and pushed with all her might, but instead of pushing away from the tree, they pushed in right up to the elbows. Jewels' back hit the trunk and stuck as well. "No," Jewels struggled against the pull. *Yes,* a calmer part of her mind reassured. She could feel her body becoming rigid and rough, her breathing, labored, her skin ligneous. "No!" she screamed in panic. *Oh, yes,* she also thought. Her body sank in faster and her head began to transform, bark snaking it's way up her cheeks. "Noooooo..." her scratchy voice, barely recognizable as her own, was cut off as her face disappeared entirely. *Yes,* her thoughts soothed, *peace, tranquility... back to our roots.*

Another Kind of Ultimatum

By Vergil - Oct 23 2008

Vergil walked down the Admin tower with a iron face. He needed to ask w-dueck for a permission to leave Calamity Refuge for an extended period of time, and he was getting impatient. And Vergil also worried about whether or not w-dueck would allow him to go, he seemed on the fritz recently. But the Bluebloods and Shrikas wouldn't wait, and he also had to hunt in the abyss for a daemon to inherit his ultimatum. Vergil tapped his bleu box, it was the key to hunting semi-ethereal prey. Reaching the bottom of the tower, Vergil stepped outside to see w-dueck in a trance. He saw that he had a small, content smile on his face and he was walking slowly across Calamity Refuge. He seemed rather peaceful. When w-dueck saw him, his smile dimmed a little but remained as a smile.

"What is it Vergil?" w-dueck asked. Pausing, the smile dissipating off his face, "And what is that armor for?"

"w-dueck." Vergil gave a brief nod "I request a leave of absence." Vergil shifted *"Something defiantly seems odd about him."* Vergil thought

w-dueck just cocked his head to the side and inquired "How long?"

"Just two or three days, but it is important."

"Then you have my permission" w-dueck said permission slowly, and scanned Vergil's face for any sign of emotion.

Vergil nodded and and raced up the Admin Tower. 22nd floor, that's where the elemental plane conduits where housed. Reaching the floor, Vergil walked to the control panel. Inside there where a bunch of cylindrical booths with 5 circles of ground beneath them. One looked like a black spot, a dark rip in the fabric of universe, another was a clear, blue shimmering surface, right next to it was a bright circle with oranges, reds and yellows. A fourth was a patch of dirt, and the last one was pure white. Vergil set the destination dial to the Abyss via the Water Plain. A trip straight to the Abyss from the regular world was too much to take at one time. He then stepped inside one of the booths above the water plain, the booth shut, and it plunged into the circle. The intense colors of blue, green and purple soared around Vergil's booth. He saw that he was in a line to the next portal. Other patrons where in similar booths, some filled with fire, water, dirt, and some times they looked empty, but Vergil knew that this was just a pure form air elemental hiding, unwanted to be seen. When it was Vergil's turn to descend into the Abyss, he concentrated hard. Losing consciousness in between a plane was a very bad idea. When entering the plain, Vergil gasped, the power of the drain was immense. Vergil breathed heavily for a few moments then opened his booth. He stepped into darkness. The blackest black there was. Nothing else. Vergil jammed his eyes shut and thought *"Remember Vergil, always keep your eyes closed in the Abyss and rely on your hearing and feeling"* Vergil kneeled down after walking blindly for 20 minutes. He stayed absolutely still after making sure that the butterfly box could be opened easily. He sat there. And sat there, he lost track of time. And when he was about

to move and go back he heard a rustle. Vergil smelled without moving his nostrils. A musky, stale scent traveled over Vergil. "*Perfect,*" Vergil thought "*A smell maybe able to fool dumb hunters but not me!* He waited until the noise was about 15 feet away from him, and Vergil released the butterfly box with a quick jerk. The white creatures quickly scuttled after the daemon, piling on his black outline of a form. The outline grew smaller and smaller, until it was a little black orb. The creatures scuttled back into the box with the orb. Vergil had changed some key aspects of the box to make it a capture, nothing else.

Finding the gate back from the Abyss to the regular world, Vergil quickly made use of a traveling pad to the *Arkensulmos Mountains.* Vergil found himself at a giant gate, hidden by the snow, only see able to those who knew it was there. Rapping on the door, Vergil said "One, three, five, seven, we be the force from heaven." A crack sounded and the snow parted to a dimly lit hall. Walking in, the doors sealed again. Vergil kept on walking, finally entering a waiting room of sorts, a giant pad was in a corner of the room. with a small panel aside of it. *"My ultimatum will be working again if this goes correctly."* Vergil thought. He set the room that his ultimatum was stored in and set it in. With a purple flash, the giant bunny appeared. Vergil nodded and brought the black orb out of his box. Placing it on its head, Vergil started murmuring a binding spell. A rhombus of runes glistened on the forehead of the rabbit. The orb sunk into the runes and just a few moments after, the bunny breathed, and opened its eyes and turned its head towards Vergil. "I acknowledge your successful hunt. I am bound to your service." The bunny said, then went on all fours. Vergil blinked and nodded, walking forward through a passage continuing out of the room.

When Vergil opened a door to a meeting hall, he saw a humanoid standing in the front of the room, while 17 people where sitting organized, each holding a odd item of sorts, there where 18 chairs, one was empty. The man in the front of the room paused and said, "Vergil, large items go over there." Vergil motioned to his Ultimatum and it nodded and padded over. The man smiled "Though you are late, it looks like your contribution to the super weapon is large." The man started speaking again "Now, as I was saying, the political system has gone out of hand and we have a contract from Srikas himself. The war is going badly, the humans that we support are losing, despite our and the water and ice elemental's efforts. Fire, earth and air still remain against us. So we have been planning to do the following," He paused "Srikas, our leader, the one, will concentrate on the politics with the humans and elementals, the three are commanding on the field right now, so we," The man said motioning to himself,"the five, are the ones who are trying to get this mess settled with a shadowy way." He motioned to the first row of chairs, seven in total "The seven will each be given a target to eliminate," He now motioned to the second row, holding eleven chairs "Four of the eleven will accompany our leader in his travels, the other seven will be assisting the seven." He took out a piece of paper "These are the pairings, seven in front of eleven: Phantome - Gialbir, Xelgion - Rostali, Vergil - Laesp'awn, Volke - Lunalio, El'Raga - Yuilut, Elax - Goydain, and Kaur - Venkla." The man bowed his head and walked out of the room.

Vergil waited until most other sevens and elevens stood up before walking up. "Ah, Laesp'awn, haven't seen you in awhile. How are you?" Laesp'awn smirked, a vein of fire traveling across his cheek. "Alright, but knowing you your doing better." Vergil grinned "Hey, can I blame myself?" Laesp'awn chuckled, then took a serious face. "Vergil, you are the one with the contract, see

what it says." Vergil took it off the bench and read it aloud, "Target: Cinead of the Fire Lords." All color drained from Vergil's face "They.....they don't know how I am related to him, right?" Vergil asked Laesp'awn. Laesp'awn grimaced and said "I bet they do, they are doing this so that you can inherit the title of Fire Lord, I don't why they would want you to kill him personally, though. Vergil wasn't listening though, just staring at the innocent little piece of paper with a deadly message.

Vergil came back to Calamity Refuge, mind stressed and sad, he decided to go to the watch tower at lookout, he needed something to focus on.

Experiments

By Sudanna - Oct 23 2008

Nalyd looked over the shriveled remains of the latest experiment. He had lost several more machines this time, and they would be expensive to replace. The power spirals were still functional, though. He had repaired the one from the first experiment with a variation of coral that hardened into crystal upon death. Nalyd cursed his ill fortune. He finally had access to a high-quality Shaping lab such as this and he was squandering his resources! Nalyd slashed at the sick-looking fetus on the floor with Lifesower, barely feeling any resistance as the blade passed through.

Sighing, Nalyd turned to the wreckage of the chemical intravenous regulator. This, he would have to entirely replace. The creature's energy-storing glands had discharged right at the wrecked thing. He'd have to place another order, and his funds were waning. He would have to prioritize his ideas. Start smaller. Nalyd paced about before quickly Shaping a small, temporary Thahd to clean up.

Nalyd exhaled slowly and sat against the wall. His essence was very much drained- it took a spectacular level of control to try Shaping an entirely new beast. He needed rest, that's it. He would replace the machine in the morning. The Scythe's denizens shifted to a sweeter tune as he drifted to sleep.

Dire Tidings

By Nioca - Oct 24 2008

"I don't believe so..." w-dueck said. He stood up, stumbled, then fell back into the couch. It took him two more attempts to remain standing. Then, he stumbled to the coat rack and donned his robes.

Nioca stood as well. Unlike w-dueck, he was well aware of how Amritae could throw someone's balance off, and thus was capable of walking without even a stagger. "Thank you for your time."

With a slight smile, w-dueck nodded and walked away. After he heard the front door of his citadel close, he approached the shade that had taken w-dueck's robes. "Well?"

"Sssssorry, massster." The shade hissed.

"Of course." Nioca said, a vicious tirade at the tip of his tongue. However, the citadel door opening again distracted his thoughts. At once, a shriek went through the building as the shades suddenly rallied against an intruder. They had strict orders; apprehend anyone not of the Refuge and disarm them. Nioca, taking the cue, drew Crusader's Protectorate with his right hand and prepared a Smite spell in his left, holding it out in front of him.

A tense moment passed. Then a struggling man in yellow platemail was dragged into the room by two shades. A third was holding a vicious blade that glowed brightly. The two shades brought the man before Nioca and shoved him onto his knees. With a thick accent, the man spoke, "I suppose you want to kill me. I suffose you wan soo cill me."

Nioca lowered his blade and looked at the man, astonished. "Yirri?"

The man jerked his head up to look at his captor. "Nioca?" He said, stunned. Nioca signaled off the shades as the man named Yirri stood and continued to speak. "What a pleasant surprise to see you here! Thank the gods! Wha a fleasan surrise soo see you here! Sanc the jods!"

"It's been too long, old friend." Nioca said, embracing him briefly. As they broke apart, a shade handed Yirri back his weapon. "What brings you here?"

"Dire tidings. Is there somewhere we can talk in private?

"Indeed. One of the guest quarters is bound to be complete by now." Nioca said. "Follow me."

It had been disturbing news indeed. Still, Nioca had no time to dwell on it. He had offered Yirri the chance to stay for a while, one he graciously accepted. Nioca felt lost. Only a day ago, he was someone who's biggest fear was whether he would complete a scenario in the near future. Now, he had to look over his shoulder for gods-only-know-what.

"*Nioca! Get to Robsta's hut, now!*" Aryll's voice shouted telepathically into Nioca's mind, almost scaring him out of it.

"*What's going on?*" He responded, regaining a modicum of sense and heading towards Robsta's.

"*I... I think Jewels just got eaten by a tree!*" Aryll said, sounding panicked.

"*Excuse me?*"

"*She came out of Robsta's, blasted a tree, then healed it and it... it.. it ate her! She just got absorbed right into it!*"}}

Nioca approached the tree outside Robsta's hut. It was large, foliated, and rather inconspicuous. "*This tree?*" Nioca asked, humored.

"*You don't believe me.*" Aryll said, an accusation in her voice.

"*Actually...*" Nioca said, kneeling to examine the grass with a hand on the hilt of his sword. "*I'm starting to.*" The grass near the tree was scorched in such a way that it resembled a set of footprints. Nioca circled the tree, sword out, and examined the tree thoroughly. It looked perfectly healthy. Nothing odd about it at all. Cautiously, Nioca gave the bark a slight tap with his blade. It didn't respond. "*There's nothing here now.*" He said to Aryll telepathically. However, as he turned to leave, a glint of metal caught his eye. Looking closer, he noticed that it looked like the edge of a ring caught in the bark, near the roots.

Ambitious, Nioca jammed Crusader's Protectorate inside the ring, and pried at it. However, it didn't budge. Still ambitious, Nioca then put his hand on the tree and started a chant. His hand glowed red for a brief moment, but nothing seemed to happen. Backing up, Nioca uttered another chant, and a shield formed around him. It's timing was fortuitous; at that moment, the spot Nioca had touched exploded outward, superheated from a divine fire spell. The tree smoked heavily as it caught on fire. Nioca rushed forward and grabbed the now loose ring, which was considerably larger than he had first thought. Casting a Sanctuary spell and cursing under his breath as his hand received severe burns, he ran away from the tree, which had been completely engulfed in flames. Then he examined his prize. It had been the same thing his insane twin had inspired him to get, and the same thing he had tried to steal from w-dueck during their conversation: a set of Administrative keys.

"*Well, Aryll, it appears that this wasn't for naught.*" Nioca said telepathically. "*This might be just the thing I need to give Jewels life a more thorough examination. Assuming she's still alive, of course.*"

"*You mean assuming that blowing up the tree didn't kill her.*" Aryll replied.

"*If that tree really did eat her, which it looks like it did, then I just did the CRF a favor by blowing up a carnivorous tree. If she is dead, she can be revived using a spell. In the meantime, I need you to start following Vergil.*"

"*Isn't he the nutjob with those crazy things that come out of that box?*" Aryll replied, a note of hesitance in her voice.

"I wouldn't say nutjob, but yeah. With Jewels currently getting digested, Vergil is our only lead on what's happening. And Aryll, if it comes down to it, don't hesitate to hit him with everything you've got."

At that moment, his RMM started beeping. Digging it out, he discovered that an explosion had taken place inside the Geneforge boards, and that Nalyd was currently in there. Deciding that he needed to check it out, he headed to the Geneforge forum.

Nioca walked into the Geneforge Moderation Centre, only to be confronted by a Thahd. However, it didn't attack. In fact, it was cleaning. Pacified, Nioca sheathed his sword and found Nalyd sleeping peacefully. Rather than wake him, Nioca decided to write a small note to him, which read, *"Welcome to Calamity Refuge, Nalyd, and congratulations on becoming a moderator. Stop by my citadel sometime for a drink; I'd be happy to bring you up to speed on what you need to know around here. Signed, Nioca."*

Not wanting to place it somewhere where Nalyd might miss it, Nioca brushed his finger across a nearby puddle of water, and then across the top of the note. He then, gently, stuck it to Nalyd's head and headed back to his citadel. He needed a good night's sleep, and a shade would wake him if Nalyd stopped by.

Nioca entered his bedchambers. After pulling off his shoes, Nioca marched to the secret passage down into the citadel bunker and said, "Sereota emgas phtros." The wall faded, and Nioca headed down. Placing the keys in a lockbox, he then headed back up and fell into bed. As the wall sealed back up, Nioca faded into a restful sleep.

A Rare Sight Indeed

By Vergil - Oct 26 2008

Vergil had been thinking. *"A rare sight indeed, eh?"* Vergil thought to himself. On one hand, he could go through with it and the fire lords would lose a corrupt leader, the bluebloods would be satisfied, and the war would be stopped to a screeching halt. Yet on the other, he would have to kill his own father, his own blood, his own flame. He would lose the bluebloods and would be a tratior, yet he would remain loyal to his family. It was too much at one time, too much. There was communication, politics and- Vergil paused, the air seemed to get colder. Vergil bolted upright and ran, yet he could still feel the coldness following him, trailing him. Running past the Spam board, Vergil turned around and put a halo of fire right in front of him. Just as he expected, one section of the fire wall shimmered for a moment, then was invisible. A smile creaked in Vergil's face. Running up the admin tower, he reached the teleportation tubes and entered one, straight to the fire plain. Vergil show the edges of the booth frost, but payed no attention. When entering the fire plane, he definatly felt the presence gone.

Vergil saw an ash elemental, sitting in a cornor, desperatly trying to kindle himself. Vergil ran over and spread his hands into the bulk of the ash. The ash turned into tinder and started burning brightly. The now fire elemental smiled and thanked Vergil before hobbling away. *"There are always going to be more if the war doesn't stop"* Vergil thought. Vergil then decided that he must continue with the assignment. His face hardened, Vergil now headed into an ally a couple blocks south, knocked on a dumpster 7 times. It opened to a grinning Laesp'awn. "Glad ya made it." Vergil nodded "I got my prototype weapon, the ripper." Laesp'awn motioned to his arm, there was a firing tube strapped to his arm and comming out of it was a rope attached to a metal prong. At the end of the prong, there was 4 grooved hooks with serrated edges, forming a point at the tip. "When I fire this at someone, the prong goes through it, then the impact reverses the prongs in the oppisite direction, firmly lodging inside the persons body, then I can recall the rope and tear them in half." Laesp'awn grinned "Useful for assassination." Vergil nodded and said, c'mon, lets go to the palace, we are using entry point 7, through the roof." Laesp'awn grunted and trudged off.

Embracing Destiny

By Jewels - Oct 26 2008

Snoop, thief, *murderer*... The list of things Jewels didn't like about Nioca was growing. She had observed him carefully, coming right to her. He must have been watching. No, the shade by his side had been watching. They didn't speak but their expressions told Jewels they were communicating. She wished for a moment that she could have heard them. That she could know their motives, but from her point of view Nioca's actions made him a traitor. Maybe he was still insane. The look of gratification in Nioca's eye at finding her keys had sparked a memory. A very dangerous memory. Her resolve not to harm other with her powers had been all but obliterated. *I never did have any willpower,* she chuckled to herself. The flames burned extra bright at her thoughts, consuming what was left of the tree faster and faster until only ashes remained. Jewels stood above the ashes, a constant form of flame burning of it's own accord. Her heart mourned for the loss of her brief sanctuary. Her peace and tranquility... her rest had been violated... destroyed. Slaughtered by Nioca. As Jewels hovered there in flowing fire she was loathe to admit to herself how she felt. She had spent the better part of her life choosing to love the unlovable, but where was that love now? She began to argue with herself. *Burned away with my peace and tranquility... No, it can't be gone... but it is... I can find it again... It's not lost, it has been extinguished. You have been extinguished... I won't believe it... Ignorance doesn't change the truth.*

Jewels shoved her thoughts and feelings aside. She told herself she no longer cared what Nioca planned to do with her Admin Tower keys. Let him blow the whole place up. It was of no consequence. It wasn't her home. It never would be. She couldn't change what she was. She couldn't run away from herself. Suddenly Robsta burst out of his hut, Stonecrusher in hand heading straight towards her. She knew he didn't recognize her but it didn't matter. *Just another*

murderer... she thought. *Time to embrace my destiny*... Jewels dissipated before Robsta reached her leaving only smoldering ash in her wake.

Cinead had been waiting for her. He knew the time had come. She had awakened! Awakened to the vileness that was humanity. Awakened to the cess pool that had become the world. Awakened to the most central need in her soul. To cleanse, to purge, to sanctify until only the most pure and refined remained. She was ready. Ready to join him in his cause.

Cinead welcomed Jewels back warmly. "Oh, Daddy," she sighed, "it's so hard. I'm struggling so much..."

Her father shushed her. "You have only known for a day, child. It's always hard on the first day. We all must struggle in the beginning, but we always come to the same conclusion." Cinead sat down across a table from her. "So what have you concluded?"

Jewels searched herself for the answer. What did she know? Finally she looked up at him. "Mankind ravages the world, and the love of man is folly."

Cinead chuckled, "Something like that, anyway. You can never count on the mortals. They will always let you down, and we have to stick together in order to survive."

"I wish mom was here. I've been finding it hard to even remember her. Her comforting lullaby's, the soft touch of her light green fingers, that sweet earthy smell..." Jewels' voice trailed off to a sob.

"I know, I miss her too, but her absence is just another reminder," Cinead's voice cracked a bit, "another painful reminder of the corruption of man. They always fear what they don't understand... and destroy what they fear. You know I fight for her, right?"

"Yeah, I know dad, but what about Vergil? You said we all come to the same conclusion so why doesn't he fight with you?"

"Woah, that's a... um... I know we haven't talked about it much but... you're brother, well, he inherited a bit too much blueblood from his mother. I thought, maybe, I'd be able to bring our bloods together, you know, like joining two kingdoms, but, well, it turns out we had irreconcilable differences and Vergil... he took after his mother. Sometimes I think the whole thing was one big mistake. Wish I'd never..."

"Daddy!" Jewels broke in berating him, "Don't say that. Don't even think that! I've only known Vergil a little while but even though he's been frustrating and... irreverent and... completely inappropriate at times... When it comes to the important things, Daddy, he really does come through. He even taught me how to put out quickfire with him."

"What?!" Cinead's eyebrows went up in surprise, "Put out quickfire! Really? He... he made a cyclone with you?"

Jewels nodded, "I didn't have any idea what I was doing but he walked me through the whole thing. Daddy, he's a good guy. You should be proud of him."

"Well, I'll be..." Cinead scratched his head. "Maybe I have been too hard on him. I can't expect him to be just like me, huh? Besides, he never did like following orders. I don't think he'd do

very well in a military setting. I don't suppose I should hold it against him for not wanting to join up."

Accepted Invitation

By Sudanna - Oct 27 2008

Nalyd softly stirred from his light nap and opened his eyes. And couldn't see a thing. Panicking, he leaped to his feet, fell into the wall heavily, yelled and lashed out wildly with the Scythe(Which he had kept in his hands while sleeping). An anguished roar rewarded him. Scrabbling at his face, Nalyd backed away from the wall and tore a piece of paper from his face. His Thahd stood before him, sans left arm. Straightening from his combat-ready crouch, Nalyd sighed and looked at the poor creation. Best to absorb it now. Cleaning was done anyways.

After scooping the last bits of essence from the dissolved Thahd, Nalyd looked at the crumpled and slightly torn piece of paper on the floor. After processing Nioca's invitation, he went to the desk in a corner of the room. Breaking out the good paper - his supplier would charge more if he used anything else -, he began to fill out an order form for the intravenous regulator. Grimacing at his offered price, he sighed and Shaped a tiny messenger bat. Chittering, it grabbed the message in it's dry, toothless mouth and flapped off through the open doorway, leaving a new layer of vinegar-stench in it's wake.

Again looking at the invitation, Nalyd stood and walked to the doorway. As his light boots clacked against the cold marble surface of the Shaping platform, he was struck by a thought. Several of the experiments had attempted to attack him, but their malformed bodies couldn't even live for more than a few seconds, let alone move. If he ever got one *right*, the results could be disastrous. He hadn't been following one of the primary rules of Shaping. *Always* have bodyguards. Preferably, meatshields capable of soaking up an explosion or distracting an unstable creation long enough for the Shaper to skedaddle. Nalyd pocketed the note and stepped off the platform. His Scythe clacked against the ground with every step. Leaning on it heavily, he stretched out his left hand. He had recovered enough essence for this. Ropy, dripping tentacles of semigelatinous essence stretched from quivering fingers. Worming themselves into a tall, muscular humanoid, they began to smooth over and redden. Definition began to show. The traditional blue pattern faded into place on the chest. A Battle Alpha.

The great, red muscular beast looked about blearily. It was more twice the height of Nalyd, who was used to being short anyways. It's enormous shape was blubbery with a thick underlay of augmented muscles. The Alpha scratched it's protruding potbelly and noticed Nalyd. Growling, it stepped forward, only to be hit with a wall of mental force. It's simple mind couldn't last more than half a minute against the trained mental onslaught of Nalyd. Cracks formed in it's mental barricade and worming bits of Nalyd's consciousness stretched throughout the Alpha's brain. Whimpering, the creation took another step forward before falling to one knee and reaching out

at Nalyd with a huge, monstrous arm. The thing collapsed and twitched about for a few seconds- dangerous indeed, with a beast that size and strength. After a few moments, it stood up again, it's eyes now empty of even the primitive, apelike intelligence it had shown earlier. Nalyd shuffled about in the pocket of his robes and fished out a loincloth - so as to not startle the outsiders. The Alpha reached out a hand and fastened the loincloth around it's waist. The short, wiry black hair dotted sparsely about it's form shook as the Alpha scratched it's back with hands as big as a man's head, pulling the layer of blubber about as it did. Nalyd sighed, drained, and led the beast outside. His small form looked ridiculous next to the towering Alpha.

Right then. Off to Nioca's citadel. Wherever that was. Nalyd sat down heavily against the wall of the Moderation Centre for a breather while the Alpha went looking around for a citadel. Nalyd realized his mistake about a minute later. Courtesy of an adrenalin surge, he sprinted after the Alpha. Thankfully, nobody had seen it and tried to exterminate the "pest". Nalyd looked about for a bit before he spotted the citadel in the streets of Calamity Refuge. He entered what looked like a lobby, and watched a greenish shade flit through a wall. Sitting down, with the deadly Alpha looming above him, Nalyd looked about. A drink sounded good right now.

Of What Was, What Is, and What Should Have Been

By Nioca - Oct 31 2008

Nioca suddenly got up. He didn't know what inspired him to do so, but he was suddenly wide-awake. Everything around him took on an aura, one of suspicion and paranoia. He became aware that he had gone to bed fully-clothed and equipped; thanking whatever possessed him to do so, Nioca stumbled out of his bedchambers, noting that the door had been left opened. Something was wrong.

Nioca stepped cautiously out of the Citadel. It was a bright day; a feeling of absolute perfection floated through the air, carrying the sounds of laughter to him. Nioca looked to his right; a small picnic was taking place in the center of the island, near a small pond. Jewels, w-dueck, Vergil, Nalyd, and Robsta were all gathered around a cloth, eating a wide variety of foods, including homebaked cookies. It was a moment of contentment.

Nioca walked towards them as their conversation drifted across the breeze. Was everything returning to normal? He hoped so. Perhaps he was foolish in his investigations towards Vergil and Jewels...

"Where's Nioca?" w-dueck asked.

"He's not coming." Jewels replied. Nioca savored the sweet, innocent tone in her voice... it's been a while since he heard it. But who's she to decide he's not coming?

"A pity. Nalyd was hoping to meet him." Nalyd said.

"Ah, but more for us!" Vergil added. He then said something Nioca didn't catch, and everyone started laughing.

Nioca smiled as he watched, and his worries dissipated. At last, nothing was wrong with the world. Jewels looked up at him and smiled. Nioca couldn't help but grin. Then he closed his eyes. It was a dream... it had to be. Yet when he opened his eyes, the picnic was still there. Finally convinced of it's reality, Nioca kneeled next to the others. He hit the ground with an odd sounding thump, but thought nothing of it. Then he looked up a Jewels again, and saw her face: a look of mingled shock and pain. Compounded on top of a small trickle of blood that started from the corner of her mouth. Her eyes took on a reddish glow.

"Jewels, are yo-" w-dueck started. However, with another thump, a crossbow bolt embedded itself in w-dueck's chest. w-dueck fell backwards, twitching, a reddish glow forming in his eyes. Jewels had fallen forward and was also convulsing. Vergil leapt to his feet, his katana already out of its sheath, pushing something under his cloak. A panic alarm went off around the island, with news banners flashing red warnings and sirens wailing. Robsta started to draw his blade, but was hit, and also fell convulsing. Jewels and w-dueck meanwhile had a bloody nimbus forming around their entire body, whilst they still convulsed. Robsta started suffering the same fate. Nalyd stood, wielding the scythe, but took a hit from a crossbow bolt. He fell backwards, whilst Vergil, who had started to charge towards the hostile fire, took a bolt in the leg. Oddly, though, neither of them were affected the way the other three were, whom had now all perished. Nioca, still rooted in place by the shock of the sudden change, yanked his own sword out and started preparing rituals for combat.

Suddenly, Vergil shouted and charged forward. However, the bolts had stopped coming; it seemed as if the shooter had found his marks. A small figure could be seen standing up on a building, only to vanish with a flash of light. Vergil turned around and hastened for the fallen bodies of his fellow members. Nioca cast a healing spell on Nalyd, who had pulled the bolt out. However, much to his chagrin, it had no effect. Vergil busied himself with Jewels. Holding her head in his hands, Vergil focused, and a white light filled Jewels' body. Nioca tried to heal Nalyd again, but failed. Nalyd shuddered once, then died. Meanwhile, Vergil finished what was obviously a resurrection spell. The light faded from Jewels body, and she sat up. "Jewels?" Vergil asked her. However, Jewels just turned and looked at him. She made no other indication she even knew he existed. "Jewels, are you alright?" But Jewels merely stared at Vergil, uncomprehending, with eyes that looked completely empty. That's when it hit Nioca; her eyes were just as empty as when she was dead. The bolts had a dark enchantment on them, one he had seen once before; they were spiritkillers, a weapon capable of completely destroying a soul. Jewels was forever gone. As were w-dueck and Robsta. Nioca had tears form in his eyes. Was this how it would end?

"What's wrong?" Aryll asked, a panicked note in her voice. Nioca turned to face her.

"Are you blind?!" Nioca shouted at her. He was on the edge of hysteria. "Look at them!"

"Look at who?"

"What the hell is wrong with you, Aryll?!? Are you enjoying this?!" Nioca shouted. He waved at the bodies and looked at them again.

But they weren't there. The grounds were clear; no blanket, no lifeless bodies, nothing. Just green grass. "Nioca..." Aryll's voice gently drifted to him. "Are you feeling okay?"

Nioca didn't respond. He felt sick and relieved simultaneously. Mostly sick, and somewhat dizzy. "Wait... vertigo?" Nioca sat down as the vertigo passed, and he thought back to the vertigo he felt near the end of the Time-Fracture Incident. Time Vertigo. This wasn't a dream. It wasn't a hallucination. This happened... no, would have happened. If the Time-Fracture Incident hadn't ripped everyone apart, Jewels, w-dueck, and Robsta would be a kind of dead that was beyond resurrection. The irony; in destroying their lives and relationships, it wound up saving them. He communicated what he learned with Aryll.

"But wait..." Aryll said, concerned. "How would the incident affect the assassin? I mean, if he was here in the original timeline, why isn't he here now?"

Nioca blanched. "Who's to say he isn't?" He reached into his robes and drew Crusader's Protectorate. Almost on cue, a bolt came whizzing at his heart and struck the blade. A red flash of light made Nioca stumble backward as the crystal tip of the bolt shattered, and the rest of the bolt ricocheted into the grass. Nioca immediately raised a protective field around himself, while Aryll changed from a human appearance to a fiery orange spectre. Another bolt flew and ricocheted off of Nioca's magical shield. Nioca retaliated with a Smite spell, and Aryll fired a beam of fire at the source. Both missed, but caused the assassin to start fleeing. Aryll fired another beam, and a blast of electricity sent the assassin flying off the rooftop.

Nioca and Aryll rushed to the prone form, but before they could do anything, the wounded assassin pulled out an emerald and vanished in a flash of light. Nioca bent over with his hands on his knees, panting. "That won't be the last... we see of him." He then, without another word, stalked back to his Citadel.

Nioca quickly ordered a shade to bring him Amritae. Then he looked again at Aryll, who had resumed her human appearance. "Why aren't you following Vergil?"

"He discovered something was following him. I managed to track him to the Admin tower, but..." She finished inconclusively.

"So we have two flaming Admins on the lam, an assassin on the loose, Timeline vision, a burning carnivorous tree, a new moderator, an exploding Geneforge forum, dire news from Ermaria..." Nioca trailed off as he finished summarizing. "Something tells me that this universe doesn't like the idea of relaxation and peace anymore." Nioca smiled slightly at this thought, and accepted the glass of Amritae he had just been brought.

"What's the next move?" Aryll asked.

"Vergil and Jewels are a dead-end at the moment, since both of them have taken an impromptu vacation. I'd be tempted to think they had advance warning on the assassination, if it weren't for the timeline jump." Nioca took a sip of Amritae, then settled deep into a squishy armchair. "Besides, right now the assassin is of far more import."

"Why do you think he's after Calamity Refuge?" Aryll inquired.

"I don't know. A more pressing question is why his spiritkiller bolts affected... err, would have affected Jewels, Robsta, and w-dueck, but not Vergil and Nalyd." Nioca replied, troubled. "There has to be a link in one of those two groups. Some underlying connection that was targeted." Nioca then drained almost the entire glass of Amritae. He put his head in his hands for a brief moment as the liquid momentarily removed him of all his faculties.

Aryll waited for him to recover before continuing. "Residence?" Nioca looked up at her. "Perhaps it's members that are infused with power from the island itself?" She added tentatively.

Nioca nodded. "Sounds good in theory, with one exception. Vergil has dwelled here for longer than all save for Jewels. However, he was unaffected. Besides, any power from this island couldn't be targeted that specifically without prior contact."

Aryll thought for a moment, before shaking her head. "I can't think of anything."

"Nor can I. It's bad enough that someone's trying to kill most of Calamity Refuge's members, but without a motivation, we have no idea where or who he might go after next." Nioca finished his Amritae. "Thankfully, we have a few days to figure that out before all hell breaks loose on the Ermaria front. I may have to handle the troubles there personally if this keeps up, and I don't want to leave with an assassin on the loose."

"Go back?!?" Aryll yelped. It reached him both audibly and mentally as a result of Aryll's shock. "Nioca, they consider you a traitor there! If yo-"

"I'm well aware of the risks involved with such an endeavor, Aryll." Nioca said with his voice raised. "But either I go to them, or they'll come to us. Either way, I'll have to deal with it shortly."

"But they'll kill-" Aryll started.

"This isn't up for debate." Nioca said, in a tone that had a strong note of finality. "Look on the bright side. I'll get see Syla again."

"Oh, great. Her. Just what makes up for dying horrifically." Aryll said in a disapproving voice.

A shade approached at that moment, warding off the impending argument. "Nalyd is in the foyer." It hissed.

"We'll talk later." Nioca said to Aryll. "Show him to the parlour." He then added to the shade.

Nioca sat with a tray of drinks on the table. Amritae was conspicuously missing from the assortment; Nioca wasn't in the mood to share the last of it, nor did he desire to pay out the 6200 gold needed to purchase another bottle. Not that he could have; he didn't actually have 6200 gold, due to the low funds incurred by building the citadel.

Nalyd stepped in, followed by his hulk of a battle alpha bodyguard. Nioca stood up out of reflex upon seeing the beast, but promptly passed it off as a mere courtesy. "Hello. It's nice to see you here, Nalyd." Nioca said, reaching out to shake Nalyd's hand. Nayld shook it, then settled down into the nearest sofa. Without prompting, he grabbed a bottle of alcohol and poured himself a glass. "Rough day?" Nioca asked.

"Exhausting." Nalyd replied, quickly downing the glass and pouring another. "Aren't you going to have any?" Nalyd asked, setting the bottle down again.

"No. I'm already somewhat... intoxicated." Nioca replied carefully. "*Well I'm not lying.*" He thought to himself; the Amritae was still affecting him. He recalled the first (and also last) time he mixed Amritae and alcohol; it didn't end well for him or his digestive system. "Though I suppose ice water wouldn't hurt." Nioca added.

"Suit yourself." Nalyd said indifferently.

"Enjoying the facilities?" Nioca said, a touch of humor in his voice.

"They're excellent. Nalyd haven't seen a Shaping lab like that for quite some time."

"True enough. w-dueck outdid himself in that respect. Though the security features are lacking, but, judging from your bodyguard and your weapon, that's nothing you haven't already surmounted." Nioca was struggling with the small talk. His mind was still focused on his vision of the other timeline, and what connected the three that were obliterated. "What are you researching, anyway?"

"Nothing important. Just this and that." Nalyd responded.

"Ah. Well, at any rate, I may be able to help with that. If you need funding of any kind, or a private testing area, let me know." Nioca inwardly grimaced the second after he said this. Why in his right mind would he offer to fund this?

Apparently, Aryll was listening in on his thoughts and added, *"Because you're a good person that's kind, considerate, and in no way hell-bent on destroying other people's lives?*"

"No, that's not it." Nioca replied humorously. *"Though I do suppose it could prove to be a good business venture if it succeeds. Care to join us, Aryll?*"

"Are you alright?" Nalyd asked.

Apparently, Nioca had completely tuned out while talking to Aryll. Shaking himself slightly, he replied, "My apologies. One of my shades had some information regarding the citadel." Nioca smiled inwardly. "*Beautiful. I'm getting good at this.*"

"Disgusting is what it is." Aryll interjected. Nioca ignored her.

"So what is there to do around here?" Nalyd asked.

"Not much. Posting and conversing, obviously, but I really consider this a place to relax. And my new home, of course." Nioca leaned back, waiting for Nalyd to respond. However, Nalyd was staring with rapt attention at some point behind him. Baffled, Nioca turned around to see Aryll, dressed in a stunning white dress and looking the part of a fairy-tale princess. *"Show off."* Nioca chided her. Aryll didn't respond but simply seated herself next to him with all the poise she could muster. "Ah, allow me to introduce my bodyguard. Nalyd, this is Aryll. Aryll, Nalyd. He's recently joined us from Spiderweb."

"A pleasure to meet you." Aryll said to Nalyd, holding out her hand. Nalyd didn't respond. Aryll let her hand fall to her lap. Several moments passed where Nalyd just sat, stunned.

Finally, he stuttered out, "N-nice to meet you too." Coming out of whatever spell Aryll had over him, he then turned to Nioca and asked, "Is she... effective?"

"Extremely." Nioca replied.

"*Er... Nioca...*" Aryll said hesitantly, with a tone that suggested squeamishness. "*Are you sure he means combat effectiveness?*"

"*What do you mean by that? What else could he be... oh...*" Nioca trailed off as comprehension dawned on him. "*Well, if that's what you're thinking, can you really blame him? Look how you're dressed!*" Aryll didn't respond, but he could still feel an aura of discomfort radiating from her. "So, Nalyd, have you experimented with the GeneNexus yet?" Nioca asked, hoping to steer the conversation and Nalyd away from Aryll.

"The what?" Nalyd asked, startled out of his reverie.

"I take that as a no." Nioca replied. "It's a device in the basement of the Geneforge form. It powers most Genescript within the forum. The Blades of Avernum and Blades of Exile forums share the Blades Nexus, which is a similar device that allows noding... and... scripting..." Nioca trailed off. "Excuse me a moment, one of my shades has a situation. I'll be right back." Aryll, taking the hint and desiring any excuse to put distance between her and Nalyd, followed him to the incomplete second floor.

"*That's it, Aryll! That's the connection!*" Nioca said to Aryll.

"*A situation with a shade?*" Aryll said, confused.

"*No, Blades! Scripting and Noding! These are assassins from Ermaria!*" Nioca said urgently.

"*But Yirri said-*" Aryll began, terrified.

"*Yirri thought it'd take them longer to mobilize, I know! But obviously this isn't the main force! This is someone making a power play and hoping that they can score points for themselves with the Emperor!*" Nioca began to think quickly. "*That's why he attacked Calamity Refuge. It's a foothold towards the larger establishments from which Noding and Scripting is practiced.*"

"*"So you don't have much of a choice but to go back...*" Aryll stated. She then started pleading with him. "*Nioca, please, this isn't your fight... find someone else, someone more-*"

"*More what, Aryll? More understanding? Only a few people know the connection between designing and Ermaria. More capable? As far as I know, I'm the only one that's even been there! Or perhaps you mean someone more distant to you?*"

"*YES!*" Aryll mentally screamed out in frustration and despair. "*I DON'T WANT TO SEE YOU DIE! YOU MEAN TO MUCH TO ME! YOU'RE ALL I HAVE LEFT!*"

"*Aryll...*" Nioca began gently. "*Someone needs to do this. Right now, I'm the only person in the position to do something about it. If I turned my back now, I'd deserve nothing more than death.*"

"*But...*" Aryll began, and the tone of immense sadness and despair in her voice almost made Nioca reconsider. However, he knew what had to be done. "*If you don't want me to die, then make sure I don't. I certainly don't intend to go alone.*"

Aryll remained silent for what felt like an eternity. Finally, she stated, broken, "*What's next?*"

"We aren't leaving immediately. Preparations must be made. First, Yirri must be informed of what has transpired. We'll need him with us on this one, Aryll. Meanwhile, I'll contact Robsta, w-dueck, and Nalyd. They could prove valuable as assets, and, quite frankly, they're safer accompanying me than they are staying here. I'll then make sure w-dueck shuts this entire place down to guests and prevents new registration. That way, only members can get in or out. You'll prepare the recall crystals and the portal for plane shift. Then we'll all meet back here."

Nioca turned to leave, but a gentle voice stopped him. *"Nioca... Please. Be careful. I can't lose you. If I were to lose you forever... I don't know what I'd do. I'd... I'd go insane. I could never forgive myself. Please. Before you go... before you go back to that place... for once, think of how it'll affect those closest to you."*

Nioca couldn't respond. It was then he wished it'd all go away. Could life give him a break? Would he ever just settle down and stay put? Would life allow him to? Why him? Why? Aryll was right; it was hurting the people he cared about, and the people around him. If this didn't stop...

No. He'd make it stop. He'd make those heathens wish they'd never been born. He'd make those who started him down this path pay to the full extent of his deadly abilities. Those that stood in his way would die. Those that resisted would be bent to his will. It was simple. It was plain. It was cruel. It was sickening.

But it was the only way.

Nioca approached Nalyd. "I hate to ask this of you this early, but it appears that an unusual situation has evolved involving yours truly. In short, I need to assemble some people for an expedition, and I was wondering if you were interested in coming along."

"Why?" Nalyd asked.

"I'll pay." Nioca replied.

"Yes, but why do you need people for the expedition?" Nalyd persisted.

"It's... complicated." Nioca said hesitantly. "Suffice it to say that it's a protection detail, of sorts."

"Hmm..." Nalyd said. He seemed to be thinking it over. "Alright. Nalyd is in. What will I need?"

"A little rest, your scythe, and your current bodyguard. That, and possibly a change of clothes." Nioca stated matter-of-factly.

"What's wrong with Nalyd's clothes?" Nalyd said, a touch of offense in his voice.

"We need to blend in a bit. A flashy weapon won't scare people, but your image implies necromancy. And that... Well, it could alarm people. Especially armed people that enjoy sticking metal into other people." Nioca hoped he'd see his side of things.

To no avail. "The clothes stay. Dress however you want, but Nalyd likes his clothing."

Nioca sighed, then said, "Well, we aren't leaving for a couple hours, so take advantage of the guest quarters in the meantime. A shade will show you there." Nioca nodded to him, then headed into his own quarters.

Down in the Citadel complex, Nioca entered one of the rooms off the main room, which turned out to be an armory. He caught his appearance in a mirror and sighed. He was wearing a regular shirt, pants, and boots, making him look like the typical Ermaria commoner. Well, the typical overweight Ermaria commoner; one thing he had liked about the robes was that it hid his weight effectively. The room was sparsely decorated with weaponry and armaments. A few regular weapons layed about. He passed these up and grabbed a blood-red cloak on a hanger. Donning it, he felt a shiver of confidence fill his veins. He then hooked Crusader's Protectorate onto his back, along with a large, platinum shield. The cloak draped over these, concealing his armaments. Nioca then stepped in front of the mirror again. "There we go. And a name... How about Anidon?" The conversation was with himself, admittedly, but it still helped alleviate his nerves. But the thoughts of Ermaria still took him back. Back to another time...

Smoke choked the air as Nioca prowled the streets. An acolyte then, he kept his arms raised, ready on a notice to let loose a blast of ice on anything that might try to kill him. Donnai had been completely leveled by the attack. What fresh hell had the Designers unleashed this time? A demonic plague? Angry wizards? Whatever it was, it had attacked his hometown. More so, it had attack his house. Of course, it was a smoldering ruin now.

"Ghuery!" Nioca shouted, running full-pelt towards the ruins. "Sarah!" He could make out the details now. Charred beams and smoldering ash constituted the remains. "TEVEREN!" Nioca screamed. But it was to no avail. The house was lifeless. Nioca fell to his knees. No. It couldn't be. It can't be. No, no, no, NO, NO!

"Nioca..." A voice rasped nearby. Nioca stumbled to his feet and found his way over to an upturned wagon. Moving it, he found a woman pinned underneath. "I'm... so sorry." She gasped out.

"They're okay, Aryll, they're okay. They can't be dead. They got out. It's okay. We'll all be alright." Nioca said, his voice both a statement and a plea.

"Nioca... your family..."

"No, don't say it! They're fine! And you will be too!" He yelped, tears springing to his eyes as healing spells started pouring into Aryll's body.

"Nioca..." She said, now strong enough to prop herself up against the wagon.

"Don't say it, Aryll! I know they're fine! I'd know if they had... they're fine!" Nioca pleaded, tears trickling down his ash-covered face.

"Nioca, they-" Aryll began, her eyes red from both the smoke and the tears that had started to form in her eyes.

"No, Aryll! NO!" Nioca screamed.

"They're gone, Nioca. I'm sorry... they're gone." Aryll sobbed.

Nothing happened for a moment. It was as if the world had suddenly stopped at these words. Dizzily, Nioca collapsed, too grief-stricken to even try and fight it any longer. His brothers and sister... the only family he had left...

Nioca grabbed onto Aryll for support, and she him. For the longest time, they held onto each other, sobbing. It was only when the sun started rising on the city that they broke apart. Nioca stumbled back to his feet and looked through the ruins again. The sunlight caught a shiny object in the ruins of his house, and Nioca started for it. Digging into the debris, he found a full-length mirror. It was Sarah's; she adored that mirror since the time she got it. A mostly unadorned metal frame with a sapphire embedded in the top of the mirror, it was miraculously undamaged, if a bit dirty. Nioca stared into his reflection. It was a grim reminder of how little he had left. The light in his eyes had left. A smile would likely never again grace his face. His hair no longer obeyed any sort of order. His skin was pale. It was like he was looking at a ghost. He brushed the sapphire with his fingertips. "I promise you. I promise you, sister. Those that did this will pay."

Nioca snapped out of the memory, and realized that tears had been spilling down his front uncontrollably. Shaking himself and wiping his face, Nioca marched out of the complex. It was time to make good on his promise.

The Work of a Lifetime

By Sudanna - Oct 31 2008

A shade showed Nalyd to the guest quarters. Leaving the freshly christened Alpha, Kurj, outside, with orders to let nobody in, Nalyd wearily flung himself onto the small bed, which was still more than adequate for his diminutive frame. He cradled the Scythe to his chest and tried to resist sleep. Shaping, especially failed Shaping, was ridiculously draining. Sitting up slowly, he fished an essence pod out of his robes and hungrily began to scoop out the faintly glowing goo. It helped some, and Nalyd retrieved another.

Standing up, he went over to the little desk in the corner and barked a few mystic syllables. The world seemed to slow, and Nalyd's form moved with unnatural speed. He pulled from an inner pocket a tightly folded sheet of paper. Sitting at the desk, he rapidly unfolded it. It turned out to be deceptively huge, and disturbingly clean and bright. Pulling at a shining metal pen pen clipped to a silver necklace, he began to sketch the vague outline of a creation. As it took on greater detail, long and illegible equations were scrawled all about the edges of the actual sketch and spilled over into huge paragraphs of illegibly scrawled notes, which were intertwined with sketched closeups of individual parts and organs. Detailed inserts of specific tissues and cells grew outward from those in a complicated weave. The huge roll of paper spilled over the edges of the desk and he had to begin shifting it about. Diagrams of the DNA molecule stretched and spun throughout the entire paper, filling in gaps with an intricate twining spiral. The very makings of life blossomed upon the creased and smudged paper. The most elemental aspects unwound themselves before Nalyd's hand. The very chemical fires of life were unmasked and bound to his design as Nalyd's trained hand blurred over the plans that were now growing more and more indecipherable.

Then Nalyd began correcting, proofreading, expanding, trimming, eliminating, detailing, fixing, altering, innovating, substituting, discarding, changing, slashing, creating, mixing, reversing, and a thousand other equivalent terms. Then he did it again. And again. And again. Then he factored in for the limits of all the machines, all the constraints of his ability, all the possible variations in surroundings, environment, and interference, and a million other annoyances. Then he went back and fixed and trimmed and proofread again. And again, and again, and again.

Entire organ structures vanished before the constraints of reality. Limbs were added, removed, moved. Tissues reorganized themselves, senses dulled and sharpened. The intricate neural workings changed their fundamental aspects again and again. The spinal column had it's vertebrae adjusted, the kidneys were merged with the liver, the heart switched places with the brain, all of them to only be returned to the original configurations. The lifespan wavered chaotically, skeletal tolerances whipped from one end of the spectrum to the other, calculations for the intellect of the thing took up almost a square foot on their own. Reflexes spun drunkenly throughout a host of values, strength became a living nightmare. Height was stretched from four feet to nine to three to six. The digits shifted size, position, power, number.

Nalyd whizzed over the great sheet like a demon of desert sandstorms. A sheen of sweat showed on his blitzing fingers. The Scythe laid across his lap clattered to the floor, Nalyd's foot upon the blade, as the Shaper stood and leaned over the overflowing desk and reached his arms to the far reaches of the design. The vast amount of information, which Nalyd had been muttering for some time now, grew in volume until Nalyd was veritably shouting.

Then his spell expired. Over the course of a few minutes, he had spawned a huge amount of text. The smeared, creased, smudged, and completely indecipherable sheet in front of him held the makings of a new being. Nalyd twitched violently and foamed at the mouth. Inhuman gasps and gurgles escaped his shuddering lips. The twitches and dull moans grew in intensity as the full aftereffect of the spell set in. To Nalyd it seemed that hours had passed. The spell not only made the "victim" many times faster, it greatly slowed their perception of time. Nalyd involuntarily kicked away from the desk as the seizure consumed him. His tiny body threw itself about on the floor. The Scythe lay a few scant feet away, but Nalyd could already feel the aching mental hunger for it's beautiful song. As he twisted and contorted upon the floor, he managed to force his fingers around the smooth silver shaft before his mind fled entirely into the darkness.

His body remained in the throes of the seizure for a few minutes longer before he sank into a deep sleep. When he awoke, he would be greatly reinvigorated. Some residual effects of the powerful spell would fool his body into thinking that a greater time had passed while he rested. He would pay for this eventually, but he could stave off a complete collapse for quite some time. It was a hard-won skill.

Upon the desk, his fanatical workings rested, the ink still wet. It showed a form all too familiar to belong in a Shaping plan. From the bipedal form to the ten-fingered hands, from the two eyes to the 32 teeth, to the list of ingredients along one edge. . .

It was a human. A man, to be precise. The heading, the only text on the sheet legible to anyone other than Nalyd, read in a beautiful calligraphy-

Human, Tier Two

The Service of a Sword

By Robsta - Nov 6 2008

Robsta thought he heard something. He stopped carving the tree apart. *Thump thump thump*. A voice yelled his name. *Thump thump thump*. Robsta hastily finished the branch he was working on, then sauntered over to his hut. Nioca was there, banging on his door, shouting for him.

Robsta wasn't pleased with another intruder, but the last turned out to help him a lot more than she hindered. Robsta sat on rock beside a small pile of ashes, and remarked "I don't think he's in right now."

Nioca jumped, surprised at being outflanked. "Ah, Robsta, I need to ask you something." He responded, quickly regaining composure. "What were you doing outside?"

"I was cutting some firewood," Robsta patted Stonecrusher, "Now that you've asked your question you can leave." Robsta turned his head slightly, indicating the imminent departure.

Nioca smiled. "That was not the question I came to ask you. I need your sword."

"I need it too. Without Stonecrusher I would have to get out one of my hand axes to cut this wood."

"Not like that," Nioca laughed, "I need the service of your sword, preferably with its wielder too. I pay well."

"Oh." Robsta was taken aback, he wasn't expecting this. He had been rarely hired out before, and those that had hired him usually knew quite a bit about his capabilities. Robsta knew little about Nioca, so thinking the knowledge in the reverse direction was more was disturbing.

"Well ..." Nioca prompted, hoping for a response.

"I don't know; give me more time."

Something didn't feel right about Nioca to him. Somehow his inner self told him Nioca was an adversary, even though his reason argued the other direction. Nioca had been in many suspicious places lately. He had been in the BoA forum yesterday during his case of vertigo and rash actions. He had been there this morning during the strange incident of the burning tree. And he was here now, without invitation to his hut, asking for a mercenary. Then again, this feeling might just come as a lingering effect of trying to kill Nioca twice in alternate timelines.

"What do you need me for?"

"An expedition. I need a small group for a protection deal, of sorts."

"Why me?"

Nioca was taken aback this time. He didn't know what to say. Surely he couldn't mention the assassin, or the picnic. *"He asked me why I chose to ask him. What should I say?"*

"Try flattering him"

"That usually works"

"I need you because of your renown skill with that sword."

A generic response, good for any situation, Robsta thought, and not given with haste either, like he was covering up his real reason and had forgotten to come up with an alibi. It didn't take any of Robsta's suspicion off Nioca. He looked into the recent incidents with more depth. The BoA forum incident was part of the timeline kafuffle, as Jewels had explained to him. Unless Nioca had Jewels working for him against Robsta, that did not entice guilt. The strange incident with the tree was different, stranger. He looked over the details one more time. He had been sharpening his long sword again, going over all that Jewels had said, when the fire died down. A short search showed him to be out of wood. On his way outside he chanced to look out the window and see Nioca walking away from a burning tree. Registering only the tree at this point, he reckoned that it would make good firewood if the fire was put out. He went to the well in his basement to get water to put out the fire. When he got outside, bucket of water and Stonecrusher in hand, the tree had burnt down, it its *spot a pillar of flames, in a somewhat humanoid, feminine form. The form dissipated as he drew near. He found another tree for wood.*

"Be patient, Robsta likes to think things over before he acts. It is both a weakness and a strength."

"A weakness?"

"He is venerable while he thinks, his mental energies are devoted to scrutiny and not defense. "

"Reminds me of you."

Why would Nioca want to burn down a tree? Was the fire spirit conjured by him? Would Jewels make a long, complicated alibi to defend him, while he barely had an alibi for a face to face confrontation? The two options remaining were a conspiracy, or Nioca was genuine.

"Ok, I will go with you, but I need more details." He would make a point of learning more about Nioca and stay wary of any traps lain for him.

"Details will be supplied when necessary. We leave today."

"Today! When? I still have most of a log to carve into firewood. And I need to pack."

"In about two hours. Meet us at my Citadel."

"Us?"

"I'm gathering a small group. So far that new member is also coming, Nalyd. I still need to talk to w-dueck."

"I'll try to be there on time, I have a lot to do."

" will look forward to working together with you at what you do best."

Robsta walked over to the firewood he had cut and took it inside. Grimacing, he left the rest outside and went to pack.

To Trap a Designer

By Sylae - Nov 6 2008

211 System powering up...

530 Powerup done. Ready for use.

LIN w-dueck

230 Logged in to system.

WSC Ermarian

200 Beginning World Status Check of Ermarian...

214 Expected time for query: 21.2 sec.

212 WSC done. Ermarian is available for transfer.

OPN Ermarian

200 Opening connection to Ermarian...

220 Connection opened.

225 Ready for use.

LOC YoU/SO

200 Setting Location...

213 Location 'SubTerra Outpost' found.

RES 60

200 Transfer area reserved for 60 seconds.

MOV

150 Opening connection...

214 Expected transfer time: 42.1 sec.

125 Beginning transfer...

214 Transferring...

226 Transfer OK.

OUT

231 w-dueck logged out.

220 Ready for use.

Boats loaded down with building materials slid silently across the water of the lake, dimly lit by blue lanterns hanging from the cave roof fifty feet up and by warm lantern light from windows cut into the scaffold-covered walls of the cave, where workers scuttled about removing and smoothing the cave walls.

A flash of brightness, and a man appeared on a distant island in the lake. The citizens stopped their work and stared towards the distant figure. Was it a mage, sent to aid in the construction? A spirit from the nether? The worker's instinctive superstition kicked in, and many found shelter by going the other way, or, for a lucky few, by going into the lake.

Another flash, and the figure disappeared and reappeared on top of a chunk of scaffolding. "Get back to bloody work!" he screamed, voice magically booming across the subterranean lake, "And get the mayor here now!" several stalactites in an unfinished area of the ceiling quivered and fell into the water.

The mayor and director of construction quivered as he was brought. The Designer could not be happy if He came so...publicly. And He wouldn't be much happier when He was told about the complications that had occurred so recently. When he arrived, he climbed up to the Designer's level, not looking Him in the eyes, and knelt, "How may I serve?"

"Oh, knock the dramatics off. I'm just another Designer, and a sub-mediocre one at that," The collective gasp of all over the workers made the Designer realize that saying that so loud was a bad idea, "I shouldn't have said that so loud, that was a bad idea. and *STAND UP!!!*"

"Highest, there have been some complications. The plans you designed have an error in Sector two four. It was supposed to be solid rock, but we've encountered another cave."

"That cannot be good. Have you placed guards there? If not, they had better be there by the time oh... THAT boat carries me there. Okay?"

---

w-dueck walked past the guards at the entrance and turned to the two torch-bearing escorts, "I'll take it from here." The clattering of torches told him that he wouldn't encounter any arguments. He illuminated the head of Anamzas and continued down into the cave.

After a hundred feet of walking, w-dueck stopped. A footprint clearly sat in the dust ahead. He knelt down to examine it, and stopped the cave flared into light.

"I would strongly suggest that you drop the stick and come with us," the fellow behind him said as a circle of crossbowmen and magi stood around the ambush site, "I must say I am surprised one of your status would fall for such a simple trap."

A Foiled Flame

By Vergil - Nov 6 2008

A swirl of flames surrounded Vergil as he looked through a flaming glass window. He motioned to Laesp'awn, not daring to speak, "*Two standard bodyguards.....Cinead...and some woman next to him..*" Vergil drew Yamato and held it backwards, similar as he would hold a tonfa, the signal he was ready. Leasp'awn snapped a few things on his arm and nodded. Vergil held up three fingers, then two. Leasp'awn cocked and aimed his weapon. Vergil dropped to a 1, Laesp'awns eyes squinted. Vergil curled the final finger into a fist. As soon as that was done, Laesp'awn fired his weapon, breaking the glass and going clear through a guard. Laesp'awn tugged on the rope violently, grinning like a fox. The man's spine snapped and he was ripped in half. While the other guard was starting to voice a alarm, Vergil descended into the room and slammed his elbow down, Yamato landing on the guards shoulder. As he screamed and clutched and looked at his wound, Vergil grasped his hands on the head and neck of the man and a sharp, 130 degree twist, snapping the mans neck. "VERGIL!!!" The woman screamed. Vergil instantly recognized her. "*JEWELS?!?!*" Cinead had stood up, eyes blazing. Laesp'awn ran to the main door and put his back to it, suppressing the pounding. Vergil rushed up to Cinead, gently, but forcefully pushing Jewels aside. Vergil rammed up with Yamato, slicing Cinead's shoulder and chest. Jewels stood shocked. Vergil was about to slam his blade into Cineads heart when eyes seemed to explode. She channeled her energy towards Vergil, and at the same time clenched her hand into a fist. Suddenly, Laesp'awn lost all fire around his body, he was grasping at his neck, desperately trying to breathe. Just when he was about to become total ash, Jewels unclenched her fist and Laesp'awn, while unconscious, was still breathing.

"WHAT IS GOING ON?!" Jewels roared in fury. Vergil grimaced. Cinead opened his mouth "His group has ordered the assassination of me." Jewels wheeled around to Vergil. "Why?!!" Vergil spit out large drops of blood. "He needs....to die." Jewels stared with a furious gaze. "You.....you would condone the murder, of your own FATHER?!!" Vergil curled a lip "Fathers do not matter in war, there is only an ally, and an enemy." He pointed to Cinead "He is the enemy." "Of who?" "The Ignius Alliance." Jewels looked slightly confused for a moment. Vergil eyes opened wider. "You don't know about the war? Hah!" Vergil balanced on one of his knees. "Do you think there is a group of assassins that randomly kill people? No. We are supporting the war. The war between fire elementals, and humans and water elementals. And if you don't know, or care, that is your problem, not mine." Vergil pointed again at Cinead "If I kill him, the war will be over. But now..." He chuckled "Now, even more will die." Laesp'awns eyes slammed open and he motioned at Vergil. Vergil smiled. "I am afraid I will have to go." He leaped up to the roof, followed by Laeps'awn. He and Laesp'awn both turned into flame, leaped off of the roof. "STOP!!" Jewels screamed, but no avail, Vergil was gone

No Son of Mine

By Jewels Nov 7 2008

Jewels stood in unbelief as she watched Vergil leave. Her emotions raged between love and anger, from despair to fear. *How could he?* He had almost killed her father... ***their father!*** And within days of her rediscovering him, too. Was nothing sacred? Was there no one she could trust? *You can trust me. You can trust yourself...* Jewels' thoughts quickly reviewed her recent behavior... her most recent change of heart. *No, I can't even trust myself... I trust myself least of all.*

The voice of her father broke her from her reverie. "Jewels..." Cinead still nursed his wounds as she walked to him. "Jewels we must speak. This is most urgent. In light of what just happened... there is, ah, business we *must* complete. Now!"

"Business?! How can you even think about business?"

"I must, Jewels. I don't have the luxury of time. A failed assassination attempt can only lead to another. And if I know your brother..."

"Daddy, don't..."

"...once he sets his mind to something..."

"...don't say it."

"...he will not stop..."

"YOU stop!"

"...until it is done."

Jewels was shaking her head when Cinead grabbed her shoulders and shook her. "Jewels, he WILL come back to kill me!"

"No! I refuse to believe that..." her voice trailed off to a whisper. "...he wouldn't."

Cinead drew her in close. Holding her face in his hands he stared his firey eyes into hers. "He would, and he already has."

Jewels stood shaking. Her flame dimmed to barely a sizzle. The truth was too much for her heart to accept so once again she shoved her emotions aside. "What do we need to do?" she managed.

"I must disown Vergil, and you must become my sole heir." As he talked he waved his hands summoning a flaming document and a pen.

"Okay," Jewels said flatly. In her mind she retreated... back to her sanctuary. Back to her tree. She blindly followed her father's instructions signing here, crossing there, and making a flame print with her thumb. The words passed in front of here eyes but she didn't see them. Cinead explained things to her but she didn't hear him.

When he was done with the documentation he waved his hands over them and they disappeared, presumably to some official place where they would be kept safe. "I really need to rest now, Jewels."

"I really need to find Vergil... try to talk to him."

Cinead sighed at his daughter. "Go ahead, but don't hold out hope. He is as stubborn as I am."

Jewels nodded and teleported back to Calamity Refuge. A brief walk around the grounds revealed no one and a glance at Who's Online revealed the same. *Where has everybody gone?*

Vergil obviously hadn't come back from the fire plane, but she had no idea where to look for him there. Worry started to creep into her mind. Had something happened while she was away? Will, Robsta, Nalyd, Nioca... all were gone.

Jewels ran out to the courtyard. Nothing was blown up. No monsters ran around... but she could find no one. The 'what if's' filled her head and the dread overwhelmed her. Soon all the emotions she had shoved aside came flooding back. She realized that her love had not been lost at all. It was all too real to her now. If the love of man was folly, then she was the biggest fool of all. She collapsed in the grass of the courtyard. Tears flowed unhindered as she sobbed. Time passed. Eventually the heaving stopped and her eyes dried but the pain of worry lingered.

She absentmindedly caressed a stray flower and watched as it bent towards her touch, opening it's petals wide. She was nature, she was fire. One hand held death and destruction, the other creation and life. As much as she had been fighting with herself, she had to admit it was a unique balance. One that she should learn to master. One that she *must* master. Lost in her thoughts, she didn't hear the footsteps and was so startled, she yelped at the sound of the voice.

"Hey stranger, why so glum?" Jewels looked up, the beginnings of a smile daring to tickle her lips. A hand reached down for hers to help her off the ground and seconds later she was enjoying a tight hug that could rival her father's for warmth.

Her old nature kicked back in as she instinctively started to joke with him. "I'm 'so glum' because *you* haven't been around lately, mister." Jewels hit him playfully in the arm.

"Come now, Jewels, your eyes aren't all red and puffy just because of little ole me. Tell me what's up."

The weight of it all screamed at her as she rubbed her eyes with futility. All reservations she had once had of staying anonymous melted away at his sincere concern. She felt she could tell him anything. Indeed, she felt the *need* to tell him everything. "Let's take a walk," she suggested. "It's a LONG story."

"Well, if we're going to walk, I have something I want to show you." He offered his arm then started leading her off.

"Where are we going?"

"To the spam board."

"Why?"

"I told you why. I want to show you something I found."

"What is it?"

"It's a surprise, now come on. Didn't you have a LONG story you needed to tell me?"

"What kind of surprise?" Jewels insisted.

"Oh fine. It's a plant. A pretty plant."

"I like plants. Especially pretty ones."

"Great! Somebody hung it up in the doorway. Right this way."

Jewels stopped short and laughed, a knowledgeable smile on her face.

"What?" he asked with mock innocence.

"You're a rascal, that's all."

"Why do you say that?"

"Oh I don't know?" Jewels feigned ignorance through her giggles.

"Why are you laughing at me?"

"No reason, none what-so-ever. Didn't you have something you needed to show me in the Spam Forum?"

He laughed, a knowledgeable smile on his face. "Yes, yes I did."

They continued walking. "You always know how to make me feel better, Nikki."

Koronos of Ermaria

By Nioca Nov 7 2008

Nioca looked around. w-dueck was nowhere to be found, and his instincts were telling him that something was seriously wrong. "*Really?*" An annoying part of his mind intruded. "*We're three admins short of authority, with an assassin on the loose, and it's taken you till NOW to figure out something's seriously wrong?*"

Nioca shook his head and strolled back to his citadel.

Robsta set his pack down in the parlor. Nalyd was already there, shifting *Lifesower* anxiously. Yirri joined them, with a large pack strapped onto his back. He was followed shortly by Aryll, who had changed into a simple shirt and pants. She noted, much to her discomfort, that Nalyd was staring at her again. "Robsta!" She said, noting the new arrival. "It's a pleasure to meet you. Have you looked in the Armory for any spare equipment that might suit you?"

"Aryll, there's nothing *in* the Armory yet." Nioca said, walking up behind the group. "Is everyone ready?" A nod of assent went through the room. "Yirri, you have my pack?" A pack thrown in

his direction came as an answer. Nioca winced as he heard a glass object shatter within. Picking it up, he motioned for the group to follow him. They entered a small, hastily-built basement, primarily dominated by a crystal with a rusty-colored nimbus. Nioca went to a dark marble counter and gathered several green crystals. "These are imperative. They're Recall Crystals, and they'll be the only way to get back to Calamity Refuge once we leave. There's one for each of you," he said, tossing one to each member of the group. He slipped the extra one that had been meant for w-dueck in his pocket. "If, for any reason, you need to get back here immediately, just rub the crystal. It'll bring you back to this room. Is that clear?" A murmur of assent went through the group. "Good. Then lets go." Without any preamble, he grabbed ahold of the crystal. A brilliant flash of white blinded the entire party...

The air had changed. Before, it had been a slightly sweet, musky scent from the citadel. Now though, the scent was faintly of blood and smoke. Everyone in the group was mentally and physically ravaged by the plane shift. Aryll, being a shade, recovered first from the shock, and quickly changed back into her normal form; her combat form had been revealed due to the stress of the transition. Nioca was next, stumbling to his feet with Crusader's Protectorate in hand and noticing the ruins around him. Whilst the others were slowly picking themselves up, he gasped out the words, "Detect Life!" His mind suddenly became flooded by the awareness of every nearby lifesign. In particular, one fast-approaching lifesign directly behind him, not part of the group...

"Smite!" Nioca shouted, whirling around and flinging his free hand in front of him. A bolt of ice fired from his hand, narrowly missed Nalyd, who had to promptly duck to avoid the bolt, and struck a charging ogre. It grunted in pain as the bolt exploded in frost. Aryll also spun to face the attacker, her form reverting back to it's combat stance. Pointing a now-fuzzy-formed-finger at the ogre, a ray of fire hit the ogre, flinging it backwards in a small explosion. It writhed for a moment before expiring. Aryll shifted back to her regular appearance as blades were unsheathed and bearings gathered by the rest of the party. "Welcome to Ermaria, gentlemen. The land where anything that can go wrong does, and anything that does go wrong tries to kill you." A wry smile crossed his lips as the rest of the group regarded him with scowls and nausea, save for Aryll and Nalyd's battle alpha, which now seemed to be in a stupor. "I suggest staying close. It appears that our destination isn't as friendly as I last remembered." As an afterthought, he added, "Best not to use real names for some of us here. They're recognized and despised around these parts. I will be going under the alias of Anidon. Aryll will be going by the name of Shannon. And Robsta, you'll need an alias as well." Nioca signaled for the others to follow him as he walked down a ruined street.

"Why?" Robsta asked, alarmed.

"I already said it. Your name is recognized here in Ermaria, and not in the good way. Unless you want every kind of thief, assassin, and bounty hunter to chase us around, you'll need to go by something else."

"I'll think on it." Robsta said, throwing a suspicious look Nioca's way.

Nioca ignored it. "Stay close, keep weapons out. This was supposed to be a live city, which means that something's gone terribly wrong in the past..." Nioca added it up in his head. "...eleven years." Nioca gestured to the ruins around him.

"Wait, eleven years?! You're working on eleven-year-old information?!" Robsta yelped.

"Well, actually, time moves faster around these parts, so it's probably closer to fifteen." Nioca added.

"FIFTEE-" Robsta began.

"Robsta, if you'd like to guide us around here, be my guest. Tell me, where's the nearest town? Don't know? Then pipe down. You might attract more scavengers, and I'd prefer to save my energy for an actual threat." Nioca was beginning to get annoyed. His mood wasn't helped when they passed a couple of goblins who, despite being smart enough to avoid a confrontation, hurled several choice insults in the party's direction. "At any rate, I'd prefer to find our final destination, which is a day from here." Nioca looked up. "It's already noon here, so we can't make the entire distance today. We'll have to steer towards Konoros and spend the night there."

The party had now left the city, and was traveling on a road away from it. There was very little grass; mostly just dirt and sand. "Why is it so lifeless?" Robsta asked.

"Well..." Nioca began. "Ermaria was a rather hostile place to begin with. Then the fighting began, and it became even worse."

"The fighting?" Robsta inquired.

Yirri spoke up in response. *Ermaria has been besieged by a constant parade of monsters and vile men, each one with a new and exciting way to cause death and destruction. Whenever one problem is resolved, a new one shows up. The people of Ermaria can never get ahead. It's been even worse recently, with the advancing army of demons.]Ermaria has veen vesieged vy a honstant farae of monsers and vile meh, each o'e with a hew and excihing way oo ause eath an hestruction. Whe'ever o'e vroblem is resolve, a ew o'e shows uh. The feofle of Ermaria han hever jet ahea. Is veen eveh worse recenly, with the avacing army of hemons.*

"Demons?" Nioca asked, stopping and facing Yirri. "Like the ones that attacked Trisolo right before I left?"

No. Like the ones that destroyed Nauteris.]Ho. Lie the o'es tha hesroyeh Hau'eris. Yirri stated. Nioca stared at Yirri, eyes wide, trying to read him for a specific answer. Nauteris? Was it the same demons that started him down this road? A quick, almost imperceptible nod came in reply.

Nioca remained silent for a moment. Then he continued on. However, he let himself fall back slightly so as to talk with Yirri. "The Designers haven't been working with demons recently. At all. There's no reason that demons should have shown up now." Nioca whispered.

"*I should take your word?*" Yirri whispered back.

"Have I ever lied to you?" Nioca replied.

Yirri didn't respond.

It was a rather awkward march towards Konoros. No one seemed to be in a rather talkative mood. So an almost audible sigh of relief went through the party as they entered Konoros's gates near evening. The guards seemed to become cagey as they walked past, but took no action. Nioca stopped a passing merchant. "Excuse me, do you happen to know where the nearest inn is located?"

"Try the Rusty Bottlecap. They usually have a few vacancies." The merchant then hurried away.

A few minutes later, the party located the Rusty Bottlecap. The reaction at their entry was immediate and cold. Strangers were apparently unusual around those parts, especially ones that weren't human. Glares of hostility and suspicion followed Nioca right up to the counter. "We need..." He said, pausing to look at his party. "Three rooms for the night."

"Sorry. Full." The innkeeper replied tersely.

"Really? Why is there a vacancy sign outside, then?" Nioca replied, annoyed.

"Laziness, I guess."

"Are you..." Nioca began slowly, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a few gold coins, "*sure* about that?"

"Well..." The innkeeper started uneasily. "Maybe... We did just have three merchant caravans leave this morning... so there might be three rooms..."

"How fortuitous." Nioca replied, straining to keep the sarcasm out of his voice.

"It'll be 135 gold for the rooms." Nioca muttered something under his breath and shelled out the gold. He then grabbed three keys from the innkeeper and directed the party upstairs.

"Alright, here's the deal. We're staying here for the time being because it's too dangerous to travel at night. You can wander the city if you want, but don't get into trouble. The last thing we need is someone getting killed because they annoyed a guard. Nalyd, you'll bunk with your creation." He said, tossing a key to him. "Robsta, you'll be with Yirri. Take some time to think up an alias." Another key was tossed, this time to Robsta. "I'll share my room with Shannon. I suggest you get a good night's sleep, because we'll have a long day ahead of us tomorrow. Thankfully, we'll have horses by then." Nioca then unlocked his door and entered the room, followed shortly by Aryll.

A few hours later, after nightfall, the window in Nioca's room opened, and Nioca climbed out. He leaped out the window and landed heavily on the ground. While he picked himself back up, Aryll floated out the window and hovered down to him. "What are we doing?"

"Gvelston Sanctuary is the last place I want to take those four. This is an errand I need to run by myself." Nioca replied tritely.

"Other than me, of course." Aryll responded.

"No. You need to stay here and wait till I get back. I'll need someone here to keep a lookout. I'll see you in the morning, Aryll." Without waiting for a response, Nioca turned and walked away.

Fixing the Errors

By Sudanna - Nov 7 2008

Nalyd went to his room with Kurj following. He would send the Alpha outside later- they weren't known for their hygiene- but no sense in giving up a private room by mentioning the fact.

As the name suggested, the Rusty Bottlecap was not of high quality. Not that Nalyd cared- he slept on the floor more often than not. But the lack of a desk did mean that it would be somewhat awkward to work on his project. He took out the deceptively large sheet of paper (Folded, of course), and shook it out to it's full size. It wasn't actually paper per se, but the derivative of a creation. It served the same purpose, but was very thin and very strong. For paper, anyways. Thick layers could serve as low-quality clothes or very low-quality armor in an emergency. The huge amount of indecipherable scribblings had not yet filled half the sheet.

Pulling at the pen clipped to his necklace(Another creation- grown inside of a metal shell, it excreted ink when the cap was removed and pressure applied. They lasted indefinitely, needing only the bare minimum of sustenance, taken from various gasses and occasional exposure to light. Also, the ink dried almost instantly, and was indelible unless one prodded the "pen" to take the ink back. They tended to be rather expensive.), Nalyd pored over his plans. While the spell he had used sped up the user's perception of time, it sped up their body even more, so one was still prone to errors when using it. Making small corrections and additions, Nalyd sifted through the pile. Lifesower hummed through a host of bacterial symphonies as he worked. When Nalyd began to tire, he energized himself with magic. The crash would come in a week or two, if he didn't stop until then. Though he would likely sleep for four weeks if he waited that long. He hoped he finished before that time came.

The monumental amount of corrections he had to do almost made the previous spell not worth the trouble. Almost. Nalyd groaned again and again when he saw he would have to rework huge sections of high-caliber math, only to find earlier problems that forced him to do it all over again. He added some details to the sketch in the center, filled in some blank areas. Expanded on the diagrams of certain organs. Thought about adding a second heart, decided to just make the original better. Hours passed in this manner.

Nalyd looked over his plans. This was about all he could do without access to a Shaping lab. Standing up, he groaned and stretched. Looking out the glassless window, he saw that it was only late afternoon. Time enough to look about and find some amusement.

"Kurj, go outside. Nalyd can't have you stinking up the room while he's gone."

Kurj had been curled up in the corner. "Goo. . . Whurr . . . Mashther?," it said thickly. The huge blocky jaw gnashed comically.

Nalyd sighed. "Follow me, Kurj. You're lucky I can't spare the essence to make you smarter, or they'd hear you screaming back at the Refuge. It isn't an easy process, you know."

The alpha had stopped comprehending anything after "Follow me". It stared dumbly for a few seconds before intoning " Yerrsh. . . Mashther. . ."

Nalyd was going to leave the beast in the stables, but they weren't nearly big enough. What with there not being any. After some debating, he just said to hell with it and told Kurj to wait behind the building. The alpha would munch grass and be inoffensive to anyone who didn't sniff the thing until Nalyd came back. After carefully explaining to the creature where not to go, Nalyd went on his merry way. There was little of interest to him here, but he might find something to do.

Korrington watched the Shaper from a distance. He noted Ephesten trailing the oblivious. . . man? Probably not, too small. Nedze had stayed around the inn to monitor activity and the Battle Alpha.

Josten spoke up from behind him. "Are we going to do something? Ephesten can handle following this little lady on his own- *I'm* not sticking around."

"You'll 'stick around' for as long as I say so. You can go whoring after we finish this."

"They're not whores, they're my rapidly-gained lady friends. And will we be finishing anytime soon?"

"Probably not. I don't like the looks of that scythe. And we have to get the Alpha first, or she'll just go running to it. Little bugger looks speedy, too."

"Plan?"

"I haven't seen any good spots except for that empty street a while back. There's still traffic on it, though. We'll have to see if she stays out after dark."

"Bah. Just have one of us kill the Alpha- it's been ordered to be 'inoffensive'. I listened"

"*You* do it, then. I'm not getting near the thing. Besides, she'll sense the death and come for us. She's no small-timer, either. I can sense the taint on that scythe from here."

Josten grumbled a griped for a while longer but followed along. The Trakovites may be rather undisciplined, but Josten knew his place, at least.

A New Fire Lord

By Jewels - Nov 12 2008

Nikki sat across from Jewels at a table in Calamity Refuge's bar The Mistletoe shaking his head. "I don't believe it," he scoffed. "You're making the whole thing up."

"Ha, I wish!" Jewels replied gaining a mischievous smile. "Does the skeptic want some proof, then?"

Nikki nodded and prodded sarcastically, "Please, by all means. Prove away."

"You asked for it, then." Jewels stood up from the table and moved a save distance away. "You know I don't do this for just anybody. You could say it's my first time... intentionally flaming up for someone, that is."

"If it makes you feel better, it'll be my first time, too... watching somebody flame up, that is. But I think I'm ready." He gave her a wink.

"You still don't believe me," she pouted. Nikki just shrugged but was soon sitting with his jaw dropped and his arm up to shield himself from the heat. Before him, Jewels had turned to pure flame and hovered over the floor boards. "Do you believe me now?"

Nikki didn't answer but smiled as he took it in. Finally, he asked, "So... uh, where did your dress go? I mean, did it burn up? Will you be needing a new one or anything?"

"Let's find out, shall we?" Jewels turned back into corporeal form, dress and all. "Nope, still there."

"Aww... ahem, I mean good, good. 'Cause that would be a waste of a nice dress. So how did you do that."

"I'm not sure, actually. I've never thought about it. I'll have to get back to you on that."

Nikki had left Calamity Refuge assuring her there was nothing to worry about. They had combed the whole isle and found no one but neither did they find any signs of foul play. Everything was as it should be... just empty. Still, Jewels wished they would have left a note or something. *You mean like **you** do when you just up and disappear?* She sighed at herself. She hated it when she was right...

Jewels hadn't been paying attention to where she was going when she found herself at the Admin Tower. *Good, I could use a rest...* She reached for the door when it hit her. Nioca still had her keys and there was no one else here to let her in. "Arrrg!" Well, she had no idea where Will was. She wouldn't even know where to start. Looks like she'd have to go confront Vergil after all, if just to get him to let her into her room. She resigned herself and sighed. "TELEPORT."

It actually didn't take her very long at all to locate her brother. Apparently a pillar of blue is rather noticeable in a plain of red flame and the one named Vergil is well known for frequenting *Paul's Plushy Pub*. Jewels walked up to his table and sat down unsure of how to address him. Six empty glasses were strewn across the table and Vergil stared down at them. "Barkeep," Jewels hollered, "two more of what ever he's having."

Vergil's head snapped up. "You're not thinkin' about havin' what I'm havin' are you?"

"Why not? I'm sure that I can hold one of whatever you can hold six of."

Vergil chuckled, "Pah, fat chance. You won't make it past the first sip."

A waitress came over and put down two filled glasses in the middle of the table. Jewels picked one up and squinted at it. Stopping the waitress before she left, she asked, "Just what, exactly, is this?"

"Ice water, miss. Strongest stuff we carry."

Jewels burst out laughing. "You've got to be kidding me! Ice water? Vergil, is it really just plain ice water?"

"Of coursh, it is. You can't tell me you've ne'er noticed what ice water does to you."

"Well, yeah, I noticed... I just didn't know it was such a big deal." Jewels downed her glass in one swig holding the ice cubes in her mouth as they quickly melted. "Ahh, so refreshing. Hey, you've already had six, maybe I should finish this other one too." Without gaining his permission she grabbed his glass and downed it, too, saving the ice cubes to crunch on one at a time. "Ice water is the best! It's like it replenishes my very soul."

Vergil sat shaking his head. "It fig'ers... Darn halfbreed."

"Takes one to know one. I mean, I thought you were half ice anyway. Why does it get you drunk?"

"Just lucky I guesh." Vergil folded his arms in obvious envy.

It felt good just to talk to Vergil jokingly like this but the smile on Jewels' face turned back to a frown as she remembered what she really needed to talk to him about. "Vergil..." she started, "about what happened today..."

"Oh, don't even start. I don't want to even remem'er taday, let alone talk about it. Why do you think I'm in here?"

"**I** need to talk about it, Vergil. **I** have to know that we're on the same page... that we understand each other. I mean, I'm sure that whoever you've sided with has made it sound so perfectly sensible why you need to kill daddy, and that the good of the many outweighs the life of one and maybe even they have convinced you that this personal sacrifice is the most honorable thing that you can do, but Vergil, I'm telling you. There has to be another way! I'm still mad at you for trying to kill daddy, and I don't think he'll ever be able to forgive you, but you and me, Vergil, we can work it out. Your people and daddy's people, there has to be a way to work it out..."

Halfway through her rhetoric Vergil started shaking his head and holding up his hands but Jewels didn't stop until their table was approached by two very large, very official looking fire elementals. "May I help you?" Jewels asked suspiciously. The one on the right unrolled a document he had been holding and started reading it loudly.

"As it has always been among the living fire, so it is now, and so it will always be. The old Fire Lord has passed from this plain, the new Fire Lord shall command every knee. Czar. Magnate. Emperor. King. From this moment on we rest under your wing." Then both visitors knelt at the feet of Vergil and Jewels. A murmur went up among the other patrons but soon one by one they were kneeling, too.

"Wait a minute," Jewels whispered, "I don't understand. Vergil, *who is* the Fire Lord?"

Vergil started to stand, although unsteady. His eyes were bright as he answered. "I am!"

Greenskin

By Robsta - Nov 13 2008

"Robsta sipped at his beer." He was an anomaly in his race in his distaste for alcohol. He didn't know what he would turn into if he got drunk, and didn't want to find out. He remembered when his friends used to overturn tables, get into lethal fights, or go on raids, all because of ale, all with high spirits. They had done a lot of damage to others, but didn't care. Possibly a bigger deterrent for him from drinking was other examples. Drink had a reputation of loosening the tongue, and he had secrets that could not be reviled, much less to common people in pubs. So he sat and sipped, no more. There was much more ale flowing at a nearby table. The ale was cheap but effective at the Rusty Bottlecap, and a couple mercenaries were taking advantage of this. He had been around, and he knew ale could put on a good show, so he sat back and watched. They were occupying themselves with a few crude jokes. "Jake, do you know what the dead girl did then?" One asked, laughing as soon as he did. Jake was about to answer when he noticed Robsta staring. He got up, staggering towards Robsta.

Leaning over, the table the mercenary shouted into Robsta's face "You greenskin!" His breath smelled terrible, and his manners were crude, so Robsta didn't respond. "Greenskin. What you doing here? I thought I was done with your filth when I left that Trevis place. Gheor, get over here. Greenskin what you doing here? You want a piece of me?"

Jake was getting himself worked up into quite a fit, and his friend came over to support him, sword drawn. This all Robsta would have found amusing, if he wasn't the object of their yelling. Robsta stood up, as it was a much better position to be in if they should attack him.

"Greenskin! You want ta piece o me? You wanna kill cause you're feeling green? You think you can take on two easy? You going to kill me cause I don't have green skin? You think you're better cause you're bigger? You got guts to face me?" Jake had crawled over the table and was yelling up into his face again. Behind him, his slightly less drunk Gheor had drawn his sword. The mercenary gave Robsta a push, which Robsta was prepared for, so it effectively sent himself stumbling back into the table, and left Robsta unfazed. "Gheor, let's show this bastard who is boss round here." Swords were drawn.

Jake, for once paused. He saw Robsta's sword and either its superior workmanship or Robsta's grace in drawing his sword must have gotten through his drunken haze. "You're not a ... not a ..." Jake asked, gasping. "No, I'm not, but I'm as deadly as one." Robsta replied, taking an intimidating step forward. "Dare to test me?" Jake suddenly felt much less like fighting, and chose to get out of the inn as quickly as possible. At least they should forget all about him by morning, thought Robsta, being that drunk he wouldn't remember anything.

Fulfilling Duty, Missing Destiny

By Vergil - Nov 17 2008

Vergil shakily stood up

"And now it can end."

The officials, unmoving, broke in

"You sir, are wrong."

Vergil spun around

"What?!" he hissed

"We are proud to announce that Jewels shall be the new Fire Lord." Vergil eye and arm twitched

"I. Thought. That. The. Son. Would. Inherit." Vergil said, spitting out every word.

"Cinead had no son."

Vergil cocked his head to the side slowly until a crack sounded. His nostrils flared. Jewels stared in shock, a look of horror on her face.

"No....no, that can't be....." Jewels stuttered out. An official looked at his watch

"I'm sorry madam, but we have pressing business. Good day." The officials marched off. Vergil sat down Jewels stared down with wide eyes

"I..can't be a fire lord..." Vergil came out of his stunned state with eyes blaring and cold

"This is unexpected." Vergil said through clenched teeth. "I suppose they would want me to kill you too." Jewels head snapped up

"What!?

18 hours earlier.....

Vergil walked up to the palace doors in a big robe and hood. He knocked.

"Yes?" a fiery intercom voice boomed.

"I wish to see the Lord, it is urgent." The doors opened. Vergil walked through. After 20 minutes of traveling through long hallways, he reached the audience chamber. He walked through. Cinead was wearing a flaming coat and a large sword was rested on his lap. He looked at Vergil and smiled

"Guards," he motioned, "leave us." The guards nodded and walked out. Cinead frowned "Take that off Vergil, you aren't fooling anyone." Vergil reluctantly let his over robe off to reveal a set of black armor and a Yamato in a sheath. Cinead smiled.

"You want to kill me?" He laughed "be my guest!" Vergil said nothing and pulled out Yamato. "Oh, Vergil! You can't see that I have won, have you?" Vergil hissed and rushed forward with Yamato. He swung from his elbow, but Cinead flicked up his sword and parried. Cinead rushed out of his seat and swung backwards as he was turned to face Vergil. Vergil rushed forward, pushing with one hand but grasping it before the blade made contact with CInead's blade. Cinead shoved the blade away and thrust his sword at Vergil. Vergil let the blade slide on Yamato before working a series of complicated cuts and thrusts, weaving back and forth, creating a web of steel. On the last hit, Cinead stumbled and flew an awkward thrust at Vergil. Vergil let the blade sink into the middle of his chest. He looked up and let out a blood-curling howl. Vergils limbs and bones twisted, his face convulsed, and his skin started to flow like molten rock. Blue fumes wafted up from him. His eyes where replaced by giant, bug-like sockets of white flame. Yamato started to glow a deep blue. Cinead showed shock, surprise, then grimness. Vergil hissed. He leaped towards Cinead, uppercutting with Yamato. Cinead tried to parry but the blow was so great that it sent his blade flying. Vergil then grabbed Cinead and flung him up in the air. He jumped to Cinead right at the ceiling, then rammed Yamato through him. Cinead gasped and was impaled to the roof. Gradually, his body sunk down to the hilt and Yamato fell out, with Cinead on it. Vergil grabbed Cinead's sword and positioned it right under where Cinead would land. The tip of Cinead's sword met perfectly on Yamato's hilt. The sword ran through Cinead and Yamato flew in the air. Vergil grabbed it then shoved Cinead into his throne. His sword pinned him there. Cinead struggled with the sword but with no avail. Vergil walked up and rammed Yamato deep into Cinead's chest. Vergil started forming a ball of ice in his hands. "I.....still.....win!" Cinead choked Vergil held the ice ball with one hand and ripped of a section of clothing covering Cinead's collarbone. He thrust the ball into the gap. Cinead uttered a groan and turned darker and smaller. His skin started to flake off, revealing black material. After 15 seconds, the only thing that remained was a pile of ashes. Vergil fell down as his body rebuilt itself. Vergil woke up a few minutes later, shaking his head and groaning. "*What happened, the last thing I remember was trying to get a blow in...* Vergil eyes opened and he looked at the black smuts on the ceiling and the pile of ashes. Vergil felt sick and woozy. He grabbed Yamato and headed out of the palace, shaking his head.

Present time.....

Keep Your Enemies Closer

By Jewels - Nov 18 2008

Jewels' head was spinning. *Old Fire Lord has passed... the son would inherit... Cinead had no son... Jewels shall be the new Fire Lord...* She suddenly wished she had been paying attention to the 'business' her father had done with her. Her father... her father had been the Fire Lord... her father was now dead and Vergil... Vergil had... "You didn't go back, did you? Oh, Vergil, tell me you didn't go back. Tell me it was someone else." Vergil sat in silence across from her. "Lie to me if you have to! Just tell me it wasn't you... *please*."

"What does it matter?" he snapped at her. "I meant to do it the first time. You were so ready to forgive me for that so what does it matter if I finished my task... *fulfilled my duty*?" Vergil spit out the words before lowering his tone. "Is there really that much difference between a failed attempt and a successful one?"

Another group of fire elementals wearing armor walked up to their table, paused in genuflect, and saluted Jewels. It took all she had to stem the flood of tears that were so ready to burst out of her. "Yes?" she snapped emotionally. "What is it?"

"Begging your pardon, lord. We have been assigned to guard you and escort you to the palace where you will be debriefed."

"Is it urgent?"

"At your earliest convenience, my lord. We are at war and there is much to discuss."

"Give me 5 minutes, OK? Now... go guard me by waiting outside." The guards hesitated giving each other a sideways glance. "Why don't you take these civilians with you if you're worried. I need to speak with my brother... alone... Now!" she barked then added for good measure, "And that's an order!" That got her the compliance she had wanted. *No time... no time to talk, no time to think, no time to grieve...* Jewels held her head in her hands. It was all too much and the one person she could have looked to for guidance was now dead. "Oh Vergil, what am I going to do now? I have no idea what I'm doing."

"Then rescind the throne to me. I'll do the right thing."

"*The right thing!* Jewels hissed at him. "You thought killing Daddy was *the right thing!*"

Vergil slammed his hands down on the table. "I'm trying to end a war here! Sometimes sacrifices have to be made! If you were any kind of leader you'd know that!"

Jewels yelled back at him, "Some sacrifices should NEVER be made! Oh no, I don't think your moral compass is on straight enough for me to just hand everything over to you. I may not know what this war is all about, but you can be sure that **I** will be the one deciding just what is and what isn't worth fighting for."

Vergil had calmed down a little and lowered his voice but his words still held all their intensity. "Freedom from this damn war is worth fighting for and if you insist on dragging it out and my superiors ask it of me... Make no mistake, Jewels. I WILL kill you for peace."

Jewels saw the truth burning in his eyes and felt like she should be shocked but so much had happened in such a short span that it was just another wave in the turbulent sea she was on. After a few seconds of silence a guard knocked loudly on the door and poked his head in. "It has been five minutes, my lord. Are you ready to depart?"

Jewels screwed her eyes shut. There was nothing more she could say to Vergil here. Nothing that would change anything between them. When she opened her eyes they flared, echoing the same intensity of Vergil's which looked right back at her. "Come with me," she whispered.

"What?! Are you kidding? If they knew..."

"I need you, Vergil! I need you to be there! Come with me, and if anyone so much as thinks about protesting, I'll have them flogged... or sprinkled with water... or whatever else you do for

torture here." That got a small smile and half a chuckle out of the tense man she stared at. "You are my brother, no matter what document Daddy signed, and you shall be my honored guest at the debriefing table tonight." Jewels smiled aside from her feelings as she watched Vergil nod at the idea of being honored, another old adage running through her head. *Keep your friends close, keep your enemies closer.*

Eyes of Vision

By Jewels - Nov 26 2008

Cold, so cold... Need more heat. Darkness, all is darkness... Then let's have a little light. Jewels lifted her hand in front of her and sparked a flame. A damp stone wall stood before her. An unlit torch just within reach. She set it alight and it flickered dimly. *Where am I? How did I get here?* "So cold..." she whispered aloud her voice echoing around her eeirily. She turned to take in her surroundings. A small prison cell, dank and dark and oh so cold. She was not alone. On the opposite wall hung a disrobed man. The shackles on his wrists held his toes a foot off the ground. She could not tell if he was alive.

An undeniable urge forced her closer. Without knowing how she knew it was there, Jewels instinctively grabbed a bucket from the shadows of a corner and placed it upturned in front of his feet. At this proximity she could see clearly his wounds. From head to toe harsh knife wounds covered his flesh. She wished she would look away but she couldn't. Instead she stepped up on to the bucket so she was nose to nose with the prisoner.*What am I doing?* she thought but could not resist her actions. *Cold... he's so cold.* Indeed, with her body just an inch from his, it felt like her own heat was being drained by him.

Her hand raised on it's own reaching for his lolling head. His face was dirty and bloody but familiar... so familiar. When her fingers reached his skin he lifted his head in recoil his eyes snapping open. Jewels almost fell off bucket but steadied herself by leaning forward into him. She gasped from the quickened heat transfer and he groaned from the pain. His eyes stared into hers a mix of fear and confusion. His eyes, they were unmistakable. Then, without warning, a hand grabbed hers and she was ripped backwards into the darkness.

Vergil stood up from the pub table. "I guess we should get going then, huh?" He looked down at Jewels but she sat unmoving. "Come on, we don't have all day. You can think while we walk." Still she didn't respond, not so much as a twich. "Jewels, hello..." his sing-song voice fell on deaf ears. "Fire and ice to Jewels, quit playing around. We gotta go." His impatience could be seen clearly as he reached for her hand and pulled her out of her seat.

"Will!" she screamed it in his face as his pull caused her to stumble into him.

"Nope, I'm still Vergil." His voice was coy but his face looked worried. "Jewels, why are you so cold? Your hands... they're like ice."

Will stared at the lit torch on the opposite wall of his cell. *It was not a dream, it was not a hallucination.* Hours after the warmth of her touch had left his skin the light she had left still burned in his eyes. His hope of rescue burned on with it as did his conviction. *It was not a dream, it was not a hallucination.*

To Consume by Fire

By Nioca - Nov 27 2008

Hark dozed, only to force herself awake again. Guard duty had fallen to her again. Faith was wavering badly, and several priests and priestess had left for greener pastures, so to speak. Her own faith was even coming to question... Why was this happening? Had the radicals at Vaw been vindicated?

She was startled out of her reverie by a figure dismounting a horse. Realizing the possible threat, Hark scrambled out of the guard tower and awoke several of her fellow priests and priestesses. She then marched towards the front doors of the cathedral. Visitors to the Gvelston Sanctuary were not unusual, but they usually did not come in the dead of night. Most were refugees that showed up to rest in the courtyard, which provided a safe-haven. But the only people that showed up in the dead of night were adventurers or bandits, and both tended to have the same goal on their minds. "Who's there?" She yelled.

"An old acquaintance of Vorgron, the high priest! It's urgent, I need to see him at once!" A voice yelled back.

"We do not allow strangers into our cathedral! Return in the morning!" Hark replied.

"It can't wait!" the voice shouted.

"It will wait! Now leave the premises, or I'll have you killed for trespassing!" Hark shouted back.

At first, she thought whoever it was had left; the person had stopped talking at any rate. However, she then heard his voice again. "Then give him a message! Tell him that the divine of fifteen has returned, and that Anidon waits for him in the courtyard!"

"What's going on here?" A heavily robed priest came down a nearby spiral staircase.

"A visitor. He requests Vorgron, and wants to pass a message to him." Hark replied, annoyed.

"Why not pass it along, then?" The priest asked.

"...fine." Hark marched away.

Vorgron self-consciously picked at himself as he hobbled towards the high sanctum. The holiest part of the cathedral, and the only place where official meetings between the high-ranking priests took place. Only the most trusted were allowed. Only those who were devoted to the Designers.

The doors opened to admit him. Inside, paintings of all the known Designers decorated the walls. Only a few unknowns were left out. Vorgron stared at a far painting, one depicting a meek-looking priest. Then he let his eyes fall to one of the chairs around a long stone table. In it was the same person that left fifteen years ago.

The doors snapped shut as Vorgron greeted the visitor. "The prodigal son returns." A nod from the visitor concluded the sentence. "What brings you back to our hell, Nioca?"

A collective gasp went through the rest of the priests as Nioca replied. "Your 'hell', as you so aptly put it, came to me. In the form of this," Nioca finished, pulling a damaged ruby-tipped bolt out of his pack. "A spiritkiller, specifically designed to kill my kind."

"And you expect us to stop it? After you turned your back on us?" Vorgron asked, incredulous.

"No. I want to stop it myself. After I figure out what's happening with these demons."

"Surely you would know that, Nioca. Which Designer set this plague upon us? You?"

"Vorgron, no Designer has been working with demons recently. At all. This is something else. Something from another plane." Nioca shifted uncomfortably.

Vorgron sighed, turning away. "Nioca, I taught you why we worship the Designers. They bring torment upon us to pur-"

"You're wrong." Nioca interrupted. "Most of the Designers don't even know Ermaria exists."

Vorgron stared wide-eyed at him, but before any inquiries could be made, the doors to the high sanctum burst open again. A frazzled looking priest entered, saying, "There's someone from Vaw, who bri- Ow!" The priest yelped as he was shoved aside. A sadistic smile played across the face of a man wearing freakishly heavy armor, dual broadswords, and a crossbow across his back. "I thought you should know, we're holding an execution tonight. We caught one of the beings you worship. As a message, we're beheading both him and the slattern you sent as an emissary."

"You attacked one of the Designers in their own realm?!" Vorgron gasped.

"NO! Why kill Syla?!" Hark yelled, shocked.

"Their own realm? He was forcing slave labor in the Subterra Outpost! Now, the people will rejoice as his head is mounted as a trophy! And as for the girl... well, she constituted a vermin problem in our city. We merely are exterminating it. If you wish, you can come down and view her anytime... She'll make an excellent mount for my own private collection."

The priests stood, for the most part, speechless. Vorgron, however, spoke in a dire undertone. "This will not go unanswered. If you go through with this, you will pay."

"Be careful who you threaten. The Vaw Retaliatory Power is in full swing. The Emperor himself backs us. So, unless you throw off these worthless Gods you worship... well, Syla won't be the

first Gvelston priest to die, but she certainly won't be the last. You're on the wrong side of this conflict, though I suppose a few of these might make you realize the error of your ways." The man reached into a small pouch by his side and pulled out a ruby-tipped crossbow bolt. Smiling further, he put it back. "Now, if you'll excuse me..." The man turned to leave, only to find Nioca in his path. "Wait... You're-!"

"Nice to meet you too. Say, didn't you try to kill me this morning?" A sadistic smile to equal the Vaw man marred Nioca's visage as Crusader's Protectorate slammed into the man's sternum. The man gasped once as his life energy flooded to Nioca. Then he collapsed to the ground. Nioca sheathed his weapon, and grabbed a few of the Spiritkillers. "I don't have any time further for talk. It appears that I am needed elsewhere."

Vorgron quickly rallied. "What about Syla?"

"She won't be harmed. I'll make sure of it. In the meantime, I need your help." Nioca picked through his pack, and then tossed a silver crystal to Vorgron. "It's a plane-shifting crystal. I need it placed somewhere on the premises so I can shift to and from this plane safely and at will." Nioca hiked his pack over his shoulder and walked away.

Nioca had pushed his borrowed horse into a full run. Looking up at the sky, he could see the moon starting to fall from its apex. It was well past midnight; there was no way he'd make it the leagues to Vaw, rescue w-dueck and Syla, get two extra horses, and then get back to Konoros before daybreak.

"*But that's the least of my worries.*" Nioca thought to himself as he suddenly felt his horse get blasted out from under him. A blast of flame came from the side of the road, frying the horse and flinging it into the sickly woods to the side of the road. Nioca was carried forward by his momentum, and wound up landing flat on his stomach. He stumbled to his feet, dropping his pack as his hands flew to his sword and shield. He then whirled on his attacker and saw something that came right out of his worst nightmares.

Standing before him was a being he had only heard described. Yet he felt like he knew it more intimately than any before him. It was one of them. One of the demons that caused Nioca to become what he was. It was made entirely of living fire, an engine of unadulterated destruction and terror. It looked at him with fiery eyes, mocking Nioca's attempts to ready himself. It somehow managed to hold a massive greatsword in its hands, which it then promptly swung at Nioca's head. Nioca, on reflex, ducked it, and shouted out a ritual. A beam of holy light propelled itself from Nioca's sword and struck the being square. Unphased, it retaliated, releasing a plume of pure flame. Nioca raised his shield, and as the fire contacted it, a dazzling red barrier emanated outward from it, holding the fire at bay. The demon, undeterred, charged forward, raising its greatsword for another swing. Seeing an opportunity, Nioca dropped his shield and put all of his force behind a stab with Crusader's Protectorate.

A howl ripped through the air as the blade struck the creature where its heart would have been. Nioca started to pull the sword back out, but a fiery hand caught him and flung him several feet down the road. Yelling in pain, Nioca gasped out a healing chant, and felt the burns on his torso regenerate slightly. Nioca turned to stare down his opponent, who had drawn Crusader's

Protectorate back and flung it at Nioca. It grazed his side, and he suddenly felt life energy start seeping out of him. On his knees, he struggled back upright as the monster bared down on him again. With an angry howl, Nioca started another chant. The demon threw itself at Nioca as Nioca's hand started to glow blue...

Nioca collapsed as the spell drained him. Pulling at his dwindling reserves of energy, he rolled over, expecting another attack. However, the smite spell had done what his previous attacks had not; the demon had been struck dead when the ice bolt hit it in the face. All that was left was ashes, coating the ground and floating on a gentle breeze. Pulling himself upright, he started a string of healing chants, and felt his numerous injuries start to recuperate. When he finished, he pulled himself back to his feet and started gathering his equipment. A sense of satisfaction took him; "*At last, I gain a measure of vengeance.*"

However, another problem came to his attention. It was certain that there was no way he could do his ever-growing list of tasks before daybreak with a horse; without it, he probably wouldn't even reach Vaw. "*Pathetic. Some God I am.*" He said to himself. But it sparked an idea. Thinking back to the teleportation that could be done with AvernumScript, he attempted to draw on the life energies needed to write out the script. He gasped; when he had used AvernumScript elsewhere, he had to explicitly write out what he wanted. Never before had he tried to use the skill in Ermaria. And the results of the attempt were something to be beheld. In an instant, his vision changed and all of his senses sharpened. Every detail in his surroundings became clear; the dark road became lit as if the moon had ignited into a new sun, every sound came as if from right in his ears, and every scent was magnified a thousand-fold. His entire being suddenly was in tune with the very reality of Ermaria, capable of bending the world to his whims.

But it wasn't without a price. AvernumScript drew not a person's magical energy, but on their life energies; the very thing that kept the being alive, that provided the being's spirit and physical well-being. Elsewhere, the drain was mild even when doing major tasks. Here, simply tapping into his abilities was quickly starting to pull on him. The shock of his life starting to drain snapped Nioca back to reality. Focusing on the issue at hand, Nioca did the only thing that seemed to make sense. He mentally attempted to will himself to Vaw.

The filthy crowd was cheering as they gathered around a massive, recently-built guillotine in the center of Vaw. Guards were pushing through the crowd, carrying two heavy sacks. One of which had several wet bloodstains on it. The guards made it to the guillotine, and dumped the contents of the sacks. A female priest fell out of one, bound at the hands and feet, and w-dueck fell out of the other, thoroughly soaked in blood and covered with dozens of different wounds, some of which were still open. The guards placed them both under the blade, and bound them in place. w-dueck groaned gently, then slipped into unconsciousness.

A man dressed in crimson robes marched up the steps of the guillotine. Pulling a small, jagged dagger, he made another incision on w-dueck. He then dripped a potion into the fresh wound. w-dueck jerked awake as a result of the potion, fully conscious. "My fellow warriors in the fight against the Designers!" The man yelled into the cheering crowd. The crowd fell silent. "Today, we strike our first blow! Today, we let them know that their time is at an end! That any who would stand against us in our holy mission shall be cut down and destroyed!"

The crowd cheered enthusiastically. Soon, it started a vulgar chant. Smiling, the man leading the execution leaned down next to w-dueck and whispered, "Make your peace, Designer." Moving back, he then looked at the blade of the guillotine. The edge of the blade was made from ruby; there was no escape from death. Then he signaled a guard, who pulled a lever.

w-dueck struggled in vain as the blade rushed downward. He could hear it rushing closer. Then, with a dull thud, the blade crashed down in one smooth stroke. The crowd roared with delight, and the executioner stood with his arms wide. The cheers grew louder, until-

"THEY'RE GONE!" The cry came from someone at the front of the crowd. The crowd's cheers quickly started dispersing, and the executioner stared in horror. Where the bodies should have been, all that was left were a pair of robes and the ropes that had bound them. The blade had sliced through naught but thin air.

In a deserted backalley in Konoros, three beings suddenly appeared without fanfare. Two of them fell flat to the ground, while the third managed to stay upright.

Nioca fell against a wall and slowly slid down it. His skin was pale, his body ached, his breathing was ragged and shallow, and he was shivering from cold despite the warm night. Nioca rummaged through his pack. Finding a healing potion, he quickly drained it, and felt a small measure of relief creep over his beleaguered body.

Syla slowly picked herself up off the ground. While physically well, she was emotionally and mentally drained. She leaned against a wall, then looked at her rescuer. "Nioca?! What are- why- how did- I thought-" She stammered out, startled. It was then that she realized that, whilst she had traveled to Konoros, her clothes had not. "And what did you do with my clothes?!?"

Nioca tossed her a particularly filthy robe as she looked around for something to hide behind. "My teleportation skills leave something to be desired thus far." He then walked over to w-dueck, who laid prone on the ground. Nioca rolled him over, uttered a short healing chant, and covered him up with another robe.

"So, let me get this straight," Syla said, now clothed. "You run out on everyone for sixteen years, do who knows what, and the first thing you do when you come back is remove my clothes? What, did you think I'd swoon into your arms the second I saw you again?"

w-dueck, now capable of doing more than just lying on the ground, slowly pulled himself upright, though he needed the support of a nearby wall to remain standing. "Nioca... am I glad to see you."

Syla stared in distaste at w-dueck, who had stood oblivious to the fact that he too had lost his clothing in the teleportation. "Oh. You're that kind of a person. In that case I shall take my leave." Syla started to turn.

"Syla, this is nothing of a..." Nioca struggled, trying to find a way to say it tactfully. "...amatory nature." w-dueck, catching on at this point, suddenly started scrambling for his robes. Nioca continued, "This has nothing to do with our past relations, though I appreciate the insinuation that I do this for the nudity."

"Nioca, I-" Syla began.

"No, stop. Right now, you probably need rest, and it's dangerous to talk about this on the street. Will and I need to have a conversation in private. Here," He added, tossing Syla a key. "That's my room key in the Rusty Bottlecap. Aryll's there, and I thought you might want to see her. I won't need the room tonight."

Syla smiled. "Aryll? You mean she survived?"

Nioca hesitated. Eventually, he said, "In a way." Syla gave him a confused look before heading off.

w-dueck summoned up a bit of his dignity and addressed Nioca. "Well, Nioca. I thank you for your help, but I must be going. Subterra Outpost won't build it-AGH!!" w-dueck yelled. Nioca, at the mention of Subterra Outpost, whirled around and delivered a solid punch, knocking w-dueck to the ground. "What are you doing you crazy-?!"

"Shut up, w-dueck." Nioca snarled, grabbing w-dueck by the collar and slamming him against the wall. Before w-dueck could react, Nioca pounced on him again and pinned him against the wall with his hand gripped around w-dueck's throat. "These people have been living in agony for the better part of two thousand years. It's bad enough when the Designers release a new plague on Ermaria. But now you directly try to make their lives a living hell?!?" w-dueck pulled at Nioca, trying to get him to release his grip as his lips turned blue. "The only reasons you're still alive is that I believe in second chances, and that Calamity Refuge needs you." Nioca released w-dueck, who fell to the ground, gasping for air. "But make no mistake... if I find out you're pulling another stunt like this, it'll be your last."

w-dueck pulled himself into a sitting position and gasped out, "Calamity... Refuge...?"

"An assassin took a shot at me. Using a weapon enchanted as a Spiritkiller, which utterly destroys a person's soul. He came from Ermaria, w-dueck, and he planned to kill the Designers there. You, me, Jewels, Robsta... and then who knows who was next. You need to bolster security to make it safe from further attacks."

"And what do you plan to do?" w-dueck asked angrily.

"I brought Robsta and Nalyd along with me. Nalyd will provide a protection detail for me. Robsta's along to protect him from a threat he didn't even know exists." Nioca idly unsheathed Crusader's Protectorate and started fiddling with it. "In the meantime, I intend to take the fight to VRP and the Emperor himself."

"The VR-?"

"Vaw Retaliatory Power. The assassin I cut down earlier this evening mentioned it. And it doesn't take a genius to figure out what they want. The problem being, though, that destabilizing the government now might be just the thing those demon hordes need to deliver a final blow."

"Look, I don't have time for this. If it'll please you, oh great one," w-dueck snapped sarcastically, "I'll be on my way."

Nioca wasn't paying attention. He had been overcome with vertigo during w-dueck's tirade, and when he looked up, the buildings around him were smoldering plots of ruin. But that wasn't all. Beings of flame walked the streets, carrying blades both mundane and magical. In an instant, Nioca started to raise his hand with a spell, but his senses caught up a moment later. The vertigo,

combined with the sudden and instant annihilation of Konoros, meant only one thing: he was looking into another timeline.

Realizing that he was just given the perfect opportunity, Nioca ran toward the center of town. The seeming-generals of the demon army had gathered in the town square around a blazing bonfire, and were talking in... *Common*? Nioca listened in.

"...a complete and total success. From here, we'll let the panicked humans attempt to retake Konoros and slaughter themselves. Then we'll push forward."

"Sir, the scout from Vaw reports that he killed what appears to be one of their Designers." Nioca shifted uncomfortably; the difference in the timelines was clear.

"Good! And his early return meant an early attack. If it wasn't for him, we would have just started."

Suddenly, one of the demons brought a struggling person to the group. Oddly enough, this demon seemed to be human; the only fire in its form was in its eyes. Nioca cocked his head; where had he seen that before?

The demon shoved the person on his knees, and the light revealed it to be Robsta. "I brought the prisoner." The demon said bluntly.

"Good. We shall begin interrogation immediately." Said another. Without any further preamble, the demon formed what seemed to be an orb of flame, and drove it into Robsta's chest.

Robsta screamed in agony... and Nioca's name crossed his lips. "NIOCA!" He howled. Nioca wondered briefly why Robsta would by crying out for him. Suddenly, vertigo set in again...

"NIOCA!" w-dueck shouted an inch from his face. Nioca winced as he regathered his senses. He then felt ill; w-dueck was shouting his real name in the center of town. Sure enough, curious and terrified townspeople were peering at him. "Nioca, I can't go back. It seems that they took my staff, and I lack the strength to teleport my-"

Nioca cut w-dueck off with a swift movement of his hand. Simultaneously, he reached out to Aryll. *"Gather everyone, and make sure they have their weapons! We're about to have company!"*

"Nioca, Nalyd and his pet aren't here! What's going on?!" Aryll replied, panicked.

"Fine, forget Nalyd. All hell's about to break loose. Be prepared to use an ice ray or fifty, and try to make sure that none of us die or the city falls." Nioca glanced around, and noted a group of twenty or so humans approaching the town square. "w-dueck, is there any way that you can defend yourself?"

"My magic is drained, I don't have my staff, and I can't use noding because it'd kill me in my current state. So no. Is that a problem?" w-dueck looked panicked.

"It will be in a minute." Nioca stated bluntly. Then, muttering under his breath, he added, "Just great. My current and only partner can't do a thing to defend himself, and I'd be better off using him to whack something with. Just," He snarled, yanking Crusader's Protectorate out of its sheath, "Fan-," he added whilst bringing his shield about, "-tastic." He finished, adding in a

blessing chant for good measure. The group of humans, seeing this action from Nioca, flared up into their true form.

"What...?" w-dueck gaped as the demons charged forward. Some of them threw fire at nearby buildings as they charged, whilst others pulled at weaponry. One whirled around and flung a gigantic bolt of fire at the city gate, blasting it to smithereens. Alarms sounded throughout the city.

Nioca wasn't intending to let them close the distance before attacking. Pointing his sword at the lead demon, he let a smite spell fly. It struck the demon in the chest, and the flames around it all but died as it fell to the ground. Screams filled the air as Nioca took aim again, but another demon threw a ball of flame at him, forcing him to parry it. Some of the demons split off down different alleyways, leaving six still charging. "*Where's Aryll? Or Robsta?*" He thought, groaning as he saw more demons rush through the destroyed city gate. Buildings were igniting as the demons set them alight.

Nioca let another smite spell fly, but couldn't tell whether it hit its mark. One of the demons had just closed the distance. Nioca raised his sword to parry, only to have the blade nearly get ripped out of his hand by the blow. Recovering, Nioca brought it down and slashed across the demon's midsection. It howled and diminished in intensity. However, before Nioca could do anything else, two more demons closed and flung fireballs at him. Nioca was blasted backwards. w-dueck, realizing that he was the next target, ran towards Nioca's fallen form. Nioca stumbled back to his feet, and put out any loose fires on his clothing. However, his spell energy was almost gone, and he now noticed that Crusader's Protectorate was left behind the demons.

Bracing himself for the drain he knew was coming, Nioca raised his hand and prepared to alter reality again. As the demons charged forward, large tendrils of frost wrapped themselves around the demons, who almost instantly disintegrated into ash. Nioca stumbled from the drain. w-dueck, who had just reached Nioca, suddenly found himself catching Nioca as he collapsed into unconsciousness.

w-dueck gulped as the remaining three demons ran forward with bloodthirsty grins.

A Battle for Alpha

By Sudanna Nov 27 2008

Nalyd had been wandering about the outskirts of the city when the elementals sprang from their disguises. The flash of light reached far into the dark greyish sky, and the whoosh of flames rolled over the small buildings. The explosion of the city gate rocked the entire wall that Nalyd was standing near. Loose stones and gravel shook from the crumbling old wall, thudding onto buildings and earth. Nalyd turned at the flash of light and yelled at the explosion. The unmistakable roars of elementals being forcibly returned to their own realm echoed throughout

the city. The people on the streets screamed and rushed for cover as some fiery debris rattled down around them. A scream of "NIOCA!" wafted through the new haze of smoke.

Nalyd mentally called for Kurj, and the Alpha leapt to it's feet back at the inn. Starting off slowly, the monstrous thing heavily ran in Nalyd's direction, ignoring the startled man about to stick it with a poisoned dagger. Picking up speed, it scattered the building crowd in the streets. Cracking the cobblestones with it's thudding charge, it burst in, and then out of a building housing an unclad couple who would have a grand story to tell of their first child's conception. As Kurj neared Nalyd, he hunched down, bent his still pumping legs, and leaned to the right, stretching out one gigantic three-fingered hand.

As Kurj neared him, Nalyd slowly began to run, and then jumped right at the outstretched arm, holding Lifesower away from the creation. Nalyd thudded into the still-charging Alpha, wrapping both legs around the huge arm, his free hand tightly gripping a fistful of blubber and fur. The wind was knocked out of him, but after catching his breath, he scurried up the creation's arm like a monkey until he was perched on Kurj's shoulder. The Alpha reached up with one thick hand, and steadied his master as Nalyd - quite literally, Alpha's weren't known for smooth rides - rattled off a quick spell.

The world slowed slightly, and strength pulsed through Nalyd's slight form. Strength blossomed on his spare body. He suddenly found it not difficult at all to balance on the jerking Alpha. He grew acutely aware of his slightests movements, and a great sense of control enveloped him. Nalyd shivered at the feeling of power.

The Alpha nearly fell over turning a corner to the town square, where the smoldering ruins of the gate and the crowd of elementals were. Kurj roared terrifyingly, and regained balance without losing too much speed. His left arm swept one flaming monster through the air and into a wall, where it shrieked and dissipated. Nalyd drew his feet underneath him, and balanced himself as best he could.

As Kurj ran towards the only three figures not completely on fire, Nalyd launched himself from his creation's shoulder. A strange, lilting song in a language none but Shapers knew tore from his lips, and Lifesower burst into cancerous green and black fire. In midair, Nalyd levered the Scythe to come stabbing in at a demon's turning back. As it collided, the sickly flames spread, in an instant, throughout the demon's body as it fell forwards. Wisps of unnatural, noxious smoke rose from the dying demon as it fell.

Nalyd tucked into a roll as the body hit the charred cobblestones, ripping the Scythe from the dissolving demon to have the shaft cradled between his legs and torso, his arms cradling either side. As he quickly straightened out, he levered the Scythe to slash viciously upwards, tearing right into the crotch of a demon and easily slicing right through the bowels, which combusted, jerking the dying thing away from Nalyd. Turning to put his back to the three prone figures, he whirled Lifesower about him in a disorienting silver blur. Patterns and glints of light showed throughout his spinning Scythe. The demon about to stab him drew back as a flurry of feints and small, distracting strikes blew around it.

A short distance away, Kurj had changed his path slightly, running right into a demon that burst into a cloud of smoke on impact. Every sweep of his great arms shattered of crushed a flaming humanoid. Cuts and chars blossomed all about his form, but the juggernaut of the Alpha would

not be stopped. A huge thrust caught a blade directly, sticking right into the huge, muscled hand of the Alpha, but it ripped off the arm of a demon as well. Spinning and heavily, formlessly crushing, Kurj threw elementals to oblivion heedless of the now-serious gashes and burns.

Nalyd's whirling routine ended abruptly, with the embedding of Lifesower into the demon's skull. As it fell, the few surviving others drew back, turning to dash for the hole where the gate should be. Nalyd hacked at one neck, the head tumbling back into the demon's realm before it hit the ground. Stretching out a hand, his fingers turned a dark shade of forest green, quickly lengthening into whipping plant tentacles that shredded one of the fleeing figures before snapping back into their normal shape.

As the last of them fled, Nalyd felt his enchantment wearing away. He suddenly realized he was standing on one foot, Scythe behind him and other hand outstretched. Flailing wildly, he fell upon the blackened cobblestones.

Nalyd laughed. Kurj came and pulled his giggling master to his feet, looking for all the world like a child holding a small puppy. It took Nalyd a minute to regain his composure enough to begin healing his companions.

Official Meetings

By Vergil - Dec 8 2008

I couldn't of seen that coming. Vergil thought, Cinead really did win that time round, but he would end up on top. He always did. Aside from a few glances, Jewels and Vergil were left alone. Guards probably helped. Reaching the palace took no time at all. Getting past the hordes of fire officials coming to greet Jewels took longer. Vergil couldn't hear himself think, hearing different things all at the same time. "What will become of the war?" "What new policies shall be brought around?" Vergil found it mind-boggling, and Jewels seemed to be worse off. She somehow stumbled into a room, Vergil following. The guards prevented the officials from crashing down the door. Jewels grabbed her head and closed her eyes. "You know you are going to have to get used to it." Vergil teased. Jewels groaned a let out a murmured "Shush." Vergil grabbed her by the the elbow. "C'mon, lets get the meeting started, if you are sitting at a table, they are less likely to cluster you." Jewels sighed and nodded. She walked outside to the pandemonium that they had left it as. Jewels raised her voice to declare "Lets discuss this at the dining hall, not in open space." And followed a guard deeper into the palace.

The meeting went well, the Nobles had seemed to calm down and where now pleasantly drinking and chatting the night through. Vergil didn't touch his food much, satisfying himself only with a glass of water, non-ice. Jewels had slightly familiarized herself with a few of the Nobles, and seemed to be enjoying herself a little bit. Shortly after the meeting started, Vergil felt a prickle in his neck. He reached back to the nape and found a prong sticking out of it. He pushed the prong in and pulled out. The whole metal piece came out. The shaft opened up to reveal a piece of

parchment. It scrawled "1st floor, 3rd wing, bathroom." Vergil grunted and excused himself. He went into the bath room to reveal Laesp'awn leaning on the wall. "I was wondering if you were going to show up." Vergil stared tensely at him. "whats the news" Laesp'awn shrugged "Nothing huge, just the 11th and some of the 13th removing a general from the world." Vergil's eyebrow went up "Where?" "Ermaria." Vergil paused "Never heard of it." "To be expected." "When are they leaving?" "Now." Vergil smiled "Well I have to get back to the meeting." Laesp'awn eyes flared "Ooh, is there food?" Vergil gave Laesp'awn a look. "What?!" "You want me to steal food?" Laesp'awn looked to the side "Well-" "No. I have to go back, you aren't starving, and the food isn't all that great either."

The Reason for a War

By Jewels - Doc 10 2008

Jewels did her best to hold herself together as she was shuffled past noble after noble and dignitary after dignitary. There seemed to be no end to the introductions but Jewels couldn't bring herself to remember a single one. Try as she might she couldn't shake her vision of Will. She had tried to tell Vergil about it but couldn't find the words before they were interrupted by the guards eager to escort them to the castle.

Most of the meeting was just cordial non-consequential fluff meant to calm fears of the general populace. She fielded questions like 'Who will be in your cabinet?" and "What will be your highest priority?" in which she said she would trust who her father had trusted and make important what the people felt was important. In truth she had no idea what any of the political issues were that she faced but years of theological and political debates at Spiderweb had taught her to bluff well without ruffling feathers. For the most part she tried to convey that she didn't plan on making any radical changes and that life should go on as usual. Luckily it seemed no one expected her to know details yet and her answers were generally accepted. Eventually she started to feel comfortable enough to relax a bit. Jewels chuckled to herself. It wasn't that long ago that she had been joking at a Spidweb chat about running for president. And now... a lord? She didn't think she'd ever get used to that title.

When things started winding down, Vergil excused himself to use the restroom. As soon as he was out of sight, Jewels was approached by a very militaristic flame. He knelt smartly in respect before addressing her. "My lord, if you'll come with me, we will continue the meetings more pressing matters away from the public eye."

"Of course," Jewels started to stand, "but we must wait for Vergil. I insist he take part in every aspect of this meeting."

The flame nodded. "I will have him escorted to us as soon as he returns."

Jewels allowed herself to be led to a small briefing office where four other military members waited. They stood at attention as she entered and showed her to the head of the table while the door was closed behind her.

"Introductions first, my lord," an older flame stepped forward. "I am Growen, the general of our army and these are my four commanding captains. Jarven, Kaylas, Mebor, and Verton." Each nodded as their name was spoken. "They all report directly to me and I..." he paused coming uncomfortably close, '...answer only to you. If you die without an heir, I become Fire Lord." He breaths heavily on her but Jewels refuses to flinch. "I want to make myself perfectly clear here. You and I both know that you don't know the first thing about what it takes to be a Fire Lord let alone a fire elemental. You've only just awakened two days ago. You can also be sure that I am committed to our people and will do *whatever* is in their best interest."

Jewels saw through the masked threat and stepped forward to close what little gap was between them to stand toe to toe with Growen. With as strong a voice as she could muster she answered him. "I understand perfectly. Now let me make *myself* perfectly clear. I am your Lord and I will not be intimidated! My commitment to our people is just as strong as yours and if their general starts to find it difficult to follow orders or shows signs of insubordination, then I will have him replaced. I see four wonderful captains here who look up to the task. Is that understood General?"

The tension in the room is suddenly dissipated as Growen breaks into a broad smile. He takes a step back to bow on one knee. "Perfectly, my lord." He rises to pull out her chair and she sits. "I now have no doubt in your ability to be a leader. Your father made a wise choice in you."

Jewels smiles as well but makes a mental note to look into replacing him anyway. "That reminds me... Where is Vergil? Shouldn't he be here by now?"

"What?" Growen's face falls. "I mean no disrespect, my lord, but these are to be very delicate military proceedings. Your father did not disown Vergil for no reason. We are at war and we have every reason to believe that he is fighting against us. Most likely he is the reason your father is dead and you should have him killed instead of letting him be privy to our strategic plans."

Jewels was indignant. "Don't try to manipulate me General. I know exactly who killed my father. I was there when Vergil tried the first time. Yes, we are at war, but there are always two sides to a war and neither side is ever completely innocent. Vergil is of the mind that this war should end with as few deaths as possible and I am inclined to agree with him. If there is any chance that a negotiation of peace can be made, I *will* take it."

Captain Mebor interrupts. "We have tried negotiations, but diplomacy has failed at every turn. The stubborn water elementals are the ones who drag this war out... You don't even know what we're fighting for."

"Then enlighten me captain. Why are we still at war if we've tried so hard at peace?"

"Your people are dying. The entire fire plane is dying! Our scientists can't explain it but the temperature of the fire plane has been dropping steadily for the past ten years. It is now 20 degrees colder on average than it was just a decade ago. You don't notice it as much in the cities where the population also warms the air, but out on the fringes? A stiff wind could almost put a

flame out. If this continues we are looking at an eventual ice age that even our corporeal forms could not survive."

Jewels was hit with the weight of the responsibility she has just inherited. Her people are counting on her for their very existence. "So we are at war with water why?"

Jarvan takes over the explanation. "For six years our scientists have been working non stop to find a solution to our problem, and they found it on the water plane. There is fuel there, an oil with unique properties, that can be used to create artificial fire fields that would almost sustain themselves. We were able to obtain a small sample from a water merchant and repeated tests have shown that this oil can easily bring our temperatures back up to normal with relatively small amounts." Jarven stops his enthusiastic revelation and becomes very somber. "But water has refused us trade. They would rather watch us be snuffed out by the cold one by one until there is nothing left of us. Their rulers have even enacted laws that say anyone caught smuggling the oil to us is to be executed on the spot. So now, we fight for it."

Jewels took it all in. What for so long had seemed like an abomination now seemed reasonable and justified. She was responsible for the survival of an entire species and the solution they needed lie just behind a line of political red tape that some water bigwig or another had put up. *But why? They have to have a reason to refuse us. Why won't they trade the oil?* A knock on the door interrupted Jewels' thoughts. *Oh good, Vergil will know. I can ask him.* But the man at the door was not Vergil.

"Captain Verton," the flame saluted and stayed standing in the doorway. "Urgent news from Ermaria. Our troops in Koronos have reported much resistance. They have suffered heavy casualties and have been forced to retreat. They are requesting two platoons of reinforcements to aid in taking the city."

Jewels stands up, "Ermaria? General what are we doing in Ermaria? I thought we were at war with water."

The general looks annoyed at Jewels' ignorant interruption. "We *are* at war with water. Ermaria is just a backup. If we cannot get a hold of the oil in time, we can relocate to Ermaria and survive there. The vegetation there is ideal fuel and though it wouldn't be home we... our people would be alive."

Time seemed to slow down as the picture of a burning landscape filled Jewels' mind and something inside her snapped. "*IMMEDIATE CEASEFIRE!*" she screamed.

All eyes within fifty yards turned towards the sound. "Excuse me?" Growen asked.

"You heard me General! I call for an immediate ceasefire in Ermaria. You pull everyone out of there. I want nothing more in that plane as much as singed by any of our hand!"

"Jewels?" Vergil had started running towards his sister's voice the second he heard it. He shoved past the reporting soldier and burst into the room a bit out of breath. "Jewels, I've been looking all over for you. What's wrong?"

Jewels ignored her brother's query still addressing the general with venom. "Or do you forget, *general*, who and what my mother was? My people include more than just the fire

elementals and I will not stand idly by while you *orchestrate their genocide*. Do I have to shout louder to be understood, general? The invasion of Ermaria ends now!"

Growen looked about uneasily at all those watching him before answering with gritted humility. "Yes, my lord. As you wish."

"Now are there any other battle fields I need to be aware of?"

"No, my lord," he glanced at Vergil, "and there is no more business we need to discuss. Our meeting is over. If you'll excuse me, I have some soldiers to recall." he signaled for his captains to follow as he left the room.

"What was that all about?" Vergil pried but Jewels was too spend to answer. She couldn't even manage a smile at her relief that the conflict was over. "I... I need to be alone Vergil. Take me someplace I can be alone... please?"

General Growan whispered harshly to his captains as they walked down the halls. "We will not give up in Ermaria boys. There is just too much at stake. Send three platoons of reinforcements to Koronos and if anyone questions it because of Lord Jewels' outburst just tell them she changed her mind. It is a woman's prerogative after all."

"What about Jewels? we can't hide this from her forever."

"Don't you worry about that. With her murderous half-breed brother at her wretched half-breed side, I have a feeling that she won't be a problem for much longer." The captains shared a chuckle with their general as they separated to their various duties.

Kaylas took only one glance over his shoulder before stopping to talk to a flame around the corner. "Code blue. Hurry!"

It's Never a Good Time

By Vergil - Dec 10 2008

"Jewels, what is going on?" Vergil said calmly, but with a hidden force. Jewels whipped around "Why won't the Water elementals trade the oil which we need?" Vergil gritted his teeth and sighed "Not only did they try to steal it without telling us, but the Water elementals had a similar situation where their people were dying." Jewels opened her mouth but Vergil continued, "The Water elementals did not know that the oil would help them, they tried to help the Fire elementals but they thought there was nothing they could do. It was not the same when the Water elementals faced extinction, the Fire elementals *didn't even try to help*, they just watched their brethren die." Jewels prompted a question with a quizzical expression "Then why did the Water elementals even try to help?" The edge of Vergil's mouth twitched "Because open rejection would be politically undesirable. The Fire elementals said they would help, but I knew people

inside the main science team. Suffice to say, it was a lie." Vergil closed his eyes "Cinead wasn't originally a bad leader, he just got influenced by the wrong people."

A captain came into the room and saluted and kneed. "What is this intrusion about, Kaylas?" Vergil's eyes lit up at the name "Ma'am, I may ask that you forgive me after this." Jewels face darkened "Solider, you will tell me what is going on right this mome-" Vergil grabbed Jewels arm. "What code?" Vergil demanded "Delta-Blue, sir." Vergil nodded and quickly looked at Jewels "We have got to get you out of here." Kaylas nodded "Come, Jewels, we must go." Jewels yanked free of Vergil's grip. "Tell. Me. What. Is. Going. ON!!!!!" She spat out each word. Vergil grunted "Not now, okay?" Jewels stared intently "NOW!!! All this time I have been confused and told I will be informed later, first with Cinead, then you, the General, and now you again!" Vergil looked around with a panicked expression "Now is not a good time." Jewels teeth bared "It never is. Tell me!" Vergil finally snapped "OK! OK! I will tell your highness what is going on!" He said with a mock tone. "Your general is a traitor, and I believe that he has plans to kill you sometime in the near future." Jewels opened her mouth "Now is not the time Jewels, I told you, now lets go! Kaylas, come with us!" Jewels protested but was carried by Vergil

Vergil and Jewels where rounding around the next corner when guards appeared "Its Vergil, his is trying to kidnap the Firelord!" Vergil hissed *we don't have time to deal with this!!* "Lieutenant Vergil, may I take lady Jewels and depart?" Vergil nodded "Send in the 101st, and give my regards to the rest of 19th." Kaylas nodded and ran out the door. The guards ran over, but where blocked by Vergil. "Now, now, I warn you, do you really know what you are dealing with?" Vergil exhaled, a frosty cloud leaving his mouth. A guard silently moaned "Not one of them....." Vergil smiled as his neck and face started to bubble "Y-yes," he half said, half hiss "one of t-t-the dirty o-ones." A small brown spike pulsed through Vergil's neck, his face started snapping in different directions. "We arrrre shu nned, buut mo re awww are, of ouur existencARGHH!" The inhumane creature roared, blazing blue, and pounced

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"Man, what are we doing here? We haven't seen any action for three weeks!" Another voice growled "Shut up! I think we may have something new.." A man walked into the room "Well, you have a new mission, perfect for you new people." The general smiled "You are to assassinate one of the most influential Fire Generals ever to exist!" A trooper shifted uncomfortably "That's all?" The general nodded "That's all." One of the members flicked out his new feline tongue and growled with a smile. Another rose out of a pillar of water. What looked like a group of men was now an assortment of blood-thirsty creatures.

Trust No One

By Jewels - Dec 22 2008

Jewels followed Kaylas on foot for about twenty minutes watching his movements and noting his tendencies. Lope, lope, lope, backwards glance, lope, lope, second backwards glance into full area scan, then six more steps forward, stop to listen before starting the cycle over again. Soon they were in a fairly cramped but seemingly vacant area. When he started down a back alley Jewels started lagging behind and managed to pick up a good sized rock without him noticing. If she could just time it right... Lope, lope, lope, backwards glance, lope, lope, second backwards glance into full area scan... They were just passing a crossing alley. She saw the opportunity she had been waiting for and took it. When Kaylas started his six steps forward Jewels cut right ducked into a doorway and counted to five before throwing her rock as hard as she could in the opposite direction.*"Jewels?"* Kaylas hissed, *"Lady Jewels!"*

Jewels listened as Kaylas ran back to the alley crossing and swore. He took off in the direction she had thrown her rock and his footsteps soon faded. When Jewels dared peek out of her hiding spot, he was out of sight. She tried the knob to the door she hid next to and it opened easily. Inside was a small apartment. Nothing fancy, just the basics. Thankfully it seemed nobody was home as Jewels made her way to the front of the building. Hanging in the entryway were a few cloaks. She donned one and cautiously walked out the front door noting the address so she could return it later. Surely no one would mind their Lord borrowing a cloak for a stroll. Hiding her face deep in the hood Jewels started walking briskly away from the last place she knew Kaylas to be. She didn't care where she ended up, just as long as it was far from here.

As she walked, Jewels puzzled over her ever-increasingly complex situation. There was no way she was going to trust Vergil's people. They were the ones that had ordered her father's death. Jewels blamed them more than she did Vergil and wouldn't put it past them to dispose of her just the same. But neither could she trust her father's people as it seems someone there has*already* ordered her death. She had reason to doubt Kaylas's word on the matter but Vergil's reaction coupled with her initial impression of General Growan gave her just as much reason not to doubt it. So where could she turn? Who could she trust? She needed a safe place... a refuge. Refuge from this... calamity?

Jewels laughed in spite of herself. She *wished* she could go back to Calamity Refuge but what was the point? No one was there and she hadn't even had time to bring up the topic of the Admin tower keys with Vergil. Wandering aimlessly, she barely noticed the prick at the back of her neck until it started to itch. She reached her hand up to scratch it when her cloak snagged on a little stick of metal. She pulled it from her neck to look at it. She had trouble focusing on it. Her vision started to blur. It was... odd. Almost... almost like a... like a...

Jewels collapsed.

Mercenary for Hire

By Robsta - Dec 30 2008

It was bright when Robsta awoke. Looking up, he found that it was not the sun that made his room bright. There was a demon, if it was a demon, standing above him. He already knew it was not going to be a good day. He had some experience of days in which demons stood over him in the morning, and they were not good days. The only days he knew that were worse were those when a dragon stood over him. Today, he knew was not going to be good because there was a demon standing over him, and because he was not as prepared as usual for calamity. In the past he had known he was in a demon area before he lowered his defences, but he had trusted Nioca to tell him if demons were nearby. The worst thing he had expected tonight was a drunken mercenary. A drunken, **human** mercenary. He had kept his sword at hand and wore his chain shirt, but his plate armour and his shield were well out of reach.

Yirri was gone, Robsta didn't know where. The door was open, and so was the wall. Yirri probably exited thought the door, the demon he was frantically trying to fend off with only his sword probably entered through the wall. Demons rarely use doors.

His shield was on the other side of the room, he had left it on the wall beside where Yirri's used to be. Somehow he had to maneuver this demon around so that he could regain his shield. His armour would take too long to put on. Robsta concentrated on fighting. A pry, a slash, he left a spot open, tempting the demon to strike at it, he dodged the expected blow. They fought, Robsta cunningly luring the demon to circle him so that his back was never to the hole in the wall where another demon might appear at any moment. A powerful blow from Stonecrusher met the demon's flaming great sword, pushing the latter back, with its bearer, onto Robsta's bed. Using the moment gained, Robsta wheeled, grabbed his shield and wheeled again, to face two foes. While his back was turned a new demon had climbed over the rubble of the wall, and stuck a quick blow that Robsta barely was able to intercept with Stonecrusher. The demon on his bed had found its feet again and the two demons bore down on Robsta, pushing him back.

Robsta was used to facing two foes, even more sometimes, but it took a different fighting style than his usual, a style that did not account for gusts of fire shooting forth from your foes quite as well. Robsta ducked behind his shield from a blast of fire from one,simultaneously stepping back, manoeuvring the other into a position just in front of Yirri's bed. The flames parted around the shield, blocking Robsta from most of the gust, but the heat was still painful, and the corners of his shield ignited. A slash from Stonecrusher pushed the other demon onto Yirri's bed, leaving it open for severing its left leg. The demon screamed, but not a demonic scream, it sounded more human. It was not a human's voice, but it was defiantly more human than the demons he had killed in the past. Despite the wound, the demon got up and continued fighting, grasping at the wall to keep its balance.

The first was still powerful and Robsta continued his fighting retreat to the door. When he got there he knew the demons either get in each other's way, or have to attack him one at a time. Both situations he was prepared for, both would be an improvement. A third situation occurred. By the time Robsta got to the door there was another demon blocking his way. Now he was surrounded by demons, frantically trying to fend off attacks from three directions. He knew he could not keep it up long, his only chance was to kill one quickly. A blast of fire came from behind, he sunk to his knees, he was developing a headache and his vision was starting to blur. Struggle to stand, a pry, a slash, the wounded demon fell to the ground, decapitated. Raise the shield to block the next stroke, a stab, easily turned aside by a shade. A shade's

Aryll had killed the two remaining demons, who were too distracted by Robsta to notice the silent death that claimed them. "What took you so long Shannon?" Robsta asked joyfully, attempting to embrace the ethereal being.

"I called for you earlier, but you didn't come. Anidon warned us of this attack mere seconds before the demons arrived."

"Where's Yirri, Ni-Anidon, Nayld"

"I'm here, I came ven Shanon called. Anidah and the sha'r I don no vere."

"Anidon needs help." Aryll stated, floting towards the hole in the wall. Yirri followed, sword drawn and battle ready.

Robsta grabbed his pack and downed a healing potion, ready to follow. "By the way, call me Kashuur."

Nioca's words hung in his mind. Hang back, provide support if the enemy gets too far in. Who was to determine how far in *too far* in was? Robsta was to determine that. Nioca was deciding everything for everyone recently and Robsta didn't like that, even if Nioca was accepted as the leader of their expedition. This was a chance for him, Robsta to make a decision. He just wished the information Nioca had given to him was more complete and sooner.

What did Nioca plan? Surely there was more to his plan than a pitched battle between the twenty five remaining guards and a thousand odd fire creatures. Even with militia helping and defensive terrain they were hopelessly outnumbered, and by more powerful beings. Walls, traps and carefully deployed troops could only go so far, and were often fragile should the enemy do anything unexpected. If the fire general was any sort of military leader, he would be able to react to the unexpected level of resistance in the town and would devise plans of his own. Robsta doubted even Nioca's mysterious reinforcements would be enough to turn the tide of this battle. The best they could hope for was a fighting retreat.

Nioca knew the elementals numbers positions, and quality, the first two he had explained to the others, the last he must know for he had fought the elementals himself. He knew they could not win this battle, unless they made the enemy think they could. In short, he planned a mind game. The fire creature army would be advancing towards a town that they expect a small, decimated garrison to hold, but would be confronted by an army much larger than they would have expected. An army complete with archers and a shade that casts deadly rays of ice into their mist.

If Nioca's reinforcements arrived and attacked shortly after they engage, it could be enough to break the enemy. A cautious commander of the fire army would by then expect the defence of the city to be well planned and calculated to be able to crush his attack, and would thus call off the assault until further notice. A reckless commander would not expect further challenge to his army, and would crush them. A brilliant commander would be able to adjust his battle strategy to react each new threat as it appeared, and would keep a plan for escape as a last resort. Only if they were lucky would a good commander fall to the bluff, even if it were pulled off well. There was no guarantee of that. They needed more surprises.

If only I had a handful of my brethren, thought Robsta, a dozen, a score, I could create another such surprise for the enemy. Berserkers would be good, they know how to look intimidating, and how to kill with speed. But there is no such force around, Jake had made it quite clear to him that the only 'Greenskins' on the surface were still kept at bay near the province of Trevis, and his intonation suggested that Trevis was not next door. Jake was a mercenary, a trained soldier not in the garrison, and could figure into a plan he was formulating...

"He was killed in the attack last night," the innkeeper informed Robsta. "His friend, Gheor lives."

"Do you know where he is? I need to speak with him."

"Do you have a name, greenskin?"

"Kashuur."

"I'll send a waitress to call him." The mercenary answered the call, but stopped cold when he caught sight of the warrior waiting for him. "What do you want with me?" He quivered, remembering their meeting the night before. "It wasn't my fault, Jake can get boisterous when he's drunk. You managed to kill him. Please don't kill me." Robsta laughed. "I'm not here to punish you for that. I've nearly forgotten the incident already. I need to hire your sword. Are there any other mercenaries with you?"

"Y-ou. You want to hire me? Wha. Why? I mean what's the task?"

"Do you remember the creatures that attacked last night?"

"They killed Jake, I thought you brought them."

"No. But there are more of them. The main army attacks today.?"

"You didn't hir- there are more?!?"

"Tons more. I need you to help me in a surprise attack against that army. How many can you muster?"

"There was just me and Jake. Now he's dead. We were on our way to Vaw because we heard they were hiring, and because Trevis is a terrible place to be a mercenary, with the Orcs and Drow and all."

"That's not going to be enough, Is Trevis close?"

"No."

"Are there any other mercenaries in town?"

"No."

"Sorry for your time then, I'll just have to take my gold elsewhere." Robsta slowly walked away, jingling a full purse playfully. Gheor watched him walk off, eyes fixed to the purse. Robsta stepped through the inn door and passed out of sight, Gheor grimaced. This defiantly wasn't his day. A friend dead, a missed opportunity, an attack coming soon. All of them seemed to lead to one person, a lost orc by the name of Kashuur.

War Preparations

By Nioca Dec 31 2008

Nioca groaned. His entire body ached. Rolling over onto his side, he felt an incredible wave of nausea overcome him. It took several moments just to ensure that he didn't vomit. After the nausea passed, Nioca got to his feet and meandered a bit. His senses were dull, seeking only a moment's respite from the chaos. He took a deep breath, and noted, to his pleasant surprise, that the air wasn't acrid. An oddity, but one that he dismissed as he walked amongst the eerily-quiet buildings.

"*What... what happened?*" Aryll's telepathy came through as dull and faint. She wasn't trying to communicate; she was merely thinking to herself with enough force that it was coming through to Nioca. Nioca ignored her as such. He wasn't interested; he was tired. Tired of getting pulled in, tired of battle, tired of playing political games with Calamity Refuge members... Why did he have to keep letting himself get involved in what wasn't his business?

"*How...? How are we here...?*" Again, Nioca ignored her errant thoughts. Instead, he leaned against a stone wall. It was too much. Too much. All he asked for was a little respect... didn't he? His mind was somewhat muddled. Fatigue was taking a toll, and as Nioca noted to himself, his thinking was turning into gibberish.

"*Oh, no... NIOCA! Where are you?!*" This time, Nioca felt her trying to communicate to him, and it was obvious she was now frantic. Still, Nioca paid no heed.

"Master?" A shade floated nearby. "The second floor is complete."

"Go away." Nioca mumbled. He didn't have time to deal with his citadel. And why was one of his shades down in Konoros... "*Wait a minute...*"

In a split second, sharp realization came upon him. The buildings he had regarded uncomprehendingly made up not Konoros but Calamity Refuge itself. Nioca shoved himself upright from the wall of his citadel, and felt through a pocket in his cloak. He winced as his hand came out covered in green dust; he had inadvertently brushed against and activated his recall crystal upon regaining consciousness, and was teleported back. However, the brief adrenaline surge wore off as quickly as it came, and Nioca soon found himself leaning back against the wall. Numbly remembering that his citadel had some supplies, he staggered inside. However, the

effort proved too much, and he fell on the threshold. He struggled upright, only to fall again. He wanted to scream; his body was failing him right at the time he needed it most. He continued to struggle, only to eventually collapse on the ground, helpless.

He panted heavily, trying to catch his breath and feeling like the cornered, wounded prey of a feral animal. With one last heave, he pushed himself up again, and tried to walk. But it was in vain; once again, he fell. As if out of nowhere, a pair of hands grabbed him at the last second, holding him upright. Someone spoke to him, but he couldn't understand it. It was as if all of his senses had dulled back down. He vaguely felt himself guide his newfound companion to his bedchambers, hoping to collapse on something soft to rest. However, he knew that he couldn't afford to rest now. He was needed.

However, he didn't have much of a choice. He fell onto the bed and quickly collapsed into a dreamless sleep.

A sharp prod woke Nioca back up. He blinked blearily as Aryll's face came into focus. "How are you feeling?"

Nioca paused to consider it. "Like I haven't slept at all. How long have I been...?"

"Five minutes."

"Ah," Nioca replied. "So my feelings were correct. How did you find me?"

"I didn't." Aryll responded sharply. "Would it have killed you to answer me?"

"But you..." Nioca started drifting off again, and Aryll gave him another prod. Nioca resumed with a start. "...you caught me. In the antechamber."

"Actually," another voice rang out as the secret passage in Nioca's bedchambers opened up. "That was me." Syla stepped through as the passage sealed up behind her. "In the future, remind me that you're carrying recall crystals before I pick one up." She raised a green bottle and uncorked it. "Drink this."

"Erm..." Nioca replied uncertainly. It was quite a bit to take in over a period of thirty seconds. Nevertheless, he grabbed the bottle from Syla and downed the potion within without any preamble. Almost immediately, his senses sharpened and his fatigue faded into nothingness. His mind once again became capable of coherent thought, and the drain from his powers dropped away. It wasn't a replacement for sleep; but then, a lack of sleep wasn't his problem.

"Here," Syla said authoritatively, producing Crusader's Protectorate. "We're going back at once."

"No." Nioca stated, righting himself.

"Excuse me?" An indignant look crossed Syla's face.

"Not immediately. It's a good way to get killed. No, we need to have a plan." Nioca doggedly persisted.

"Like what?"

Nioca didn't immediately respond. What could he do in Ermaria? The plane was turning into a powder-keg, ready to detonate. On one hand, he needed to keep Ermaria from assassinating the

Designers. On the other hand, he needed to handle the demons plaguing it. He could handle the former on his own, but the latter was too big of a task for him. How could he stand against their entire army? And even if he could, the assassins would get too out of hand by that point.

"No wonder the Designers can't get respect." Syla muttered, frustrated at Nioca taking his time.

"Respect..." Nioca's mind suddenly changed track. Respect, Nioca realized, was the key. The problem to go after was the demons; and by making it clear he, a Designer, was stopping these things, it should be enough to get them to back off. Nioca silently berated himself; he was thinking too big. It was quite clear what needed to be done; he needn't take out the entire army, but merely those leading it. Nioca then spoke up. "We'll get some supplies here, potions mainly, then head back to Ermaria. It's time one of the Designers graced those people."

"Oh no." Syla said, noticing the sly smile creeping across Nioca's face. "Last time I saw that look, I wound up getting dangled out a window."

"Captain, the enemy is mobilizing for a full-scale attack." A rather nervous lieutenant stood on the damaged Konoros parapets next to the captain of the city guard.

"We can't survive such an attack. We lack the manpower and the equipment." The captain spat. "Is there anything we can do?"

"You can accept my help." Nioca walked up behind the two. He was now wearing full priestly attire, though he continued to wear the blood red cloak, and now had Crusader's Protectorate was safely sheathed at his side. Aryll was on one side of him, and Syla on the other.

"And just who the hell are you?" The captain asked, his voice elevated to the point half the town could hear.

"Nioca." He stated bluntly.

The captain scrutinized him carefully. "Now see here. We don't have time for this kind of s-"

Nioca cut him off. "You're right. Which is why we should cut the small talk. The first wave was supposed to be a surprise attack, meant to take out the entire town by catching it off-guard. Now that it's failed, they're going to come in with everything they have. Which is why this is the perfect opportunity."

"All right, I don't know what you're trying to pull here-"

"Captain Daniel Rewsa, I suggest you stop interrupting me with this nonsense, lest you succeed in angering me." The voice Nioca said this with was not his own, but one that would suggest a dragon over fifty feet. When the captain didn't respond, Nioca continued in a normal tone, "We won't win at all if we don't even the odds out. Right now, they outnumber us almost 50-to-1. We'll need to equip some of the townspeople with weapons. People with any experience in wielding blades should get a sword, anyone with experience in bows should get a bow or crossbow, and the rest should get any wands or scrolls we might have."

"Couldn't you just wipe out the army with a wave of your hand?" The captain asked tenatively.

"If I could, we wouldn't be having this conversation." Nioca replied tersely.

"So... after recruiting a militia, what next?"

"We wait for them to engage. If we fight them in the open, you'll be slaughtered very quickly. Instead, we use the city to absorb some of the damage, and force them to fight in smaller numbers and tighter quarters. While you're engaging them, I'll reduce their numbers and see if I can't cause some mayhem from behind."

"Fair enough. You got all that, lieutenant?" The captain barked at the nearby soldier. He nodded, and ran off. "So... Think this will work?"

"If we're fortunate." Nioca turned around and left the wall. He quickly jogged down several alleyways to the town square, where Robsta, Nalyd, and Yirri were waiting. "The attack's on. Are you ready?" Nods greeted this. "Good." Nioca replied, noting that Syla had effectively healed the wounds of Nalyd's pet. "Has anyone seen w-dueck?"

"No." Nalyd replied.

"Figures. Probably went back to Vaw to retrieve his staff." Nioca stated. "The plan is this: Robsta, Nalyd, Yirri, you three hang back. Provide support if the enemy gets too far in. Aryll, you'll be close to the front as the enemy charges. Use ice rays to take out as many as possible before they close. Syla, I want you to remain back here and provide healing wherever necessary. Is that clear?" Once again, everyone nodded. "If they hold off the attack long enough, or if they don't but we hold out long enough, we'll get some reinforcements. The Gvelston Sanctuary is sending a group of priests to aid us; if they push their horses, they'll be here within a few hours. If there's any supplies you want to gather... well, now would be the time."

Nioca turned, heading toward the market square for some last minute supplies. "Alright, I hope everyone's feeling up for combat. I suspect today will be a *very* long day."

Of Bluebloods and Balls

By Vergil - Jan 1 2009

Vergil stopped for just a moment in his running for a breath. *Where is Kaylas?* Vergil looked around, he couldn't see anything. *Blast it I will have to leave for Ermaria without him.* Finding a working portal was easy, as was slipping past the drunken guards, for they where either passed out in a bed, with another person in a bed, or whamming their heads into tables. Vergil didn't know what to expect on the other side, so he went to a bedroom door, and nicked the armor there and put it on. A bit clunky, and a bit too big, but it was tolerable. He took the helmet as well and tried his best to conceal his face. In a matter of moments, he walked through the portal. Instantly, fire and the clashing of metal could be heard, Vergil shivered from the sound. "Solider! Get your rear on the battlefield before I punt it there! Vergil knew that this was the one. "Yes, sir!" when the officer had turned back to his lieutenants, Vergil took a small sample of his heat from the joint of his neck and spine, an area where such a small drop would be unnoticed, but the Bluebloods would know that it was their target. Vergil skidded to the side of the town and took

of the Armor, then tried to get a link to one of his people. A fizzy link was established after a few seconds, "who is it?" Vergil sat down on the ground, leaning against a wall "Vergil, what is the status down there?" "Its pretty bad sir, the towns people are outnumbered but they are using incredible tactics, the general is amazing, I also see a shade beside him." One of Vergils eyebrows cocked, *Nioca?!* "Have you received my mark?" The solider whispered to a few indistinct people, "Yes sir!" "Don't engage yet, help the areas needed most, are the troops in their heightened forms?" "Yes sir, not a single force in Ermaria can keep them from killing much longer." Vergil stood up "Send an air transport elemental to deploy the troops, and also get one for me." "Yes sir!" Vergil cut the line.

Nioca gritted his teeth. No matter the tactics, the enemy wouldn't be pushed back, they certainly weren't losing, even with the numbers being evened out by tactics and close quarters, but they where taking blows and casualties. Even he was getting tired, Nalyd and his Alpha where taking hits, Yirri's golden armor was now coated in blood, and Aryll was panicking. *What a mess.*Suddenly, a huge rumble sounded, slowing the momentum of the fighting. Nioca looked up and gasped. There where solid beings of rock, mud, crystal, everything, floating downwards, and his eye glanced at one of them, it looked like some sort of avatar for a flame being....Nioca's heart skipped a beat *Vergil?!*

Muarium saw the group of Ermarians getting pinned down by the Fire Elementals. "To there brothers" he managed to snake out of his tongue.

Vergil descended onto the battlefield, consumed into a fiery rage, Vergil let out a battle roar and flew forward with Yamato, its blade being the purest and brightest blue anyone had ever seen. He would cut through solider after solider, getting brighter with flames and getting more and more contorted. The battlefield was even for now, the arrive of the 101st regiment soldiers could take on 5 elementals at a time, and the moral of the elementals decreased severely, they had never fought or seen or even heard of such monstrosities. Soon a cry was heard "THE GENERAL IS DEAD, OUR GENERAL HAS BEEN KILLE-" The soldiers head was ripped of by a flying and grinning Laesp'awn. Moral died instantly, the soldiers fled, but it didn't seem different, he kept on cutting, blue flames coming from him brighter and brighter. He massacred 2 dozen soldiers as they where running. Nioca ran up to see Vergil "Vergil, what was that?!" Vergil panted, flames spewing out of his fiery maw, he stood up awkwardly, and breathed deep, trying to control the form, a bit of his face appeared when his eyes flew open and his panted started to grow fasted and lighter, he cried out as his bones and form was twisted and snapped into a ball, then stood still, slightly quivering. Nalyd picked up the ball and threw it up and caught it a few times. He looked at it, then threw it to Nioca. Nioca eyed its flaming hue and complexion. He put it in his robe. "I think I will keep this for now."

Nioca's Final Chapter

By Nioca - Jan 1 2009

Nioca held the ball that was apparently Vergil, gaping at it. One moment, they had been fighting, and the next, it was all over.

No. Not all over. The threat remained. It just had ceased its attacks. But for how long?

"*Permanently*" A harsh voice at the back of Nioca's mind sounded out. "*The enemy is still out there. And that needs to be changed.*"

Robsta approached Nioca. "Now what?"

"Here," Nioca said, turning. "Take Vergil's ball and go back to the Refuge. You too, Nalyd. And take Syla with you." Nioca tossed Robsta the Vergil-ball.

"Why?" Robsta asked, preplexed.

"Suffice it to say that things may get messy, and you do not want to be a part of the fall-out." Nioca then rushed past them, back to the town square. Buried under an overturned cart, he found his pack. Digging through it, he uncovered a Restoration Brew and a Heroic Brew. Stowing them in his robes, he then tapped into his powers. Total awareness encompassed him, and almost overwhelmed him; he was used to, at most, only a few hundred objects that could get his attention. Now, he was dealing with several thousand. But one object of note drew his attention to the demon's camp.

Nioca snapped out of it and mentally went over a checklist of what he'd need to do. With his objectives in mind, he rushed out of the city gates and ran full-pelt toward the camp. He could see the demons fleeing everywhere. Something had broken them. "*Cowards!*" Nioca screamed silently to himself. Then he realized his responsibilities. *"Aryll! Tell the captain to hold all of his troops inside city limits and to stay on his guard. Also tell him that I'm going to take care of this problem personally."*

"Nioca, what are you doing?!"

"I'm writing the final chapter. To this invasion. To my promise. Everything. It ends now." Nioca kept a firm hold on his blade as he charged. A fleeing demon ran almost headlong into him, panicked. A flash of violet, a scream cut short, and a plume of ash resulted.

The camp itself was nearly abandoned. Only a few demons remained, and most of them were gathering supplies. A fiery portal dominated the center of the camp, with two demons on guard as supplies went through. Nioca grinned, then charged forward. Surprised, the only thing one of them could do is get his hand on the hilt of his blade before being eviscerated. The second was more fortunate, and managed to take a swing at Nioca. Nioca ducked, whirling his sword around and stabbing at the demon. A parry, two strikes, and another parry followed. However, the demon was demoralized, and, in a panic, turned to flee. Nioca brought his blade about and fired

off a Smite spell before the demon made three steps, however, and wound up scattering him to the wind.

Content that the coast was momentarily clear, Nioca turned to face the portal, bringing the ash-covered blade up in front of him, perfectly vertical and perpendicular to himself. Once again, Nioca tapped into his abilities. Knowing exactly what he needed to do, he focused. He stood perfectly still, almost as a statue. Then, his form suddenly was tinted a violent orange. Nioca became aware that his entire body felt instantly cold. The tint faded, but he was next surrounded by wavering air and a perceptible golden glow. Nioca continued to focus, finding layer after layer of enchantment and blessing to put upon himself. Then, finished, he came out of his trance. The portal seemed to move in a staggering, almost hypnotic motion. The flickering of its flames had slowed to a crawl.

Three demons had rushed Nioca during his trance. Nioca turned to face them, and noted with delight that they too had slowed to a crawl. One of them swung a massive greatsword at his head, but it now was at an almost trivial speed. Smiling wickedly, he whipped his sword around and smashed it through the demon's greatsword. The large blade fragmented on impact, sending pieces slowly whirling away. Nioca then brought Crusader's Protectorate about and, ducking under the now broken greatsword, slammed his sword into the demon's gut. Twisting it, he then yanked it sideways. The blade ripped its way out of the first demon, slashed the second in half, and, brought upwards, decapitated the third in one smooth stroke. Nioca then watched as the demons, still carried by forward momentum, slowly lost their flames and started turning to ash, the looks on their faces showing they had barely even registered the change. As the demons continued to fall, Nioca turned and ran through the portal.

Fourty demons stood on the other side of the portal. A general rushed towards it. "Why have the supplies stopped coming through?!"

He got his answer. Nioca burst through the portal, and before anyone could act, ripped through two of the demons standing by. The general watched in horror as what appeared to be a purple bolt of light ripped through his troops like butter. By the time the general had grabbed the hilt of his blade, ten were down. He pulled a Haste Elixir out and downed it quickly, then brought his blade about as only five demons remained standing. He saw now what slew his men, and gazed in horror; how could a mere mortal do so much damage so quickly?

He charged forward as the last demon fell. Nioca whirled around as the blade was swung towards his head. Nioca yanked Crusader's Protectorate up to parry the shot, then twirled it around and delivered a slice to the general's leg. He screamed in pain, only to scream louder as Nioca brought his blade around in a wide arc and, with a single stroke, cut the general from groin to skull. The general fell backwards, separating into two clouds of ash.

Nioca panted lightly as he looked over the carnage. His newfound combat prowess was short-lived, and he'd have to move fast to complete his work here. He noted that everything around him was on fire; even the walls and floors were all made of flame. Nioca found himself thankful that he had put a ward on himself to protect him from heat; he'd be a torch by now if he hadn't. That protection, thankfully, would far outlast his blessings.

He got his bearings and noticed that the door to the room he was in was open. He also noticed that Aryll was phasing into whatever plane of existence this was. She wouldn't be much help, though, considering his time-shifted state. He quickly ran out of the room, hoping to find whoever was leading the demons in their attacks.

After what felt like half-an-hour of running around the palace and killing any guard that got in his way (which, in reality, added up to about three minutes), Nioca came across a set of double-doors. Several demons guarded it, but Nioca knew they wouldn't last long. Charging forward, Nioca dragged Crusader's Protectorate across the abdomen of one demon, then whirled and slammed it into another. He was starting another attack when he noticed that the demons were starting to speed up. The strongest part of his blessing was about to wear off. Nioca wheeled and parried a slow-moving blow from one demon, then twirled his sword and jammed it behind him into the heart of a demon behind him. He then yanked it forward and dealt a slash across a demon's chest, causing it to fall back. By now, the demons were moving only somewhat-slowly. The weaker part of his blessing was still in effect, but the strongest now left him open to attack.

Nioca took a wild swing at the demon in front of him. A yell of pain greeted him. Nioca then brought the blade arcing back and ran the demon across, slicing it in two. Nioca let the blade carry him around a bit, turned his wrist down, and then yanked the blade upward. Another demon was cut down. Continuing to let the blade destroy his foes in one smooth motion, he let the blade arc upward, over his head, and slash down behind him, cleaving the skull of his final opponent. Seeing his foes disintegrate into ash, he strode towards the doors and pushed them open.

The Price of Peace

By Jewels - Jan 2 2009

Cold, so cold... Need more heat. Darkness, all is darkness... Then let's have a little light. Jewels tried to lift her hands in front of her but cold metal restrained her. The air was thick with moisture, but still she managed to spark a flame in her bound hand to brighten the room a bit. A damp stone wall stood before her. *Where am I? How did I get here?* "So cold..." she whispered aloud, her voice echoing around her eerily. She tried to turn to take in her surroundings. She sat shackled hands and feet to a metal chair in the middle of a small prison cell, dank and dark and oh so cold. This time she *was* alone.

She wondered for a moment if she was in the same place Will had been, but no. The air here... it was so humid and heavy, she had to concentrate to keep her hand sparked. The walls were different, too, smoother and of a lighter stone. There was a window above her open to the sky, though very dark. It must have been the middle of the night but no stars shown through the iron bars. Cloudy perhaps.

An awareness of what was going on started to form in her mind. The last thing she remembered was seeing the dart in her hand. She must have been drugged and was now a prisoner of war. *In whose prison, though?* Jewels had a myriad of options to answer that with but in truth, she had no desire to stick around to find out. She was going to escape. She had to. There was too much at stake to waste time being tied up here. For the moment she really regretted not studying all the spells that came with her administrative position. She didn't know if she could manage an unlock spell or even if she had one. But her fiery instincts seemed to come easier... perhaps if she could get hot enough... All metals melt at some point, right? Going into full flame wasn't too difficult to manage, but the air here, it weighed her down. She tried to burn brighter, hotter, but she couldn't seem to get enough oxygen out of the air fast enough. The air started to warm up as she struggled. *At least it isn't so cold anymore.* She kept her flame going, always pushing herself harder, reaching deeper. Then something new and strange... like a drop of fuel that gave her a tiny momentary boost, and then another. *Drip, drip, drop, drip...* Jewels tried to locate the source. Focusing on it she realized it was falling on her head so she looked up. *Drip, drip, drop, drip...*Something was falling from the ceiling onto her face. It felt like... wax? Jewels had barely enough time to wonder why there would be wax on the ceiling when the foot squared flap it had sealed fell open dumping gallon after gallon of frigid ice water right on top of her. Jewels couldn't help but shriek as her flame was choked out, but then she struggled to breathe as the water continued to pour down. She was unprepared for the energy drain that the unexpected transition caused. Her body started shivering violently as she coughed and sputtered.

Harsh laughter started echoing through the darkness. "Ha ha ha! Oh, that never gets old." Jewels was so drained that she could barely move as keys were jangled and her cell door opened. Three armored guards walked in, one holding high a glowing lamp that gave off a dim blue light. The water at their feet drained away through a small grate. "It's, ah, too bad you didn't just say something to let me know you were awake." The one holding the lamp came close unlocking the shackles on her wrists and ankles. "My orders are to take you directly to our highest authority as soon as you're up. No waiting for hours on end, no fun agonizing torture sessions, not even a roughing up..." He held her face by the chin to make her look at him, "but you had to go and try to escape first, didn't you? Now look at the mess yer in. Freezing cold, sopping wet, and fire drowned. Not an ounce of energy left to you, is there?" He didn't wait for her to answer. He nodded at the other two guards. "Get her dried off and warmed up. Can't be having her die on us... at least, not yet."

"Yes, captain." Jewels would not have been able to struggle against them if she had wanted to, but being dry and warm sounded pretty good right about now so she made no protest as they carried her away between them.

Jewels sat, still a bit damp but a good deal warmer, across the table from her captor. A rather old, and rather fat, slob of a man. The guards that had brought her in shackled her to the chair once again before leaving them alone in the room. "You'll forgive me if I take precautions for my own safety, won't you?" His voice was loud and fluid. "Trust is something we cannot afford these days."

"Who are you?" Her question was met with a snorted laugh.

"So naive and so ignorant." He spit the words at her. "You are probably the only person in three planes NOT to know who I am. Were it not for your recent awakening I would be insulted, but as it is I'll indulge your curiosity. *You* are the leader of the fire elementals, the 'Fire Lord' as your people put it, and *I* am the leader of the water elementals, King Sheldon to my subjects and to you..."

"Why am I alive?" she interrupted. Jewels wasn't about to make with the niceties or small talk. "You had ample opportunity to kill me, but didn't so what do you want?"

"Hmm... perhaps not so naive, but still so ignorant." His mocking chuckles bounced around her.

"Enlighten me, then!" Jewels didn't try to hid her disgust of him. "There isn't time to be playing guessing games."

"No, I suppose you're right. Time is just as precious as trust, isn't it? I'll get to the point, then. I *could* kill you but what good would that do me, hmm? There'll just be another Fire Lord and if we kill that one there will be another and another. No, I'd much rather try to end this war. My people are tired of fighting and the humans are being overrun."

"There is no more fighting in Ermaria. I called an immediate ceasefire just... just before..." Jewels' hand would have went to her neck if it weren't bound.

"Just before your own General decided you were expendable?" The King's harsh laughter cut through her fortitude. "General Growan has just sent three platoons into Ermaria *after* your ceasefire."

"No..." Jewels' voice was small and defeated. Tears welled up in her eyes.

"It was within our grasp to end the war when your brother took out the reigning Fire Lord. With his experience and knowledge, Vergil would have ended the war immediately by taking out the corrupt, war-hungry, leaders in your military. But no, your father decided you would be a better leader and because of *your ignorance* more are dying as we speak."

"I didn't want this," her whispered voice wavered in emotion. "I would have never wanted this."

King Sheldon smiled and nodded. "Perhaps you were not such a bad choice as Fire Lord after all... Shall we see? I would like to call an immediate end to hostilities on both our sides. No bells or whistles, no hoops to jump through, and no strings attached, just an end to the war. What do you say?"

Jewels could hardly believe he would make it this easy. "Yes... Yes, of course. If you are willing, that would be wonderful. But General Growan..."

King Sheldon held up his hand, "The general is being dealt with as we speak. He will soon be a problem no longer," as he spoke, he produced a key and proceeded to unlock her shackles, "and in good faith I will expect you to appoint more trustworthy people into positions of power."

Jewels nodded as she rubbed her wrists, grateful for the perceived freedom. "There is one more thing to discuss, though, uh... Your Majesty?" She continued at his nod. "The reason the war started... the oil. What you have and what we need... Is there no way for a trade to be made?"

He nodded again and produced a document as he spoke. "The oil you are asking for is very precious to us. It's a vital part of our ecosystem and it's not like we have storehouses of extra just

lying around. The surplus your father asked for has taken years to harvest and refine and for the expected continual need, our people will be required to use less of it themselves..." Jewels' face fell at the realization of the extent of what she was asking. "...but there is *one* thing that I see as just as valuable." He handed her the document which looked like a contract of some sort. "The same thing that I asked of your father only to have him refuse and decide to take the oil by force. One small thing to ensure the survival of your people and the peace between us."

Jewels started reading the contract full of curiosity as to what her father had refused to trade. *What could it be? "We give you oil..." blah, blah, blah. "You give us...",* Jewels' eyes flew over the words and her optimism was all but obliterated. Her stomach turned at the thought but she fought to keep her composure in the Water King's presence. "And... and what if I refuse?" she detested the quaver in her voice.

He cocked an eyebrow at her as if wondering if she really didn't know. He rose from his chair and started walking around the table towards her. "Then, My Lady, we are back to square one and either your people will slowly die out or the war that we both just ended will only start again." Jewels stared at the contract as he reached her and bent down to speak into her ear. "People die in war. *Loved ones* die in war... That brother of yours is a wonderful warrior, yes? So willing to do his *duty*. Or perhaps he will die before carrying out his duty." It took all Jewels had not to recoil as his hot moist breath traveled down her neck. "It's really a very simple request. One little thing you give me in return for all our trouble. No one else need even know... Well, not until your death at least. And then what will it matter who knows?" He moved to stand behind her placing his fat wrinkled hands on her delicate shoulders. "So, My Lady... What say you? Do we have a deal?"

The weight of it rolled through Jewels' mind. Her emotions screamed at her to say no, but the logic of it, the simplicity of it... coupled with the benefits everyone would receive? It was an offer she could not refuse. An offer she could not *afford* to refuse. Jewels was resolute, "Give me a pen".

She shuddered inwardly as he squeezed her shoulders. "That a girl. I had a feeling we would be able to work things out." He handed her a pen and Jewels signed the contract. Her hand was shaking when she set down the pen but King Sheldon didn't seem to notice as he took the signed document sporting a wide smile.

"When... when do we make the, uh, trade?"

"As soon as possible, of course. Immediately even."

"*Immediately???*" Jewels failed miserably at trying to act regally as she stammered. "Aren't there, uh, preparations and such that should be made?"

"Do you *require* preparations?" The King seemed disappointed but willing to concede.

"Yes!" Jewels stood and absentmindedly padded at her matted hair. "Yes, under the circumstances, I... I believe I need to make some preparations."

The Water King sighed but nodded. "Very well, I will give you a day to make your preparations. And in good faith of your return..." he pulled out a small canister from behind his desk, "...the first installment from my half of the trade."

Jewels stepped out of the portal she had been provided and was soon greeted by the familiar warmth of her home plane. Her strength returning, she went into full flame and listened as what little dampness left in her hair sizzled away. Canister in hand, she set off for the palace, hopeful that there would be friendly faces there to greet her. As she neared, though, she was greeted instead by mourning and destruction. Piles of ash littered the courtyard and there was a commotion deeper inside. Was this Vergil's doing? She had left him to battle an unknown amount of foes but this massacre? Vergil had made it clear to her he wanted as few deaths as possible in this war. Jewels started running without caution towards the sound. If she could help, she would. There must be an end to the needless deaths.

She arrived at the throne room to find a group of guards arguing amongst the destruction and ashes of fallen comrades. She took as authoritative a pose as she could muster. "What is the meaning of this? What is going on here?"

"Lady Jewels!" The astonished guards knelt in respect. "Where have you been? We heard you had been kidnapped?"

"Answer me first. What has happened here?"

"A rogue mortal, My Lady. He broke through the portal at Ermaria and... and..." he gestured about him. "The death toll is at 67 just on this side of the gate."

Jewels screwed her eyes shut. If only General Growan had listened to her. If only he had heeded her ceasefire. "Where is this rogue now?"

"We captured him! He was finally knocked unconscious so we took him prisoner but some say we shouldn't keep him alive. They think it is too dangerous."

"And what do you say, soldier?" Jewels fixed him with a steely glare.

"I... I believe the choice is yours to make, My Lady."

Jewels smiled at him. "Very good soldier. What is your name?"

"Laymar, My Lady..."

"Well, Laymar, you have just been promoted to captain." The smile that grew on his face was almost as big as his astonished eyes. "I need you to find Captain Kaylas and give him this." She handed him the canister of oil. "Tell him first that he has been promoted to General and second that the war is over. Peace has been negotiated and all troops everywhere are to be recalled at once."

Laymar looked dumbstruck and stuttered as he tried to find words. "I.. uh, over? The war is over? But... but how?"

"You have your orders, Captain. Please tell Kaylas to meet with me as soon as he has spread the word. I will be in the dungeons to check in on our prisoner." Jewels motioned for one of the other wide-eyed soldiers to lead her there. *There will be no more deaths because of this war if I have anything to say about it.*

At the End of a Sword

By Jewels - Jan 10 2009

"Yes, captain. Of course, but..."

"But what?!! You have your orders. Now carry them out!"

An adamant voice echoed off the fiery walls as Jewels descended the stairway to the dungeons. She quickened her pace but kept quiet to hear the conversation.

"You don't have the authority to give such an order, sir. Under the circumstances I think, maybe..."

"You don't need to think, *soldier!* The General is dead, our Fire Lord has been kidnapped and most likely killed, there are no more heirs to the throne, both Captain Kaylas and Captain Jarven are MIA, and Captain Verton agrees with me! There's nobody left with the authority to give such an order and I want him dead! If anyone with enough authority to question it ever comes back, I'll take the frost for it." Jewels guessed it was Captain Mebor who, after a pause, growled out vehemently, "If you won't do it for me then move out of my way and I'll do it myself!"

Rounding the corner after the last step Jewels barked at him, "Captain! Stand at attention and give me a full report!" She tried not to smile at his surprise and fumbling.

"My Lady! I, uh, we... we thought you had... uh..."

Jewels interrupted him. "You don't need to think, *Captain*. Just give me the report."

Even though he had been visibly shaken, Captain Mebor was a seasoned warrior and quickly composed himself though he still seemed uneasy as he spoke. "Three platoons deployed to Ermaria as ordered..."

Jewels fixed him with a steely glare, "by whose order Captain?"

"...by General Growan, My Lady."

"And my orders for an immediate ceasefire? What of those?"

"Uh... General Growan said he had talked to you and you changed your mind."

Jewels didn't believe him but wanted to hear more. "I see, continue please."

"Our troops almost overcame the city when a group of highly skilled elemental warriors arrived and started fighting against us. The tide started turning and then... the General fell..."

"Good, good..." Jewels mumbled it as Mebor continued to talk.

"...by an unknown hand and orders were given to fall back. Soon after we were infiltrated by an enchanted mortal who slaughtered our troops as they fled. He came straight to the throne room and continued to kill all he found there until he was finally out of manna and brought down." He paused for a moment and took on a thoughtful tone. "If you had been there, he would have killed you."

Jewels nodded. "Quite possible..."

"I am certain this was his intent." His voice dripped with benevolence. "I was just about to dispatch him so he would no longer pose a theat to your well being, My Lady."

Jewels put on a thoughtful look standing in silence for a minute. Then she motioned to the other three soldiers in the dungeon to come forward. "Didn't you just say you thought I was already dead, or did I mishear you? I don't like liars, Mebor." In her most authoritative tone she gave her orders. "Captain Mebor, you are hereby stripped of your title and released from the service of the Fire Lord." Jaw dropped, he started to protest but Jewels over-talked him. "I *should* have you beheaded for treason, but the war is *over*! Peace and the trade for oil has been negotiated and there will be NO more deaths because of it." The anger on his face was evident as he took a step towards her but Jewels stood her ground. "Would you like to be thrown in the dungeon as well?" She waited as his angry face fell in defeat. He shook his head. "Guards, please escort him out." One soldier took each arm while the third fell in behind and started walking him out when Kaylas came in. "Ah, General Kaylas!" Mebor whipped his head around in surprise staring daggers at Kaylas as the guards shoved him forward. "So glad to see a friendly face round here."

Kaylas cocked his head at her. "So you consider me a friend now? Because last time we were together, you ran away from me."

Jewels smiled, "One can never be too careful, you know? I still can't say I trust you," she watched his eyebrow raise, "but perhaps in time. Did you get the oil into the right hands?"

"Yes, I did. And *everyone* has the same question I do. How did you pull it off? Lord Cinead had only said that they were not willing to negotiate for the trade, so I am at a loss with how *you*, three days out of awakening and barely one day on the throne, managed to get that stubborn breed to bend." Kaylas paused from his rant, "Uh, no offense."

"None taken," she smirked as she thought of a brush off answer. "They were just tired of the war, really. Just as ready as I was to put an end to the needless deaths... If only Growan had listened to me. How many men, fire and human alike, didn't need to die today? Speaking of which, I was just about to examine our prisoner, would you care to join me?"

"Of course, My Lady. It would be my pleasure." Kaylas moved to the cell door and opened it gesturing for her to walk in before him. No sooner had he stepped behind her to follow, than he had to catch her as she stumbled backwards into him. "Woah, what's wrong?"

Jewels' mind reeled. "Nioca," she whispered.

Kaylas pulled her back out of the room and secured the door after glancing at the prisoner. "Wait a minute," he said quietly, "are you telling me you know him?"

Jewels ignored his question and started pacing. She felt a wave of relief flow over her. He hadn't been at Calamity Refuge because he had been in Ermaria. "But what is he doing here? How much did her hear? How much does he know? Is he even awake?" Her mumblings were met with only more questions from Kaylas so she continued in silence. *And what about the others? Are they at Ermaria, too?* Her relief turned to dread at her realization that her friends had very likely just been at war. She stopped in front of the table that held Nioca's confiscated items, noticing them for the first time. A few bubbling potions sat next to a dark blue robe. Jewels picked it up

amazed that it wasn't a pile of ash. The fabric felt strange under her flaming fingers. Then underneath the robe Jewels noticed the glint of metal. Crusader's Protectorate lay there, as deadly as ever. Her thinking shifted, her mood darkened. She couldn't help but relive seeing him hacking away at her tree... her sanctuary with it. Just to pocket her keys. *Thief!* Then the memory of it cutting through Vergil's chest... *Murderer!* And now... now he had come for her. Jewels felt the anger start to boil inside her as she burned bright. Nioca had come to kill her with his precious sword! *Enemy!*

So what do we do about it? The question, though coming from her own mind, startled her. *We? Is it really 'we'? ... Well, I want to kill him. How about you?* Jewels paused to think. She stepped back towards the cell door looking through the small window at her captive. He knew too much... had seen too much. Could she really risk letting him go, or having him know? She wasn't supposed to let any mortal know, but she had already told Nikki and nothing came of it. Was secrecy really that important? Her breath caught in her throat as she saw him lift his head. After a few seconds of dazed glances he look right at her. His hatred for what he saw in her was plain as day. *He doesn't recognize me. He hates the living flame, not me. ... Oh, he hates us alright. Like it or not we ARE living flame. Let's kill him and be done with it. ... No! He is my friend. ... Look at him! He is revolted by you. You think he'll want to be friends with you if he knows what you are? He is your enemy! ... There will be NO more deaths because of this war!* Jewels began to get a headache. Silently screaming at herself could not be good for her mental health. *Then yes, it is 'we'. 'This war' may be over, but OUR war... it is just beginning.* Jewels' heart fluttered in trepidation but her voice was calm and controled. "Kaylas, open the door."

"My Lady?"

"I want to talk to the prisoner alone." Kaylas made as if to protest but stopped and only nodded at the look she gave him.

"I'll leave the door open. Just in case."

Jewels walked in keeping her eyes locked on Nioca's until she was close enough to touch him. He hung against the wall of the cell, arms and legs shackled on either side of him while an extra flaming restraint held him to the wall at the waist. She marveled at how he didn't burn and wondered how long that would last.

For a while she just looked at him until he ventured to spit at her. "*Vile demon!* Kill me or release me so that I can kill you!"

Jewels looked away as his spittle quickly sizzled off her cheek. "I suppose I seem a monster to you... and I am!" she couldn't help but laugh at herself. "I am a monster! Just look at me. A pillar of fire capable of death and destruction." To make her point, she drew her energy in and then threw it out the door behind her shattering his two confiscated potions. She instantly regretted it, though. She began to feel faint and chided herself at wasting energy when she had only barely recovered from being fire drowned. She brought her hands up to look at them. "I didn't ask for this, though. I... I can't change what I am." She looked at him again. His brows furrowed over his hate filled eyes. "But you and I..." Jewels brought her hands up, watching him watch them as her fingertips emerged from the flames. "...we are not so different, Nioca"

His eyes narrowed. "Who are you? How do you know my name?" he demanded.

Jewels stepped back. How to answer? *There is only one way for us to properly answer that question.* She felt a deep instinct take her as she brightened to her full splendor. Holding her arms out she rose off the floor to hover before him and dictated with authority. "I am the Fire Lord, ruler of the living fire, and sovereign of all within this plane." She couldn't hold the pose for long, though. In her state the energy needed was just too much. Jewels tried not to show her fatigue as she continued. "Newly appointed, actually. I'm still trying to get the hang of things, but you'll be happy to know that the war you just battled in is over. My kind is being recalled from the Ermaria plane and I have negotiated peace with..."

Nioca interrupted her screaming, "*LIAR!*" His voice dripped with malice, "Filthy abomination! You are nothing more than a savage fiend that takes whatever you want leaving utter decimation in your wake. Demons are incapable of peace!"

His words stung though she knew it wasn't true. *This is how he sees us. This is how all humans will see us from now on. As a DEMON.* Jewels shook her head at her thoughts. "Is there nothing I can do, Nioca, that could prove to you otherwise?"

"You. Can. DIE!"

His words cut deep. There would be no reconciliation, no reasoning with him. *He will never call you friend. Nioca will always hate us!* Jewels was broken. It was true. He would never forgive her for what she was. She could see it in his eyes. Inwardly Jewels gave up and resigned herself. "Kaylas! Bring his sword!" Jewels ripped it out of his hand and pressed the tip to Nioca neck forcing him to draw back against the wall. *Let's finish this!* "I have never executed anyone before. Do *you* know what it feels like... to take the life of an unarmed being as they look you in the eye waiting to die?" Nioca only stared at her in defiance. "Let's find out, shall we?"

Jewels drew back the sword and in a few quick motions she had shoved the sword hilt into Nioca's right hand, broken the chain that held it immobile, and stepped back out of his immediate reach. Nioca looked on in shock. His arm fell with the weight of the sword as he struggled to even keep hold of it.

Kaylas drew his own sword and stepped forward. "My Lady! What are you doing?"

"Listen up, General Kaylas, and listen good because this may be my last order. I want you to prepare a portal and safe passage for Nioca to return to Ermaria immediately. He is not to be harmed. *No matter what.* Is that understood?"

"But, My Lady..."

"UNDERSTOOD?!"

"No, My Lady! I *cannot* let you do this!"

Jewels fixed Kaylas with a steely glare. It was good to know that he was not eager for her death or to be crowned Fire Lord after her. She felt guilty for putting him through this but it had to end. One way or another it *had* to end. Unable to yell at him any more, she firmly stated, "Either follow my orders, General, or I will find a new general who will."

Kaylas looked from the unbelieving hatred on Nioca's face to the determination on Jewels'. He sighed and bowed his head. "Yes, My Lady." He sheathed his sword and turned to leave taking one glance back at the pair in the cell and shook his head.

Jewels turned her attention back to Nioca who had managed to lift Crusader's Protectorate and point it straight at her though a bit unsteadily. "Before my death, I would just like you to know that I will be unable to fulfill my part in the trade I have made for peace. I cannot guarantee that the war will not start again in my absence. But then again, you didn't believe me anyway, did you?" Jewels flamed down all the way, staring at him with hazel eyes, as she stepped forward until the point of the sword pressed into the small of her neck.

"Go ahead, Nioca. Kill the demon."

How a Battle is Won

By Sudanna - Jan 13 2009

General Growan, surrounded by a cadre of chattering officers and aides, looked at the unimposing city walls. The charred and broken gap where the gate used to be stuck out like a plague boil, but the walls resumed their undamaged state just a few feet away from it. The enemies' plans would assume that he attacked there. There were two other gates, one a metal portcullis and the other a rather small set of thick, reinforced doors, but it was doubtful that there would be significant forces stationed at either of them.

"Do we have any usable maps yet? Colonel Deker!"

"We've scavenged some crude charts from the homes of some locals that fled into the city, but nothing that's any good."

"Bah. Give some to the scouts, get me some detail. Where'd Major Ulrot get to? I told him to tell me why he failed in his surprise attack."

"He's on his way, sir. He had to be patched up by the medics first."

"What? I told him as soon as possible! He's going back to sergeant unless he's got a *damn* good reason for his failure."

"Yes, sir."

The colonel did not leave.

"Yes, Deker?"

"Sir, if you don't mind my asking. . . Why are we doing this? Planning, I mean. Preparing. We can crush them!"

"You overstep your authority, Colonel. But you're young, I'll humor you. One doesn't become a General - one doesn't even survive - if one relies on superior numbers. Our surprise attack failed, Colonel. Obviously, they?e hiding something big. Even disregarding that - a few hours of planning may save countless lives, especially if they have a single tactician that's worth a damn. If they're smart, they'll fade back into the city and sacrifice civilians for chance at using guerilla tactics. I can't allow that."

General Growan returned to inspecting the city as the colonel walked away. The terrain all around was generally flat, but there were a few promising hills and rises for archers or siege equipment. The wall was new, and recently constructed. It couldn't be more than two decades old. There wouldn't be any decaying or damaged stretches. Nor was it in some skintight pattern around the city- a fairly uniform, unexploitable wall. A bit low, though. They might try scaling the area around the ruined gate and flank the defenders after drawing them out with a diversionary force going straight in. Leave some mages or archers on the walls. Some ballistae could be constructed out of sight and be wheeled in when the flanking began. Archers could hide on the grassy knoll, there-

"Reporting, sir!"

General Growan turned towards the speaker. One arm was in a sling and a spattering of bandages dotted his left side.

"Ah, Ulrot," he said, stepping closer. "I assume you have an excellent explanation of your failure?"

"Yes, sir." The major had flint in his eyes. "We hadn't progressed far into the city before encountering resistance. There was a mage or priest- somehow he could discern our true forms. He took some of us out, but we subdued him and his companions soon enough. Then-"

"Companions?"

"Yes, sir. There were two companions, both ineffectual."

"Hmm. Bodyguards, most likely. Go on."

"Anyways, we were then almost immediately ambushed by some beast and a mage-"

"Beast?"

"Yes, sir. Some kind of huge, red-furred humanoid. Enormous, sir. It caused most of our casualties. We did wound it, but it was clear we were outmatched, so we withdrew."

The General turned back to the city. "I see. Is that all?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well, then. You are dismissed, sergeant."

Ulrot froze. "S-sergeant, sir?"

"Yes, Ulrot. Sergeant. Perhaps if we actually encounter your beast and mystery mages during the invasion, I will reconsider."

"But sir! Ask the men! I-"

"I don't trust them any more than you, Sergeant. Dismissed." Growan turned away once more.

Ulrot shook for a moment, and then ripped his insignia off and threw it on the ground. As he stormed away, Growan called back "Report to the quartermaster for your new uniform."

Nalyd was confused. Nioca had said there was an attack soon. More of those demons? Well, no, not demons. A quick dissection - not really a dissection, more of a glance at the eviscerated bodies - revealed them to be elementals. Was this why Nioca had brought him along? To defend some backwater city from some random army of elementals? Would it have killed him to say something? He would have left his plans behind. How big was this attack going to be, anyways?

These questions and more whirled around in Nalyd's head as he reviewed his plans for cryoas. Quantity over quality, definitely. The commander here - Captain Wotshisname - had consulted with him about their plans. A skeleton force was to be left at the gate and on the walls, while archers waited on nearby rooftops. New recruits would wait in the buildings around the square. The more experienced soldiers of the standing army would be scattered throughout the city in small groups. Communication would be the real problem. After some thought, they decided upon coded trumpet bursts.

Civilians that they didn't have the weapons for had been advised to evacuate, but few were going too, and the Captain wasn't going to turn down cannon fodder.

Yirri had been the one to suggest collapsing the walls. They didn't have any experienced sappers, but they had just taken parts out until it looked rickety enough. Iron bars driven into the stone were tied to small, hastily-cannibalized catapults hidden in the buildings.

When the elementals came through the ruined gate, the skeleton guard force would rush out to meet them, and be slaughtered. As the elementals continued to advance into the square, the archers on the rooftops would jump up and shower arrows down on them. A short while later, their forces inside the buildings would rush out. Unless things went extraordinarily well, they would engage the enemy for only a short time, keeping them near the walls and allowing the archers to scatter throughout the city. Then they would collapse the walls and retreat to join up with the smaller groups of the standing army, which would then patrol designated areas of the city, engaging the elementals where possible. The archers on the rooftops were their real plan- as the ground forces kept the enemy spread out and distracted, the archers would begin a systematic sweep of the city, purging the elementals block by block.

Nalyd offered his services as a Shaper- after some explanation, the Captain decided that a cryoa should be given to each squad of ground troops roaming the city, for detection purposes. Some would also remain behind after the human soldiers left the gate area, sacrificing themselves for the less expendable troops.

In the end, he had to absorb Kurj to do it, but quantity over quality. Kurj might be able to take out five, six elementals before succumbing to an organized army- Cryoas, with the backing of squads, could be far more useful on an essence-cost basis. And Nalyd would be making dozens. Three went to each squad, with a score used to delay the elementals at the gate.

Nioca's estimate was off. It was at least a day and half before the elementals attacked.

General Growan watched his advancing forces from the same slight rise he had been on the previous day. There was nobody on the walls, as he had expected. As far as anyone could tell, the city was a cold, dead monolith of gray stone. The ruined gate lent an aura of long abandonment to the place.

But of course that wasn't the case. The diversionary force drew closer to the blackened, gaping opening of the gate as the spear-bearing flanking forces advanced more cautiously towards the walls on either side. Grapples and ladders clanked on the walls and, after a few minutes of waiting, the diversionary force was sent in. The battle was brief- the flankers did not scale the walls, even. The diversionary force advanced cautiously, keeping the flankers alert. When the archers on the rooftops began to shower down arrows and the troops rushed out of nearby buildings, the diversionary force retreated back to near the gate and the flankers scurried upwards, only to be greeted by a hail of arrows. Blasts of fire soon came as retaliation, and the archers soon retreated over the rooftops. As the flankers crowded the walls, the fast-deteriorating ground troops gave the signal to collapse the walls. Inside the buildings, the two catapults clicked and snapped upwards, dragging thick, many-stranded ropes with them. The iron rods at the ends ripped out, taking huge chunks of masonry out of the already- weakened base of the wall. The entire construct crumbled in on itself- patchily and somewhat slowly, but the end result was the same. The diversionary force and most of the flankers were crushed under tons of stone, or they fell to their deaths. As were many of the human recruits- but that was acceptable. The remainder of the humans scattered into the city, back to their designated posts. The elementals scattered everywhere.

General Growan roared sheets of fire, back at his camp. Drawing his sword, he spat orders at his banner-bearer. A trumpet call sounded, and a specific series of flags and banners rose and flapped in specific patterns. Specific orders were shouted, back at the reserve camp. Within minutes, orderly ranks of flaming, hissing elemental firemen marched forth, leaving sputtering trails of ash and ruined land. General Growan himself marched behind, surrounded by fluttering banners and glittering trumpets. Strange, patterned calls echoed throughout the city as they approached, betrayed by a column of smoke. As they reached the twice-ruined gate, the formations crumbled as they had to scramble over piles of rubble.

They were greeted at the gate by sprays of cryogenic fluid. It burned and slew them as if it were the most potent of acids. High-velocity ice needles and spraying droplets of supercooled fluid tore through the first to come over the ruined walls. Withdrawing briefly, they marched in again, this time leading with streams and walls of flame. Cryoa spit still punched holes through these, but they moved onwards inexorably. When at last they confronted the blue raptor-like creatures inside the square, many had their throats torn out by massive reptilian jaws before they began to slay the beasts. Frozen drool dripped from the blistering jaws of the now-fleeing cryoas. Vergil burst from an alleyway, briefly flaring with power, but causing little real damage. Arrows rained down on the elementals as they advanced, burning down buildings and men alike. They did not split into groups as the humans had expected them to, instead systematically burning down all they encountered. Frantic trumpet calls sounded through the burning, dying city, calling the scattered human patrols to group together. The archers split into groups now, swiftly engaging and withdrawing from the army, causing some confusion and casualties. The elementals left their wounded behind. The human army, hastily slapped together, approached the marching elementals from three different directions, Nalyd with the remaining cryoas from one, Yirri and Robsta part of one group, and the Captain himself leading the third. The archers on the rooftops converged. Fireballs were lobbed onto the rooftops and into the approaching human formations, but many were intercepted by cryoa spit.

General Growan yelled orders and the elaborate system of pennants and banners fluttered madly in the smoky, heat-hazed air. Needles of bone fired from Nalyd's hands shattered and tore these, but the army responded just as well to shouted commands. The cryoa pack charged in first, quickly and deeply penetrating the blob of flaming elementals, but quickly becoming bogged down and enduring heavy casualties. Then came the Captain's group, backed up by the majority of the archers. The experienced soldiers held their ground admirably, but they fought a losing battle. Robsta and Yirri's group connected last, the untrained troops trying to skirt the edges of the elemental's forces, trying to join up with the Captain's group. Nalyd, surrounded by his cryoa pack, was soon surrounded by elementals as well. The Captain's group was making slow progress, as more and more archers showed up, but they would not reach him in time. The General roared manically from inside his forces, as the siege engines outside the city finally began firing - without direction from the banner setup. Huge ballista bolts rained down at random. One hit Nalyd directly in the leg, all but ripping it off and driving him to the ground. Elementals, leaving him for dead, trod over him with flaming feet as they defended against the deteriorating cryoa pack.

Robsta was on the frontline of his moving force, simply because he was one of the few not dying. No elemental could touch him, and any that tried had their head bashed in with a shield. The untrained troops were fearful and sought only to join the relative safety of the larger force, but could not and were forced to fight for their lives, with a wall of flaming buildings on one side and a wall of flaming people on the other. They would have done cornered rats proud.

The Captain's force was wearing at the elementals like the sea at rocks. The Captain himself shouted hoarsely, directing volleys of arrows with stabs of his sword. When the last of the cryoas was struck down, he gave a signal and his ballistae, on the far wall of the city, fired upon the elementals. Huge bolts rained down among them, in addition to the bolts of their own engines outside the city that rained among everyone randomly. The main force of archers, originally the human's real plan, arrived on the ground, as all the buildings were aflame. Arrows rained down in force, and the elementals began to fray. The General himself was struck through the head by one of his own ballista bolts. The Captain's force spread out, trying to engage as many of the now-directionless elementals as possible. Several more squads appeared to bolster the human forces. Several troops were sent to deal with the siege outside the city. The Captain's forces had the elementals backed up against a stand of burning buildings, but they blasted their way out with a series of fireballs and fled through the ruined gate.

Back on the charred and burned field of rubble where the battle had taken place, Nalyd's shattered form twitched and shivered, each movement agony. His flesh was burned to the bone in patches, but joy suffused him. In his broken and burned hand, he clutched a small, pristine slip of folded paper that sparked and fizzled with protective light.

The Ends

By Nioca - Jan 20 2009

Nioca glared at the demon, but he felt despair well up inside him. Though the demon had spouted many lies, one thing had stuck: the demon lord was expendable. If it died, it could just be replaced. Nioca could kill the demon, but... what was the use? His entire trip here was in vain. Even if he had been able to strike the demon lord down and get out, it would have been worthless. Another would have replaced it, and the fighting would go on. The weight of it all came crashing down; the futility, the inevitability, his own fate...

The hand with Crusader's Protectorate slowly dropped away from the demon's neck. He could feel the sweat dripping down his neck; his fire protection was running out. "You've made a wise decision." The demon said with a smirk. "Many lives will be saved because of you."

"Yes, they will." With those words, a new fire took Nioca; he snapped the blade back up, dragging it vertically through the demon's torso. The wound wept ash as the demon staggered backwards. An ordinary human would have been disemboweled by the wound; as it was, the demon just collapsed, the fire around it dimming.

"You... you fool..." The demon gasped out. It wasn't the kind of fatal blow Nioca had hoped for, but the demon likely didn't have long to live.

"I agree." A voice came from the door of Nioca's cell. A blast of lightning shot inside and struck Nioca dead-center, killing him instantly. Weakened, Aryll dissipated.

Outside the cell, Nioca's robes started smoldering. Then, without fanfare, they burst into flames. Soon, they were nothing but a pile of ash, leaving naught but Crusader's Protectorate.

Nioca pondered the landscape. Rolling green hills stretched out in all directions. Small huts could be spotted here and there amongst them, along with several small lakes and ponds. He checked himself over, noting that he had all of his equipment with him. However, Aryll was nowhere to be seen.

Nioca wandered the hills, relieved at the change of pace. It hadn't taken him long to figure out where he was; this was one of the afterlives. The Ermarian Maeparphra. He was, however, curious as to which one. This didn't look like Resata Maeparphra; at any rate, green hills didn't figure into any kind of hell he heard of.

As he meandered, deep in thought, he bumped into someone. "My apologies," Nioca said, staggering back. "I didn't see..." Nioca trailed off, pondering the man before him. "What the...?"

The man was completely still. He had neither reacted nor noticed; he merely stood mid-stride, gazing off into the distance. It was if he had been suddenly frozen. Nioca promptly started reconsidering where he was; becoming irreversibly frozen in time didn't seem like something paradise would offer.

"He's not frozen. It's just that your perception of him is slowed," A rough voice called out behind Nioca. Nioca jumped, startled, then turned to the man. He was slightly taller and far better built than Nioca, and was also completely bald. His voice sounded like a distant rumble of thunder. "What's the matter, brother? Forgotten about me?"

"Teveren..." Nioca said, his voice laced with disbelief. After a brief moment, Nioca ran forward and hugged him. "It's been too long!"

"It has, Nioca," Teveren intoned deeply. "We need to talk."

"Yes we do." Nioca said, breaking off from Teveren. "Where's Sarah an-"

"Here. But we'll get to that in a few minutes. We only have a limited amount of time, and quite a bit to cover."

"Okay..." Nioca said, puzzled. "Like what?"

"Like why you ended up here, in Phemgor Maeparphra, instead of Pheros Maeparphra." Teveren said, a severe look on his face.

"I... I don't know. This is the middle plane?" Nioca responded. He knew the order; Pheros was paradise, Resata was hell, and Phemgor was between the two. "Couldn't you just tell me?"

"They're called the [abbr=Maeparphra translates literally as "Contemplation"]Contemplation[/abbr] for a reason."

"Maybe... maybe it's because I became a designer?" Nioca offered.

"Most likely." Teveren responded.

"You don't know?" Nioca fired back.

"One of the perks of Pheros Maeparhra is omniscience... but only on Ermaria. When you travel to the other planes, the only way we know you're okay is whether or not you're here." Teveren looked troubled. "Quite frankly, Phemgor is an improvement over the Consignment."

"The Consignment? You mean there's four planes as part of Ermaria's afterlife?"

"No," Teveren intoned darkly. "The Consignment is the ultimate plane. A plane where the most unfortunate of souls go. It's a plane of the afterlife unconnected to any other plane, but linked to all. A void... the epitome of nothing. Souls who go there eventually just... fade away."

"And you were worried I would end up there?" Nioca stated bluntly.

"Yes. Unless a soul there is intrinsically linked to a soul on any other plane, there's no return. It's what happens to those who are killed in the afterlife. Or by a dark enchantment in the mortal realms." Teveren nodded to Nioca, who quickly understood; this was the fate of those hit by a spiritkiller. "Or, worst, if a plane of existence dies out."

"Good god..." Nioca added, appalled.

"Not even a God could help you," Teveren said seriously. "It's where Aryll is now."

"What?! But I... but... no, I-" Nioca stammered.

"She's linked to you. Once you die for good, she'll enter the regular afterlife. As it is now, though, whenever her form has taken too much damage, or whenever you enter your afterlife, she'll be sent there." Nioca exhaled heavily as Teveren explained. "But on to something else; something you'll remember-"

"What do you-?!" Nioca started.

"I'm saying that, for the most part, you won't remember anything from your time here. You'll have a few vague memories. That you saw your family and so forth, plus a few selected things by our pantheon. But other than that, when you get revived in two minutes' time, you'll remember nothing." Forestalling a further question, he then added, "Two minutes by Ermaria's standards. When someone dies that'll soon get revived, time slows down for them proportionately. So we have about an hour."

Nioca struggled with that for a moment. Then he asked, "What are the few selected things?"

"I'm glad you asked; first off, Robsta's next," Teveren stated matter-of-factly.

"'Robsta's next' for what?" Nioca demanded.

"Secondly, there are more sides to every issue than you often realize." Teveren added, ignoring Nioca.

"'More sides'... Not that I'm ungrateful, but can we stop with the fortune cookie advice here?" Nioca said, getting irritated.

"Look, I'm just the messenger here," Teveren cut across sharply. "And finally, protect all those of the Refuge to the fullest of your extent, no matter your feelings."

"Well, at least that was less cryptic." Nioca muttered. He stood silently for a moment, then asked, "Is there anything else?"

"There's one last thing," Teveren said. Suddenly, his face cracked into a smile, and he waved at something in the distance. Several figures appeared over a distant hill. "Your family's waiting to see you."

Nioca's jaw dropped. Teveren started walking away, and Nioca numbly followed. Soon, Nioca smiled; he could see his sister Sarah waving at him.

Without any hesitation, Nioca joined the rest of his family. For a moment, at least, he could find a measure of peace. For a moment.

"We really need to stop this."

Nioca blinked. The light coming from above hurt his eyes. His entire body felt drained; every part of him hurt with wild abandon. Still, Nioca pushed himself upright. "Where..." Nioca gasped, suddenly noting he was short of breath. "Am... I...?"

"Konoros." A familiar voice stated. Nioca suddenly became aware that he was in a ruined building, and that someone was forcing him into a pair of pants. "Allow me to say, by the way, that you. Are. An. Idiot."

"True enough." Nioca said, fully coming around. It was Syla, who was graciously dressing him. "You revived me?"

"Don't be ridiculous. I'm not that powerful." Syla snapped.

"Then who-?"

"I did." A creaky voice came from a corner of the room.

"High Priest Vorgron," Nioca said, astonished. The aging priest was sorting through bottles, and selected one with a cyan fluid contained within. "I take it the priests from Gvelston have arrived?"

"Yes. We were too late to offer any assistance with the battle, but we are helping to heal the wounded. It seems," Vorgron said, turning to Nioca with a glint in his eye, "That a measure of faith has been restored with the Designers. Drink this." Vorgron thrust the bottle into Nioca's hand, then hobbled away.

Nioca finished dressing himself with the mundane shirt and pants Syla had provided. Then he drank the potion Vorgron had left, and promptly felt relief pour through his body. "Anything happen whilst I was gone?" Nioca asked Syla.

"Not really. Mostly, we've been recovering from the battle. The Captain has been having a royal fit; the mayor died during the battle, and now all of the city's decisions are landing on him." Syla said with a grim smile.

"What about Robsta? Nalyd? Yirri?" Nioca asked tentatively.

"Robsta's around here somewhere, though I haven't been paying attention. Nalyd was last seen during the fighting, and hasn't been seen since. And Yirri..." Syla's voice quavered slightly. "...didn't make it."

"He's dead?" Nioca asked, his voice a despairing monotone.

Syla nodded. "He was struck down by a ballista bolt during the fighting, and his body burned up from all the fire that was going around..." Syla paused, then picked something up from the floor. "He would have wanted you to have this."

Nioca saw what it was: Avenger. Yirri's broadsword. It glowed gently still, even though it was coated lightly in ash. Nioca took it gingerly. "It's fortunate that I receive this now; I lost Crusader's Protectorate. Still... I wish it were under better circumstances. I mean, who's next in this-" Nioca stopped short. "ROBSTA!" He shouted, panic gripping him. His memory of Phemgor Maeparphra was hazy, but the meaning of his brother's word of warning became clear; more than that, it became clear why Nioca was told of the Consignment.

Robsta watched the east gate carefully. Whilst the enemy had left, there was no telling whether it would return. And until Nioca returned from... well, wherever he ran off to, there wasn't much else to do.

"Robsta! What are you- oh for God's sake!" w-dueck had appeared behind Robsta, staff in hand. Unfortunately, his sudden appearance resulted in Stonecrusher being leveled at his throat.

"w-dueck." Robsta said, surprised. He lowered Stonecrusher. "What are you doing here?"

"Looking for Nioca." w-dueck said, rubbing his throat. "And you ar-" His question was cut short; somebody had grabbed him around the neck from behind. Robsta raised his blade, only to whirl at the last minute at an opponent coming up behind him.

"Nice to see you aren't all complacent!" Robsta's attacker snarled. He was a large man wearing black plate mail, and wielding a ruby blade. The man swung his blade in a fast, graceful arc. Robsta parried, but the ruby blade caught in the hilt of Stonecrusher. With a quick yank, Stonecrusher was ripped out of Robsta's hands, and Robsta was knocked to the ground. The man raised the crimson blade for a killing thrust...

"YOU AGAIN?!" A harsh voice cut through the air as a shining blade flew at the assassin's head.

The assassin whirled on the new opponent. "I heard you were dead!" The assassin snarled.

"You *were* dead!" Nioca snapped back, taking another swing. The assassin parried quickly. "I killed you myself at Gvelston!"

"Um, a little help?!" w-dueck squeaked, partially choked. He was vainly struggling to throw off the man holding him.

"Yeah, yeah, in a minute." Nioca snarled through gritted teeth. Whilst the advantage of surprise had provided an early edge, Nioca was suddenly becoming aware that he was not a swordsman. It was only through a blessing ritual that he wasn't already decapitated.

"Fool!" The assassin roared with a particularly vicious stroke. Nioca stumbled backwards as the blade cut across his forearm. Nioca screamed in agony; the cut was minor, but he soon realized that the ruby blade that cut him was a spiritkiller. A fire raced through his every vein, and he could feel his very soul fall under attack. His vision turned red. In the little rational thought Nioca had left, he realized that his eyes must be red at that very moment. His body started to convulse as it hit the ground. From what he could still see, he saw the assassin standing over him, preparing for the final blow. It would be a mercy.

Suddenly, as if from nowhere, Robsta tackled the assassin. The pair flew several feet, landing apart and raising a large cloud of dust. The assassin quickly stumbled upright and readied his blade, but Robsta beat him to it; a solid punch landed across the assassin's face, knocking out multiple teeth and sending him back to the ground. w-dueck, still struggling, raised his staff. A blast of lightning struck the man holding him, electrocuting them both. w-dueck fell to his knees, then flung himself forward and out of the man's grasp. Whirling, he raised his staff again, and a bolt of black energy struck the man in the gut. The man fell, but was dead before he hit the ground.

Nioca's vision then cleared. He had survived; through some miracle, his body had been strong enough to hold his spirit intact. However, he felt, if possible, worse than when he had just been raised. He barely had enough strength to pant for breath. Rolling over, he brought his hand back to Avenger, then looked at the raging battle. w-dueck was free, and Robsta was up and fighting the assassin. However, Robsta didn't stand a chance, and w-dueck couldn't attack the assassin without taking the very strong chance he'd hit Robsta by mistake. Nioca, realizing that the battle needed to be turned in Robsta's favor, focused. Without warning, the assassin was tossed

backwards. "Robsta!" Nioca shouted hoarsely, raising Avenger. "Catch!" Nioca tossed the shining broadsword haphazardly in Robsta's direction.

With agility to rival a cat, Robsta turned and snatched the broadsword from the air. w-dueck took aim at the assassin, but the assassin fired a bolt of fire from his palm. w-dueck was thrown back, his robes smoldering. The assassin then made a wild swing at Robsta, only to be met with Avenger. The assassin looked on in horror. As the assassin brought the ruby blade about, Robsta slashed the man across the sternum. Avenger caught between the plates of the assassin's armor, and a howl escaped his lips. The assassin then took another swing, and was again parried. Multiple stabs and slashes filled the air as the two dueled. And Robsta was winning. With a savage scowl, the assassin took a step back and dove behind a nearby cart. Rolling, he righted himself, and pulled a ruby-bladed dagger from his belt. Taking a half-second to aim, the assassin drew back the dagger and launched it. It wasn't aimed at Robsta or w-dueck, but Nioca. The blade rotated through the air...

And exploded in a dazzling display of fire and ruby shrapnel. Pieces of ruby showered Nioca's face as the hilt crashed into his forehead, knocking him unconscious. The assassin stared in abject horror and rage at the new arrival. "NO... YOU WORTHLESS SCUM! THIS ISN'T-" He screamed, cut short by a cloud of daggers flying at his head and Robsta bearing down on him. The assassin turned and ran. Robsta chased him, but the assassin pulled out an emerald and disappeared in a flash of light.

Syla sprinted up and stooped by Nioca whilst Aryll took position in the middle of the street. Uttering a healing chant, Syla's hands took on a yellow nimbus. Nioca's eyes flickered open. "Ow..." Nioca groaned, slowly pushing himself up. "I keep this up, and I'll be on my third life in no time. Just six shy of being a cat!" Syla pulled Nioca upright. "Now," Nioca said in an odd tone, "Where is my sword?"

"Nioca, what's going on?" Robsta asked in a severe tone. He handed Avenger over to Nioca.

"What's that? What's going on what?" Nioca asked, confused.

"What's happening here?" Robsta persisted. "And I want the truth!"

"You're giving me my sword, silly..." Nioca said, staring at Robsta as if he was an idiot.

Robsta stared at Nioca for a bit, before turning to Aryll. "What's wrong with him?"

"I don't know..." Aryll said, worried. "Something happened during the fight. It..." Aryll shuddered slightly. Her mind replayed a mental scream of agony, partially distorted. It'd be something forever burned onto her memory. "Suffice it to say that I'm not interested in hearing it again."

Syla slipped up behind Nioca and sniffed the air. "Nioca, have you been drinking?"

"Of course, my love! I'd die if I didn't!" Nioca responded rather belligerently, attempting to throw an arm around her. Syla rolled her eyes and backed off a couple paces.

"He, um, thinks you mean drinking water." Aryll added. The thoughts coming from him were disjointed at best.

"Why is Nioca drunk?" Nalyd had shown up, hobbling but alive.

"Nalyd! Come, sit, enjoy the merriment!" Nioca cheered.

"Wait, Robsta; did that assassin at any point land a blow on Nioca?" Aryll asked.

"Once, across the forearm. Why?" Robsta asked, puzzled.

"You're welcome!" Nioca exclaimed.

"Spiritkiller weaponry..." Aryll said aloud to herself. "Nioca, who... am... I...?" Aryll said haltingly, enunciating every word.

"Aryll? Why are you talking funny?" Nioca said, confused. "Ah, never mind. Where's the duck?"

"Duck?" Nalyd asked, puzzled.

"Yeah, the Will duck. Where is he?" Nioca persisted.

"Right here, thank you very much." w-dueck fumed. Syla had gone off and healed him whilst the others were pondering Nioca. "Now, if you don't mind, I'd really like an explanation for what just happened. Why are you here, and why did you bring Robsta and Nalyd along?"

"I am here, because I was born here. Robsta needed protecting, and Nalyd... well, just look at him! How can you say no to that face!" Nioca rambled off cheerily. Nalyd was less than amused.

"Wait, *I* needed protecting? What-" Robsta yelped.

"TAXI!" Nioca yelled at an abandoned cart, waving it down and completely ignoring Robsta. He then stumbled to it and muttered, "Gvelston Sanctuary, my good man!" And collapsed on it, sound asleep.

"'Taxi'?" Nalyd asked.

Aryll opened her mouth to explain, then shook her head, thinking better of it. "He has a good idea, though he doesn't quite realize it. We probably need to get back to the Refuge."

"Refuge? What Refuge?" Syla asked as they all started gathering around the cart.

Nioca blearily awoke on a dusty road, listening to the sound of cartwheels rumbling down the dirt highway. Judging from the sky, several hours had passed since he had passed out. Nioca groaned and clutched his head; it felt like it was about to split open. Unsteady, Nioca sat up and looked around. The spires of Gvelston Sanctuary were approaching in the distance. A sigh of relief passed his lips. Then he looked at his companions on the cart. Robsta at first glance looked alert, but his eyes were closed in slumber. Nalyd slept soundly, his scythe clutched by his heart like a teddy bear. He leaned against w-dueck, who snored gently. Syla also seemed asleep at a glance, but as Nioca looked at her, she raised her head and acknowledged him sleepily. The only one really alert was Aryll, who guided the horse pulling the cart.

Nioca squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, trying to make the pounding in his head go away. Then he jumped off the back of the cart and jogged alongside it for a moment, catching up to Aryll. He took a glance back at the cart, checking to make sure everyone was safely to sleep, before talking to her. "Did you have any trouble?"

"Nothing I couldn't handle." Aryll responded stiffly.

"I wasn't talking about an attack."

"Neither was I. I've convinced Robsta that you were just babbling." Aryll said flatly. Even she was getting tired.

"Good." Nioca pondered briefly. "You know, it'll be nice to be home."

"Home, Nioca?" Aryll asked, amused.

"Calamity Refuge. Might as well be. Just settle down for a while... put this whole travesty behind us." Nioca suddenly heard a loud thump behind him and turned around. The cart had struck a small stone, jostling everyone inside. w-dueck moaned gently, then fell back to sleep. Robsta shifted slightly as well. After watching them for a moment, Nioca continued, "Hopefully, it's enough to get Ermaria to call off the dogs. We'll still have to deal with the VRP's assassins, and I'll have to keep an eye on Robsta... but at least the invasion threat's over."

"Why not just tell Robsta the truth?" Aryll inquired.

"Quite frankly, I don't trust him. I... I'm not trusting anyone anymore. Save for you. Everyone around me seems to have an ulterior motive, and it makes me question whether they'd turn on me if it came down to it."

"So, what next? How will you explain this?"

Nioca paused. "Well, I'll tell Nalyd and Robsta that I no longer need their services. I'll pay them; thankfully, someone recovered my pack. And we can go our separate ways. Will already knows more about this than I'm comfortable with, but I can likely pacify him with a simple demon invasion story. As for Vergil, well..." Nioca looked back at a misshapen blue ball on the cart. "...I don't really know. It's not every day someone turns into a ball, and he seems to know a lot more than he's letting on."

"And Syla?"

Nioca didn't respond.

The cart bumped to a stop outside the Sanctuary gates. Nioca proceeded to wake everyone and show them inside.

A flash of light surrounded the ruddy crystal in Nioca's Citadel basement, and everyone reappeared. For a moment, everything was silent. Then, looking up, Nioca stated, "Aryll... This basement has a sunroof."

The entire corner of Nioca's Citadel had collapsed. The group rushed out of the collapsed basement, unsheathing weapons and preparing spells. But it didn't prepare them for what they saw.

"Holy..." Nioca said, stunned.

"What a dump." Syla stated, unimpressed.

"What happened...?" Robsta intoned, his voice hollow.

"Why is Nalyd not surprised?" Nalyd said cynically.

"Who would do this?" Aryll gasped, horrified.

"My Refuge..." w-dueck said in a terrible whisper. "MY REFUGE!" He screamed out, anguished.

Refuge Island was destroyed. No building was unscathed; From Robsta's hut being a sooty blot on the ground to the once-mighty Admin tower, now crumbling and half its original height.

w-dueck fell to his knees and started sobbing. The rest just looked on in horror. How? Why? When?

"There's someone behind that building." Nalyd said suddenly, breaking the reverie and pointing behind the Spam forum. A figure could be seen striding across the grounds toward the Admin tower.

There was no hesitation. Nioca immediately ran forward, intent on intercepting the intruder. Whoever it was took no notice as Nioca closed the distance. With one swift grab, Nioca yanked the intruder around by the shoulder and pushed the point of Avenger into the intruder's stomach.

"Jewels?" Nioca said, lowering the sword. She was breathing heavily and looked terrified, but otherwise seemed alright. Robsta caught up with them moments later. "What happened here?"

Death, Life, and a Day at the Spa

By Jewels - Jan 22 2009

"The portal is ready, sir."

"Good, good." Kaylas made a brief inspection before dismissing the soldier. "Now clear everyone out. I don't want anyone wandering between the dungeons and here." The soldier looked at him quizzically but nodded his understanding.

Kaylas closed his eyes and shook his head. *What was she thinking?* It was inconceivable to him, putting a sword back into the hand of that murderous zealot. She was so foolish and so... so trusting and forgiving and... so loving. He'd never met another living fire like her. Kaylas just couldn't understand her and perhaps... perhaps he'd never get the chance to. The sudden knot of dread in the pit of his stomach surprised him. He didn't think he had cared that much. They had only just met, and yet... what she had accomplished in such a short time? Her presence, her confidence, her calm demeanor... She was unique and Kaylas knew that if they lost her, they would never find another like her. Wracked with worry he headed down the dungeon stairs hoping beyond hope to find her still standing there with the prisoner. Still he drew his own sword and kept it at the ready. If this 'Nioca' had gotten free Kaylas was not about to just let himself be run through as well.

It was all too quiet as he descended the last few steps and rounded the corner. The door to the cell still stood open as he had left it but there was no sound save for the constant crackle of fire

that was commonplace on this plane. Kaylas moved slowly fearing an ambush all senses on heightened alert but his first glance into the cell told him his fears were unfounded. Hanging from the shackles were nothing more than charred and smoldering bone. The prisoner was dead.

Jewels lay on the cell floor barely aflame as Kaylas rushed to kneel at her side. "Jewels?! ... My Lady, are you alright?" Gently her rolled her to her back. He couldn't help but swear at what he saw. One look at the gaping wound through her torso told him she couldn't last long like this. His voice was urgent... pleading as he ripped off pieces of her dress to make a bandage. "Jewels...*Jewels* just hold on! I'm gonna get you to a healer. You... you're going to be OK..." His voice caught in his throat. He tried to make himself believe it but fear gripped him. Her fire was so dim... and he had just given word that every available healer should head towards the military bases to attend to wounded there. They had an hour's head start on him. He'd never get her to a healer on time.

Such a senseless death... *and for what?? To allow a hate filled human momentary revenge?* Kaylas glanced at the quickly dwindling remains of the prisoner and a rage took him like never before. He wished Nioca wasn't dead just so he could kill him personally. But his anger had no foe left to fall on. Instead it turned towards himself. "I never should have left you... it's all my fault!" His vehemently whispered self-admonishments didn't go unanswered.

Jewels eyes fluttered as her hand searched for his. "No..." came a barely audible whisper. Kaylas grabbed her seeking hand and squeezed. "Don't blame yourself Kaylas," she paused for a labored breath. "If you must blame something, blame anger... blame rage... blame the hatred that seems to come so easily to us." Slowly she turned her head to look at him, eyes pleading. "Do not harbor any, Kaylas. Leave it all behind you or it will only continue to destroy everything... everything we hold dear."

Still boiling with anger at both the human and himself, Kaylas couldn't understand how he could ever do such a thing but nodded none the less. How could he disappoint her with the trivial? Jewels closed her eyes seeming not to have the energy to keep them open. "Kaylas," she breathed, "take me... take me to Calamity Refuge."

He shook his head at her. "But my lady, we have to get you to a healer..."

Jewels cut him off. "I want to see the blue sky. I... I want to feel the green grass and hear the birds... Kaylas, how I miss the birds. *Please!*" She opened her eyes with effort to stare at him again, "Please, take me home."

He was unable to say no to her entreaty. The chances of getting her to a healer on time were already slim to none. Formalities gone, he nodded, "OK, Jewels. OK." With that he gingerly picked her up and headed for the portal that had been prepared for Nioca. With a few adjustments to it's settings he was on the internet plane in no time. Gasps and stares of onlookers greeted him at the Google station he found himself at. Indeed, in corporeal form he was quite a sight. In full armor and trimmed beard holding the limp form of Jewels whose bandages and dress were thoroughly soaked and dripping blood. Ignoring them, he grabbed the first transport out, all the while aware of Jewels' growing stillness and ashen complexion.

Kaylas was apprehensive when he arrived, about the questions he would have to answer, but to his relief he found the Refuge emptied of members. "We're here Jewels," he whispered.

Jewels opened her eyes, a tiny smile on her lips. "The courtyard... Sit with me in the courtyard, Kaylas." So under the blue sky and in the green grass, Kaylas propped Jewels against a towering oak and sat next to her. After the grimaces of pain subsided, her fingers went to the grass gently caressing the blades. He stared at her face. If it weren't for her paleness, the joy that shown would have made Kaylas think there was nothing wrong. When she spoke, her words were so quiet that he had to struggle to understand. "I don't know why, Kaylas, but I've grown to love it here. I think I could be quite content to stay here forever." He only nodded and squeezed her hand not knowing what to say. "I'm so tired, Kaylas. It's time...," Kaylas had to look away as his tears started to flow, "...time to rest. *Peace... tranquility...*"

Her voice took on a harsher tone which made Kaylas turn back to her. "Jewels?"

She continued to whisper, "*rest... peace... tranquility...*" her voice growing more and more forced, but more concerning to Kaylas was her shoulder. It looked like it had sunk halfway into the tree.

"Jewels, what's happening?! *Jewels!*" She ignored his query until he started tugging on her arm. "Jewels, I have to get you away from the tree."

She looked at him with eyes that mirrored her words, "No... I want this. Let me go, Kaylas. Let me rest."

He couldn't keep the emotion from his voice, "I don't want you to go. Your people need you, Jewels... *I... I need you.*" Sinking into the tree, she didn't answer him but looked on with fondness. She held tight to his hand. "Please, don't leave." Kaylas held on as her face disappeared followed shortly by the rest of her body. He pounded the tree with his fist as it tore her fingers from his. "Give her back," he heaved. *"Give her back!"* Left with nothing but his grief, Kaylas couldn't hold it in. He screamed at the world, at fate, and the unfairness of it all. Kaylas gave himself over to his emotions. Going full flame, he took out his anger on anything that stood in his vision. In his rage he threw fireball after fireball until nothing in all the Refuge lay untouched save the tree. That lone tree standing in the middle of a smoldering ruin. He couldn't stand to look at it anymore. Letting out one final anguished cry he blasted it with every ounce of energy he had left. Burning branches lay strewn all around him as he collapsed, emotionally and physically spent. All of the Refuge burned around him and he closed his eyes imagining he was back at the fire plane. That's where he should be. The people would need to be notified... and there was much business to attend to. Flaming down to corporeal form, he whispered a final benediction, "Goodbye, Jewels." Then turning to walk away, he left it all behind him.

He didn't stay long enough to see the flames that licked the oak tree turn white hot and grow to four stories high. _____

Nothing... all is nothing. No sound or sights, no tastes or smells, nothing that she can feel. Even her thoughts remained silent.

Jewels woke with a start not knowing where she was. Everything around her was in ruins and she lay in a pile of cooling ash and soot. Very confused, she stumbled to her feet and wandered around aimlessly. Noises... she heard noises. People talking? No, yelling. She leaned against a wall trying to make sense of anything. She started walking again just to keep herself stimulated only to find herself soon ripped around and poked harshly with a sword at her midriff staring at a

face she knew she feared. The cool blade against her skin brought a wave of inexplicable panic over her. Though he quickly retracted his sword, her terror only increased at the sound of his voice. "Jewels?" Another figure rapidly approached adding to her confusion. "What happened here?" And yet another strode forward, staff in hand. "And what happened to you?"

"I... I, ah..." Jewels struggled with words as she looked down at herself. Her dress was ripped across the bottom, caked with dirt, soot, and blood, and around her middle were sloppily tied rags that neglected to completely cover a neat horizontal rip underneath. She started shaking with the input that just wouldn't compute. "I don't know."

The third figure stepped forward resting a hand on her shoulder. "Jewels, are you alright?" He looked at her with concern in his eyes... those unmistakable eyes. A moment of clarity came to her clouded mind. "Will!" she smiled, "You're alive!" She threw her arms around a startled w-dueck and let her tears of relief flow. Squeezing him tight she whispered, "I was so worried."

He rested his chin on her shoulder and patted her back. "Yeah, Jewels. I'm OK... Glad to know somebody cares." When Jewels made no move to let go and some snickers started coming from the gathering audience a flushed w-dueck attempted to extricate himself gently.

Still trying to piece together what was going on, Jewels seized the opportunity. "Group hug!" she yelled. Nioca's eyes went wide as he started to back away but Nylad gave the woman behind him a smirk and a nod. She rolled her eyes at him but still stepped forward as they each wrapped an arm around Nioca and shoved him into the center of the hug. Jewels' thoughts were coming back clearer. She recognized the ruins of the Refuge and remembered her encounter with Nioca by the time everyone had at last let go. She spoke up before more questions could be thrown at her. "I don't know what happened to the refuge. It was like this when I got here. And I'm a mess because I attempted to go spelunking in my suite... *before* it collapsed." She searched all their eyes to see if they believed her and stopped to stare at Nioca last. "I'm lucky it didn't kill me."

Holding his gaze was difficult to say the least. The pain of his blade was very fresh in her mind. She searched his expression. *No flinch, no nothing. I suppose that's good news. ... It only means he doesn't know yet but he will never accept us for what we are. You'd better pray he never finds out... or be ready to take him out if he does.* Jewels shook her head at herself. She'd already been through this. Killing Nioca was not an option and yet.. something nagged at the back of her mind. A dark shadow. Nothing she could put her finger on. Nothing... nothing she could remember. But she couldn't deny her apprehension... or her new fear of death. She shivered involuntarily, putting her head in her hands.

"Are you sure you're all right, Jewels?" w-dueck asked.

And suddenly she wasn't. Panic gripped her. "What time is it?" she blurted out.

Robsta glanced at the sun. "It's almost mid-day, why?"

The small group looked on in bewilderment as Jewels started ranting frantically. "Ohhhhhh crap. Crap, crap, crap, crap, Crap. *Crap! CRAP!!!!* I'm late! Oh crap, I'm late! My dress? My hair? I look worse than before... I don't wanna do this. I can't do this. I *have* to do this. *CRAP!*" *I believe the word you're looking for is [CENSORED]. ... Shut up! That's not even funny. ... Maybe not but it is quite ironic, don't you think?* Jewels couldn't think straight, not with her own mind jeering at her.

w-dueck cut in, "Wait a minute, Jewels. Late for what?"

"An appointment! A VERY important appointment! I... I need help. Will, you *have* to help me! I need you to... to... Oh, I don't know what. I just *need* you. Come with me. Please, Will? I need you to come with me!" She grabbed his arm and started tugging him towards the portal off the isle, which though charred, still seemed to be in working order.

"But we just got here," Nioca protested. "What about the Refuge? Who's going to fix all this?"

Robsta spoke up. "Well, rebuilding my own hut will be easy enough if I can get the supplies, but I have no idea what the specs were on the rest of the buildings."

"Don't look at Nalyd. He is a Shaper, not a construction worker."

Nioca stared incredulously as w-dueck was letting himself be pulled away by Jewels. "Priorities, Will! We have work to do here."

"I... well...," w-dueck stuttered as he looked between the two. "Jewels does seem to need me more urgently. Her appointment can't take that long. We'll be right back, I'm sure... Won't we, Jewels?"

"Yeah, sure, right back. Now come on! I'm already late. We have to leave NOW!" With a few final tugs Jewels managed to pull him through.

The group stood staring at the sparking portal.

"Maybe Vergil can do something," Robsta suggested.

"Nalyd thinks Vergil can roll... maybe bounce, but not much else."

"Maybe we can help Vergil so he can help us." Nioca turned and started walking back towards his ruined Citadel.

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w-dueck struggled to keep up as Jewels ran to the nearest Google station. "Jewels, where are we going?"

"Gotta find a portal to the water plane," she called back. "Gotta get a new dress, and fix my hair, and... a bath! Will, I so need a bath. And one of those clocks that turns back time, that'd be nice. Wish I could get a hold of King Sheldon. Make sure he knows I'm not backing out and Kaylas..." Jewels stopped dead in her tracks causing Will to run into her. "Oh, Kaylas must be sick with grief..."

w-dueck took advantage of her momentary pause to voice his ever growing concerns. "Wait, wait, wait! Grief over what, Jewels? Who is Kaylas? And King Sheldon?! 'Ruler of the water plane' King Sheldon? Why in the world do you have an appointment with him?! Jewels, you're not making any sense. Where have you even been for the past two days?"

"I don't have time to answer questions, Will. I have too much to do that needed to be over and done hours ago." She started walking away from him again but he grabbed her and turned her to face him, holding her by the shoulders.

"Jewels, I want to help you but I can't unless you to *talk to me!* Whatever this appointment is for, rushing is not going to make you 'not' late. Help me understand, Jewels." He loosened his grip as she stopped struggling.

Jewels' breathing slowed as she let herself cling to his reasoning. "OK, I'll answer your questions, but I really feel like I should be multitasking here so is there someplace we can go where people can get me cleaned up while we talk?"

Will smirked, "I think I know just the place."

Minutes later Will led Jewels into *Susie's Luxury Day Spa* and ordered them both 'the works with the perks'. "Wow!" Jewels admired the beauty of the place. "How'd you know about this place?"

"I, uh... I plead the fifth."

"Oh, come on," she whined. "You expect me to answer all your questions but you won't tell me how you know about 'the works with the perks'? That doesn't seem very fair."

"Let's just say, I've been here before. Now, the mud bath is first so take off those filthy rags so we can have them burned."

Jewels stared at him hands on hips. "Right here?"

He smiled and turned her around before answering in a sing-song voice. "No. The ladies dressing room is right over there. They have fresh clean robes right inside for you and the attendants will show you where you need to go. Now get. I though we were in a hurry."

"Hurry? At a spa? I don't think so. I don't want to miss a single perk." After disrobing, Jewels was soon led to room with a round tub filled with warm mud. Will wasn't there yet so she hurried in and laid back to relax placing some of the provided cucumber slices over her eyes. A minute later, she heard footsteps and someone else getting into the tub across from her. "I don't even know where to start," she ventured.

Will's voice answered back. "Why not start at the beginning? That's always a good place. I'll try not to interrupt."

Jewels sighed to herself. What was the beginning? "I'm not human, Will. My father was a fire elemental from the fire plane, and my mother was a Dryad from the Ermaria plane, which makes me... well, I don't know. Messed up at least. I've spent most of the past two days, on the fire plane really just remembering who I am, or *what* I am. It's all a huge mess. My father was the leader there and they were at war with the water plane over this oil we need and the war was extended into Ermaria for the land... I'm sure you noticed... and then Vergil is my brother an..."

"What?! Your brother?!!"

"Excuse me, half-brother. Now, stop interrupting. Anyway Vergil tried to take over the fire plane by killing our father which normally would have made him the Fire Lord except for dear old dad figured out his plot and disowned him just in time. So dad's dead and guess who gets to take his place. Go ahead guess."

"Uh... you?"

"Right, me. Lucky, lucky me. So now I'm in charge and I don't want to be at war but my supposedly loyal inner circle *does* want to be at war so they ignore me when I call a cease fire and go ahead with their campaign in Ermaria... I'm sure you noticed... where, fortunately, the biggest supposedly loyal inner circle guy, General Growan, gets killed so I don't have to worry about him anymore. But then I'm kidnapped by Zyqxuwy-knows-who and taken to the water plane where, good news, I'm able to end the war with King Sheldon. He was very ready to have my people stop slaughtering his. Also good news, he is willing to trade for the oil we need. Bad news... I am willing to trade for the oil too." Jewels stopped her ramblings. It felt good to just let it all out but she was afraid how Will would react to what she agreed to.

"Why is that bad news?" Will prompted.

Jewels forced herself to tell him despite her fears. "He wants... an heir."

"Air? What, they don't have enough air on the water plane?"

Jewels took off her cucumber slices and threw them at him. "An *heir*, Will, a son! He wants a son and he wants me to bear it so that eventually the water and fire planes will come under the same rule. That of our son. That's where I'm supposed to be today... procreating." She wished she had more cucumbers to put back over her eyes so she had an excuse to not look at him. To not see his reaction.

"So, you're marring King Sheldon? I thought he already had a wife."

Jewels shook her head vigorously, "Whoa, whoa. NO! Nobody's getting married over this. Just... having a baby. Now can we drop it and move on?"

Will continued to press the issue anyway much to Jewels' dismay. "And you agreed to this?" Jewels nodded. "In trade for the oil?" Jewels nodded again. "Isn't that sorta like... prostitution?"

It stung. Hearing the actual words ring in her ears cut deep. Not that she expected anything less from him but she had hoped... Tears in her eyes she raised her voice. "What was I supposed to do, Will? Tell him no? I don't think you understand how important this oil is. Without it the entire fire plane would die out. *My people* would die out unless they conquered another plane like Ermaria, and then the dryad's, *also my people* would die out. Not to mention all the humans there."

"That's..." Will paused searching for the word.

"That's what? Disgusting, inconceivable, insane?"

"Well, I was going to say selfless, but I suppose it could be all those other things, too." Will gave her a crooked smile that completely disarmed her. Acceptance? Understanding? She couldn't help but smile back. She also couldn't help but throw a handful of mud at him for agreeing with her.

After the mud and the massage, the manicure, the pedicure, the hair, and the facial Jewels looked and felt like a new woman. She'd have to come back here sometime. And often. Just as her attending ladies were putting on the final touches Will walked up carrying a few bags. "What's all this?" Jewels asked.

"Well, you said you needed a new dress, so foregoing the facial I went and picked something out for you. Go ahead. Try it on."

Jewels was surprised, to say the least, but took the offered bags gladly, smirking at the pink striped bag in the middle as she headed towards the dressing room. He certainly had been thorough. She came out twirling and gushing. "Will, it's beautiful! Thank you, so much."

Will stood shyly. "You're welcome. ... Are you ready to go?"

Jewels' face fell. "No. I don't think I'll ever be ready."

"You don't have to do this, you know."

"Yes, I do... I don't think I could live with the consequences if I didn't. Let's get it over with." Will offered his arm and Jewels let him escort her out the door.

Arriving at the water plane, it was short work getting a ride to the castle. Jewels admired the scenery along the way. Rolling hills, thick forests, and blue skies reflected in mirror like lakes. The dryad in her felt a certain kinship with the natural beauty. Looking over the horizon she didn't see any sign of the castle so decided to start up some conversation. "So, Will, you never told me how you got out of that dungeon."

"You mean that wasn't a dream? Well, it would have been nice if you had sprung me. Do you make it a habit, appearing to prisoners to give them hope and then disappearing just as quickly?"

"I don't even know *what* that was. It was like a vision only I was there. Vergil said I never left the bar stool when it happened though. Maybe those two glasses of ice water had something to do with it, I don't know."

"Ice water?"

"Long story, and we're talking about you now. So... spill. I want details."

"Well it wasn't anything glamorous. No prison break, or anything. They were about to chop off my head at the guillotine when *poof* I'm in Koronos with Nioca and his lady friend Sela, *sans clothing* I might add."

"Nioca has all the luck..." Will gave her a cocked eyebrow. "What? I meant getting to rescue you. That's all." But she couldn't contain a giggle.

"Anyways, we're there for, like, two seconds before all hell breaks loose and the city is crawling with demons!" Jewels couldn't hide her dejection quick enough. "Er... I mean... Not that I think you're a demon or anything. It's just..."

"It's OK Will, I know how other people see me... my kind. I'm just still trying to come to terms with it. Please go on, and by all means call them demons. They were sure acting like demons."

"OK, where was I? Oh yeah, demons everywhere, me without my staff and barely any energy, and Nioca so drained that he completely collapses after killing just a few. Long story short, Nalyd rides in on his giant alpha and saves all our butts."

"Really? Nalyd has an alpha?"

"*Had* an alpha. He made it. He's a shaper, you know? But he reabsorbed it so he could make a whole bunch of croyas for the next battle."

"I never got into Geneforge so I guess I had no idea what a shaper could do. That is so interesting."

"I wasn't about to go into the next battle without my staff, which had been left back at Var where I was being held captive, so I went to get it. Took me longer then I thought it would though. By the time I got back the battle was in full swing and I was on the wrong side of the sea of fire people. I didn't really know what to do. I couldn't fight my way to the city and expect to live. But then I thought about how Nioca had gotten me out of Var in the first place. Supposed to be something any designer can do so I thought I'd try it, you know, teleport myself into the city. Yeah, it didn't work very well though. 'Bout the way that CoSC came out."

"That bad?" Jewels teased.

"Felt like I half died and I didn't even really move, but..." he paused dramatically, "I did manage to get a birds eye view of the battle. It was like it was a game of chess and I could see every single piece, *including* the 'King'! The first try really weakened me but it also gave me a feel for how it was supposed to work so..." Will starts gesturing with his hands, "...I concentrated on the guy in charge of the enemy army and *fshewwww-pow* I guide one of their own flying balista bolts right through his head."

"Wow. You took out General Growan?"

Smiling at himself he feigns mock humility. "It wasn't all that much, really. I also passed out right afterwords for I don't know how long. When I came to, most of the demons had cleared out. I was able to cast a couple of healing spells on myself and get back into the city to find the others. I thought the battle was over, but no. This human starts attacking us, too. Very well trained. I think it was five against one when he finally decided to retreat. Eventually Nioca brought us back with a Shard of Returning which is when we found you all messed up." Will paused, his story seeming to be finished. "So this spelunking in the Admin Tower... what were you looking for?"

Jewels didn't hesitate with her answer. "I lied."

Will looked confused. "Lied? What do you mean?" Will became accusatory, "Do you know something about my Refuge?"

Before Jewels could even start the carriage started to slow and the driver announced their arrival. The castle loomed outside imposingly and Jewels' stomach tied itself into knots. "Looks like we're out of time, Will, but I promise I'll tell you later."

"You better..." his tone was harsh but when he saw her nervous glance up to the tower he softened. "Come on. One step at a time."

They let themselves be led into the castle and before the throne of King Sheldon. Jewels whispered on the way, "Just... be gracious."

"You're late!" came a snide bellow off the throne. "I, in good faith, allow you to leave before our trade is complete and *this* is how you respond? With such insolence and disrespect?!"

Jewels made a deep curtsy, staying in the lowest position she could manage while she talked. "Forgive me, Your Highness. Preparations took longer than expected." Straightening up she finished. "I didn't want to come at less than my best, but I am here now," Jewels took a step forward and spoke with much more confidence than she felt, "and I am ready."

Unfurled

By Vergil - Jan 24 2009

"Well, if we are to rebuild the refuge whilst both admins are gone, I think our top priority is to get Vergil back into a state of non-crumminess." Nioca looked at Robsta and Nalyd "Any ideas?" Robsta pulled out Stonecrusher and cleaned off a bit of dried blood. Nalyd rubbed the palm of his hand against the blade of his Scythe. Nioca sighed "Guys, come on, I know none of us particularly care for Vergil, but he is essential to the restoration of Calamity Refuge." Nalyd's hood went up "I could try to find some shaping tools in the remains of the Geneforge Board that would help." Nioca nodded "Okay, okay, that is a start. Robsta?" Robsta chewed on his bottom lip. "I could carry him to a place where we would rebuild him, but we do not have such a desirable place." Nioca gritted his teeth *Should I let them to my Citadel? Is it too risky?* Nioca's face hardened *No, it is not too risky, I don't have to show them the basement, I could just let them into the lobby and a table.* "Lets take him to my citadel, I hope you can carry his weight that long, Robsta." Nioca turned around and headed to the Avernum board, while walking, he called back. "Get the things you need, we leave in ten minutes."

Nalyd and Robsta looked in awe when they saw Nioca's Citadel. "Come, its only ten minutes away." Robsta shook his head and trudged on "Between my sword and my armor, I have quite a burden to carry, but add a ball that weighs as much as Vergil...." Nalyd was walking along happily, using his Scythe as a make-shift cane. Nioca unlocked the doors to the Citadel, and he walked in. Robsta and Nalyd sat down whilst Nioca grabbed a table, a lockpick, and a scalpel. "Robsta, hand me over Vergil." Robsta held up Vergil and gave it to Nioca "Thank you. Nalyd, get over here, and put that scythe down, its getting creepy." Nalyd hesitantly put down his scythe and picked up the scalpel. "Okay, let see if we can get an arm or a body part off now, try to find some creases or lines." Nalyd poked at it "Nalyd found one." Nioca looked over "Okay, now try to wedge your knife under it, gently now." Nalyd gave the knife a little push, it went 4 inches into Vergil with a sickening splurt. Nioca grimaced "Now try to life your knife up like a lever, it might pull up a limb, and this time, be more gentle!" Nalyd furrowed his eyebrows and carefully pried at the line, eventually, a crooked arm and hand snapped out, shuddering. "That is a good start, Nalyd." Nalyd looked at the many curves and lines now exposed, he saw a big curve to the left of the revealed space. He carefully nudged the scalpel into the curve and pushed. It resisted him. Nalyd tried again, the knife bounced off. Nalyd briefly looked at it, then jammed the knife into the crease and yanked it down. What looked like to be a knee and leg popped forward. A similar set of lines and creases where mirrored on the other side of the ball. "I think that Vergil

may not be as misshapen as he thinks he is. Can you do the rest?" Nalyd nodded and set to work at Vergil. An intense smell of vinegar and blood followed. Eventually, Nalyd called to Nioca "Nalyd has gotten him into a human shape, now you must heal him up, as Nalyd is not a priest." Nioca nodded, he looked at Vergil, he now looked like a humanoid, but his structure was still bent and broken. Nioca's hands turned blue as he closed his eyes and channeled the mystics of rejuvenation. He placed his hands on Vergil's heart. The walls of the Citadel rumbled slightly as the energies flowed into Vergil. A few moments later, there laid a restored Vergil, a bit flamely in complexion and hue, but defiantly Vergil. "Apparently, clothes do not survive the rigorous process of whatever he went through, I will be right back with some robes." Vergil groaned and shook his head, he opened his eyes. His eyebrows knitted "Where am I?" Robsta looked up "Oh, you are awake, well, you are at Nioca's citadel." Vergil pulled up his torso "Where are my clothes and where is Nioca?" Robsta crossed his arms "Nioca is getting you a robe and I have no idea where your clothes went." Vergil nodded and stood up then suddenly asked "Where is Yamato, I feel naked without it." Robsta chuckled "Well I assume that is for other reasons, and again, sorry, but I have no idea where it went." Robsta face hardened "Vergil, whats that thing sticking out of your back?" Vergil raised an eyebrow "Hm?" Robsta walked over. "I mean," he said as he tapped the piece of metal "this thing." Vergil looked over "Oh, that is where it went." With a sudden jerk, Vergil pulled the metal and out came Yamato. "I dislike when it does not return to me in an easy to locate place." Robsta took a step back "Vergil, are you okay?" "Yes, do I seem injured?" Robsta hesitantly spoke "No.....Its just you seem odd." Nioca walked into the room with a black robe, he tossed it to Vergil "Get dressed and help us rebuild Calamity Refuge." Vergil caught the robes and got dressed. "What do you mean, rebuild? Did something happen to it while I was sleeping?" Nioca walked to the teleporter pad. "Yes, now come on."

Nioca, and Vergil teleported to the center of the refuge. Vergil took a step back "The structural integrity average percentile is down from normal parameters by 97%. This will take time to do." Nioca nodded "I bet it will, contact me when you are done." Vergil nodded and concentrated. He could feel the broken buildings. He labored for time, although when he was done, the spam was where the admin tower should of been, the dump was still missing, and the RP was highly unstable, but other than that, there was nothing more he could do, he would just have to wait. w-dueck returned, Vergil bowed "Archadmin, I have managed to rebuild 84% of the refuge, but I need your help to fix the remainder of it, sir." w-dueck's eyebrow went up "Sir? Oh well, that can wait, now let me fix the refuge." w-dueck closed his eyes and formed a green misty ball in his hands. He walked over to the center of the Refuge and threw it to the ground. A huge blast of light shined. When the light dissapated, they found themselves in a completely restored refuge. Vergil's mouth dropped "You....can fix it that easily?" w-dueck chuckled "Yeah, its easy." Vergil's breath went unsteady "If you can complete necessary maintenance without my help, I see no point in continuing." Vergil slumped against the side of the building and closed his eyes. w-dueck went over and shook him "Vergil.....Vergil!"

Song for the Lonely

By Nioca - Jan 25 2009

Nioca sat on the shore of Calamity Refuge Island, staring out at the waters, pondering. Avenger sat on the sand in front of him, glistening gently. He closed his eyes and listened to the sound of waves, in and out... in and out... never stopping... always in... and out...

Syla quietly approached. Without a word, she sat down beside him and watched him for a moment. "I didn't know Yirri that well," she said softly, a soothing tone in her voice. "But he died doing what he loved. I don't think he'd want you to dwell on it."

Nioca shook his head, a tear coming to his eye. "No. It's not him. Not... not just him..." Nioca shook slightly. "My god Syla, why? Why do I get a reprieve and not Yirri? How come Ermaria got overrun with those demons? Why did they... Why? Why?" Nioca started shaking harder.

Syla reached out an put an arm around him. "Look, there's no reason to feel guilty just because you survived. There has to be a reason, right?"

"I-I don't!" Nioca stammered out. "It's not that... not that I feel guilty. It's just..." Nioca sniffed, pausing to catch a trembling breath and steady himself. "It's just that I can't shake this... this *horrible* feeling."

"What feeling?" Syla asked, concerned.

"That... that there is no reason. That it's all just some cruel joke." Nioca was still shaking, but he opened his eyes. A vicious glint entered them. "Why?" He asked again. His voice, however, had changed from the crushing despair and grief he once held to a savage rage.

"Nioca, stop. Now." Syla snapped, afraid. "That isn't true. There's always a reason. Always."

"Like what?" Nioca said, shaking from the combined grief and anger.

"Like now. You have a job to do here. I've only been here a short time, but I can tell that this place needs you. In some way, it needs you. But not like this." Syla paused.

"You have a lot of faith for someone who recently discovered that her gods were... well, this." Nioca said. His voice sounded a bit clearer. "But you're right. I... Come on. I need to check the Blades Nexus." Nioca shakily stood up, grabbed Avenger, then gently sheathed it. As he did, he noticed something odd; the blade was warm to the touch. Nioca thought nothing of it. He turned and headed towards the Blades of Avernum forum.

"That's weird!" Syla exclaimed excitedly. "This 'internet' culture, these 'forums'... amazing!" They were approaching the door to the Blades of Avernum forum, now intact.

"Indeed." Nioca said. He felt infinitely better, though he still quietly mourned. "Now, the machinery in here is liable to be off, so it'll be extremely dark. Just wait here till I get the lights turned on, okay?" Syla nodded in response. Nioca then opened the door. He was right; the forum

was pitch-black. He took a few steps inside and pulled out Avenger, which illuminated a small area around him in a golden light. Murky shapes became visible within, though it wasn't enough to make out anything specific. Nioca took another step forward and felt his foot sink into something squishy with a audible squelching sound. Stepping back, he brought Avenger down to illuminate it. It was a small, now flattened pile of spam, in the shape of some small animal's bowel movement.

Suddenly, there was an audible chittering from within. "Oh, crap." Nioca moaned. Whirling, he ran for the door and got out. Before he could shut it, however, a swarm of flying creatures came pouring out, knocking Nioca and Syla over. They were bat-like creatures, but with a ruddy-orange skin tone. Hundreds poured out of the forum, flying up towards the moon.

Then they arced back downwards towards the two priests on the ground. "Spam bats!" Nioca yelled as the bats came down on them.

"What the heck is a spam bat?!?" Syla screamed over the sound of the bats' squealing. She raised her arms and fired a smite spell at them.

"Bats made of hardened spam!" Nioca yelled back, casting blessing and shielding enchantments as the bats came within a few feet. Nioca swung Avenger at the closest bat. It hit, cutting through it. Instead of blood, however, chunks of hardened spam went flying. The blade continued, and Nioca, unused to the weight of a broadsword, got yanked sideways and stumbled over. The bats closed, nipping at them. Whilst they didn't do much damage individually, together, they caused numerous bleeding cuts and rips in their robes. Syla screamed as one got stuck in her hair and proceeded to panic. Soon, they were just randomly trying to swat the bats away.

The cloud passed and went up into the night sky. Nioca muttered a healing chant, then readied himself. Raising his left hand, he yelled an incantation. As the bats came back around, they suddenly got hit with a large vortex of whirling, hovering knives. Bat after bat got skewered by the magical knives. The half that didn't get skewered pressed on, squealing for blood. "Hang on, Nioca, I got this one." Syla said confidently, raising her arms.

"Syla, what are you thinking?" Nioca said, his tone worried.

"Time to heat things up!" Syla yelled. "Divine Fire!"

"No, don't-!" Nioca started. A blast of flame rocketed from Syla's hands and struck the horde of squealing bats. The bats easily ignited, and the squealing intensified. "...do that." Nioca finished lamely.

"Oh, come on. Now they'll all catch on fire and die. Isn't it nice when a solution is that- oh dear Designers are those things STILL COMING AT US?!?" Syla stared in disbelief. "WHAT KIND OF ANIMAL CAN FLY WHILE BEING ON FIRE?!?" Syla shouted, appalled.

"THAT KIND! AND THANKS TO YOU, NOT ONLY CAN THEY BITE US, THEY CAN IGNITE US TOO!" Nioca shouted back. "CLOUD OF BLADES!" Another whirling vortex of blades slashed through the bats, sending bits of skewered flaming spam bat everywhere. However, there were still several dozen bats coming at them.

"SHOULDN'T WE BE RUNNING?!?" Syla shouted over the squealing bats.

"NO! WE HAVE TO STAND AND FIGHT!" Nioca raised Avenger, knowing what was coming. He took another swing, and bisected a particularly engorged spam bat about the size of his head. Nioca then fell to the ground, trying to duck under the flaming horde of bats. Once again, a nip-fest ensued, but it was now coupled by flaming globs of spam flying everywhere. The swarm passed, and the two priests staggered upright, smacking out smoldering parts of their robes. "Okay, those things won't live much longer." Nioca said, pointing at sizzling drops of spam on the ground. "They're about ready to melt down. So, *now* we run." Nioca turned and ran off as the bats started coming back for another attack. Syla quickly followed suit. The bats started to give chase.

However, Nioca was right. They were slowing down and unable to keep their altitude. One by one, they became shapeless blobs of flaming spam and hit the ground. Just as the last bat caught up with the duo, it too died. "See?" Syla panted. "I told you setting them on fire was a good idea." They both started walking back to the BoA forum. Thankfully, they hadn't run far. "So... now we can enter?" Syla ventured.

As if on cue, a gigantic beast of hardened spam burst through the front door. It towered over them at twelve feet, and was an almost amorphous blob of spam, save for a pair of large wings, six legs, and a reptilian head and neck.

"I blame you for this." Nioca said, annoyed. Syla opened her mouth to protest, but then silently nodded in agreement. The spam dragon let out an ear-splitting screech as Nioca brought Avenger about.

"What now?" Syla asked, somewhat panicked. Nioca, however, wasn't listening. Avenger had gone from being mildly warm to intensely warm; it was as if it had been laying in the sunlight on a boiling day for hours. Nioca felt a bit of energy start ebbing into his hand, and suddenly realized that it was ready.

Without questioning what the blade was ready for, Nioca pointed the blade directly at the beast's heart, and willed it to attack. As the beast started to approach, the golden aura surrounding Avenger suddenly gathered into a tiny sphere at the tip of the blade. Then, in the time it took for a single blink, the tiny sphere of light flew at the beast. The golden projectile struck dead center, and the body of the beast imploded around the impact. Chunks of hardened spam-turned-shrapnel blew out the spam dragon's back and sides, pockmarking the nearby walls and ground. The creature let out another shriek as its body was abruptly blown apart, then fell to the ground, dead.

Nioca stared at the blade, eyes wide. It no longer felt warm nor did it have the aura. "Whoa..." Nioca said, unable to articulate anything else. Finally, he added, "No wonder Yirri liked this blade. It's like having your own hand-held cannon!" Nioca sheathed Avenger.

"Why were those span thingies here?" Syla asked tentatively.

"The spam beasts. Well, they effectively are living spam. They feed on more spam, and basically use it to continually grow and reproduce. They tend to inhabit abandoned forums." Nioca sighed, then added, "They aren't that dangerous, even the largest ones. Still, they can quickly overwhelm a person." The two marched into the dark and now-silent BoA forum. Nioca fumbled through the dark until he found the Moderation Centre. Struggling with his keys, he opened the door and

flipped on a nearby light. "Alright..." Nioca muttered to himself, seating himself behind a computer console. Turning it on, he pressed a few keys. Power turned on throughout the entire forum, illuminating just how much of a mess it was. Little piles of spam-excrement and partially eaten spam littered the place. The trees were withering and broken, and the landscape was barren. "This is why I am *not* cleaning up the Spam forum. If this forum had a few hundred, the Spam forum must have millions of the little buggers." Nioca started rapidly typing in commands. The roof of the forum majestically opened skyward, letting in the moonlight and the night air into the main part of the forum. Finally, a set of symbols flashed across the display Nioca was sitting at. "Diagnostics check out. Aside from needing a new door, this forum is ready for use." Nioca typed a few more keystrokes, then got up and exited.

Nioca walked towards his Citadel, Syla in tow. The brief burst of energy from his earlier nap was now leaving him, and he needed a proper night's rest. Hopefully, he could get it without any further interruptions.

Unfortunately, he had no such luck. As he came within a few dozen paces of the Citadel's recently repaired front doors, he noticed Jewels standing by a small pond. "Hey, Jewels is back!" Nioca said somewhat excitedly. This excitement stopped faster than it came; he saw that Jewels was holding herself, gently rocking back and forth on her feet. Even from behind, Nioca could tell that she was badly distressed.

Nioca turned to Syla and gave her a small smile. "You were right," he whispered into her ear. He then ran inside the citadel. About five minutes later, Nioca ran back out. "Syla," he whispered, "you can stay here tonight if you want. I'll have a shade show you to one of my guest rooms." She nodded and, seeing that this was a private issue, turned toward the citadel. Nioca, meanwhile, approached Jewels. Now closer, he could hear her muttering something to herself. "Jewels?" Nioca said, putting an arm on her shoulder.

Jewels started and turned toward him, pale. A flicker of something crossed her face, but it was gone before Nioca could recognize it. "Wh-what are you... what do you want?" She asked. She seemed anxious to be alone.

"I..." Nioca said, unsure where to start. "I wanted to apologize."

"For what?" Jewels said.

Nioca noted that Jewels sounded even more anxious. "For being a pompous fool. I was blind to our friendship, treated it as something that could be discarded. I recently... recently had an issue that put things in perspective. I realized just how valuable you are. How everyone is... And maybe that I need to stop stealing keys." Nioca said with a laugh, producing Jewels' set of administrative keys. Jewels took them rather hesitantly. "I somehow doubt this has ever happened to you, but I recently came close to losing everything. You, the Refuge, everything. I got a bit closer to death than I'd ever care to get again, and... it just... it made me realize I need to stop taking things for granted. You and the refuge is the closest thing I have to a family. And I need to act as a member of such."

Jewels simply stared at Nioca. Before she could say anything, Nioca turned and walked away.

Foreboding: Past, Present, and Future

By Sylae - Jan 25 3009

"I look forward to it," Sheldon nodded and gestured to w-dueck, "And what is this...filth? My castle is not a holding pond for this human *scum*."

w-dueck bowed politely and said, "I must apologize for my being human scum, but I am afraid I can't do much about that. I would hope that one of Your Majesty's stature would understand that the Lady Jewels personally requested my assistance and would have undoubtedly taken longer to arrive had I not been there to aid her in coming here."

Sheldon had begun glowering as w-dueck spoke and finally said, "You may leave my presence. Perhaps housing could be arranged for you...with the *dogs*." He turned to Jewels, "And no, *it* cannot watch."

"I thank you for your kindness," w-dueck turned his back to Sheldon and muttered to Jewels as he walked towards the elaborate doors, "I wouldn't want to be you..." Jewels's glare could have taken the varnish off a table a mile away, but he left the throne room and into the hall beyond.

The young man walks into his father's study. "You requested me?" he says as he closes the door behind him.

"You have nerve, boy. What were you thinking with that fool stunt? You almost died!" The Duke almost screams, and the young man can hear the guards outside shuffling their feet nervously.

"If I wouldn't have done so, or if I waited any longer, more of your men would have died fighting your useless battle. Unlike some, I can't just sit on my ass while innocent levies are dying," He stops as the Duke's face starts turning purplish.

"You think I give a damn whether those peasant shits live or die, boy? I'll tell you this, the Arendese are rich! The Queen's chamber pots are made of solid gold! Imagine what riches our family could have if we could win this war! Do you-" He was cut off.

"How much of that would go to *them*?" He points out the wide window to the farmers struggling with oxen and plows, "Already, they speak of revolt. You've been in power, what, a year, and you've already managed to destroy their trust in the royal family? And this war isn't even the worst of it! You cut the soup kitchens, you insist on lavish ceremonies for you and your puppets, you go out on the city every night with your men raping every woman you set your eyes on-" He stopped as a crystal ink jar went past his head.

"You go to far, boy. I'll have your head for that. No amount of your sorcery will save you from what will come. Guards! Take this boy from my sight!" The door slams open and the two guards

rush in and grab the boy by the arms, "Take him to the cells and tell Lord Lydiar to come here immediately. We have an execution to plan."

The two men took him to the ground level, then stopped. The older let go of him and said, "I heard what you said to him, it was hard not to," his lips cracked into a smile for but a second, "You don't deserve this. So make it look like you beat us. You'll have to leave town though. He'll have an army after you to take you to the demon's hell."

All he could say was, "Thank you" before he gathered his power. The two guards collapsed unconscious before him, and he headed towards the kitchens to use the gate there.

"Will, are you OK?" Jewels shook w-dueck, who woke with a jerk.

"BAH!! ... Oh, hey Jewels. Was just thinking..."

"About what? Oh, come on, I have to go ... make a trade."

"Just my past. It's a story for another time... Being around all this royal governmental crap brings up memories I'd rather not bring up... So, how was our good friend Sheldon?"

"An arsehole, as always" w-dueck raised an eyebrow at the language, "Well...he is! He can't stop talking about what will ... happen. He starts grinning like there's some stupid joke floating above my head whenever he talks about ... it. Oh, that reminds me," she slugged him in the arm...hard, "that's for the snide comment."

"Sorry, it probably wasn't necessary." The pair were silent for a time, "Why is it that all the bad people get this sort of power? I guess Sheldon isn't *that* bad, but..." he trailed off, and was silent once more.

"I have to go. One more thing, though. You'll need some sort of heat-protective clothing or something... We'll need to head over to the fire plane for a bit after we're done here. ... It was nice talking to you."

Jewels walked into the throne room, and stopped. Sheldon and a young man stood waiting at the top of the dais.

"Ah, the lady Jewels! Took your time, I see! Let us hope you don't in the very near future," He smirked and gestured to the other man, "This is my eldest son. I hope to hear great news about my first grandchild's conception! Well, I will just let you two get on with it!" He tossed a pair of keys to his son, "Those are for the guest apartments upstairs. Shall I have the servants bring up some wine? I've been saving an exquisite piece just for this occasion!"

A Reason to Glow

By Jewels - Jan 27 2009

Jewels looked uneasily from King Sheldon to the young man whose face momentarily seemed just as uneasy as she was as he shook his head. The King laughed crudely as he took his leave. A mediocrity of relief came to Jewels at his absence. Not wanting to drag it out Jewels walked up the steps to waiting man. He extended his hand as she neared helping her up the last couple steps. "May I introduce myself properly? I am Prince Darius of the Living Waters, and you Lady Jewels," he paused to kiss the back of her hand, "are more beautiful than my father led on." The contrast between the prince and the king seemed drastic in both appearance and demeanor but Jewels wasn't about to swoon.

Trying to remain professional and polite she addressed him cordially while extracting her hand. "Let's not be mistaken. I wish to be perfectly clear. I do this for the future of my people and *only* the future of my people."

Darius nodded in understanding as be began walking up further with her. "This whole thing was my father's idea. I wasn't exactly thrilled about it when he ordered me to go through with it, though my sister is very relieved it is no longer on her shoulders."

"Your sister?" Jewels was curious. "What do you mean?"

"Well, when this scheme was first concocted, Cinead was Fire Lord and your brother Vergil was to succeed him. For the child to be a rightful heir to the fire plane throne it would need to be Vergil's first son or barring that, first daughter. Here in the water plane, our government is a little bit different. Our rulers are free to choose whichever offspring they desire to succeed them. My sister, Kali, was supposed to be mated to Vergil until she bore him a son, but of course your father refused and since he also disowned Vergil, Kali is sitting free as a bird and my father's plan has fallen to me."

Jewels couldn't help but smirk at the idea of Vergil agreeing to go along with this. "Vergil probably would have enjoyed the prospect more than I do," she joked.

"I have to admit. It doesn't seem all that terrible to me either. At least... not anymore."

Darius was charming. Jewels couldn't deny it. She could feel herself letting her guard down. "After dreading the thought of having to mate with King Sheldon, this seems a whole lot *less* terrible than it did."

Darius's jaw dropped, "That bastard! Is that what he made you think? Oh, that's just cruel... and you still agreed to it?!" He shook his head at her. "You are very brave. I'll give you that."

"Brave... desperate... they're really the same thing, right?" They had reached the suite and Jewels couldn't help but shiver at the sound of the door closing behind her.

Darius faced her putting his hands on her shoulders. "Being desperate for the lives of others is not a bad thing. It shows heart. Something I was told never existed in the living fire and something that there is too little of in the world today. Now, if you're ready... flame up."

Jewels looked at him quizzically as he stepped back. "But why?"

"It's much easier to mate as elementals, don't you think?"

"Usually, yes. But you're water. I'm not interested in killing you at the same time." Jewels puzzled at his smile.

"You won't hurt me." Before Jewels' eyes Darius transformed into what she could only describe as a cloud. "I'm only half water. Didn't you know? The queen is an air elemental." Jewels shook her head. She should have guessed. Half-breeds must be in style or something. "Take my hand, Jewels." He offered a fluffy extension. Jewels took it gingerly but was surprised at how firm it still was. "Now flame up and don't let go." She did so, though the heavy air of the plane still took much concentration.

Jewels watched her hand in his. She dared not let go. Instinct forbade her to. Deep instinct yearned for intimacy, for unity. Their hands coalesced, their fingers fused, and a small spark appeared at the center. It grew and grew into a blinding light that permeated the entire room. The light of new life.

Jewels nudged Will again, who hadn't fallen back to sleep yet, but looked like he would have if given a few more minutes. "What, you're done already? That didn't take long." He glanced at his watch. "That couldn't have been more than five minutes."

"Sometimes five minutes is all you need. Are you ready? I'd like to get going. The sooner I'm back at Calamity Refuge and away from this place, the better."

"Just a sec." He went about casting a few final protection spells. "OK, now I'm ready."

"Hold on then." Jewels ignored his surprise as she hugged him tightly. *"TELEPORT!"*

The vertigo subsided quick enough but still Jewels held on. "Um... Jewels?" Will finally ventured. "We're here."

"Sorry," she muttered. "It's just nice to have a friend."

"Where exactly is here?"

"This is my home." Jewels looked around the familiar flaming walls. "Where I was born, at least. My teleportation spell is like a homing beacon that brings me back here. I can refocus it with effort if I'm already here but I have to be familiar with the place I'm going to."

"And... why are you on fire?"

"This is my natural state in the fire plane. If I want to be corporeal here, I have to flame down on purpose." Just to prove that she could, Jewels did it for him and decided to stay that way. Hopefully less people here would recognize her. "Come on. The castle isn't too far. We can walk."

They hadn't gone two steps when the front door opened wide and Kaylas stepped in. He was livid in his surprise. "What are you doing in here?" he barked. "This is a private residence!"

So much for wanting to be unrecognized. Jewels quickly flamed back up and closed the gap between them. "Kaylas, it's me. It's Jewels."

He stared as if he wanted to believe but was unwilling to let himself dare to hope it was true."Is... is it really you?" His hands shook as he reached to touch her. "You're alive?"

"Yes, Kaylas," she grabbed his hand. "it's really me."

"You're alive!" He picked her up and swung her around in his excitement. When he set her down he took a step back. "I can't believe you're alive! Let me look at you. You're practically glowing, Jewels." Suddenly his excitement turned to trepidation as he stated mater-of-factly, "You're glowing, Jewels. Why are you glowing?"

"I don't know," she answered confused. "Maybe because I'm glad to see you, too?"

Now anger started to creep into his voice. "Don't give me that crap! And don't try to tell me you've forgotten basic biology. You're *glowing*, Jewels. The same way that every other *pregnant* fire elemental is glowing. Why are you pregnant?!"

Will had for the most part been watching the reunion quietly but stepped forward to intervene. "Hey, back off! Maybe it's none of your business."

"And just who are you, anyway?" Kaylas squinted at him as if really seeing him for the first time. His voice dripped with contempt, "*Human*... You brought a human here?" Kaylas was beside himself. "Didn't the last human here do enough damage? I just got the recount. 32 husbands will never be returning to their wives. 25 fathers will never be returning to their children. *73 mothers*lost their sons! And the whole plane is mourning the supposed loss of their second Fire Lord in less than a week. Humans were never meant to be in our world and I intend to make sure that humans are never in our world again."

Kaylas drew his sword and tried to advance on Will but Jewels stood in his way. "Stop it! Will is here because ***I*** want him here. He's like family to me."

Kaylas's eyes bulged. He pointed an accusatory sword at Will. *"He's the father?! You mated with this... this human scum?"*

Will put his hands up in defense, "Whoa, whoa... Wait a minute. I may be human scum but..."

Jewels didn't let Will finish before she shouted, "So what if he is?" The pause from both Kaylas and Will was as pregnant as she was. She asked again with tears in her eyes, "So what if Will is the father? Why does that matter? What is it to you who I love?"

Kaylas looked frustrated that she didn't seem to understand his rage. He struggled to find words but couldn't. "But, he's human," he finally managed.

She leveled him with a steely glare. "You're just as bad as Cinead was," she seethed. Jewels walked back to Will's side. "Don't bother telling the people I'm not really dead. I don't belong here anyway. I never belonged here. I'm sure you'll get along just fine without me." With that Jewels grabbed tight to Will again and teleported back home. Back to her real home.

Jewels stared back into the pond, keys in hand. Did she dare believe that Nioca considered her family? That he would accept her despite of what she was? Did she even realize how much she*needed* him to accept her? At least she could get into her own room now. Some sleep would do her good. Jewels headed off for the 29th floor of the Administration Tower.

A Storm is Brewing

By Ackrovan - Jan 27 2009

Ackrovan pulled his row boat onto the shore. He exasberated, clearly weak after today's rush. The skies were darkening, both because of the growing storm and with night approaching. He was glad he didn't have to deal another night of that in his "ship". He pulled a piece of parchment out of his forward pouch, and glanced down towards it. It's decriptive nature(and the lack of skill of the drawer) showed a series of islands, each with some sort of distinct feature. With a use of arrows, it showed were certin currents were "supposed" to be(though ackrovan could argue there effectiveness). Near the end of a specificly strong current, lay a small island, titled "Calamity Refuge Forums".

It was Ackrovan's hope that he could seek solitude here. Which is why he left his life to come.

Ackrovan, unsure what lay ahead of him, strapped on his plate chest armor, and tucked his iron helmet onto his head. His legging were of a chainmailed stock, and his boots iron. Across his back was a firm circular shield, which he named Therador, that was enriched with runes to protect him from magical attacks(though a skilled mage could easily push their way threw). He preffered to fight with a long sword, though he was fimilar with melee weapons of most kinds(his usual attire forbided much else). While his armour was supposed to be a greyish tint, due to the sea trip, it was begining to turn slightly green and rusted. A good oil bath would clear that up.

Ackrovan began marching carefully to the west, not eager to attract unwanted attention. It was nearly night now, and seeing had become a near-defening challenge, even without considering the ever nearing storm. Still, there was enough moonlight to see up to a few yards. For now. He started to climb what at first apperered to be a steep hill. It was at a nearly 60 degree angle, making jogging up it, even if Ackrovan wasn't trying to be stealthy, quite infeasible. Instead, he crouched into near-fetal position, taking half a step up at a time, which in his armor, was quite a challenge. Eventually, however, he managed to climb to the top, or what appeared to be the top.

He look down, almost losing his footing in the process. What he had just climbed was a rocky cliff. If he were to of fallen down.....

Ackrovan gripped his head away from those thoughts. Bearing risk, he poked his head up. He did not like what he say.

His gazed to the west, upon a huge ruin. This place had clearly suffered a huge attack. Building's were trashed, rubble was everywere. One thing that did attract his attention was a small tent that poked out a bit to the south. It appeared to be vacent, which relieved him. He returned his focus to the west, seeking out any signs of survivors. He couldn't see any, but again, at this distance nobody could. He cast his glance northward and dicovered some sort of castle. A small one at that. As far as he could tell, there was no activity. He turned toward the castle, *"Well, If I'm alone I might as well be sure of it"*. He began moving northward.

As Ackrovan trotted north, he stumbled upon a small pond. Around it were two people, one male and one female human. He ducked down into some tree's to observe the situation. Ackrovan sould see both were wearing robes, the man seemed to be some sort of priest. A glistening sword hung of his side. He began to hear the man speak, "....a bit closer to death than I'd ever care to get again, and... it just... it made me realize I need to stop taking things for granted. You and the refuge is the closest thing I have to a family. And I need to act as a member of such" He stoped speaking. If the women responded at all, Ackrovan did not hear it. After a few more seconds, the man walked away. Ackrovan, weighing on who to follow, chose the priest.

Nioca approached the gates of his Citadel. A shade approached him, "I have shown our guest to her room, as you instructed." Nioca nodded, "Good, good. I'll be inside in a minute." The Shade wisped back into the complex. Nioca then leaned on the side of the door, contemplating on what he said to Jewels.

Ackrovan approached the near proximity of the fortress. He stepped a bit forward, nearly stepping on a large branch in the process. Sighing a quick breath of relief, he stepped over it and nestled himself near a bush.

A shade shot out of the complex, approaching the Priest. *Well, if he's powerful enough to make a shade, then he might be powerful enough too.....*,Ackrovan's thoughts expressed vivd images of a mad priest gone wild and destroying a small, innocent settlement. He waited a few more moments, wanting to get a bit more conversation.

Jewels sat quitely on a log near the pond. She began thinking of what Nioca had said to her.

Nioca lifted himself off of the wall of his Citadel. His tiredness finally overtaken him, he proceeded into the Citadel.

Ackrovan shrugged. He was hoping for some more intel, but that would have to wait until tommorrow. He turned around, intent on finding that hut and useing it for the coming storm.

He would of gotten away to, if he hadn't of forgotten about that branch.

Snap! Nioca's body froze. Except for the occasional thunder clap, not a sound was heard on his way here. Curious, he stepped away from the door and stood carefully still. He could hear a slight rattleing. Avenger in hand, he proceeded into the forest.

Ackrovan cursed his misfortune. He stood completly still, unable to see or hear the robe wearing priest. He sheathed his sword.

Nioca walked quietly as he combed the woods. Crouched, he stumbled upon a crouching warrior, in full metal armor. A huge shield was hanging off his left arm, hooked firmly still. What worried Nioca the most was that a five foor sword was out and at the ready. Silently, Nioca approached him, intent on getting the sword out of his hands to talk to him.

Ackrovan's eyes were spining in and out of his helmet, trying to find were the priest was. He couldn't of gone inside, as the door was still open. His breif distraction with the branch had cost him the element of suprise. A mistake he won't soon forget.

Nioca thrusted Avenger downward, aiming at the intruder's wrist. The intruder, however, reacted and rolled to the side, so the blade hit the ground. He rose his longsword up, Nioca barely having time to parry the blow. Nioca aimed his free hand down and lanched a firebolt at the warrior. He shrieked.

Jewels was still waiting by the pound, despite the coming storm. Suddenly, an echoing yelp bolted her upright. She turned northeast, "Nioca?"

Ackrovan shoved the priest off of him with his shields. His foot badly burned, he knocked the priests sword away with his Therador. He slashed his longsword on the priest knee, leaving a

gastly cut. The priest bellowed. Ackrovan ran into the woods, not that eager for a second confrontation.

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Jewels reapeated her cry, "Nioca?" Her shouts became more frantic, "Nioca?". She turned the corner, then gazed upon Nioca, bleeding perfusly out of his leg. "Nioca!"

A Night at an Inn

By Sylae - Jan 28 2009

The man steps through the door of the Red Seal and seats himself at a corner table. One of the serving girls ambles up to the table with a professional smile.

"Hello, ser. Tonight we have stew for four and the chops for five. Ale's two and wine is four," He hadn't thought food was that dear.

"I'll take the stew with ale," He slides seven coppers across the gouged table.

"It'll be out in a second," The coins disappear and the girl walks away. The man leans back in the straight-backed chair and listens to the banter off the inn.

"...went to get turnips ... prices keep going up..."

"...she's marrying ... don't know why ... him?..."

"...the duke ... heard his brat disappeared ... dead..."

*"...*sure *that he's heartbroken ... soulless jackal..."*

"...quiet ... has ears everywhere ... remember Jheran?..."

A bowl slid across the table with a large mug of ale. A half-loaf of bread follows, "There you be, ser," He smiles and slides another copper across the table.

Beads of sweat break out on his forehead when he tries it. It is heavily spiced...undoubtedly to hide the foul taste of turned beef. He takes a drink of the ale...at least he got a good drink.

By the time he finishes the stew and a second mug of ale, it has grown dark out and he waves a hand to the serving girl, "How much are rooms?" two silvers later he is asleep.

The next morning, the man is eating eggs and bread in the common room. At least the eggs are fresh. The bread could be used to forge good Saralin iron. By the taste, it probably had. He was about to leave when the door was slammed in and a half-squad of the Duke's Guard march in, "Where's the innkeep!" one screams, and a short balding man stumbles forward and bows, "Sers..." his voice quavers.

"Where are your guests, man? There's an escapee loose! We think he may have stayed in the city!" the guardsman screams, although the man is but a few feet away. The innkeeper points straight to the corner table, and the young man sighs and draws his power.

Silver and Orange

By Nioca - Jan 29 2009

"Son of a..." Nioca gasped out. This was not his day. "HEAL!" He shouted, a hand over the wound. A cyan light enveloped his hand, and the pain faded. Upon lifting his hand, he discovered that the wound was completely healed.

"Nioca, what-" Jewels started.

"I... Don't know." Nioca said through gritted teeth as he stood up. Healing spells were effective, but, in what Nioca's opinion was a rather egregious oversight, they didn't ease pain, meaning that the previously-injured area still ached. "Some... hell, I don't know, some guy's running around out there with a longsword. I approached him, and... well, see for yourself." Nioca waved at the blood down one side of his robes.

"Nioca!" Aryll and Syla came running out of the citadel, panicked. "What happened?"

"I got attacked is what!" Nioca said, voice raised. "Some guy showed up on the island." Fumbling through his robes, he pulled out his recently reacquired Remote Moderation Module. Then he started to put it back. "Screw it. I'll let w-dueck handle it. At any rate, I don't think he was looking for a fight."

"Nioca, what if w-dueck gets attacked and killed?" Aryll said worriedly.

"I'm sure Jewels can revive him, right?" Nioca nodded towards Jewels.

"Actually, no, I'm not sure I can." Jewels replied.

Nioca looked down. Then he sighed. "...I hate this." However, before he could do anything, Syla grabbed his arm.

"Nioca, I know you. You're tired, almost to the point of collapse. If you go running off, your odds of doing something particularly stupid increase to the point it's almost guaranteed. Furthermore, you need to find a new set of robes." Syla pointed at the bloodstain down Nioca's left leg.

"What do you suggest?" Nioca asked hopefully.

"I suggest that you let me find him." Syla said with an implacable tone.

"No! It's too dangerous!" Nioca barked adamantly, startling Jewels and Aryll. He suddenly felt protective of her, and had no intention of letting her march off into the unknown.

Syla examined Nioca carefully. "Nioca, I'm a full priest of Gvelston Sanctuary, one that specializes in combat rituals. I can take care of myself. And you..." Syla paused, staring Nioca in the eyes, "...need to keep it in the past."

Nioca felt stung by her last words, despite recognizing the truth in them. Still, looking into her eyes, he could see that she would not be convinced otherwise. He turned to Aryll. "You'll accompany Syla until this is resolved." Nioca stated, a grim tone in his voice. "Don't let anything happen to her. And Syla," Nioca added, turning to her. "Take this." He tossed her the RMM. "If you run into any trouble and need assistance, push the silver button twice. It'll sound a Code Silver-Alpha and bring a small army of moderators to your position."

"Code Silver-Alpha?" Syla asked.

"Dangerous intruder, try to resolve peacefully." Nioca explained tritely. "Good luck." He added. Syla and Aryll nodded and headed quickly into the forest. "And Aryll, one more thing!" Syla and Aryll paused. "If Syla's life is in imminent danger, no matter what her protests are, you inform me and *get her out of there*." Nioca put heavy emphasis on his last words.

"Nioca!" Syla shouted, exasperated.

"Don't 'Nioca' me, Syla! I'm trying to keep you alive!" Nioca shot back. Syla shook her head and ran into the forest, with Aryll in close pursuit. Nioca turned to find Jewels giving him an odd stare. "What?"

"Nothing..." Jewels said. "I've just never seen you like that."

"Well, it's..." Nioca started. "You know what, Syla's right about me needing sleep. Good night, Jewels." Without another word, Nioca turned and marched back to his citadel. Stopping at the doorway, he turned an eye back to the forest. "Be careful." He whispered.

Syla picked her way through the brush. Now that Nioca was out of sight, her confidence was starting to waver slightly. Who or what was she up against? Was Nioca right about it being too dangerous? She prepared every chant and ritual she could think of, ready to let loose a maelstrom of spell-fire and curses. The layers of magical shields and wards didn't seem like enough.

Then her thoughts turned to the way Nioca reacted to her tracking down his assailant. She had feared this would happen since Nioca had rescued her; that his old feelings for her would return. Worse yet, she worried that her old feelings for him might return as well. It was clear; she'd have to leave this Calamity Refuge soon. She had her heart broken by him once. She didn't need it a second time.

The rustling brush brought her attention back to the assailant. A squirrel bounced through the woods, making a racket as it went. Syla took a brief glance at Aryll before proceeding forward.

Nioca stalked the streets of Vaw, a shortsword held firmly by his side and a cloak pulled about his form. He knew what he had to do. There was no way they'd harm Aryll. Not if he had anything to say about it.

Nioca quickly rushed toward a ramshackle temple on the outskirts of town. Even from the outside, Nioca could hear the chanting. The ritual has started. Nioca, with a smite spell prepared, kicked the door down.

But he wasn't prepared. Not for what was inside.

The altar room was dominated by a large slab of granite, a demonic figure carved into the front. Bloody candles burned throughout the room, forming a pentacle around the altar. A man in blood-red robes stood behind the altar, screeching an ungodly song to Resata, a plea for power. He was flanked by four acolytes, robed in black with a monotonous chant on their lips.

But that wasn't what held Nioca's attention. No, that hardly got his notice at all. His eyes were focused on the woman bound to the altar. Aryll.

To say she was near death would have been kind. The priests had stripped her down and mutilated her, pushing her to the point that death was mere minutes away. Her breathing was labored at best, and she coughed up red at an alarming frequency. Her skin was hardly even visible; she was covered head-to-toe in her own blood. Each pulse of her dying heart brought a new wave of blood.

The screeching of the priest reached a crescendo. Then it halted; total silence. Before Nioca could even think straight, the priest pulled out a knife and drove it into Aryll's heart. A small moan escaped her lips and her muscles spasmed. Then her head lolled to the side.

"NO!" Nioca screamed, raising his hand. A blast of ice flew from his palm at the lead priest, but an acolyte stepped in the way and took the shot. The acolyte fell dead. The evil priest, his eyes closed, made a motion with his hand and proceeded to chant again. The other acolytes proceeded to advance on Nioca. Nioca fired another smite spell and ran forward, driven into a frenzy to protect Aryll. She couldn't be dead... she couldn't be...

As Nioca drove himself against the acolytes, a small outline of lights rose from Aryll's body. Nioca saw it, and thought he'd be sick; it was Aryll's spirit. And this priest was binding it. Ramming his shortsword through an acolyte's skull, he fired another bolt of ice at the priest. Yet again, it missed. The priest was again reaching the crescendo of his evil chant, and the outline of Aryll's spirit glowed brighter.

"ARYLL!" Nioca screamed again. The chant had stopped again. The outline has taken on a dark aura, and a dark wisp of energy started extending from the evil priest's heart to Aryll's outline. Desperate, Nioca fired another smite spell at the priest. Unfortunately, that shot was also off, and went high.

But not high enough to miss Aryll's spirit. A mere moment before the dark binding tendril connected, the smite spell struck the outline. Instead of travelling through it, the icy magic fused to Aryll's spirit. The tendril then connected, and the outline formed into an orange shadow.

The acolytes brought Nioca down to his knees and held knives to his throat. Nioca sobbed, tears spilling to the floor. The newly-formed Guardian Shade floated to the floor, passive. And the evil priest smiled a knowing, bloodthirsty grin. "At last." The priest hissed. "An unwavering servant. Shade!" The orange shadow turned to him. "Kill the intruder. Demonstrate the fate of those who defy Trynitoth!"

"Aryll..." Nioca pleaded, hoping that a part of her was still present. But she didn't seem to hear. She approached Nioca, razor-sharp claws forming at the end of her shadowy fingertips. "Aryll, you don't have to do this! You can defy him!"

Trynitoth let out an unsettling laugh. "She can deny me nothing, boy."

Aryll stopped. In a new, ethereal voice, she whispered, "No. I... I can't. Not him. Not him."

"I am your master!" Trynitoth barked. "You will do as I command, and I command you to kill the intruder!"

Nioca knew it was tearing her apart. She wanted to do anything else. Anything. But her hands were tied. "I'm sorry." Aryll whispered.

Nioca saw her come forward again. He could practically hear her screaming out in protest. No, ***she was*** *screaming out in protest. Nioca knew it... so why couldn't he hear it? Why was he so sure of her thoughts? It didn't take Nioca long to figure it out; a brief moment of mirth came over him. The evil priest gave him an odd look. "Is something funny?" He intoned, his voice laced with daggers.*

Nioca didn't reply to him. Instead, he looked up at Aryll, who was now standing over him. His eyes shined with both tears and his new-found knowledge. "Aryll, you don't have to do this." He said calmly.

"I'm sorry." Aryll whispered again.

"Aryll, I command you to stop!" Nioca said, a cold determination in his voice. Nioca's words had an impact nothing else had. A shiver ran down Aryll's form as the command echoed around the temple.

"You fool, do you honestly-" Trynitoth began. Before he could finish, Aryll whirled on him and, pointing a finger at him, launched a ray of fire. Trynitoth ducked it, and the beam blasted a hole in the wall behind him. The two acolytes holding Nioca down took the knives forward in an attempt to fend off the shade. Seeing an opportunity, Nioca slammed his elbow into the groin of one acolyte. The acolyte fell, dropping his knife and cursing loudly. As the other acolyte became completely panic-stricken, Aryll slashed him across the chest with her claws. As the cursing acolyte stumbled back to his feet, Nioca grabbed his shortsword and drove it through his chest. The acolyte fell with one last curse.

Nioca then stood there. Trynitoth had seen fit to flee while the two acolytes were killed. Nioca and Aryll were alone. No words were exchanged between them. The weight of what had just happened seemed to render any words that could be spoken moot. Finally, Nioca looked at Aryll's body. It was still tied to the altar, covered in blood and bound. Removing his cloak, he walked over and draped it over the body. Taking a knife used by one of her assailants, he carefully cut the bonds that held the body to the altar. It was then he saw it; in his hurry to leave, Trynitoth had dropped something behind the altar. Curious, Nioca picked it up. It was a sheathed shortsword not unlike the one he was carrying. However, as he pulled at the blade, he saw it was enchanted. The blade was dark, yet gave off a violet nimbus. It felt sure in his hand; like it was built for him.

Stowing the treasure away, he wrapped his cloak around Aryll's body and carried her out of the Temple.

Nioca shot bolt upright, finding himself back in his bed at the Citadel. It wasn't the first time he had this dream. Definitely wouldn't be the last. He took a glance at an enchanted miniature glass fountain that doubled as a clock. Twelve plates for twelve hours, with water filling them in perfect time. Half an hour had passed... a mere half hour.

Nioca settled back down, his thoughts back on Aryll becoming a guardian shade. He had buried her back in Hauteris, next to his old home. He christened the blade he found Crusader's Protectorate. But the memory that hurt the worst was of him telling her sister that he had failed. That Aryll was dead.

He needed to talk to her. He couldn't bear the silence. He couldn't bear to sit with his reminiscence. *"Aryll?"* He called out telepathically.

"Yes?" Her query came back clearly. She already knew something was wrong.

"Tell me it'll be alright."

Silver Shovel

By Sylae - Feb 4 2009

The towers of Corel rise in the distance as the lone man guides his horse down the gentle slope of the dusty road. It has been three long days since he left Aradhol-and his old life-behind, and the saddle of his mount hasn't gotten any softer.

The guards give him a glance, as he passes through the gate, but do not stop him. He hopes that the news hasn't gotten ahead of him, a hasty departure from Corel isn't what he needs right now.

He bends over in his saddle and grabs a boy by the shoulder, "Do you know where I could find a good inn, son?"

The youth gestures down a side street, "If coin is dear, ser, I'd be a'suggestin' Horalt's, the Silver Shovel. The food isn't that spectacular, but it fills you up. Else, I'd suggest the Crown, up in the northeast section of town," The man nods and tosses the child a copper piece, then heads down the side street to the Shovel.

He was just getting out of his dusty riding clothes when he hears a woman's low moan from outside his alley window. He rushes to the shutters and looks down. The alley is dark. He sighs and grabs the lantern off of the dresser..

A quarter glass later he walks into the alleyway...

Selfish Retreat

By Jewels - Feb 4 2009

Jewels didn't know what to think, or what to do for that matter. She felt like she should help Syla. She obviously meant a lot to Nioca. But the motivation just wasn't there. Jewels knew she was being selfish but she didn't care. She could have comforted herself with a dozen perfectly reasonable excuses. Syla seemed capable enough, and she wasn't going alone... Jewels needed her own sleep, not to mention the myriad of traumas she had been through in the last 24 hours. But instead she let her feet take her towards the administration tower fully aware of her selfishness, making no excuses, and feeling no regret. Someone else could deal with *this* problem.

Taking the 'elevator' Jewels soon plopped down on her bed wishing she didn't have the usual hour of tossing and turning to go through before falling asleep. Her mind wouldn't let her drift off without first reviewing the days events and the tears threatened to fall within minutes. Luckily she thought of a solution and quickly cast a sleep field over her bed. Unfortunately, though her consciousness did start to slip away, her mind still demanded review, and the nightmares pursued her relentlessly through the night.

Defeated

By Ackrovan - Feb 7 2009

Ackrovan fell next to a tree trunk, like a clad of metal in water. Holding back tears, he lifted his right foot up to eye level. Realing, he removed his iron boot, only to be greeted with a massive burn mark running all around is foot and lower leg. "Son of a bitch....." He had dealt with burn marks before. It wasn't that serious, but it's going to get infected if he didn't find something to stop the bleeding.

He look around his surroundings. The rain from the storm was making it difficult to see or hear anything(the thunder didn't help either). To make matters worse, there was no place to hide from the very likely persuers that could be a couple of yards off in any direction for all he knew. Running wasn't an option either. Not at all eager for another confrontation with that mage, or his counterpart, Ackrovan desperately started looking for a place to hide. Then he noticed the tree he had just laid on.

As its branches spread out in almost every direction near the top, Ackrovan saw a huge branch that looked like it could hold an small elephant. It'd b be a perfect hiding spot until the storm calms and he could escape this island.

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Syla and Aryll wavered between different trees and hills, trying to find clues as to were this assailant had gone. The storm, the rain, and the nightlight didn't help much either. Syla noticed a huge tree at the top of the hill. Its levees could provide a perfect shelter from the rain for a few minutes, so they could assest the situation. Syla and Aryll began walking towards the tree.

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Ackrovan froze instantly. Two mages were approaching his hiding spot. Ackrovan withdrew his one-handed crossbow(called a crosswick) and aimed it at one of the opponents. It was a newly crafted crosswick from the Elven Kingdom of Jucina. They were used in combat as a last resort weapon, and situations similar to Ackrovan's. They were rarely given to nonelves, partly because elves have a long history of mistrust of other races, and partly because they were very difficult to make. Ackrovan, lending his sword in a time of crises, was made an exception to this.

Ackrovan waited very carefully. Because of his journey, his lack of food, his weakened weapons and armor, and most of all because of his lack of will to fight, he was not in top fighting condition. Weakened, he was an easy target until he could get some food and rest. He would rather not release the bolt, but if they continued to come closer.....

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Syla and Aryll continued to approach the Weeping Willow. Syla's thoughts were switching between Nioca and this intruder. Aryll merely glanced back and forth between bushes and trees, trying to get a picture of the imediate area.

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Fling!

The bolt flew out of its cartridge and hit one of the mages right in her arm. The second one sprinted towards Ackrovan, erupting into an orange light. "*A Shade!*" Ackrovan jumped off of the tree branch and drew his longsword, droping his crosswick in the process. The shade hit him head on, knocking him back a few steps. Its claws started riping around Therador, eager to dive into Ackrovan's flesh(as far as Ackrovan could see). Shoving it away, Ackrovan swung at the creature, hitting it hard on the ribs, only to see it was barely affected. He jabed, the blow parried.

Suddenly curse ray's started to fly at Ackrovan from down below him. Before he could respond, the Shade sent him flying into the tree, causing a huge indentation to show. If this were another day, if Ackrovan was in top-fitting form, he would not of fallen so quickly. But at last, the wearyness had finally overcomed him. His sword grip losened. There he lay, tired, one-bootless, knocked out.

Losing Track of Time

By Sudanna Feb 7 2009

Nalyd's diminutive form scurried to and fro in the Shaping lab, examining equipment, tweaking settings, measuring quantities, making sure that everything had been properly restored and repaired after the attack on the Refuge. Aside from some delicate work he could do on his own, everything looked to be in working order. Most of the many, many ingredients he required were present in sufficient amounts, and he knew where to purchase more. His only slightly singed plans were tacked onto a wall, and after he finished his inspection, he looked over them once more.

They were still crude and undetailed, with many of the most intricate and essential systems yet to be puzzled out, but he was making excellent progress. He hadn't slept for several days, and wouldn't have to for quite a few more. A very useful trick he'd picked up. He'd crash and burn eventually, but that was a long ways off yet. The many organisms on his Scythe, which he was still slightly hobbling on, sang sweet music to him, lauding his progress. He scribbled out a few more notes on a more variable musculature, moved on to controllable pain receptors, put in some work on a stabler, more durable spine. A series of interlocking triangles? Perhaps. Photosynthetic patches? Best put them on the shoulders or scalp. The neck was so vulnerable - best thicken it. The feet were too unstable. . . Perhaps a rotatable pelvis could compensate?

Before long, the diagram was barely recognizable as a human - but only because you could see the inner workings. Nalyd made sure that, no matter how alien his design became, it appeared human. Mostly, anyways.

Freakish designs and blatantly outlandish ideas blossomed under his pen, late into the night. . . the early morning. . . noon. . . the night again. . . and again. . .

Twenty-Twenty

By Jewels - Feb 7 2009

Kaylas didn't know what to think, or what to do for that matter. He shut the door to Jewels' fire plane house as he walked slowly back to the castle. He had come to mourn her loss, to come to grips with her death. He hadn't told the people she was dead yet, he hadn't been able to bring

himself to say the words out loud. And now... now it wasn't true. So why did he still feel the same aching loss?

This time she left on purpose. This time she abandoned him... she abandoned them all. Of course, he hadn't given her much reason to stay, had he? Not half a minute into their reunion and he was practically screaming at her... practically shoving her away. And for what? If he was being honest with himself, he'd have to admit it was for hurting his pride. Why hadn't he been the first one she had run to with the news. She had chosen another's arms over his. And not just running to someone else... but mating with them? An elemental only gets pregnant when they want to. No 'happy' surprises or messy abortions to worry about like the humans do. Jewels had wanted a baby... a baby with someone else. Kaylas didn't really care that he had been human. No, what hurt was that it wasn't himself. He had been a fool. He had only known Jewels a few days and had to admit that he really knew next to nothing about her, the life she led, or the people she cared about.

Something I'll have to remedy soon.

He was almost at the castle when a soldier approached him. "Prince Darius of the Living Waters is here sir. He is requesting to speak to Lady Jewels. What should I tell him?"

Kaylas pulled himself out of his thoughts to concentrate on business. "Have a conference room prepared and lead him there. I will speak to him myself."

A shimmering cloud turned as he closed the door and approached. "Kaylas! My old friend. Better days have come at last, eh?"

Kaylas put on his best smile and offered his hand in welcome. "Prince Darius, what a surprise! Better days indeed if you come to see me instead of the other way around. To what do we owe the honor?"

Darius patted the large metal barrel next to him. "Just making our next installment for the oil trade. Lady Jewels left in such a hurry this afternoon that we didn't have time to send it with her."

"She did?" Kaylas tried not to look as surprised as he felt as he sat at the table with Darius. "This afternoon?"

"You know, my father was quite worried she was going to back out when she didn't show up on time. It wouldn't have been the first time he had been 'burnt' by your leaders." Darius gave a hearty laugh at his cleverness and Kaylas chuckled along. "But she came through and made the deal. You should be proud. You have an honorable woman as a Fire Lord. It's a quality that is lacking in leadership far too often these days."

"Yes, we are very lucky, and very proud."

"Is she coming? I was hoping to discuss some future plans with her... contingency plans if you will."

"Contingency? Contingency for what?" Kaylas didn't want to sound too eager for information but Darius apparently expected him to already be in the loop.

"You know... in case we need to try again? By the way, do you guys have a cover story planned? She didn't seem to eager to have everyone know what was going on yet. A wedding perhaps?"

Kaylas' head snapped up, "A wedding?!" Darius had a big grin plastered across his face and raised his eyebrows playfully.

"If you haven't thought about it yet, I'm full of ideas. You two would make a lovely royal couple and I could be the best man... that way when the child is born the scandal seems a little more plausible."

The pieces finally started fitting together as Kaylas' mind worked fast. "No, no..." he waved Darius off, "that won't be necessary. Uh... Jewels has decided to take a leave of absence from the fire plane instead. We're calling it a... a training time. Since she has so recently awakened and all." Darius nodded as he considered it's viability. "In fact, she has already left. She didn't want to risk anything."

"Pity... I mean, it's good that you've been so proactive, but it's a pity I won't be able to talk with her. I assume you know where she is?"

Kaylas nodded suddenly eager for their conversation to be over. "I do, but she has asked not to be disturbed for a week, not even by me, unless the matter is most urgent. She wanted to be alone. I'm sure you understand."

"Of course, of course. It can wait. But do let me know when she is accepting visitors will you? I don't want everything to be as rushed as it was in the beginning. The circumstances were not optimal."

"I'll do that. Now, if you'll excuse me. I have much to attend to. You'll not believe all the duties a General is expected to keep up with." Kaylas stood up and shook his hand again. "And thank you for being so gracious as to bring the oil here yourself. It was good seeing you."

Kaylas took his leave, a little wiser, a little humbler, and in great need to talk to Jewels.

Distanced

By Nioca - Feb 7 2009

Nioca rose blearily. Sunlight was streaming through a small window at the top of his bedroom. Birds were chirping. Out the window, blue sky could be seen, pocketed by the occasional puffy cloud. It looked peaceful. Clearly, something was horribly wrong.

As quickly as he could, Nioca dressed. He chose to wear a bright red set of robes without a hood, and a pair of sandals that had not been worn out. Nioca thought with dismay that he needed to amend his wardrobe. He strapped on a belt, and clipped a sheathed Avenger to his side. Then he hastily exited his bedchambers.

With wild abandon, Nioca charged out of the citadel, waving Avenger and uttering a fierce war cry. He then stopped short. Several members were out on the fields, staring at him with varying mixtures of shock, concern, and incredulity. Mostly incredulity. He could see Aryll staring at him as if he was out of his mind. Lowering Avenger, Nioca glanced around in anticipation. It was here somewhere, waiting...

"Nioca, there better be a good reason why I'm up at this hour after last night." A rather bleary-eyed and bedraggled Syla approached him from behind. She was still wearing sleeping attire.

"Something's wrong." Nioca stated bluntly.

"What?" Syla said, her tone indicating that she had absolutely no interest in hearing what he had to say.

"I don't know. But it's quiet. Too quiet. It's never this quiet." Nioca's eyes darted across the landscape as he said this.

Syla stared at him for a moment, at a complete loss for words. "You mean to tell me..." Syla began slowly, "That I'm out here in nightclothes in front of everyone, with a few hours less sleep than I could have gotten, all because it's a *nice day*?!"

"Well, when you put it like that..." Nioca said sheepishly. Syla merely groaned and shuffled back to the citadel. Nioca looked out at the members still staring at him. It occurred to him to sheath his sword. "Sorry. Sorry everyone. Go back to... whatever you were doing."

Aryll approached him. "Are you... feeling all right?" She asked, worry in her voice.

"Yeah..." Nioca said, baffled. "It's just that... this is weird! Do you mean to tell me it's a normal day?"

"Pretty much!" Aryll said, laughing lightly. She wandered off as Nioca stared in wonderment at Calamity Refuge. It was as if he was seeing it for the first time. People happy. Posting freely. No threat of impending doom, no worry of an attack.

Of course, Nioca was still worried. He knew that a threat was still out there. Eventually, he would have to crush the VRP, and stop the assassins. Constantly, he'd be looking over his shoulder. Jewels, w-dueck, Robsta, himself... All legitimate targets for a well-placed spiritkiller. But at least there wasn't an invasion in the near future.

Nioca struggled. Should he tell them what they were up against? w-dueck was well-aware of the target on his back, but Jewels and Robsta were still in the dark. And that stranger... whoever he was, he proved that a person could get on the island with ease. But even as he thought that, something else intruded. Explaining the assassin would require explaining that Robsta and Jewels were Designers. That their dabbling in BoE and BoA resulted in them becoming Gods in another plane. How much damage would be done if they realized their powers, and it went to their heads?

No. He'd protect them. He had been charged with as much. But they didn't need to know. Nioca took a deep breath. For whatever concerns were present, it appeared that he had been graced with a brief reprieve.

Nioca turned to Aryll. "What happened last night?"

"Well, we got the guy. Not before Syla got shot in the arm, though. But we brought him down. w-dueck hauled him off this morning into the Admin tower, and that's the last I know of it." Syla stated tritely.

"Hmm... Any idea-" Nioca began.

"Nope." Aryll cut him off.

Nioca sighed, then eyed Calamity Refuge more carefully. It appeared that w-dueck had been busy; A new forum gleamed in the light of the late morning sun, entitled 'News'. Another large building stood next to the Calamity Refuge proper, though its purpose was yet unknown. However, several members were congregating there. Curious, Nioca approached. Sounds of laughter and conversation wafted from the building's ajar oak door. Nioca cautiously pushed it open and entered.

Inside, the members of the refuge had gathered. A polished wooden table stretched the length of the room, and several smaller tables were scattered about it. Off in the corner was a kitchen, where a woman he did not recognize stood serving up a variety of food and drink. A bar surrounded the kitchen. Nalyd sat on one of the stools surrounding the bar chatting with the cook, who seemed to laugh without provocation. Vergil sat at another stool, seemingly lost and contemplating his mug of ale. w-dueck and Jewels were in a corner, speaking in hushed voices, occasionally taking furtive glances at the room before continuing. Robsta sat with another newcomer. The man spoke casually with Robsta, who responded occasionally with a word or a nod. A two female members and a male member he didn't recognize sat at another table, chatting excitedly.

Nioca worked his way to the bar. "Hello!" He said cheerily, and the cook flashed him a smile. Something disturbed Nioca about her. "What's on the menu?"

"Omelettes!" She said in a high-pitched voice that made Nioca want to gouge his ears out. It was like fingernails scraping over a chalkboard. "With anything you like in them! Also have pancakes for those allergic to the eggs! And the usual refreshments!"

"But... this place *didn't exist* yesterday. How can it have 'the usual refreshments'?" Nioca asked, puzzled.

"Oh, you silly!" She responded with a giggle that made Nioca started pondering the intricacies of a Code Violet. "We have a variety of refreshments! Anything from water to ale!"

"How about Amritae?" Nioca asked.

"No, I'm Ligrev." The cook responded, confused.

"That's a no." Nioca sighed.

"I'm know what?" Ligrev said, thoroughly baffled.

"Ligrev, do not worry about it." Vergil said monotonously.

"Okay. So what'll you have?" She squeaked at Nioca, making him wince.

"Just coffee." Nioca stated.

"You have a cough?" Ligrev responded incredulously. "You sound fine to me..."

Nioca's placed his palm on his forehead, noting the headache that was starting to build.

After another ten minutes of Nioca trying to get coffee, not to mention Vergil explaining to Ligrev what coffee was, Nioca finally had a small cup of strong black coffee. He sipped quickly at it, draining the mug. After finishing it, Nioca pondered his next move. The assassin had proven easily that he lacked the ability to fend off an attack easily. If more than one assassin attacked at once, Nioca would have to be able to drop them quickly and easily. As it was, one assassin was enough to put Nioca on the defensive. It had been easier to handle in Ermaria; but then, scripting wouldn't do him much good here. His abilities weren't nearly as strong outside Ermaria, and he had to spell everything out. Anything useful he wanted to do would have to be written out beforehand.

Unless...

Nioca got an idea. It was risky and dangerous, especially if it went wrong, but it could prove useful. But it'd require more equipment. And some tinkering with the Blades Nexus.

Nioca got up. He needed supplies, and he knew a few places to find them. It'd require briefly leaving the Refuge... but he'd be back soon enough. Nioca headed for the door.

"Hey, Nioca!" Nioca froze, and turned toward the person who called him. w-dueck waved him over to his and Jewels' table. Hesitantly, Nioca meandered over. "Have a seat." w-dueck motioned to a chair.

Nioca eased himself into the chair. "Nice place."

"Thanks. Hopefully Jewels can make a few of her cookies to complement the menu." w-dueck smiled at Jewels. "But I waved you over to talk about the Refuge."

"What about it?" Nioca asked cautiously.

"Back in Ermaria, you said that the Refuge was in danger. I want to know what we're up against." w-dueck said.

"Okay." Nioca said.

A long pause followed. "Well?" w-dueck ventured.

"I thought this would be a private conversation." Nioca replied.

"It is." w-dueck responded.

"No, it's not." Nioca fired back, motioning to Jewels. "No offense, but Jewels doesn't need to hear this."

Jewels started to get up. "Jewels, stay." w-dueck said, a note of anger in his voice. "Nioca, you have nerve telling one of my Admins to leave. I don't mind her hearing this. She needs to know."

"Like hell she does!" Nioca spouted vehemently. "There are plenty of things she needs to know. This isn't one of them, and I'm not discussing the issue in front of her."

"Nioca, I have had it with this cloak-and-dagger bullsh-" w-dueck began threateningly.

"Then perhaps I need to start spilling your inner-most secrets for everyone to hear!" Nioca's voice was raised enough that the room could hear it. A couple members glanced, but otherwise paid no attention.

"That's enough!" w-dueck shouted. The meeting hall suddenly started to pay attention. "If you want to keep secrets about your personal life, you be my guest, but if *my refuge* is in danger, I want to know about it!"

"Well, we can't always get what we want, can we?!" Nioca shouted back. "If I'm keeping secrets about the Refuge, it's for a good reason! And I'm not going to go about spilling it to every person that walks through the door!"

"Have you thought about the lives you put in danger?! Or are you too busy shirking your responsibilities to-"

"HOW **DARE YOU!**" Nioca roared. Everyone else present paid rapt attention. Jewels quickly edged away from them. "HOW DARE YOU ACCUSE ME OF IRRESPONSIBILITY! Unless you forgot, I'm the only one of us who actually gives a damn about being responsible! Who was it that had to save your sorry **ass while you were off playing God?! Who was bothering to save lives on that thrice-cursed plane instead of *enslaving* them?! *ME!***"

"I didn't need your help! Especially not with that little string attached!" w-dueck roared back. "If I have business to attend to in Ermaria, no amount of death threats on your part will keep me from it!"

"You want to know why I'm not telling you anything? IT'S RIGHT HERE!" Nioca screamed, rising from his chair. "ERMARIA HAS IT BAD ENOUGH WITH ONE POWER-HUNGRY BRAT PUSHING HIS WEIGHT AROUND! IT DOESN'T NEED ANY MORE DECIDING TO TURN IT INTO THEIR OWN PERSONAL PLAYGROUND!"

"YOU POMPOUS, OVERBEARING SON OF A... NO WONDER THEY'RE TRYING TO KILL YOU!" w-dueck shouted himself hoarse, also standing.

"NOT JUST ME, YOU FOOL! HALF OF THE REFUGE IS ON THEIR HIT LIST, AND YOU'RE TOO BUSY BEING FULL OF YOURSELF TO REALIZE IT! I'LL TELL YOU THIS, THOUGH," Nioca's voice started coming back down. "You better watch your back. AND MAYBE REMEMBER WHO [I]AND WHAT[/I] I AM!" Kicking his chair away, Nioca marched toward the door.

"GET BACK HERE *NOW*!" w-dueck shouted, also rising.

"I'M NOT YOUR LAPDOG, W-DUECK! I'LL DO AS I PLEASE!" Nioca shouted back. He marched out the door and slammed it shut behind him.

Nioca sorted through a large rucksack. He was still fuming about his run-in with w-dueck. The need to get away from the Refuge for a while dominated his thoughts. Besides, after his performance, he doubted that anybody would want to see him for a while. He just counted himself lucky that w-dueck didn't try to stop him. Contemplating about his ever-sinking status with the Refuge, he hiked the sack over his back and proceeded to the door.

Nioca marched across the grass to a small station on the edge of the island. Pressing a green button, he set the sack down and waited. Aryll had been told to stay put, and keep an eye out. Syla was leaving for Ermaria. "So much for a nice day." Nioca muttered to himself. Indeed, the sky was turning gray, and small claps of lightning and thunder could be seen and heard in the distance.

A rocket-shaped vehicle flew toward the station and landed on a small pad. Picking the sack up again, Nioca walked to it. He set the sack in the back, and then climbed into the cockpit. Pressing a button on a small, flashing console, he stated, "Tesara Post." A green light flashed, and the windshield closed. Tiny drops of water could be seen on the canopy as the vehicle took off.

Another vehicle pulled into the station not long after the first left. Two men stepped out of the shadow of a tree. "You stay put, see if you can take one here. I'll go after the priest." One of the men ran to the vehicle, repeated Nioca's destination, and took off in pursuit. The other drew a dagger and proceeded back to the Refuge, a drop of rain catching on the tip of his ruby blade.

Nioca smiled at his new fortune. The weather here was clear. Nioca stepped out of the vehicle and grabbed his rucksack. A large, medieval city was sprawled before him. Wanting to get his errands done quickly, Nioca hiked up the sack and jogged toward the city. He got stopped at the gate by a rather bored guard. "Name and reason for visit?" He yawned.

"Anidon. I'm here to buy some supplies and sell some excess wares." Nioca responded tritely.

"Great. Welcome to Tesara Post. Don't steal anything and don't kill anybody, or I'll be stickin' you quick." The guard stated. Nioca wondered briefly whether he had even heard him, but after hearing 'sticking you quick', decided not to question him. He meandered into the busy city streets. Peasants, merchants, and guards alike shouted and bustled about, going through their daily routines. Adventurers, ranging from Ermaria-like warriors to truly bizarre parties consisting of people hardly over 13 with weird hair, congregated to share tales, find rest, and trade supplies. Nioca stopped to let a goat charge past, pursued by its frustrated owner. Taking a deep breath of air, Nioca let nostalgia overcome him.

Nioca staggered, trying to keep upright. He had marched into the Great Desert in hopes of finding the sacred place of the Designers. But now... now it seemed that he wasn't coming back out. He had turned around once he realized his supplies were low, but discovered that he could not find from whence he came. He was completely lost. Was he making progress across, or making a big circle? He couldn't tell, and dehydration kept him from coherence. So he stumbled onward... onward to nowhere.

Finally, Nioca's legs gave out, and he hit his knees. It was over. Aryll was back at Gvelston as the priests tried to break the enchantment on her, leaving him utterly alone for his final moments. Nioca pondered what had possessed him to take up his errand of stupidity; no one could find the Designers, not unless they willed it. But Nioca thought otherwise. A fire had grabbed him, driving him to corner one. And to ask... why?

A humorless laugh at his lips, Nioca looked up. The hazy outline of a small building was in the distance. A mirage, another one conjured by his mind or some other device to mock him. Nioca

considered just ignoring it. But why bother? He wasn't for long, anyway. Surely, it couldn't hurt to approach.

Staggering to his feet, Nioca dragged himself inexorably to the building. Made of stone mined from a quarry, it looked almost like a shrine. A large, bright double-door taunted him as Nioca kept moving forward. Soon, he was in arm's reach. He carefully extended a hand, knowing just what would happen; the mirage would disappear as if it had never existed, replaced by more sand. His hand was an inch from the door... and then made contact with one of the brass doorknobs.

Nioca nearly swooned. His hand had closed around a solid metal knob, real in every way, shape, and form. Then he hoarsely cursed; out in the blazing sun, the brass had heated enough that it had burned his hand. Moving as quickly as possible, Nioca grabbed the handle again and shoved the doors open. Inside, a dark, cavernous room stretched for several feet, holding a small crystal pillar at one end. What caught his attention first, however, was the pools lining the sides of the room. Filled with water.

Nioca staggered gleefully into the cool oasis of a building, dropping by a pool and drinking as quickly as he could. He didn't care that the water was stagnant and somewhat dirty. It was water. Cool, life-giving water. And he needed it. He swallowed mouthful after mouthful. Finally, after nearly draining the pool, he drifted off, his exhaustion and dehydration carrying him off.

He woke up later, though he couldn't tell how much time had passed. His hand was drifting in the pool, and he had been drooling slightly in his sleep. Shaking himself slightly, Nioca pushed himself up. His senses had sharpened, and the delirium from his dehydration had been pushed back. Nioca carefully got to his feet.

However, something yanked him back down. Without warning, something had grabbed onto his robes and collapsed against him, forcing him to the floor. Ragged breathing sounded loud in Nioca's ear, and a voice gasped, "Warn..."

"Who...? Who are you?" Nioca gasped back, noting that his voice was scratchy and dry.

"Warn them... stop them..." The presence rolled off Nioca, and Nioca sat up to behold what had accosted him. A man, dressed in traveling clothes, laid next to him. He breathed raggedly, an infected knife wound in his back. "Stop... god..."

"Stop God? Sir, what are you trying to say?" Nioca asked, confused. In hopes of helping him, Nioca put a hand over the wound and ran through a simple healing chant. His hand took on a cyan nimbus for a moment, then faded without effect.

"Done... something... terrible... stop..." The man gasped. Nioca couldn't think of anything to say or do. What was this? "Must... stop... warn..." The man continued to gasp.

Nioca panicked. Unable to think of anything else, he tried scooping some water up from the nearby pool with his hands and carrying it to him. However, he refused to drink it. "What happened? What's wrong? Who are you trying to warn?" Nioca finally burst out.

The man didn't respond. His breathing seemed to have stopped. Nioca slowly got up. Suddenly, the man's arm shot out and dragged him back to his knees. The man's eyes fixed directly on Nioca, as if seeing him for the first time. "Nioca. Warn them. Stop them. Stop this."

Nioca screamed. His mind felt overloaded. Memories and knowledge not belonging to him suddenly flooded his consciousness, a montage of madness he couldn't keep up with. Designers. Bladescraft. Avernum. Exile. Internet. As the montage progressed, it became more broken. Tiny segments of memory of other people he didn't recognize, yet somehow knew. Places he never visited yet remembered.

And just as quickly as it began, the contact was broken. The man fell prone, surely dead. Nioca collapsed backwards, holding his head and screaming. It was too much. Way too much. He couldn't handle it. Knowledge. Memory. ***Power****.*

He never quite recalled how long he had laid there, screaming in anguish. But he did know what had happened once he stopped. Picking himself up shakily, he felt himself drawn to the crystal at the end of the room. Without even thinking about it, he approached, reaching a hand out for it. A finger brushed it...

"Watch it!" Someone shouted. Nioca broke out of his reverie to notice that he had nearly knocked over an elf. Apologizing profusely, Nioca looked around. He had wandered toward his destination; a rather ramshackle building made of stone and straw. A wooden sign nearby identified it as the *Shop of Ill-Gotten Gains*. Smiling, he marched toward the door and pushed it open. A tiny bell rung as the door swung inward, and Nioca stepped across the threshold. Closing the door behind him, he dropped the rucksack.

"Whosare?" Someone shouted. A man came around the corner, his hand waiting by a sword. "I don't need no thieves, so if you'in thinkin' of stealin', you need to get you carcass outta here."

"I was thinking of selling, actually." Nioca responded coolly, pulling his rucksack forward.

The man looked rather curious now. "Sellin'?" Then he shook his head. "Sorry, bub. Only doin' business with folks ah trust nowadays. You ain't one of 'em. But if you interested in buyin'..." He finished hopefully.

"No, it's selling. Though I have to admit, Juk, I'm a bit disappointed you wouldn't buy from an old friend." Nioca said bitterly.

"Old friend? Just who do ya think ya are?" Juk demanded.

"Anidon." Nioca responded.

Juk paused. First, he looked puzzled. Then startled. Finally, he finished it off with a wide smile. "Anidon! It's been too long! Too freakin' long!" Juk exclaimed, excited.

"'Freaking'?" Nioca asked as Juk beamed at him.

"Bah, city guard has a problem with impressionable young kiddies gettin' sworn at." Juk replied crossly. "Tha', or it may have been the fact I told the mayor to go f- er, *copulate* with hisself."

"Sheesh. Still haven't learned to control your tongue?" Nioca shook his head.

"O' course not! This is how a man talks! An' they ain't stoppin' it." Juk responded exuberantly. "Now come. Lets see what ya got." He added, shuffling behind a dirty counter. Nioca lugged the rucksack up onto the counter and poured its contents out. "Good gods, man!" Juk yelped as he

saw a wide variety of body armor and weaponry pour out. A few items even fell to the floor. Juk desperately peeked over the pile. "I *hate* bags with extra-dimensional space..." He muttered. "Now, lessee... A greatsword?" Juk picked up a large, still sheathed sword. He gave it a slight pull. "Wow... that's... that's the highest quality I've ever seen! Flame-retardant too, I sense, though I'm not sure why someone would want a fire-resistant sword. But no questions, eh?" Juk gave a hollow laugh.

"Indeed. Suffice it to say I got locked in a very large battle, and this is what I salvaged." Nioca replied.

"How many o' these ya got, anyway?" Juk asked hesitantly.

"Three greatswords, five longswords, two broadswords, ten shortswords, a couple daggers, and a katana that's of even higher quality." Nioca rattled off.

"Sweet merciful..." Juk whispered. "The greatswords alone gotta be worth twelve-hundred gold apiece. But let me see this katana." Nioca handed it over, and Juk unsheathed it. His eyes buldged. "And I thought the greatswords were nice. Nontarnishable blade, honed to an edge finer than anything I've ever seen... It's even enchanted. Returns to its owner." Juk shook his head. "By itself, it's worth 'bout five-thousand!"

"Then there's the armor." Nioca pointed out.

Juk meandered over to seven suits of armor. "Freakishly high-quality, slightly lighter than usual... Enchanted to be completely impregnable to fire. A suit of plate mail, two suits of chainmail, and four suits of studded armor. Do you... do ya think I'm a bank or something? I mean, sh... oot. Shoot, man. That's gotta be worth 30,000 gold right there." Juk wrote down the amounts. "32,620 to be exact." Juk sighed, then looked at a few other pieces. "And you have helmets, and... do ya have plans to drive me out of business?!" Juk busied himself examining the rest of items.

"So? What's the offer?" Nioca asked impatiently.

"For the lot?" Juk asked. He paused and looked at it carefully. "42,000 gold."

Nioca balked. "That's it? I just heard you add up the suits of armor to be 32,000 gold by themselves! The greatswords were twelve-hundred gold, and the other swords can't be that much less! Not to mention the helmets and greaves!" Nioca exclaimed. "How much do they add up to?"

"Is that really im-" Juk began.

"How... much?" Nioca intoned.

Juk sighed. "57,394 gold."

"You were trying to screw me!" Nioca yelped.

"Nay, nay! I have to take off commission, and quite frankly, 10% can take a bit-"

"A little over five-thousand, not the 15,000 you knocked off. What, you think I can't add numbers?" Nioca shot back.

"Look, I can't afford the whole lot! If I paid out 50,000 gold, I'd go bankrupt!" Juk yelped.

"You've made larger transactions before." Nioca observed.

"The economy wasn't in the crap-house before! Everyone's suffering! And I've got folks coming in from a D&D site tonight!" Juk responded.

"50,000. Take it or leave it." Nioca intoned.

"But... Anidon, be reasonable!" Juk pleaded.

"You won't see equipment like this again." Nioca warned him.

"But... but... wait, here's an idea! You take a few items off the table, keep im! And then I pay you 42,000! Sound fair?" Juk pleaded.

"Fine. I'll take the platemail back." Nioca conceded, shoveling the red suit of platemail back into his rucksack.

"Good, good! I'll get the coin!" Juk responded fervently.

"Large denominations! I don't want to carry around 42,000 individual pieces of metal here!" Nioca commented as Juk opened a large chest nearby. It opened with a loud creaking noise. Scooping up an armful of shiny silver coins, he brought them over to the counter and started counting them out. "While you're counting, do you know of a Shaping supply place near here?"

"There's *Gathitens*, but... well, what kind of things are you looking for? Shaped tools and such or actual Shaping equipment?" Juk responded, staring at him inquisitively.

"Actual Shaping equipment." Nioca replied.

"Then you're sh... *shoehorn* outta luck. Unless you have permission to legally Shape, he won't sell Shaping equipment to you. Hell, he'll turn you in to the Shapers if you try!" Juk warned. "When I tried, he almost sicced an agent on me! Took half-an-hour to convince him I wouldn't do it again, and that's 'cause I won't!"

"Well, I happen to know a Shaper, so I think I might be able to bluff my way through." Nioca responded confidently.

"Anidon, listen; don't try it. I'm tellin' you this as a friend, that guy can't be bluffed. If he thinks you're doing something illegal, you're screwed in ways I don't even want to ponder."

"Juk," Nioca replied, "Thanks. But it's worth the risk, and it's not the first assassin that's come after me."

"Your neck." Juk responded darkly, pushing a large stack of coins towards Nioca.

"Yep. Now, if you'll excuse me, there's some risking I need to do." Nioca said, scooping the coins into a purse. Without further ado, he turned about and walked out the door.

Nioca walked through the door and stared in awe. Shaping symbols adorned every wall, and mysterious vats bubbled with noxious substances. An artila sat curled up in the corner, but had its head reared to contemplate the new arrival. A gentle hiss escaped its maw.

"Welcome to *Gathiten's Shaping Supply*." A mysterious voice wafted from behind the counter. A heavily-robed man walked around the corner, his beady eyes taking in every detail of Nioca. He

wore the Shaper insignia on his robes; Nioca immediately knew what he was dealing with. He thought that the store was run by an outsider permitted to work with shaping supplies; never in a million years would he have guessed that a full Shaper was actually deigning to tend a shop. "My name is Gathiten. And, looking at you, I guess you're someone curious about the powerful tools created by the Shapers."

"I'm Anidon." Nioca stated with more confidence than he felt. "*Here goes...*" he thought to himself. Continuing, he said, "Actually, I'm in need of some supplies for an experiment I'm conducting. I need to construct a channeling device, but I lack-"

Gathiten cut him off. "Yes, yes. You are ignorant of the ways of the Shapers. We-"

Nioca returned the favor. "Don't share secrets with outsiders. I should know, seeing as I am one."

Gathiten examined him. "Fool! Do you think I am blind or stupid? No self-respecting Shaper would go around wearing *those*!" Gathiten pointed at Nioca's robes. "You, Anidon, are a liar, and I shall be reporting you to the-"

"Oh, save your breath already!" Nioca roared, his terror fueling his false rage. "Any self-respecting Shaper knows that sacrifices have to be made, even if its your pride that's cut! You of all people should know this, running this shop like some cheap-trick magician for peasants to gawk at! You are here because the Shapers will it, and I wear these rags *because the Shapers will it*. Unless, of course, you aren't who *you* say you are." Nioca finished, a deadly insinuation in his voice.

Gathiten looked taken aback, but not convinced. "Very well. What was it you needed?"

"Materials to construct a Shaping platform, channeling device, and power crystal. Plus the usual reagents, along with living tools." Nioca listed off. He honestly had no idea what was required by any of those devices, let alone what the usual reagents even were. Still, he hoped that Gathiten would, and wouldn't question him on it.

"What's the experiment, Anidon?" Gathiten asked suddenly as he fished through supplies.

"Humanoid modification. Trying to improve the existing humanoid creations further. Thahds with hardened skin, War Tralls that throw energy-infused rocks, and so forth." Nioca babbled, making it up as he went along.

"Ah... Any of them try to eat you yet?" Gathiten probed.

"Most of them, actually. Maybe I just rub humanoids the wrong way; most humans seem to have a similar reaction. Which is why I'm out here in this uncontrolled cesspit in the first place." Nioca was sweating. He was just glad that he could blame it on the vats of chemicals around him.

Gathiten let out a hollow laugh as he placed the goods on the counter. "I see. Quite frankly, I find Thahds a nuisance. Ever since the forty-second generation arrived, they tend to be a pain. Don't you agree?"

Nioca started to respond in agreement, but stopped himself. There was something off about Gathiten's response. It was specific. Way too specific, especially when directed at someone who was suspected of being an outsider. "Actually, I can't say." Nioca began carefully.

"Why not?" Gathiten said with his brows furrowed.

"Well, mainly because the forty-second generation *doesn't exist*." Nioca said, playing his hunch.

Gathiten's expression softened. "My apologies."

"Don't worry about it. If I have to go through a little trouble to make sure an outsider doesn't get forbidden secrets, it's time well-spent." Nioca waved it off. "Say, do you have any Submission Batons?"

"As a matter of fact, I do." Gathiten replied, now quite cordial.

"Good. I need half-a-dozen, with plenty of ammo. These idiot guards seem to think that I can just wave my hand to replace them." Nioca said, now quite confident.

Gathiten laid out six thorn batons and ammo on the table. "7,539 gold."

Nioca got his purse out and made a small show of painfully counting out the coins. Eventually, a small assortment of coins lay on the counter. Gathiten scooped them into his palm and deposited them in a small chest. Nioca fished the equipment into his rucksack. "Farewell, Gathiten. I hope we do business again." Smiling, Nioca turned and walked out the door. Once it was safely shut, he let out a sigh of relief. "Actually, no. Let's never do business again. Ever." He muttered to himself.

It was afternoon when Nioca finished his business in Tesara Post. He wanted to stay a while; no doubt w-dueck would have words back at the Refuge. Still, he didn't like being away. Especially with his schedule for tomorrow. Regretfully, Nioca headed to the Google station, wondering what awaited him. The bustling crowd jostled him as people embarked and disembarked from the vehicles. Nioca found a rather secluded one and headed for it.

Without warning, someone landed a solid punch against Nioca's face. Nioca stumbled back, almost falling over. He heard steel rasp against multiple sheaths as weapons were drawn. He had been ambushed.

Unfortunately for Nioca, most of the people on the platform were civilians. They quickly skittered away from the ambushers. The ones that could have helped seemed less than inclined to do so. Nioca was on his own as six thugs closed on him. "Look here!" One of the thugs shouted gleefully. "A little priest all by his lonesome!" The thug raised a battle-axe and swung it down. Nioca rolled out of the way, mentally crying out to Aryll as the others rushed him. Yanking Avenger out of its sheath, Nioca swung at another thug, a blessing chant on his lips. The sword met with another, and the thug parried Nioca's blow. Nioca desperately brought Avenger back around, but a quick jab knocked it clean out of his hands. The thug with the axe approached and drew his weapon back for a finishing blow.

Nioca suddenly felt like every ounce of warmth had been forcefully ripped from his body. Something had just phased through him. With a flash of claws, the thug's chest was slashed open. He toppled forward as the other thugs panicked. Aryll pointed at another thug, and a blast of caustic mist exploded around him. The thugs started choking as their throats were burned by inhaling the mist, and red patches formed on their skin. Nioca lunged toward his sword, grabbing its hilt and turning back to face his opponents. Another thug was brought down by Aryll's claws.

Infuriated, Nioca ran a third thug through with Avenger, then slashed at a fourth. The thug took the blade between the ribs, and collapsed. A fifth, the one at the epicenter of the acidic cloud, fell choking. The final thug, seeing how quickly his allies had been routed, ran. Aryll, enraged at the brazen attack on Nioca and further incensed at the thug's cowardly retreat, fired a cyan ray at the thug. It stuck the man square in the back, and, with a spray of frost, threw him several feet. Upon striking the ground, he shattered into several frozen pieces.

Nioca panted slightly. "That wasn't on the agenda for today." He observed. "Thanks for the rescue. I thought I was a dead man for-"

Nioca gasped. A throwing dagger had struck him in the chest. Nioca stumbled backward as he pulled the dagger out, his hand shaking ever-so-slightly. Aryll frantically looked about for the assailant. A small man in dark clothing came out from behind a parked vehicle. As Aryll prepared to hit him with a ray, the man pulled out a wand made of bone and pointed it at her. A ray of white light struck Aryll, and she disintegrated. Nioca tried to cast a spell at the man, but he couldn't focus; it felt as if his mind was going fuzzy. His entire body started shaking as the man pulled out a ruby dagger. Desperate, Nioca pointed Avenger at him.

A bolt of light shot from Avenger and struck the man in the chest. With a flash of light and a spray of gore, the man was thrown back into a vehicle, a large, smoking crater where his ribs used to be. Nioca attempted to call for Aryll, but he didn't get a response. Nioca tried to focus on a curing spell, but couldn't get the spell to work. The dagger that hit him had been poisoned. Nioca could feel it slowly starting to paralyze him.

One thing dominated Nioca's thoughts: he had to get back to Calamity Refuge. Someone there ought to know how to purge the toxin that ran rampant in his veins. Stumbling, Nioca grabbed his rucksack and got into a Google vehicle. With a furiously shaking hand, he pressed a button on the vehicle's console and stammered out, "Ca-calam-m-mity R-r-refuge." The vehicle's cockpit closed as its engine started. With violently trembling hands, Nioca applied pressure to his injury as the vehicle lifted off.

The vehicle landed gently back at Calamity Refuge's station, and the cockpit opened. Nioca drew a rattling breath. It had taken a mere five minutes, but it was enough for the poison to wreck havoc. It was impossible for him to hold his hands still, his chest was completely numb, his entire body was weak, and he could hardly even focus his eyes. The knife wound in his chest bled freely; his entire front was stained with blood, his hand was coated in the red fluid, and the vehicle was spattered with blood droplets and puddles. Desperate, Nioca dragged himself out of the vehicle, the rucksack and Avenger hitting the ground with him. Nioca took a few steps towards Calamity Refuge, but his body couldn't hold out any longer. He hit his knees, unable to stay upright. Then he fell face-first to the ground and laid prone.

Revelations and a Dragon

By Jewels - Feb 10 2009

While her dreams hadn't been all that pleasant, Jewels had to admit that she felt better after a full night's sleep. She met Will in the new chat lounge he had created Zyqxuwy-knew-when. "It's great, Will, absolutely amazing!. I don't know how you do it or why you keep me around when this kind of stuff is way over my head."

w-dueck showed her to a small table over in the corner. "It's not that hard, really. I'm sure you could learn how to do it in no time. Speaking of... you know Vergil quit his adminship, right?"

"Yeah, I saw he mentioned that. Something about not being needed?" If Jewels was being honest she didn't really feel needed either, but then she*had* made it clear to Will of her uselessness right off the bat and he had wanted her to be an Admin anyway. "You, like, completely fixed the boards in five minutes, after he had spent hours trying. I'm kinda curious how you did it."

"I just tapped into the database and restored it with a backup, really, but I hadn't given you or Vergil access to it so I was really the only one who could have done it. But I've set you up with an account now so in case anything like this happens again you can fix it, too." w-dueck handed her a sheet of paper with portal coordinates and password on it as well as a set of keys. "Just punch the coordinates in to any internet portal and the password and keys will let you in."

"Wow, Will, you sure you can trust me with this? What if I break it?" She looked at him nervously as she put the stuff into her pocket.

"Heh, I doubt you could ever do any worse than what I've already done to it. Just make sure you save a backup in maintenance before you tinker with anything and try not to blow us up." w-dueck smiled confidently at her but Jewels didn't feel at all like she was prepared.

"Uh... OK. And just how do you make a backup?"

Will burst out laughing while he rolled his eyes at her. "Just go poke around. It's pretty much self-explanatory. I'm sure you'll figure it out."

"All right..."

Will's demeanor became more serious as he gently asked, "So, how are you doing?"

"I'm... I..." her instincts were to lie, pretend everything was perfectly fine, but looking into his eyes she felt safe. He could be trusted with the truth... he deserved the truth. "I really don't know how I am. I haven't given myself time to think about it, though none of my dreams were what I would call 'good'." Jewels reached across the table to squeeze Will's hand. "Thank you for being so understanding. You don't know how much it means to me. And I'm sorry if what I said to Kaylas last night made you... uncomfortable. I don't know what I was..."

Will interrupted her waving his hands in dismissal. "Don't worry about it. I was just surprised that you would *want* to imply that..." His voice trailed off.

"Oh don't even," Jewels teased, "You know you're a great guy. Not that I was planning on it, I was just *so* mad at Kaylas." Jewels couldn't help but speak harslhy as she continued. "I hate it when people judge others because of things they can't control. Racism, sexism... speciesism. It's the most *ignorant* thing in the world! And I..." She realized she was getting carried away and pulled back to calm herself for a moment. "It's just a sore spot for me."

"Understandable." w-dueck sympathized as he noticed Nioca at the bar. "Oh good, Nioca's here. I had some questions I wanted to ask him." He started waving him over.

"Nioca?" Jewels tried not to sound anxious. "Oh, okay, I'll just be on my way then so you two can talk."

"No," he grabbed her hand before she got up. "Stay. I want you to hear this, too. Hey, Nioca!"

Jewels shifted in her seat uncomfortably as Will turned his attention back to Nioca. Niceties were exchanged as he sat down but it was soon obvious that Nioca did *not* want to talk to Will in front of her. Feeling quite relieved Jewels happily stood up to leave again.

"Jewels, stay." w-dueck said, a note of anger in his voice. "Nioca, you have nerve telling one of my Admins to leave. I don't mind her hearing this. She needs to know."

"Like hell she does!" Nioca spouted vehemently.

Jewels sat again but not because Will had asked her to stay. Hearing Nioca's voice brimming with such anger... the sudden panic almost overwhelmed her. Her hand instinctually flew to cover her stomach as she cringed against the sound of their argument.

"HOW **DARE YOU**!" Nioca roared.

She couldn't stand it anymore. She had to get away. Neither one seemed to notice as she stood and bolted from the room. Jewels ran and ran just trying to get as far away from Nioca's voice as possible but it rang on in her ears anyway. She wasn't even paying attention to where she was going when she found a door and hurried through slamming it behind her. Her final sense of escape disappeared almost as quickly as it had come as she was welcomed with a long string of loud explicits. "Who the hell slammed Nalyd's door! Nalyd spilled his ink jar all over! "

Jewels fumbled with the knob as a short hooded figure stormed towards her menacingly pointing his scythe at her. "I'm sorry," she squeaked. "I'm so sorry, Nalyd! I didn't mean to bother you. I... I'll leave right away. I'm so, so sorry!" She whimpered when she pushed on the door but it refused to open.

Nalyd had stopped advancing and stood just a few feet away. "Firstly, let Nalyd apologize, Jewels. You... startled him." The cheery voice he now spoke in was such a stark contrast Jewels almost felt like he was a whole different person. "Secondly, if you really must leave, you need to pull, not push. But... Nalyd does not want you to go."

She stood against the door as her heart's thudding slowly decelerated. "You... you want me to stay? Why?"

"Because Nalyd is very curious. You and w-dueck left the Refuge together yesterday, and you... brought someone back with you." A long bony finger pointed at Jewels' midsection. "Nalyd is a Shaper. Nalyd can sense life and he wonders exactly what you two were doing yesterday."

Even though Jewels couldn't see his face, somehow she knew he was smirking at her. She sighed heavily. *Perfect, just what I don't need.* She decided to feign ignorance. Normal women can't tell the moment they concieve after all. "What!? I'm pregnant? I can't be pregnant! It was only... no! You're making it up. You're just fishing. It's quite impossible, because I didn't... I couldn't... I... I have to go!" Jewels thought she pulled it off rather well with her emotion level running so high anyway, but Nalyd only shook his head at her.

"Tisk, tisk. Nalyd would almost believe you didn't know... if you were human." Jewels cursed mentally, could she not catch a break sometime? "Like Nalyd said, Nalyd is a Shaper and is very familiar with lifeforms and how they feel and how they sound. Nalyd is very sure you are an elemental. Not a pure blood but an elemental none the less. Nalyd is also very familiar with how different lifeforms procreate so still Nalyd wonders what you were doing with w-dueck."

The jig was up. Looks like she'd have to deal with this now. "Well," she started sarcastically, "obviously he was off helping me get pregnant. Guess I can't hide that part from you." He seemed to be waiting for something more. "What? You want details? Use your imagination, I don't kiss and tell and I'd appreciate it if you didn't go telling everyone else either. At least not yet. I don't know if I could handle it yet. Please, Nalyd?"

She looked towards him longingly. As he seemed to consider it, Jewels decided to try to change the subject. "I'm really sorry about startling you. What were you working on anyway?" She took a couple steps towards his workstation when he stopped her.

"Uh... Nalyd would prefer it if you not see his mess." He turned back towards the table almost woefully.

"I keep hearing about how you're a Shaper and little snippets about what you've done. Will said you made a Battle Alpha?"

Nalyd seemed happy to have someone take note of his work. "Yes, Nalyd made Kurj... but Nalyd had to reabsorb him for the battle we were in. Then Nalyd made a bunch of cryoas!"

"Really? That's... well, to be honest, it's fascinating. That you can create life so quickly... and whatever you want?"

"Well, Nalyd can try to make whatever he wants. The designs don't always work out."

"Still," Jewels gushed, "it'll take me nine months to make one life... Nine very, VERY long months." Jewels hadn't meant to bring the topic back to her procreation but she was truly jealous.

Nalyd seemed to be considering something for a minute before responding excitedly. "It doesn't have to take nine months... Nalyd thinks he could help you with that."

"What? Really? You mean like make it grow faster?" Nalyd nodded and Jewels entertained the thought. It would be nice to have it over and done with but... "Would it be safe?"

"Fairly safe... Nalyd thinks. Nalyd has never actually done it before but Nalyd knows it can be done."

Jewels shook her head. "Maybe not then. I... I don't think I can afford the risk. I'll keep it in mind at least." Nalyd's countenance seemed to fall at her rejection of the idea. "...but, maybe there's something else you could help me with."

He perked back up again. "You have something else for Nalyd to do?"

"Well... I hope so. Things sometimes get lonely around here, or at least too tense to really socialize. I've been considering getting... a pet."

If Jewels had to guess, she'd say Nalyd frowned. "Nalyd does not waste essence on just any old thing. You want a pet go search the web for an adoption agency."

"But," Jewels insisted, "the kind of pet I want... No. The kind of pet I *need* doesn't exist. At least I don't think so, anyway."

"You have Nalyd's attention again. Just what kind of pet are you looking for?"

"You ever watch *Mulan*? What I'd really, really like is a miniature serpentine dragon." Jewels wished she could see his face so he could judge his reaction to her request before he actually answered her. He didn't say anything so she continued. "It has to be able to withstand white hot fire and preferably breath fire as well as be an herbivore... and it should be smart enough to be trained to attack on command and still be willing, *and soft enough*, to cuddle with me. So... what do you think? Is it doable?"

Jewels waited with fingers mentally crossed as minutes seemed to drag on. She would almost think he had fallen asleep were it not for one finger tapping his scythe intermittently. "Nalyd thinks he could do that... but it would talk a lot of work and planning. We should start writing some things down if we're going to make this happen."

Jewels smiled from ear to ear. "So you'll do it then? You'll make me a dragon?"

"Nalyd will try, but Nalyd cannot promise anything. There are lots of things that must be very precise for it to work."

Jewels was so excited she couldn't help but pick up Nalyd's small frame and spin him around in a bear hug. "Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

"Whoa! Nalyd likes hugs but this one is making Nalyd dizzy. Please put Nalyd down."

Jewels obliged and spent the next couple hours answering his ever more specific questions and watching him excitedly work.

"I don't know what color the underbelly should be or how long it's teeth it should be!" Jewels was exasperated. It had become very clear that designing a life form was very, very tedious. "Gah! Maybe we should take a break."

"What? No. Nalyd does not take breaks. Nalyd does not *need* breaks!"

"Well, Jewels is exhausted and Jewels does need a break!"

"Nalyd does not appreciate your mocking tone and Nalyd does not want to stop."

"Can we at least leave this forum? It's so stuffy in here. I need some fresh air... and, AND some inspiration. Nalyd, I think I remember seeing an artist's rendering of the kind of dragon I want over at Deviant Art! If we can find that again, maybe it'll help me decide on what exactly I want. Please, oh please, can we go out for some research?"

"OK, fine, but Nalyd is not exactly happy about this. One trip out and then immediately back. Agreed?"

"Agreed, lets go." Jewels was up and out the door so fast that some of the papers on the desk went flying. She didn't stop to help pick them up. She just needed to get out. Jewels walked to the edge of the isle and looked out over the sea. A Google station car zoomed past. It seemed to be landing on the Refuge. Nalyd shuffled up behind her as she started to hurry towards the docks. "Come on Nalyd, if we hurry maybe we can catch that transport before it leaves." As she got closer she could make out a figure walking slowly on the shore but couldn't see who it was. The form fell to it's knees just a little farther up. Worried, Jewels picked up her pace leaving Nalyd behind. It took only seconds for her to recognize him. *Oh, no...* The realization almost made her stop dead in her tracks. *But, what if he needs help?* Jewels chided herself for letting her emotions get in the way. *You have to help!* Now sprinting she saw clearer the scene before her. The man in armor before her hovered above another and drew his sword, raising it high to strike. Jewels quickly formed a fireball in her hand and deftly threw it at the sword while screaming, "Kaylas! Stop!" The blast made the sword fly from his hand and nearly knocked him over but he was otherwise unharmed.

"What the..." Kaylas swore as he retrieved his sword.

Jewels managed the last couple of yards and knelt by the still figure. Nioca lay there unconscious, pale as a ghost. "What have you done to him!?" she demanded.

"I didn't do anything to him!" he shouted back indignantly. "I just got here and I found him that way. He's practically dead anyway, I was just going to be merciful like and finish him off."

"Merciful? You think death over healing is merciful?!" She was incredulous, "Somehow I don't quite believe you!" Jewels prepared a healing spell, putting her hands over Nioca, as a winded Nalyd tromped up beside her.

"Nalyd thought we were going for a break, not a jog," he gulped between breaths. "Next time you need to communicate better with Nalyd so Nalyd can decline the offer."

Jewels pulled her hands away but Nioca was still as pale as before. "Nothing happened. Nalyd, what's wrong with him?"

Kaylas butt in, "Why are you trying to save him, Jewels?! *He tried to kill you!* He doesn't deserve to live!"

Nalyd's hood shot up. "Is Nalyd missing something here?"

"Shut up, Kaylas! Nioca doesn't know. I told you before, he's my friend." Jewels fumed with frustration. "Gah! Nalyd, I... I'll tell you later. First things first..." She gestured towards Nioca.

Nalyd refocused and checked his body over. "Stab wound... looks infected... probably poison... but not any normal poison or that healing spell would have closed the wound at least. We have to get him back to Nalyd's lab if we're going to save him."

"Kaylas, pick him up. You're carrying him." Jewels looked up at him but he stood in rigid defiance. "Kaylas?! Pick him up!"

"No! He *hates* us and you know it! He would kill us on the spot if her were able... *if he knew*. I refuse to help him." Kaylas' voice grew to a fevered pitch. *"I refuse to give him the chance to take you away from me again!"*

Jewels had had enough of this. "Why are you even here Kaylas?"

"I came to APOLOGIZE!" He screamed it at her as if couldn't believe she didn't already know.

The word took most of the fight out of Jewels as a tense silence filled the air. Jewels stepped up to Kalyas, fire in her eyes, and whispered with fierce urgency. "You want to apologize?" He nodded. "Then the first thing you need to do is get past you're own bigotry and help me save somebody I love!"

"Nalyd hates to interrupt but if Nioca doesn't get to Nalyd's lab soon you'll be fighting at his funeral."

Without another word Kaylas picked Nioca up and started following Nalyd.

Once at the Geneforge forum Nalyd gestured to a free table where Kaylas dumped Nioca, none too gently.

"Kaylas! Be careful!" Jewels hissed.

"What? It's not like he felt it anyway?"

"Please, if you two insist on still bickering, take it somewhere else. Nalyd needs to concentrate."

Jewels looked apologetically towards Nalyd. "Are you sure you don't need anything else?"

Nayld's hood shook. "Only silence. Please."

Jewels nodded and roughly drug Kaylas backwards out the door with her. when she felt they were far enough away she tore into him. "I can't believe you! You've got some nerve showing up here."

"Jewels..."

"All high and mighty, ready to stick your nose in where it doesn't belong."

"Jewels?"

"And after making Will feel like a parasite."

"Jewels!" Kaylas grabbed her by the shoulders and stared into her eyes. "I'm sorry!"

She tore away from him speaking harshly. "You still haven't changed."

"I know, Jewels." He reached for her again but she put her arms up to block him.

"Then leave! And take your attitude with you!"

"No, Jewels," his voice was sympathetic as he spoke gently. "I *know*." Jewels waited for him to explain since she didn't understand. "Darius came to the castle to bring the next installment of oil... I know." Kaylas reached for her again and she made no more attempts to stop him. His arms enveloped her as he whispered into her ear. "I'm sorry, Jewels. When I thought that you had... and he was... I... I was just jealous. I'm so sorry."

Jewels couldn't stop the sobs as she collapsed into him, letting him hold her. She didn't know how long she cried or how long they stood there in silence when she stopped. Eventually the sound of approaching footsteps and a hesitant voice interrupted them.

"Jewels?"

More than Lurking

By Azuma - Feb 11 2009

Lurking has its advantages and seeing from a safe distance is one of them. Azuma saw it all. The fights, the incidents, the involuntary muscle spasms. He looked over without doing anything, mainly because he was sure the other members can handle it. Besides they've got Nioca and Jewels. What could possibly go wrong. Apparently, a lot still can.

Azuma sighed and stepped of from the cliff he perched on, still double-thinking if has to really return to the Refuge. He was a mod there, is a mod. Of the Spam Section even. But without any noobs/trolls/gnibbles there to act on, he faded from the site though still maintaining some sort of connection. It was his first time to come back. His spam surveillance was severed during an incident (he blames the cats!), effectively disabling his only view on the Refuge.

A good few whiles and moments and Refuge Isle was in sight. Azuma paused and took a deep breath.

"Get in. Repair. Get out." Azuma murmured. He was hoping not to get involved in something over 9000. He stopped near a small shrub and waved at it, phasing out the shrub, revealing a small, circular platform with runic designs.

"At least no one noticed this. Noclaf Nhcup!"

The platform glowed with a bright blue hue and Azuma stepped on it taking him to the other platform he placed before he left the Refuge.

"The smell of spam is different here. Slightly stale but still spam." Azuma was outside the Spam Forum. He saw no one. Maybe he won't.

"Time to go *there*, fix the damn camera then go out. Hope no one sees me." Azuma sighed and walked off.

Iffy Returns

By Zoe - Feb 11 2009

Iffy stood there, amused, as he watched Azuma teleport away. Iffy hadn't been there in a while...he just got lost in thought far too much.

Well, he remembered now.

"I wonder how much has changed," Iffy said. "Things don't completely seem to be right. After all..." Iffy paused as he heard a noise behind him. "I guess I need to see Will...and find out what the hell is happening"

Iffy muttered quietly. A script appeared, hovering in front of him, only to disappear almost instantly. "Hmm...hey you back there, I wouldn't try killing me if I were you." The highway man, startled, took a step back.

Iffy muttered once again. Another script appeared. It glowed and disappeared almost instantly like before, and the man started screaming in pain.

"Heh, that'll teach him" Iffy chuckled and walked on to the forum, ready to find Will...or someone anyway.

The Die, Cast

By Sylae - Feb 11 2009

w-dueck stepped across a crack in the old stone staircase of the Admin Tower's basement. The lanterns on the walls shined brightly for the first time since the Refuge had been opened. It was also the first time the dungeons had been used, unfortunately, they were sadly in disrepair, the walls of the lower cells were crumbling and the enchantments of the lorkenwood doors had worn down to nothing. The only occupant of the floor was residing in a hastily refurbished cell in the middle of the maze of hallways and guardrooms.

Ackrovan looked up at the door as the jingle of keys sounded, followed by the thump of a lock sliding open. A hooded man carrying a tall staff and a platter of food walked in and made the two steps to where he lay fettered to the wall quickly. "I'm going to unchain you," he said softly, "don't try anything wise. There's a squad of men standing outside the door and their blades are drawn. So can I use these?" he jingled the keys and Ackrovan nodded. Two more locks were opened, and he stood up wearily.

"Apologies for being inconsiderate and for the messy lodging," The man smiled and gestured toward the slimy walls, "I am w-dueck, ArchAdmin of the Refuge. You are currently in the fourth basement of the Administration Tower. Now, unless you want to stay in these ... rustic accommodations, I'm going to need your word that you won't try anything, can you do that for me?"

Ackrovan hesitated. "I'm not sure I can make that promise. I'm sorry."

w-dueck--if that was his name--nodded, "That's all very well. You can have this here, then." he set the platter on the stone floor and opened the door again, "I'll probably be back in a few hours. Have fun changing your mind."

This time the small shutter slid on the door open first, and w-dueck gazed through looking quite agitated, "get back against the wall, and don't fuck around. I'm not in the mood right now." Ackrovan put his back to the far wall, and w-dueck strode in, followed by two menacing-looking machines. We're going to my apartments for the interrogation. Please don't wreck them." The two machines grabbed Ackrovan by the wrists with cold steel jaws and hauled him behind w-dueck, and up many, many stairs.

Ackrovan was sat down in a chair, and one of the machines rolled back one of it's side panels to reveal a camera, "OK, this is going to be very quick, because I want to get this over with quickly. Just remember, I could restrain you and then ban you. Ask yourself what happens when you are forced to leave but can't. Anywho, who are you and why did you assault a member of the Refuge?"

"Wait, I got assaulted. You must be mistaken, my wizard. I was trying to catch my breath from the long, difficult sea travel I've been through. When I noticed this 'Nioca' I was trying to get his attention, but he ducked out of sight and struck me with a lance of fire. There is clearly a misunderstanding. I am the victim of this.....incident."

"Hmmm...I would call Nioca in, but we are currently...having difficulties..." His voice faded off and the table was quiet for several minutes. "You!" w-dueck pointed at the machine that wasn't recording, "Get one of the bracelets from the Ban Center...And find out where Nioca is...and coordinate a patrol with the other SimpleBots! But bring the bracelet back first!"

The machine--SimpleBot--replied with a robotic voice, "[tt]200 - commands received. creating function for task...function created...notifying core system...engaging function task(2132-8987-091W).[/tt]" It flew off through the open balcony door overlooking the bay at Refuge Isle.

"Listen, I'm going to attach an enchanted bracelet to you. It will prevent you from engaging in hostile activities at the Refuge, unless provoked, of course, and it will allow me to track you at any time. Until Nioca can speak, I believe this is the best course of action, short of dumping you in that cell again...undoubtedly a move neither of us would like." The SimpleBot returned with a hum and deposited a steel piece, about two inches wide, covered with arcane engravings. w-dueck attached it to Ackrovan's left wrist, then tapped it with his staff, "If ever you need assistance in an emergency, just hold your thumb on this spot for five seconds, and I..or any other Admin...or an armada of SimpleBots packing enough weaponry to level the High Tower of Corel...will come as soon as they can. And you are free to go. The other machine will escort you

down to the ground floor. I'd strongly suggest staying out of trouble. And your things are in the guest apartments over by the Google Pier."

"Jewels?" w-dueck hesitantly walked around the corner. "Oh, um, am I, uh, interrupting...anything?"

"No Will, come on over. What do you need?" Jewels smiled and moved away from Kaylas.

"Oh, um, here, I just brought this for you. It's, um, for the, the, the, the robot thingies." w-dueck pulled a hunk of Administrative techno crap out of his pocket, but unfortunately, his hands were so sweaty it slipped and fell. "Here." He thrust the bits of Administrative techno crap at Jewels, "It is...was a, uh, um, universal, um, moddie thing."

"An RMM?"

"Yeah, those," w-dueck stammered.

"Uh, are you OK? Kaylas, could you give us a moment?" she said over w-dueck's nervous "no"s. "Will, did you eat the food in the Spam forum again? What have I told you? You look like you are about to throw up! Should I call Nalyd?"

"No, I, uh, haven't eaten, uh, there. I was, um," he wiped his forehead on the sleeves of his robes and paused for a minute, "Jewels...I was wondering if you would marry me."

Nothing Changes

By Zoe - Feb 12 2009

Iffy raised one eye when he heard the proposal from a distance. "Okay...it looks like things have changed" Iffy looks for a second and backs off. "I'll think I'll just go get something to munch real quick..."

Iffy takes a look at the news. "Hmm, spam rate has increased a bit...whoa that's a lot of new members. And...Nioca's been assaulted? ****..."

Iffy stepped into the General forum and punched in a code in a box nearby making sure no one saw him. It opens and he took out his moderator card. "Okay, so I'm still a mod" As he stepped out, a member saw him holding it. He stared up at Iffy with awe. "Cool! A moderator! Hey I'm new! Could you help me?"

Iffy bit his lower lip a bit. "Uhh, Welcome to Calamity Refuge. I suggest speaking with the Admin 'cause it's been a while since I've been here. He's over there, umm, socializing" "Okay, thanks," the newbie chirped. The newbie then walked off in search of the admin.

Iffy sighed then walked out again to look around the outside a bit. "Things seem a bit different. Hmm. Ahh. What the... Umm," Iffy had commented as he walked around. He saw a target meant for magic spells.

Iffy proceeded to do what he had done before, activating a script. This one caused a fireball shot from him to the target, completely destroying it.

"Hey!" said someone from behind. "Now we will have to...Iffy? You're back?"

Uneasy Rest

By Ackrovan - Feb 12 2009

Ackrovan trudged across the island with a certain discomfort around him. He had gotten into a fight with a member, yet he was allowed to walk freely? With only a bracelet to stop him? Either that wizard is crazy(which isn't at all a long shot from the truth) or he had an emergency to tend to. It didn't really matter, anyway. Ackrovan might be able to get refuge here. His disastrous trek across the sea might have been worth it.

After about an hour of hard walking, Ackrovan had arrived at his quarters near the google dock. It was a small, one room shack that looked more like a storage room than a tenant. Still, it would have a bed, and bed would mean sleep. Which was all Ackrovan wanted at this point.

Entering the building, he saw that w-dueck was, in fact, true to his word. All of Ackrovan's equipment was in fact laying on the bed. Sword, armor, weapons and all. A large bowl of oil laid in the corner; perfect for encrusting his steel equipment. A set of cloths also lay on the opposing corner. Ackrovan's bag of meager belongings rested near the door.

Picking up the sack, Ackrovan sat upon the part of the bed that wasn't holding his equipment. Opening it, he began sorting threw his things. A large potion, meant to haste in the middle of a battle, was laid on a table. The map of the surrounding area had survived. About 4000 coins, some left over loot. His pipe had also made it. Everything seemed to still be here. He could sell off what he can in a nearby city. Maybe get some information as well.

Ackrovan put his belongings onto the floor. Turning towards his armor, he began repeating the process with them. His leggings, boots, gauntlets and chestguard were all slightly dented. His helmet especially. A good smith could fix that up, though it would cost a pretty penny(or several). He unsheathed his sword from its holster. Five feet long, it was remarkably large to use with a shield. Like the armor, it was dented in several places. Also like the armor, it would have to be repaired. His throwing knives had remained nearly perfect, for the shear fact they had not been moved since he had placed them there. His short bow(he could use a long bow as well, but for this occasion he chose a short one) wood was of a carved ivory tusk, perfectly preserved. Its string was not so lucky. He would need a new one. He also had about four dozen arrows in his quiver.

Ackrovan picked up his axe. About two and a half feet long, it was used as a second line of offense should Ackrovan lose his sword. A brass handle and a steel edge, it has been as reliable as Ackrovan shield, *Therador*. He was glad it wasn't damaged; just in need of a good oil bath. Ackrovan then pulled his long knife out of his boot. As a last resort, this would protect him if all else fails. It was also a useful tool.

Finally, Ackrovan picked up his Crosswick and Therador. Some dirt had gotten into the cartrage, along with some bolts had been lost. It was still in good condition though. Nothing seriously wrong with it. Picking up Therador, he brushed some mud off of its hull. Numerous runes ran along the edge, circling a golden dragon. With a tint frame, it had braved Ackrovan threw countless trials, and proved to be more then worthy of its weight. Immune to curses of nearly all varieties, and almost unbreakable, it had protected him threw who knows how long. Gently putting it in the corner, Ackrovan left it alone for the night.

Inshort, Ackrovan did not rely on any single type of weapon, and instead rested on multiple fighting styles

Pulling up a chair, Ackrovan ignited the fireplace and let his aching bones relax. He was finally here. He could now start a new.

Lighting up his pipe, Ackrovan dossed off into the night.

A Different Kind of Spammer

By Azuma - Feb 13 2009

The smell of burnt buttertoast muffin indicated there's a being of infernalness nearby. Iffy.

*I thought that overgrown pastry left? *sighs* Better sneak around him. Don't want to get all buttery or pencil-ly...*

Azuma sneaked around Iffy. It then came to him that he should have put the tele-pad inside the forum.

That's what you get when you let your dominated imp get your drink before you make an escape plan.

Someone took Iffy's attention. That made Azuma's sneaking easier. With a sidestep, forward flip, and a barrel roll, he arrived at the entrance. The smell of stale spam emanated from the doorway. It was only he can sense it. He was a different spammer. He opened the door, ready to see it, the spam. Azuma was already bombarded with much spam before. His trip throughout the internets almost defiled him, almost turning him into a mindless n00b but he, with an iron will of over 9000, prevailed, letting him gain an almost zen-like state of spam mastery. He was neither spammer or forum rules nazi, he was something greater and he, now, has to fix a cheap 2-cent camera he put inside the Spam forum rules board.

Nobody would ever bother to look there and it has a great view. Azuma smirked.

Nobody hasn't seen him but he was no fool. He knew that w-d, the admin, could see the logs and figure out that he returned. If he was quick enough he could leave the forum before letting w-d come to him and, possibly, reprimand him.

He took off the broken cam. It was heavily damaged. Scratched on every single side like it was catnarok. He crutched it tightly. The camera phased out of exitence. Another one replaced it. And meaner looking at that. He placed it in the same spot as its predecessor.

*Now to test this baby out. Good thing **KDR** wasn't busy.* He flipped on the switch and the camera lit up to its e-life.

All's good. Force and script shield. Crisp graphics. Has sound enabled. Even x-ray vis-Heh. Azuma whistled cheerily, remembering Jewels sometimes post in the Spam forum.

Now, to get out of here. Azuma looked around before walking towards the forum exit. He was still a good ways from the exit when he tripped and fell over a hole with open-enders and unfinished lines.

Craaaaaap! Plot hole!

"HALP!"

Marriageous Interruptions

By Nioca - Feb 13 2009

Darkness. As he came to consciousness, it was as if he was enveloped in the solid fabric of a nightmare. He couldn't move, he couldn't feel his body... he couldn't even open his eyes. All he could do was listen in foreboding to his environment. And wait in terror. Someone was chanting nearby. The occasional scrape and footstep was audible. An echo reverberated.

He struggled with himself to open his eyes. It felt as if he was playing tug-of-war with his eyelids, with them winning easily. With a bit of relief, he noted that a numb, tingly feeling was spreading throughout his body. Trying harder, he fought with his eyelids.

Then, slowly, his eyes opened. It wasn't overly bright, wherever he was at. He tried to take in as much information as he could, struggling with the influx of light and details.

"Ah. He awakes." Someone said nearby. Nioca attempted to respond, only to discover that he couldn't talk. A long moan followed as he tried to articulate, but to no avail.

"Nalyd was afraid of this. The toxin was purged, but it symptoms will take a while to wear off." Nalyd said with what sounded like forced sympathy.

"Mmph!" Was all Nioca could reply.

"Nalyd will be back shortly." Nalyd said. He then walked away. Nioca closed his eyes and waited. A few moments later, he tried moving his hand. He noticed with elation that his fingers twitched slightly.

Nalyd returned from whatever errand he had embarked on. "How are you feeling now?"

"Ah... haw... haw... woof..." Nioca stammered out. Mustering up his willpower, he finally blurted, "Awfoo."

"What was that?" Nalyd asked.

"I said, awful!" Nioca responded, surprising himself. It was still coming out slurred, but it was comprehensible. He was now able to lift his arms, and he could finally turn his head.

"Ah. In that case, Nalyd believes you will make a full recovery. Now, if you'll excuse Nalyd, Nalyd needs to go check on Jewels. Nalyd hopes Jewels grants Nalyd the chance to accelerate her pregnancy! Nalyd's so excited!" Nalyd started wandering off.

"Whoa, whoa, *whoa*! Hold up a minute here! Accelerate Jewels' *what*?" Nioca asked, alarmed.

"Pregnancy. Jewels is pregnant." Nalyd repeated, annoyed.

"Jewels... *pregnant*?" Nioca said back to Nalyd, stunned. "But how?"

"Well, she presumably copulated with another elemental." Nalyd said matter-of-factly.

"Another what?!" Nioca yelped, becoming desperately confused.

"Nalyd does not have time for this. Nalyd must check something in the moderation center. Once Nalyd is done, Nalyd will check on you, and then on Jewels. Unless you have any objections." Nalyd paused for an infinitesimal amount of time. "Nalyd sees you do not." He added, hurrying away from Nioca's questions.

Nioca struggled for several moments. His arms were starting to behave, and he could move his legs. Nioca tried to push himself upright. "Oh crap." Nioca yelped as he wound up falling over and off the table with a loud thump.

Nalyd came out of the moderation center to find Nioca mobile again, though he was still shaking. "See? Nalyd told you you would make a full recovery!"

"Yeah. But I'll bet the symptoms hang around for a week." Nioca muttered. "Hey, wait for me!" Nioca shouted after Nalyd as he stalked toward the exit of the Geneforge forum.

Nioca hobbled as quickly as he could muster, Nalyd right in front of him. He could hear w-dueck up ahead. "Great." Nioca muttered. "Just what I needed." Nioca strained to make out the words.

"...haven't eaten, uh, there. I was, um... Jewels... I was wondering if you would marry me."

Nioca, shocked, lost his much-needed concentration on his footing and tripped, landing face first on the ground. Staggering back up, Nioca hobbled faster as Nalyd ran ahead.

Then he heard Nalyd speak to w-dueck and (presumably) Jewels. "Well, isn't this a happy surprise".

Nioca made it to the door to the Geneforge forum and stepped outside. Nalyd was standing closest to him, his arms crossed in a demeaning manner. Jewels was red-faced and clearly looked how Nioca felt. And w-dueck was looking rather ill. Across from them, a man he didn't recognize stared angrily at Jewels.

"I... Will, it's... I..." Jewels stammered out, stunned.

"I'm- I'm sorry. I shouldn't have-

"No, it's okay! It's..."

""Jewels, you're not seriously considering-?"" The stranger demanded.

"Well, I... I really-"

"Wait a minute, what's wrong with me marrying Jewels?!" w-dueck yelped, offended.

"N-no, don't-" Jewels began desperately, a slight shiver going through her form.

"How about the fact you're human scum?!" Kaylas growled, taking a step forward.

"Well at least I care about Jewels feelings, unli- NIOCA, WHAT IN THE NAME OF THE ZYQXUWY ARE YOU DOING?!?" w-dueck turned and yelled at Nioca.

Nioca, who had been stooping and looking at Jewels' back, glanced at w-dueck. Ignoring him, he then reached out towards Jewels back. Jewels stepped away, and Nioca lost his balance. The stranger gave Nioca a distasteful stare. "At least you're better than this one." The stranger consented, addressing w-dueck.

"Nioca, can you please explain to me why you're leering at the woman I plan to marry?" w-dueck asked darkly.

"Not if I have anything to say about it." The stranger shot at w-dueck.

"Nalyd thinks that w-dueck and Kaylas should stop this bickering." Nalyd stated. "It isn't good for Jewels or the baby."

"Well, what am I supposed to do? Let Lady Jewels go off and marry... *this*?" Kaylas snarled.

"Marry a man who loves her? How dare she!" w-dueck said sarcastically.

"As if I don't!" Kaylas snapped back.

Jewels gasped. She trembled from the shock of it all, unable to find words... Nioca cocked his head. Or maybe... maybe it was something else...

"You?" w-dueck asked, also stunned.

Kaylas stopped. He, too, seemed surprised at what had come out of his mouth.

Nalyd chimed in sardonically, "Well, Nalyd finds this just lovely."

Nioca, now steady on his feet, approached the stunned Jewels and grasped at her back. Jewels yipped and stumbled away. w-dueck, Kaylas, and Nalyd stared at Nioca, exasperated. Jewels blinked a few times. "N-Nioca, what are..." Jewels started. Then, without warning, she collapsed.

"Jewels!" w-dueck and Kaylas shouted, running forward and pushing Nioca out of the way. They stooped by her side as Nioca examined something held between two fingers.

"Is that some sort of nerve pinch Nalyd hasn't heard of?" Nalyd asked, bemused.

"No. Nalyd, care to strut your stuff again?" Nioca responded, a worried tone in his voice. He held up a tiny metallic dart.

"Oh dear." Nalyd said plainly.

"w-dueck, Kaylas, bring her inside now!" Nioca said firmly to the two men. Then to Nalyd, Nioca added, "It's the same thing I got hit with, I'd bet money on it. Trembling, difficulty focusing, decreased mobility. And," Nioca showed his hand, which had fresh blood on it. "No clotting."

w-dueck and Kaylas carefully carried the unconscious Jewels into the Geneforge forum.

Purging Another Poison

By Sudanna - Feb 13 2009

Nalyd was, by this point, quite annoyed by the flagrant departure from his fledgling routine that the day had taken. He'd thought of a dozen new concepts for his creation, and he was going to forget them before they could be put down on paper, at this rate. New, custom creations being demanded, elemental pregnancies, people almost dead of obscure and annoyingly speedy toxins. . . He had half a mind to throw everybody out and get back to work. He certainly couldn't have them inspecting his designs, and even being present around his delicate lab equipment was just bound to screw something up.

Ah, but then there was the pregnant Jewels dying bit. And he'd never had a chance to tamper with a sentient still in the womb. . .

W-dueck and the strange elemental bore Jewels into the Geneforge Moderation Centre. The quiet hum and subdued ticking of the myriad devices around them was accompanied the soft hiss of bubbling vats.

Nioca had said that Jewels was likely hit with the same poison that he was. If that were the case, he would normally have little problem with it. However, Jewels was an elemental - a completely different physiology, and one that he wasn't too well acquainted with. And then there was the fetus. . . also an elemental, in addition to the myriad difficulties that pregnancy introduced. At least it was still early on. There wasn't that much to interfere with.

Nalyd bustled in after Jewels' carriers, ignoring their pleas for information, and retrieved a scalpel from one of the many cabinets around the lab. Sterilizing it with a wave of his hand, he nicked the vein just under the dart's point of entry. Using a different section of the scalpel, he retrieved a blood sample from just above it, as well. Setting the scalpel on a metal tray, he

snatched the dart from Nioca, who had just come in. Setting that on the tray as well, he crawled up onto the counter in order to reach a higher cabinet. From this, he retrieved several small rocks and a large bag of powder. Crushing the rocks with a mortar and pestle, he spilled out some of the powder onto the floor.

The pestle kept grinding away after he set it down, and he scurried from one place in the lab to another, taking various powders and vials and herbs from obscure places that he had memorized. Setting these on the floor by the small pile of brown powder, he took the pestle out and sprinkled a pinch of the now-powdered rock onto the two blood samples and the dart. The dart soon glowed a deep, sinister purple, which the first sample mimicked. The second sample did not change. Jewels' body must be quickly absorbing the toxin, or neutralizing it. It was, at the least, similar to what had hit Nioca.

Looking for his scales, he flung the powder out of the bowl and into a corner, and gathered up some of the ingredients on the floor. When he found the little golden instrument, he plunked it down on the floor next to his pile of ingredients, and promptly sat down beside them.

Tracing runic circles around some of them, he one-by-one picked through the pile of stuff. Careful measurements and ratios were very important, especially since he was dealing with a fetus as well.

Let's see. . . What kind of elemental was Jewels? She'd thrown a fireball earlier, so that was probably a part of it. But she wasn't full-blooded, not at all. Oh, fuck it - he didn't have time for the tests, anyways. They couldn't be that different, right?

Mixing pieces of this with quantities of that, and scrawling mystic symbols with the brownish powder all the while, Nalyd pieced together his antidote. When he was done, it appeared to be a tiny lump of greenish paste. Standing up, and holding his Scythe above the oh-so-tiny lump of paste, he growled the words of magic. Of Shaping. Sparks spun off of his Scythe and drifted down in leisurely spirals, spreading far and wide, though all of them ended up on the antidote.

Picking up the now-wriggling blob of goo, he turned back to Jewels. The strange elemental was attempting to do CPR. Promptly kicking him in the teeth, Nalyd rolled Jewels over to see the dart wound. It was tiny. Too tiny for his antidote. Shrugging, he rolled her over once more, hacked her left arm to the bone in a fluid motion of his Scythe, and inserted the little blob. Then, the elemental tackled him.

Joining the Fray

By Bloodmoon - Feb 16 2009

Pestilence is going to mod tower when he remembered that he should fix a plot hole near the forum exit then he saw a man probably a new member he thinks but then the man suddenly take out a paper and burn it.

"Hey!" He said when the man burn the paper instanly "Now we will have to...Iffy? You're back?" He said suprised "Yes and who are you?" "I am Pestilence the new mod at Avernum/Exile Trilogy and if you excuse me I must repair the plot hole near that area."

He then started to walk towards the plot hole but suddenly "HALP!"

He quickly runs and found another man fell to the plot hole, He quickly conjure a strong rope from the blood crystal and throw it down.

"Quickly up!"

The man quickly climbed the hole using the rope then Pestilence seal the hole using some blood crystal that grows and closed the hole. Then when he looks behind where the man supposed to be the man dissapear.

"Huh?, where did he go?"

Nice Try

By Zoe - Feb 16 2009

Iffy activated two separate scripts. He used the first one to detect where the man was. The man was apparently fleeing for some strange reason.

Iffy used the second one. Green energy like stuff shot from the paper to where the fleeing man was. A yelp was heard and Iffy went to where he was. Pestilence followed.

Iffy chuckled when he saw the man trapped in the force cage. "Nice try, Azuma"

Lulwut?

By Azuma - Feb 16 2009

"Bloody... hell! Iffy! You god-forsaken pastry! Dispel this barrier or I will and you will want to go back to Cunningham!" Azuma squirmed around the cage.

"Well, first off I am not a muff-"

"Yes, you are!" Azuma cut Iffy off. "You're as soft as a muffin. You're as weak as a muffin. Hell, muffins doesn't even taste good. In truth... there are no muffins. It's a lie! The whole thing is a lie! The blueberry is a lie! The apple is a lie! You're a lie Iffy! You're nothing but a heaping

pound of unwanted flour dough, tossed aside by a third-rate, trying hard, Mexican pastry chef! You were supposed to be a burrito!" Azuma shouted angrily and tauntingly.

"Uh-"

"Shut up you pansy. Go stuff your crystal up where the light don't shine." Azuma cut the third person off to.

Iffy was fumigating with anger. All those blasphemies against muffins. He can't take it! He dispelled the barrier and readied his sword.

"I hope you like pain Azuma!" Iffy roared, pastry-like. He waved his sword around and twirled it about showing great dexterity and prowess. If one would say, Iffy was a master swordsman. But Azuma was otherwise.

"lulwut?" Azuma snapped his finger and he disappeared.

Drama Queen

By Zoe - Feb 16 2009

While Pestilence looked shocked, Iffy chuckled. "Perfect," Iffy said. "He has no idea"

"No idea about what?" Pestilence inquired.

"I can't tell you, I'll have to tell w-dueck in private. I'm so convincing with my fake outbursts, aren't I?" Iffy then leaves in search of w-dueck.

Losing Heart

By Jewels - Feb 18 2009

Kaylas got in a few good punches on the weird little robed man before w-dueck and Nioca intervened. Each grabbed an arm but they couldn't manage to pull him off. "Let go of me you filth! Let me teach this worm a lesson!"

Nioca yelled at him. "This *worm* is trying to save Jewels! Now get off him."

"*Like an underwater abyss he is!* He just sliced her arm right open!"

w-dueck interjected, "If you really care about Jewels, you'll let him work. Nalyd knows what he's doing."

Nalyd lay underneath the elemental rubbing his jaw under his hood with one hand and gripping his scythe with the other. "Yes, Nalyd knows what Nalyd is doing even if you are too ignorant to

understand. And unless you wish to join Jewels in a poison induced coma, Nalyd suggests you *GET OFF*!" He whipped around the scythe so it's tip was just millimeters from Kaylas' neck. Reluctantly he backed off allowing Nalyd to stand back up.

Before more words could be exchanged the door the the Geneforge Mod Center swung open. "Hello?" someone singsonged, "Anybody in here?" Vergil took a step in sporting a grin. "Well, of course you're all in here. Right where the *Who's online* feature said you would be. What's going on and why wasn't I invited to the party?" Vergil came in further just noticing Kaylas who had ripped his arms out of their unwanted grips. Vergil sauntered over and threw his arm around him. "Whoa, hey... What are you doing here? It's good to see you, Kay..."

He stopped mid-sentence when a cry of agony came from the nearby table. Jewels lay on her side, arm across her stomach, and doubled over. Kaylas and Will practically leapt to her side crying out simultaneously in relief and worry, "Jewels!" She opened her eyes which were burning bright on her cringing face.

"Wait... What's going on here? What's wrong with Jewels?" Vergil's tone was urgent and authoritative as he quickly stepped up next to Kaylas. He searched the others faces desperately and demanded, "What happened to her?!"

"She was poisoned," w-dueck quavered and the sudden worry on Vergil's face was evident.

Nalyd, still rubbing his jaw, quipped jokingly, "Don't tell Nalyd, Vergil loves Jewels ,too?"

"Of course I d..." Vergil began indignantly but his last word was cut off by another scream from Jewels. Anyone watching his eyes would have noticed their intense concern.

"Get... him... out of here!" Jewels gasped severely.

"Who?" Vergil asked. "Who do you want to leave?"

Jewels looked at him with slitted eyes and grabbed the neck of Kaylas' armor pulling his face down to her while Will bent close, too. "He doesn't know..." she whispered harshly, "I *don't want*him to know!" Then louder so everyone could hear. "I want everyone out!" Everyone but Nioca started protesting before another cry of agony drowned them all out. "Everyone but Nalyd out!" she shouted. "NOW!"

The trio hovering over Jewels was still hesitant but Nalyd effectively ushered them out. "You heard her. Out, out! Nalyd has work to do and Jewels does not want you distracting Nalyd. Now, get." He started shooing with his hands and the erratically waving scythe sent them backing out slowly.

w-dueck sidled up to Nioca to help him walk out. He spoke in hushed tones, "Jewels doesn't want Vergil to know about... *you know what.*" Will put his hand on his stomach. Nioca gave him a confused look but nodded anyway.

Meanwhile Vergil urged Kaylas to leave peaceably. "Come on, if Nalyd can't help her, no one can."

Kaylas gave Vergil a questioning look. "You really trust him?"

"Absolutely."

Kaylas nodded. If Vergil trusted his sister's life with Nalyd then Kaylas would, too. He allowed himself to be guided out only to feel desperately helpless when the clunk of a locking door and another anguished scream sounded behind him. He sat on the front steps intent on waiting there as long as it took. Eying the others, his gaze rested on w-dueck who looked just as pained as he felt himself. A new wave of anger and jealousy surged through him, but also fear. The fear of losing Jewels to death, or worse... to another love.

Jewels gritted her teeth between cramps. "Nalyd, did I hear Will right? Was I poisoned?"

"Yes, and with the same magic resistant type Nioca was poisoned with, Nalyd is afraid. Nalyd gave you a living antidote but Nalyd was not sure exactly what type of elemental you were. If you are in pain, it's not working as Nalyd had expected."

"Other than this gash in my arm, all the pain is concentrated in my abdomen. I... I think..." Jewels continued after another cry of pain, "my body is rejecting..." Her voice trailed off. After a moment she stared up at him intensely. "How long would it take you to accelerate it's growth?"

Nalyd seemed surprized and excited though he spoke soberly. "Nalyd is not sure... a couple hours at least."

"Do you think there's a chance..." she cringed and held her breath before continuing, "the baby might survive?"

Nalyd took a moment to answer and his voice was not hopeful. "Your 'baby' is, as-of-yet, no more than a clump of cells that has been most likely bathed in poison. Nalyd still senses life but... there is no way to tell how it will be affected."

"That wasn't my question, Nalyd. *Is there a chance?*"

"Nalyd is an optimist. If he wasn't Nalyd wouldn't begin half of the creations Nalyd starts. There is *always* a chance."

Jewels nodded and laid back amidst another shrill vociferation. After the wave subsided she breathed, "Do it." Hoping against hope but reading herself for the worst, Jewels stealed herself against what was to come.

Kaylas still sat on the doorstep. A woman called Syla had come and taken Nioca away fretting over him. An odd man called Iffy had come and drug w-dueck off on some 'urgent business', and Vergil, after getting bored of Kaylas's lack of desire for conversation, had dismissed himself for the Spam forum. Hour after hour passed with only an intermittent scream from inside to give Kaylas any clue to what was going on. He cringed every time but at least it meant Jewels was still alive. Unaware how much time had actually passed, Kaylas was surprised when darkness fell as the sun started to set. He heard another scream from Jewels accompanied by something indecipherable from Nalyd. Kaylas cringed as she screamed again soon after. Her cries of pain rose in frequency as well as in intensity while Nalyd's utterings rhythmically droned on. The minutes seemed to drag on forever as the crescendo of her misery tortured Kaylas till he could hardly stand it. Suddenly all was silent.

Jumping up Kaylas waited anxiously at the door, expecting someting. *Anything.* After minutes of nothing Kaylas started pounding on the door. He wanted answers. He *needed* answers.

Jewels lay breathless. Her pain subsided to a dull ache. In a voice so calm it surprised herself, she spoke. "Don't leave me wondering, Nalyd. Tell me what I need to know."

His hesitation told her all she really needed to know before he answered. "Nalyd is sorry, Jewels."

Jewels felt no real sorrow, she had no tears. "Can I see it?"

"Um... Nalyd would not suggest that. It is... deformed." Nalyd paused expecting a response. When she didn't give one he continued. "Nalyd could take care of it for you, if you would like."

"Yes." she said shortly. "Thank you, Nalyd... for everything." She listened as his footsteps padded away before casting a healing spell over herself. The gash in her arm healed nicely and she felt strong enough to stand. She walked over to a closet and was rewarded with a bunch of robes. Her own dress was quite a mess so she stripped it off leaving it on the floor and slid into the simplest robe there. Without waiting for Nalyd to return she left the moderation center. Someone was pounding on the outer door so Jewels hurried to open it.

Kaylas stood in seeming shock at the sight of her. His arms pulled her into an embrace that she didn't join. "Jewels? Are... are you okay?"

"I miscarried," she said evenly starting to walk down the steps.

Kaylas pulled her back to him holding her arms in his hands. "I'm so sorry." He seemed to expect something. *Anything.* But she gave him nothing. He became uncomfortable and looked down stuttering. "Well... I, uh... I mean Darius will be so..."

Jewels cut him off severely with fiery eyes. "*Darius,* doesn't need to know!" Her outburst actually seemed to comfort Kaylas but she soon calmed down. "At least not yet. Come, we have business to discuss." Jewels started walking down the steps again ignoring Kaylas's protests.

"Business? Don't you think you should rest... or something?"

"Soon. It's just a little bit of business." She walked off in front of him at a good clip towards the Administration Tower.

"Jewels!" an ecstatic voice called from the distance and Kaylas rolled his eyes as w-dueck ran up. "Jewels, I've been so worried!" He hugged her tightly though her arms didn't leave her sides. "Are you okay, Jewels?" he paused to look at her expressionless face. "Is... *everything* all right?"

Jewels didn't answer quickly enough for Kaylas who answered for her while pushing w-dueck away. "No, *human*." His voice was condescending. "Everything is not all right. Not that it's any of your business."

"She seemed happy enough to include me in her business yesterday!" w-dueck shot back angrily. "That's more than I can say for you."

"You were just a convenient facilitator, scum. Don't try to suggest it was anything more than that!"

w-dueck shook with rage but ignored Kaylas yelling at Jewels instead, though harsher than he had intended. "Tell me what's wrong, Jewels. Speak to me!"

Jewels felt the anger boil up as she yelled back at him. "I thought this was supposed to be a refuge!" Jewels got right up into his face, her eyes blazing, "I thought this place was supposed to be safe! Now I have to start all over again. I have to go through it *all* again!"

Will's countenance fell as he retreated backwards. "I... I'm sorry. I... I have to go."

Jewels knew she had hurt him as she watched Will sullenly go but she didn't care. She felt neither guilty nor gratified though Kaylas seemed rather satisfied. Jewels continued leading him up to the 29th floor.

Luckily, no one had noticed Nalyd as he slipped out of the refuge with a bag slung over his back. After securing himself a private Google transport, Nalyd glanced into the bag excitedly. Nalyd was so fortunate he could hardly contain himself. It wasn't every day that such an opportunity presented itself. In fact, it was more like a once in a lifetime kind of opportunity and Nalyd was planning on taking full advantage of it. It was also rather fortunate that Jewels had agreed to let Nalyd take care of her stillborn child. Nalyd felt a tiny bit guilty for misleading her. The only real deformation the boy had was a birthmark in the shape of a raindrop on his left cheek... or was it like the flame on a candle? But if Jewels had become attached to it, she may have insisted on a funeral and that would ruin everything. Yes, very lucky indeed that Jewels seemed dispassionate about the whole thing. It had beed odd, though. Nalyd had expected her to cry... at least a little.

Stealing Away

By Sudanna - Feb 18 2009

Nalyd had commanded the Google transport to take him far away, to a place long forgotten and utterly desolate. But a place as dear to him as a place could be. As the transport whispered along, he fought hard to contain himself. Not yet, he said, not yet. Not in the transport. Wait for a secure place. A sterile one.

After a long trip, during which the surrounds grew ever more desolate, the transport arrived at The Aracian Consulate, the second incarnation of The Roost, Nalyd disembarked. His old lab was here, doubtlessly fallen into disrepair, doubtlessly mostly useless by now. But a few things might remain, a few things might be able to be repaired. He could move some equipment from the Moderation Centre. Yes, soon he would be master here.

He hurried into the Administration Warrens, the secure network of caves that took the function of the Refuge's Tower. Unlike the Refuge, the power was far more centralized here. No separate Moderation Centres. All was controlled from these caves.

It was dark, inside. The power had gone out years ago. Nalyd limned his Scythe in lividly green flames and worked his way to the Power Core, from memory. Yes, the crystal floated dark and empty, half-melted and riddled with cracks and chipped edges, looking like a dead child levitating over a pedestal. Nalyd snatched it out of the air and tossed it to the side. The clattering echoed all throughout this empty place.

Carefully, carefully he set down the sack containing the stillborn. With care gentler than a mother's did he treat it. As if afraid it would be hurt. . .

And now came the difficult part. He strained to remember the specifics of this creation, for it was very complicated, and he had made one only once before, long ago. Ah, yes that was the way those nerves went, there were the conduits for power, and the numerous vital fluids traveled through that manner of vein. Very well, begin!

Nalyd raised his hands, one holding Lifesower, to the dank and dripping heavens of these caves. The green fire around his Scythe grew in intensity, deepened in hue, and became laced with black. The cancerous flame threw huge, sickly-looking embers, one of which turned his other hand into a similar furnace of life. Delicate tendrils reached out from each of his fingers, winding round and round and round, taking wild and curving trajectories before they gathered to a point on the pedestal before him. They shimmered and crackled, each of them eventually reforming into the stylized shape of a DNA strand, now flashing and booming as they swirled like the ropes of a ship caught in a hurricane.

It was getting rather windy in the spacious caverns. Nalyd's hood was pulled back and his hair, kept in a long ponytail, tore free. His robes whipped about him as he was buffeted with the wind, but his little body held its ground.

Ah, yes, here came the fruits of his labors. A small, pumping speck of obscure flesh was clumping together on the pedestal. It took no shape, merely spread across the pedestal like an accelerated slime mold. After slightly overspilling the boundaries of the pedestal, a lump began to form in the middle. Soon, it stretched up and up, gradually taking the shape of a gigantic torso. Humanesque, but dreadfully, disgustingly distorted. The newly-formed yet half-rotted flesh glistened with poisonous and corrosive chemicals. Obscene vapors hissed from every pore. The ribcage was clearly, easily seen through the emaciated flesh. And it was not yet more than a torso.

And here the storm of magical energy abruptly stopped, with the creature half-formed before Nalyd. It teetered and wobbled, then slowly fell towards Nalyd, who caught it in a hand he did not allow to heed the burn of chemicals. Raising Lifesower above him, he drove it shaft-first into the gaping neck-hole of his monstrosity. With a sickening, wet sucking sound, it was pulled from his grasp and into the huge torso of this beast, disappearing completely.

Now, the manic little Shaper stepped back and resumed his mystical barrage. A head, disproportionately huge, disturbingly elongated even for this massive creature, rose up. It was the face of a thing long dead, with the white of bone showing through tattered skin. Here came arms, now, stunted and useless, but from them grew tendrils like a thick, living spiders web, quickly lurching towards the ceiling and fastening to it. Propagating until there was a great web of roots binding this horror to it's surrounds.

Done! The beast before Nalyd roared in animal rage and agony, the great roar sounding like the moan of something bestial and long forgotten. The caverns shook with it's ferocity, as the darkness suddenly returned. But now did Nalyd's mind assault this thing, cracking the will and spirit of it. Shattering the mind so as to build it anew, in a picture of mindless servitude. But mighty of mind, this thing was, and it fought bitterly. Won, in a way. Nalyd got only it's servitude, not it's mindlessness. It would do well enough.

The roar ended, and the lights flickered back on, one by one. The glistening mound of flesh supported the massive torso and even more massive head of the heavily, heartlessly modified Rotghroth. A web of elastic, tentacle-like roots fastened it to the ceiling and the nearby floor. Even now, the mat of shapeless flesh was pulsing and spreading, ever so slightly, to claim this chamber as it's own.

A low gurgle came from the hideously gaping, zombie-like mouth. Most of the needle-teeth were visible through the torn lips.

But Nalyd had already left.

Trying to Catch Up

By Zoe - Feb 18 2009

w-dueck gave Iffy an annoyed look as he dragged him away.

"This had better be good, Iffy"

"It's about Azuma, w-dueck"

"What about him? He hasn't even been here in a while..."

"He was here, doing something. Something that involved something in the SPAM forum. I don't know what, but he tried to run away...but I 'trapped' him. He mumbled **** that I didn't really care about, and so I saw this opportunity to perform a fake outburst. Little did he know that planted something in him. Something to watch him. Something that he will never find, nor anyone else. Nor can he be listening to us now. I knew nothing about what he was thinking, as I haven't been here in a while, so I just did that. If you want, capturing him again would be simpler than eating a muffin."

w-dueck started to leave. "Wait!"

"What, Iffy?"

"What do you think about this information?"

"I'll think about it later. Right now I have to see about Jewels..."

w-dueck wondered off to find Jewels.

Iffy muttered something incomprehensible and went to the General forum. A bot went up to him.

"FREEPRESCRIPTIONSFORCHEEP111"

Iffy rolled his eyes and blew the bot up with a script. "Ugh, spambots. In MY forum. ... I'll just tell w-dueck later"

Iffy wondered for a few minutes. He saw Jewels shout at w-dueck.

"Dammit, I need a book on what has happened here. It's almost as if this is some dramatic RP"

For Want of a Beating Heart

By Sudanna - Feb 20 2009

Nalyd swept into the dusty, decrepit room, a flurry of activity. He waved his hand, and the lights flashed into a brightness so intense that made the previous adequacy seem like midnight. He swept from a rusted surgical table a pile of useless, decayed equipment. The various items crashed to the floor and scattered glass and broken shard of metal all throughout the room. Various congealed chemicals slowly oozed over the wreckage.

Nalyd upended the sack slung on his back over the old table. The limp body of Jewel's stillborn thudded down onto the table. The tiny head, tiny arms, tiny legs lolled about. Settled, and then slid back into action. For Nalyd adjusted the tiny, gnarled corpse, still red and wet from the birth. Whirled around, now. Searching the old, wrecked piles of equipment. There, near an unidentifiable clump of glass tubes and rust flakes. Scalpel, here! To his hand it whizzed.

Turning back to the stillborn. Passing a hand over it, a protection from the rusted scalpel. Again, this time a preparation for very invasive surgery. Parts of the blade still kept their edge. He broke the other parts off.

Carelessly, quickly did he cut into the baby. Searching for clips, using them to hold back skin and flesh. To the heart! Past tiny ribs, past thin muscle. It was easy to stop a newborn's heart, far harder to start it and still have a usable subject.

From his inner robe did he withdraw a vial, filled halfway with a thick ooze. It glowed with the same sickly green as the tendrils of power with which he Shaped. For it was the same thing, though now separate from his body - distilled - and heavily concentrated. His own essence.

He smashed the vial open on the table, snapped off some remaining glass, and dumped the vial over the hacked-open baby. Impatiently scraped out the gently glowing goo with his scalpel, wiping all that he could into the stillborn. Threw scalpel and empty, broken vial to the sides, raised his hands and rushed through an incantation. A brief flash of lightning, but green and in miniature, leapt between him and the dead thing's exposed heart. Again. Again. A different angle, this time. Again. Nalyd was sweating. Had he waited too long? Again. Enough! He blasted the tiny body with lightning, a spray of sparks and plasma. Tiny arcs crawled over the child, the table, the old, old equipment. The scent of ozone filled the room. Nalyd stopped, exhausted, and backed into another table. Braced himself against it. Glared at the little,

unresponsive body. Damn thing had the indecency to die while he was transporting it. Useless now. Mindlessly, he reached out a hand and let his essence flow out. A screeching sound, a ray of green. The body was bathed in an altogether unlikable glow.

Bah, he could perhaps gain some information on elemental hybrids with a dissection. He straightened out and walked over to the table. Arcs of pseudo-electricity still crawled lazily about. He bent over the now-actually-dead baby. His scalpel flew back into his hand and he sighed. Such a waste. He'd never get this opportunity again. Fist slammed on table. Another sigh, and he rested his chin in his hand. Idly poked the exposed heart.

Fell over, when it started pumping.

Spam Plane

By Azuma - Feb 21 2009

Azuma slumped heavily on his soft, lolcat fur bed, like a washed-out boxer falling out of his career. He never thought that fixing the hidden camera in the Spam forum would take this so much drama. He could have succeeded in sneaking but damn that plot hole! Who fell into sophomoric slump while writing a story?! In the Spam section even! Azuma sighed. He cursed again.

He stood up. No time for grovelling, he has to check the camera if it works long distance... and in this case, really long distance. He reached for the remote that was on the small table beside his bed and pressed on "ON". The T.V. across the darkly lit room lit up to life and randomly showed internetz channels ranging from pedobears up to McDonald's. He pressed on "4" and "2", the channel changed to that of the Spam forum's interior. It worked. Perfectly. Azuma heaved a sigh of relief. It was a success.

It was queer though, no one was on the Spam forum at the time. Iffy and the other guy left already. No noobs even, dare he thought that there was no spambots there. Awkward. But maybe it was just him. The Refuge's Spam section was never really that active. During his vagabond phase, Azuma saw what true spam is like. Tender, juicy, and flammable. Really, really flammable. He chuckled and shook his head, as if reminiscing good times.

Like a noob chasing after h4x, the camera fell out of place really fast. Azuma noticed it, and in exasperated surprise too. *FFS!!111!1!1!!* A loose screw gave up and let the whole thing go down like velocirapture. *Baa4a4a|) d4yy..,.,.,* Azuma cursed profanities that would make even a martyr of terror shiver. He stood up, got his cloak and trudged off. He can't phase within a 3 hour cooldown to the same Spam section so he has to sneak inside the Refuge... again. Azuma shook his head and phased towards another Spam section he knows that is not quite far from Refuge Isle.

DAMN!

He phased back to the Spam Plane and got a slender object of about 36 inches long. A longsword. He clutched it into his belt, ready to leave... but.

tH1$ uz nawt mah d4y!!1!!!11eleventyone1 I|\/|m4 RAAAAAEEEEEG!!!1!!11

Remembering that he can't recall to the same place within 3 hours, he phased to another Spam forum, this time quite aways from the Refuge. He hailed a Google cab, got in, and slammed the door.

Reconstruction

By Sudanna - Feb 22 2009

Nalyd quickly picked himself up. The spray of essence. . . had it actually helped? The odds were. . . hugely against! Ah, but if it had facilitated resurrection, there's no telling what other effects, detrimental or not, it may have caused. A cursory examination revealed moderate, randomly distributed tissue damage and some very slight DNA randomization. Exactly what, he couldn't be sure, without access to his more sophisticated equipment back at the lab. Which was now barred to him, thanks to the new, permanent location of his Scythe. He would send Thahds and Vlish to fetch it all, later. But first to repair what he could, here.

It was demanding work. He was unaccustomed to the stillborn's level of development. He had to be cautious, had to be gentle. Delicately, he scouted about with thin tendrils. Slowly, deliberately, he turned throughout the body, tapping and twisting the underdeveloped organs, the weak body threatening to collapse if he made the slightest mistake. Tedious, and demanding his full attention.

Eventually, he had done all he could. Time to close up shop. Laying the peeled-back flesh, bone and skin, and gently healing along the original cuts, Nalyd put the child back together. Very well, then. Time to reactivate the neural functions and remove the paralysis he had put on while Jewels was giving birth. Like a spider, he spun through the brain, restringing connections and laying bundles of neurons. Took back up the blockages he had hurriedly placed, recycled them into useful brain matter. Ticked along the spine, moving along the vertebrae, taking away the small fungal growths that falsified death. Removed the several small growths throughout the body that were supposed to keep the organs functioning at minimal visibility. Like a machine being oiled, the body squeaked and clanked back into normal functionality.

The baby squirmed, now, and cried on the rusted table. The harsh lights made it seem a tiny monster, a gnarled and shriveled little goblin wriggling around in the decrepit laboratory. Nalyd's black- and silver-cloaked form, though short, still loomed over this tiny creature like an avatar of Death. Indeed, he almost had been.

But not today. Today, he was was an avatar of Life!

Itching for Payback

By Ackrovan - Feb 23 2009

Yawning, Ackrovan rose from his bed. The last few nights have been a true spectical of awkwardness. He had been under the impression he would have to wait for a day, not this many. Hearing the shouts and curses from the rest of the refuge had been disheartening to the fact that this place was in fact meant to be a refuge, not a drama house. God, he didn't even *want* to know what had made those screams, or why some stuck up Elemental was here. If things didn't pick up soon, Ackrovan would have to consider leaving the refuge before he even got accepted. A shame though. After that horrid journey oversees, such a thought as to leave now was ubsurd now that he had gotten here, even with that bast.....Priest, Nioca. The last thing he needed right now was to have a rivalry with some runty little priest who sends out harlots to do his dirty work(which is ironic in itself in two ways). Well, no matter. He'd have to get back at him sooner or later, preferribly sooner. If it wasn't for that damn.....what ever the hell it is on his wrist. "*Well, that's it. I'm leaving for a while*" Ackrovan left his small cabin, carrying all of his equipment on him. With all this caous about babies and Elementals, no one would notice if he were to step out on the google transport to Teresa Post to refit his equipment and sell his excess loot.

Ackrovan exited his little cabin. The sun had reached its zenith now, and was shining all across the isle. It was actually a beutiful sight, a luxary Ackrovan had not seen in a long time. Sighing, Ackrovan began approaching the google cart. On his way there, he noticed someone approaching in the corner of his eye. w-dueck, finally coming to settle this? Nope

Nioca

A thousand reasons popped in Ackrovan's head as to why he was coming up that hill. Whether it be a message from the gods, destiny or mere fate was not known. However, what was known was that a large sack of equipment lay on the floor off to the side, no doubt when Nioca had droped them during his attack. Ackrovan could have left it alone, but he simply couldn't stop himself from approaching the bag and putting his foot on it. Nioca quickened his pace and arrived at the bag.

His assilant approaching him, Ackrovan adopts a cold smile. He breaks the short, intense silence between them "So, you're the one who attacked me. Nioca, is it?"

"And you are?" Nioca riposted warily.

Ackrovan contemplated reaviling his title to him, then decides against it, 'Ackrovan. You know, the guy you tried to fry?' Ackrovan tilts toward his newly healed foot, "Ring any bells?"

"Ackrovan..." Nioca pondered carefully. "At any rate, any injury you accrued from spying on me was deserved. Especially considering that there are assassins on this island that have an interest in killing some of the people here, myself included." Nioca finished coldly.

"Spying? How about resting from a long journey, only to be jumped by a half witted mage that crawled out of a hole in Avernum? Did that ever occur to you, welp?" Ackrovan countered. He

was spoiling for payback, and he was making no plans on hiding it. Nioca chuckled. "Ignorance. Lovely. And, pray tell, what part of resting involves sneaking up on someone on the doorstep of their own home?"

Sneaking up? You seriously think I would bother with wasting my time with you? Or that houche you have following you? Nay, I would rather sleep with a Slith bartender then follow either of you, let alone actually stalk that ugly face of yours" Ackrovan watched as the anger in the Priest rose. All he needed was one hit from him, and he'd get to sqish him like a bug.

Nioca watched him carefully. Though he wanted to, he knew he couldn't take the bait. Aside from causing additional trouble, Nioca, at the moment, was completely and utterly defenseless. He wasn't ready for a fight. But, then again, he didn't need one. Nioca stepped closer with a sneer. "So what would happen next? I take a swing at you, and you proceed to show me how it's done? Hardly. Besides, I think it hurts you more that you can't do a thing about it unless I act first. Which becomes a problem if I decide to just let you stew." Nioca paused. "Unless you want to take your chances with w-dueck, and I seriously doubt that you do."

Ackrovan pressed his face closer to Nioca's. If he wasn't wearinf his helmet, they would be directly touching. If one was to look at this scene, it must have been humorous. Ackrovan, being a few inches taller than him, he was clearly the bigger one, both in legnth and size. Clenthing his fist, Ackrovan slowly began to speak, "Hiding behind some old mage? How chivalris. I'll be sure to tell your harlot that next time I see her and explain to her that her man is to weak and cowardly to fight some dumb thug right? Can't even understand the simplist rules, correct? Just some stupid barbarian." Ackrovan did not need an answer to see the truth in Nioca. "Insulting yourself? My, I didn't realize you were feeling so impotent." Nioca said, a broad smile playing across his face. "At any rate, since it seems you're here to stay, I would suggest remembering your place around here. Some of the people here are not as patient as me, and will have less qualms about giving you a swift kick in the rear. At least."

"I'll be sure to remember that" Before Nioca had a chance to respond, Ackrovan removed his foot and moved past him, "accedently" throwing his entire body weight agianst Nioca's shoulder blade as he moved past him. Steping into the Google Transporter, Ackrovan spoke, "Til later then" The door shut as the google transporter took off. Nioca picked up his stuff and turned away, barely catching Ackrovan flip him off at the window.

Death of the Day

By Nioca - Feb 23 2009

Nioca gathered his supplies together and clipped Avenger to his side, thoroughly annoyed. He didn't need some arrogant newcomer getting in his face piled on top of all of his troubles. Still, he was at least armed now. Rustling through the bloodstained rucksack, he pulled out a submission baton and a energy potion. He downed the potion quickly, and felt a slight warmth

grow inside him. Reveling in his newfound energy, he noted several small scratches on his arms. While it was a waste to do so, Nioca cast a quick healing spell on the injuries and watched them heal instantly. Nioca grinned. He wasn't powerless anymore.

Nioca hiked the rucksack up and walked to the edge of the platform, where Syla was waiting. "What was that about?" She asked.

"You know that person you apprehended last night?" Nioca asked.

"Yeah..." Syla confirmed, an edge of worry in her voice.

"Well, it seems he's going to be a member. And an arrogant little bastard." Nioca paused, seething. "He had the gall to come at me for his unfortunate arrival! Like it's my fault he was spying on me!" Nioca pushed the door of his citadel open and let Syla lead him inside. "Anyway. I thought you were leaving?" Nioca asked warily as Syla walked past him.

"I changed my mind. A good thing too, what with the mess you got yourself into. Where's Aryll?"

Nioca shook his head in reply. They marched towards the parlor, but Nioca suddenly stopped, and grabbed Syla by the arm. "Something's wrong." He stated.

"Yeah, you're a mess and-" Syla began, giving him a strange look.

"No, I mean here. Now. Something's not right." Nioca paused. "Where are my shades?"

"Temporarily disposed of, I'm afraid." A deep voice said behind the two. Nioca and Syla whirled on the speaker, and Syla raised her palm. A sickly nimbus surrounded Syla's hand, but with a flick of the stranger's wrist, she collapsed into a deep sleep. Nioca stood there, momentarily dumbstruck. He yanked Avenger out of its sheath, but the stranger jerked his hand forward, and the sword went flying away. Nioca raised the submission baton and fired. The thorn struck a magical shield protecting the stranger and disintegrated. Undeterred, Nioca fired a smite spell. It too hit the shield, turning it briefly cyan and causing its surface to ripple. Annoyed, the stranger raised his hand and fired a red orb of light into Nioca's chest. Red tendrils of light started crawling in and out of his skin, worming their way across his entire body.

Nioca fell, screaming in agony. Each tendril felt like a searing lance, worming their way around his skin and, worse yet, into his body. They multiplied by the hundreds, covering from head-to-toe. Then the pain abruptly stopped. Nioca laid on the ground, panting and shaking. "Mr. Galton, I'm disappointed." The stranger intoned. "But I suppose you were at a disadvantage. Now, if you would be so kind, you will lead me to the parlor and get me a drink. I am quite thirsty, and..." The stranger sniffed. "Thusfar, the food here has been less than satisfactory."

Nioca proceeded to utter several oaths revolving around the stranger copulating with himself. He muttered something else, and disappeared from sight. The stranger sighed, then fired another red orb of light. Nioca's invisibility was disrupted as it impacted, and the tendrils of light proceeded to cause him further agony. "I do not enjoy doing this to you, Mr. Galton," the stranger said distastefully as he ended the spell once more. "But you leave me little choice. Now, please, let us stop this foolishness. It is unbecoming of a god, not to mention tedious."

The door to the citadel opened behind the stranger, and w-dueck entered. "Nioca, we need to tal-!" He began. His eyes had settled on Syla's prone form, and on the down-trodden Nioca. Then his

gaze beheld the stranger. w-dueck raised his staff into a combat-ready position. "Don't move, or-
"

"Really, Mr. Dueck, is this necessary?" The stranger addressed w-dueck as casually as someone addressing a dinner guest. "It's not becoming of an administrator to treat a guest this way. You should know better." With a flick of his wrist, Anamzas went flying across the hall, landing away from w-dueck.

w-dueck quickly rallied, and pulled a fancy RMM out of his robes. "Simplebots, at- ARGH!" He screamed. The stranger had fired off another red orb, and the torturous tendrils spread through w-dueck's body. He collapsed, writhing and screaming. Taking advantage of the distraction, Nioca stumbled to his feet and rushed the stranger head-long. He impacted against the magical shield and, with a bright flash of light, was thrown back against the opposite wall with a sickening crunch. He collapsed into a heap on the floor, unconscious and with a red trickle flowing from the back of his head.

The stranger sighed. "This is not going how I had planned." The stranger ceased the spell on w-dueck, who laid on the ground panting, and summoned his RMM with a flick of his hand. He caught it and stowed it away. Walking over to Nioca's prone form, he put his fingertips on Nioca's forehead. White light poured from his fingers, and Nioca's eyes blinked open blearily. "Now, if we are quite done with these proceedings, I would rather have a strong drink." The stranger said bitterly.

w-dueck raised his head to regard the stranger, then caught Nioca's eyes. Nioca shook his head. "Fine." Nioca said. "You win."

"I win? I was unaware there was a competition. Very well, gentlemen..." The stranger glanced over at Syla and made a slight upward motion with his hand. "Lady..." Syla awoke and looked about, dazed. "To the parlor! And please, leave the weapons where they lie! I assure you, they are quite unnecessary."

Nioca slowly worked his way upright, and helped the other two to their feet. They then followed the stranger into the parlor, where the man plopped himself down on one of the two sofas. Nioca, Syla, and w-dueck settled themselves on the opposite sofa. w-dueck was still shivering slightly from the torture. Nioca had recovered more quickly, partially due to the numbness that still pervaded his body from the poison. The stranger eyed Nioca intently, then turned to Syla. "Miss Prescot, could you please fetch us some beverages?"

"I'm not a housewife." Syla growled back.

"Now, now... it's just good manners." The stranger said, shaking his head. "Please."

"I think you heard the woman the first time." Nioca said, standing and placing himself between the stranger and Syla. He was terrified; he didn't want Syla to experience the stranger's torturous spell; he'd rather take it himself.

The stranger eyed Nioca carefully. "Have it your way, Mr. Galton." He conceded. He then turned to w-dueck. "Well, Mr. Dueck, would you kindly supply the drinks?" w-dueck glared at the stranger, then carefully made his way to the kitchen. Nioca noticed that he was limping slightly. "So, Mr. Galton... where to begin..." The stranger said excitedly.

"Cut the crap. If you're going to kill us, just do it." Nioca replied tersely.

"You still disappoint, Mr. Galton. Goodness, if I wanted you dead-"

"You could have done it a while ago, yes. I think we've all heard that tired old line. But it lacks the satisfaction of forcing your enemy to accept his fate, doesn't it?" Nioca cut across.

"Impressive. I withdraw my earlier disappointment." The stranger conceded.

"You're a VRP assassin. Doesn't take a lot to figure that out." Nioca sneered.

"Ah, only half-right. I do happen to belong to the Vaw Retaliatory Power, yes, but I fear I am no assassin. I lack the stomach to kill for payment." The stranger glanced sideways at w-dueck, who brought in a tray of various alcoholic beverages. "Ah, what took you so long, Mr. Dueck?"

w-dueck muttered a few obscenities under his breath as he sat back down. Nioca gave the stranger a skeptical look. "Bull. We all know there's an assassin on this island gunning for Designers, and you already admitted you're with the VRP. Hell, any Ermarian worth his-"

"Wrong again, Mr. Galton." The stranger chuckled. "I assure you, I was born and raised on the Internet Plane. I simply found Ermaria an exciting place to be, nothing more. And to preclude further accusations, I joined the VRP in hopes of bringing it down. I hold nothing against the Designers, and have a great respect for you in particular, Mr. Galton."

"I'm sorry, but I think you're mistaken." Syla butted in. "This man's name is Nioca. Nioca Matiss. Not Galton."

"Hmm..." The stranger said contentedly, taking a sip of whiskey. "I presume you all have heard of the Galtons?"

"I've heard it somewhere before..." w-dueck started.

"Of course!" Syla stated bluntly. "Traces back to Emperor Galton, the usurper of Emperor Zenar the Violent. Assassinated on the throne, but the family was enshrined in nobility until the bloodline died out three generations later. But what does that have to do with anything?"

"Everything, Miss Prescot. It's why I've come here. Tell me, what was Emperor Galton's given name?" The stranger said, a light in his eyes.

"Nioca..." Syla began. She mulled it over briefly. "Emperor Nioca Galton." An incredulous smile crossed her face. "You've got to be kidding me."

"No." The stranger responded. "I'm entirely serious."

w-dueck gave Nioca a dubious glance. "You're an Emperor?"

Syla stood up and started pacing before continuing to press. "You think Nioca... this Nioca... is Emperor Galton?!" Syla stated with growing incredulity. "You're insane! Emperor Galton died a long time ago! Beyond any human's natural lifespan!"

"An excellent observation, Miss Prescot. Might I point out, however, that there are ways of extending life beyond the normal span?" The stranger countered.

"Listen, I knew this man when he was fourteen. Fourteen! He is most certainly not a long-lost emperor." Syla countered exasperatedly

The stranger grew agitated. "I know who Mr. Galton is, Miss Prescot."

Nioca interceded. "At any rate, why would you come to me now with this? And why would I trust you?"

"You don't know?" The stranger replied. "The VRP wants the backgrounds of all their marks. You, Mr. Dueck, Miss DeForestal, Mr. Iffy, the orc... And that's just naming all of the ones here."

"Why?" Nioca asked.

"Because the idea is to have your pasts catch up to you. Have your own government come after you." The stranger glanced at w-dueck. "Or lead you into an ambush. Figuring out where you're most vulnerable. Things of that nature."

"But you still haven't answered my questions." Nioca pointed out.

"No, Mr. Galton, I have not." The stranger smirked. "I suppose it's a risk on your part. No other way around it. The best I can offer is the assassin that shot Miss DeForestal. You'll find his body near the Dump."

"Convenient." Nioca remarked.

"Yes, I suppose it is. And my, what a time it's getting to be! I have one last thing that needs to be done here." The stranger said in an odd burst of cheeriness.

"And that is...?" Nioca asked tentatively.

"Your guest quarters." The stranger stated bluntly.

"E-excuse me?" Nioca burst out, startled.

"I convinced my superiors this would be a two-day reconnaissance mission. Now, I cannot return back to Ermaria, and I need a place to stay that's safe. And it just so happens you have some perfectly-suitable guest quarters." The stranger said with a smile.

Nioca groaned. Housing a man that had just tortured him and w-dueck and may or may not be an assassin didn't sound like a good idea. Then again, he likely didn't have a choice in the manner. Pulling out his keys, he removed one from his keyring and tossed it to the stranger. The stranger nodded. "Thank you. Well, gentlemen, lady, goodnight." He promptly turned and left the parlor.

Nioca, Syla, and w-dueck waited in silence for a moment. Finally, Syla couldn't contain herself. "This is madness!" She said to herself. Then she turned to Nioca "Madness! I don't know about you, Nioca, but I think that man is insane."

"Agreed." w-dueck stated. "Bat-crap crazy and powerful to boot. Nioca... *emperor*?! Ha!" w-dueck couldn't help but laugh slightly.

"I knew Nioca since he first joined the Gvelston order! And he certainly wasn't nobility. Just a scared, determined kid at the time..." Syla continued. "Isn't that right, Nioca?" Syla asked, turning to him. "Nioca?" She asked, somewhat more tentatively.

Nioca, meanwhile, was gazing off into the distance, oblivious. "Hmm?" He said, coming back to the other two somewhat.

"Don't tell me you're putting any serious thought into this." Syla said sternly.

"Oh, no, of course not." Nioca said quickly. He stood, his mind elsewhere. "How is Jewels?" He said suddenly at w-dueck.

"Fine." w-dueck said flatly. He grabbed a glass of whiskey and started sipping at it. "Just fine."

"And the baby?" Nioca said with a smile.

"Dead." w-dueck fixed his eyes straight ahead. He downed the rest of the whiskey in his glass.

Nioca stared at him, stunned. Just like that, a life had been claimed. Snuffed out as if it were no more as an errant ember. Nioca sat down in shock. "My god... I'm so sorry. Jewels must be devastated."

"Not really. It's like she doesn't even care... She went with Kaylas." w-dueck said hollowly, pouring another glass of whiskey. "Didn't even want to look at the baby. Or me. Can't blame her, either. I..." w-dueck choked up. "I failed her. I should have protected her. I... I can't protect her..."

"Of course you can." Nioca said, attempting to reassure him. "She's alive, isn't she?"

"Yeah, thanks to you. I couldn't even notice she was dying right in front of me. I should have known... I should have known something was wrong." w-dueck finished the second glass and poured a third. He then downed that in one gulp and poured a fourth.

"Um, first, you need to lay off the alcohol." Nioca stated, getting worried. w-dueck was partway through the fourth when Nioca decided to grab the glass away. "Second, no matter how hard you try, there's no way you can prevent Jewels, or anyone for that matter, from ever getting hurt. You shouldn't blame yourself when it inevitably happens like it did today."

"And why the hell not?! Huh?!" w-dueck drunkenly demanded.

Nioca opened his mouth, as if to explain, but stopped short. He didn't have an answer to give. w-dueck reached for the bottle of whiskey and started drinking from it while Nioca lapsed into silent reverie. Syla stepped forward and took the bottle away from w-dueck, who protested slightly but was at that point to inebriated to do anything. "Why do I bother?" w-dueck muttered. "With the Refuge, with Jewels... It's no good. I want safety, and I get assassins. I want a wife, and I get a slap in the face..." His head drooped into his chest as he passed out.

Nioca, deciding he didn't want to carry w-dueck all the way back to the Admin Tower, slung him over his shoulder. "Get his staff from the hallway." He said quietly to Syla. She nodded and left. Nioca, hefting w-dueck into a better position, trotted off towards his guest quarters.

Nioca quietly slipped out of the Citadel. It was indeed late; night had fallen, and the moon was just starting to rise. Nioca scanned the landscape, but couldn't see any signs of life. He did notice a new google car; maybe that Ackrovan was back from wherever he was.

Wrapping a black cloak around him to match his new black robes, Nioca hurried across the grounds, remaining alert for any signs of trouble. Nothing assailed him as he made his way to the

back of the Admin Tower. The stranger had said the assassin that had attack Jewels was back here... Now it was time to see if he was true to his word.

Nioca rounded the Admin tower and found a body on the ground. Approaching carefully, Nioca examined it. Several darts lay nearby, along with a small blowgun. The man himself showed no sign of injury, but a quick Detect Life spell confirmed that he was truly dead.

Nioca decided to let someone else clean it up. He wasn't a maid, and he had other things to do. Pulling the cloak tighter, Nioca meandered off toward the Blades of Avernum forum. Nioca glanced up at the moon and saw that it was full; despite the light it threw down on the ground, it hardly reassured him. Setting a slightly faster pace, he took a glance up at the Admin Tower. He pondered Jewels... The news had to be hitting her hard. Quite frankly, it surprised him that she wanted to be alone, and that she rejected w-dueck as she did. He'd have thought that she'd want a shoulder to cry on...

Oh, but Kaylas was giving her that shoulder. Wonderful Kaylas. Nioca knew next to nothing about him, but Nioca's gut was screaming that there was something desperately wrong with him. That he wasn't trustworthy. That he was a threat, that his presence put Jewels in danger. Judging from w-dueck's reaction to Kaylas, he wasn't the only one with misgivings. So why didn't Jewels see it? Why was Jewels fraternizing blindly with this... this near-stranger?

Nioca shook his head. Maybe she knew something he didn't. But then again, it wasn't the first time he'd seen a reasonable and intelligent person get pulled in by a worthless piece of trash... or worse.

Nioca then started berating himself. He wasn't paying attention, and he needed to. Who knows what kind of trouble the night could turn up? Nioca set his sight on the Blades of Avernum forum. He had a job to do, and a lot of stakes in doing it while no one was watching. He gently pushed the door open and proceeded inside. Reaching inside his robes, he pulled out a submission baton. He ran through a few chants in his head, readying them to be unleashed on a moment's notice. Shutting the door behind him, Nioca swept across the forum, staying alert for prying eyes. Another Detect Life spell confirmed the forum was empty of humans, but he wasn't reassured. Just because it was empty now didn't mean it would stay that way. Clearing his way through the slowly-reviving trees and small animals that populated it. Thanks to the Blades Nexus in the basement.

Nioca pulled out his keys and inserted them into the lock of the Moderation Centre door. The door yielded with a gentle click, and, after entering, Nioca locked it behind him. A small coffee pot rested on a nearby end table, along with a few mugs. Pouring himself a cup, he then meandered over to the various consoles and computers littering the room. Taking a seat at the primary console, he started typing. After working his way through the passwords and various checks to confirm his identity, he got access to the basic moderation tasks. New options flashed across the screen. Various conversations, news bulletins, the CoC, foliage...

Squinting slightly at the screen, Nioca typed in a short string. The computer beeped in response. Narrowing his eyes, Nioca typed in the string again. Again, the computer beeped. The display showed no sign of changing. Nioca scanned the screen carefully, and promptly swore. w-dueck had installed updated software. "If that update sealed that backdoor..." Nioca muttered.

"You're spelling it wrong." A feminine voice came from behind him.

Nioca jumped up and, startled, haphazardly whirled about and fell. He brought the submission baton about to face the intruder, only to sigh with relief. "Aryll," he said, "nice to see you're back. But couldn't you have done that without scaring me out of my wits?"

"I've had my hand on your shoulder for the past five minutes." She stated, stepping forward. "It was the only way to get your attention."

"What?" Nioca asked, puzzled.

"Nioca, are you telling me that you had no idea someone was grabbing you from behind?" Aryll asked in a worried tone.

Nioca pondered her question. It suddenly occurred to him that, despite his recovery from the poison, he still couldn't feel anything he touched. "No. I suppose I didn't." Nioca hoisted himself up and moved back to the console. "So this spelling error is...?"

"The last part goes QSIJ, not QSIN." Aryll corrected.

"Mmhmm." Nioca said skeptically. He typed the corrected string in. The computer beeped again, and the display changed. A greater list of options appeared, and the user ID in the corner changed to that of w-dueck's. "Huh. Thanks."

"Don't mention it." Aryll stated blandly. "There has to be a better way, Nioca."

"I've already told you, it's the only way. Well," Nioca corrected himself, "the only that ensures their safety without locking this place down like a prison." Nioca browsed through several options pertaining to various facets of the forum. Moderation, flood controls, security, Blades Nexus... Nioca selected the option, and several more appeared. Nioca selected one entitled, "Protection" and turned it off. Nioca then selected another entitled "Radius".

The display changed, showing a 3-D view of the Blades of Avernum forum, and the forums surrounding it. A red sphere encompassed the Blades of Avernum and Blades of Exile fora, originating from a point in the Blades of Avernum forum. Below the view, a small box presented a number. Nioca typed in a new figure and hit the enter key. The sphere expanded, partially including the Avernum/Exile Trilogy Forum and the Geneforge Forum. Frowning, Nioca typed in a larger number. The sphere expanded again and completely engulfed the Geneforge forum. Several warnings came up about interference, which Nioca ignored. Satisfied, he went back to the main menu.

"Now, for the fun part..." Nioca muttered. He selected an option labeled "Power". With a few keystrokes, he cut all power to the Blades Nexus. "Aryll, stay here. I'll need someone to periodically turn the power back on."

"What for?" Aryll asked.

"I need to know whether I've got the Nexus's frequency adjusted correctly." Nioca stated. He stood up and opened a trapdoor in the corner of the room. Hesitant, Aryll sat down at the console while Nioca descended into the basement.

Nioca squinted into the darkness. A part of him was glad his eyesight was good; their was only a slight glow to guide him through the underground labyrinth of tunnels and maintenance ducts.

Keeping a submission baton aloft, Nioca carefully proceeded through the tunnels. He didn't expect a member or an intruder down here, but the air was charged with magical energy. Feral Shades and the occasional magical slime were both dangerous possibilities. However, all seemed quiet.

Nioca rounded a narrow corridor and came across a wide circular chamber. In the center, a large, sprawling device sat dormant. A macabre mix of electrical circuits, metal plating, and magical machinery, it looked, bluntly, like a mess. Rising from the center was a cylindrical pylon. Near the top of the pylon was an empty chamber which housed a large glowing emerald that levitated peacefully. Around it was a stone ring which, if the device was on, would rotate around the gem.

Nioca sighed. This wasn't going to be easy.

Syla shuffled through the various discussions in the Spam board. The General forum had turned up a few interesting tidbits, but it was hard to understand the odd ways of this... "Internet". She couldn't fully tell what Nioca wanted her to get and what was just useless side info. So she collected anything that seemed even remotely related to Nioca's needs.

Leave it to him to have her searching through rotten meat! This wasn't a priestess's job! This was a task for slave labor! Yet Syla pushed on, desperately trying to ignore the smell of the spam.

After trudging through several piles of spam, some stale, Syla finally got everything she needed. Turning, she exited the forum with all haste.

"*Try it now.*" Nioca commanded telepathically to Aryll. He waited for a few moments. "*Well?*"

"*It's on. And don't give me that snotty 'well', I'm doing my best here.*" Aryll responded, annoyed.

"*How hard can it be to push a button, Aryll?*" Nioca responded angrily.

"*Would you care to do it?*"

Nioca muttered a few obscenities. "*Fine, whatever, just turn the thing back off.*". The device whirred to a stop. Nioca made some more adjustments to the device. "*Now try it.*"

The Blades Nexus whirred to life once more, but this time, Nioca felt something different. Something... godlike. "*Yes! About freakin' time!*" Nioca was ecstatic. He hurried out of the underground tunnels, his mind feeling alert. Back in the Moderation Centre, Aryll was sitting crossly at the console as Nioca surfaced again.

"You owe me an apology, Nioca." She stated stiffly.

Nioca ignored her, instead going to the window. He focused on BladesCraft...

Just as it did in Ermaria, his surroundings became instantly known. His senses were only limited by the radius of the Blade Nexus's projection. With a wave of his hand, he brought all of the sickly foliage in the Blades of Avernum forum to full bloom. He then shivered slightly as a measure of life force left him. "Wondrous. It works... it really... Syla?"

"What?" Aryll asked, confused.

"Syla's coming." Nioca said tritely. "Aryll, head to the Geneforge Forum. I need to confer with her about some information on the GeneNexus."

Aryll nodded and ran off toward the Geneforge forum. Nioca logged his backdoor account out of the moderation console, and then logged out completely. He then rushed out the Moderation Centre door. Syla had just entered, and was approaching slowly. "Syla, what did you find?"

Syla didn't respond. As Nioca came closer, he could tell something was wrong. "Syla?" He asked.

No response.

Then the two closed most of the distance between them, and Nioca stopped cold. Syla's hand was covered in blood. However, she lacked any injury on her person. "Syla!" Nioca gasped. "What happened?!"

But she still didn't respond. Nioca quickly started counting up more things wrong with her. Her skin was pale, her eyes were glassed over, she walked as if in a coma... Nioca started adding the symptoms up in his head, and praying it wasn't what he thought it was. "Syla, are you okay?" Nioca rushed over.

Perhaps if it had been someone he wasn't close to, he wouldn't have made such a mistake. As it was, though, Nioca's thoughts were to preoccupied about Syla's safety to worry about his own.

With lightning reflexes, Syla lashed out, delivering a massive blow across Nioca's face. Nioca fell backwards, utterly stunned by the sudden attack. Syla, undeterred about her victim, continued forward with a feral snarl. "No..." Nioca moaned. "It can't..."

Syla kneeled and proceeded to draw her arm back for another punch. But in Nioca's shocked state, something snapped. "*She's trying to kill you, you moron!*" He said to himself. Nioca rolled to the side and avoided the hit. He stumbled upright as Syla came at him with greater speed. "Syla, listen to me! I know you're in there, it's the bite! I've seen it happen, but you're still in control! You can still control yourself! Don't give-" Nioca was cut short as Syla lunged at him.

"Syla, please!" Nioca screamed. He no longer cared about his own well-being. If Syla wasn't treated soon, she'd be gone permanently. If she wasn't already... noob bites were fickle that way... "SYLA!" He screamed louder, trying to get through.

But she wasn't listening. With a savage growl, she tried to claw at his face. Nioca didn't resist.

And without ceremony, she was tossed aside. Aryll, realizing something was wrong, had come back, and now stood between Syla and Nioca. Syla charged Aryll. In response, Aryll's form shimmered to orange, and claws grew out of her fingertips. Syla paused for but a brief moment before charging again. Aryll lashed out, hitting Syla across the stomach. A flash of red and a horrid scream was her reward as Syla fell backwards.

"NO!" Nioca shouted, trying to get around Aryll. Aryll, however, had no intention of letting Nioca by, and blocked his every move. Syla staggered up again, her blood now turning a sickly orange. Her irises took on a red tint as the transformation into a full noob continued. Syla charged again, only to get slashed across the arm. With a whimper, the now-feral Syla backed off.

"Syla..." Nioca whimpered.

"Nioca, she's gone. If you want to help her, you need to put your feelings aside for a moment and HELP ME!" Aryll shouted back.

Syla glared at Nioca and Aryll for a moment, now on all fours. Then she turned and sprinted out the door with amazing speed. Aryll and Nioca hurtled after her as she ran across the grounds.

Nioca stopped. He realized that Aryll was right; he wasn't using his head. Drawing on BladesCraft, Nioca locked his thoughts onto Syla. Almost unbidden, the effects of the poison he had just recovered from came to mind. Drawing on it for inspiration, Nioca willed it onto Syla.

Syla suddenly shuddered and collapsed, paralyzed. Nioca and Aryll caught up to her prone form. "We have to help her. We have to get her cured, we-" Nioca began anxiously.

"Nioca, it's too late. She's gone." Aryll stated.

"But..." Nioca began lamely, trying to think of something to say. Some way to contradict her.

"There's only one way for you to help her now." Aryll intoned.

Nioca started frantically shaking his head. "No. No, no, no, I won't, I can't, I refuse-"

"Either you do it, or I will." Aryll stated firmly, a note of sympathy in her voice.

"She's still... I can't..." Nioca protested.

Aryll looked at him sympathetically. "I'll do it." She raised her hand, and pointed a finger at Syla's prone body. A green nimbus started to coalesce.

"No, Aryll! No!" Nioca shouted.

"If you or I don't do this, she'll get loose! Then who knows what'll happen, or who she'll bite! Keeping her alive isn't doing her a favor, it's doing a disservice to both her and anyone she might come in contact with!" Aryll shouted back.

"Aryll, I command you to stop." Nioca intoned. Aryll instantly drew her hand back, compelled to obey. "I can't do it. She's still..." Nioca sighed, fighting back tears. "Tomorrow. When she's transformed completely. Until then, we'll lock her back in her room."

Aryll gave him an odd look. Finally, she said simply, "I'm sorry," and left, carrying the still-paralyzed Syla.

Nioca waited for a while. With the death of the day, another soul had perished. It was sudden. Random. But it had happened. And he had gotten to her too late for treatment. Heavy-hearted, Nioca traveled back to the Blades of Avernum forum. Entering the Moderation Centre, he curled up in the corner and started sobbing. In a way, Nioca wanted to join Syla and the newborn baby. They were fighting the inevitable. One way or another... it was all worthless...

Burning Down the House

By Jewels - Feb 24 2009

Kaylas followed Jewels through the Admin Tower eagerly, still excited at the angry words she had thrown at the human she called Will. Seeing his dejected face was almost as satisfying as the fact that she hadn't run to his arms for comfort. But then again, neither had she run to Kaylas' arms or made any affectionate gestures towards him at all. Her current silence was making him uneasy as he contemplated her lack of emotion. His mind couldn't wrap around how calm and... unmoved she seemed. If it weren't for those angry outbursts he'd swear she was a completely different person. Maybe she was in shock, maybe she really didn't care... The thought panged him as he remembered his profession of love for her. Could she really not care about that? Or had the poison confused her enough that she didn't understand it or remember it? By the time Jewels led him into her penthouse suite, Kaylas was wracked with worry and second guesses.

The entryway was wide and open. Directly in front of them was a nine foot square fireplace standing alone and open on all four sides. Jewels stepped forward nonchalantly and lit it with a fireball while Kaylas took everything in. To the right was a sitting area with couches and chairs. Floor to ceiling windows made up the western outer wall. The whole north wall was comprised entirely of custom made shelving that was inset into the wall. A giant flat screen TV sat in the middle and surround sound speakers sat in the top corners. The other shelves were covered with books, pictures, movies, and a stereo system beside an impressive music collection. To the left, a dining area with a beautifully hand carved marble table that could easily seat ten as well as an open kitchen area with gleaming stainless steel appliances and ample obsidian counter space. The north wall on this side was also entirely inset shelving only more like a hutch. There were glass doors closed upon a variety of china, tea sets, platters, and wine glasses. "You live here?" he asked a bit astonished.

"Sort of," Jewels answered. "I've actually only been here a few days, but yeah, I suppose it is my home." She itched her neck under the fabric of the robe she had come out of the Geneforge forum in. "This thing itches terribly. I gotta get out of it and get cleaned up first." She started walking around the fireplace to the south so Kaylas followed. Beyond the fireplace was a huge indoor garden under what seemed to be a skylight. Jewels saw him looking at it and commented. "It's artificial. There's still one more floor above this. Will's home." Kaylas' furrowed his brow at the name but was too busy taking in the rainbow of flowers that surrounded him to really stew about it. Wrought iron trellises, standing floor to ceiling, were laced with a myraid of vines that bloomed at all levels.

At the far end of the garden, Jewels stopped in front of a set of intricately carved double doors and slid them open effortlessly. Kaylas took only two steps in lingering at the doorway. In the center of the room was another fireplace exactly like the first only smaller. This Jewels also lit, brightening the room which featured a four poster bed to the left. Trimmed with satin sheets, decked with decorative pillows, and draped with shimmering lace. "Come in," Jewels urged as he hesitated. "One mustn't lurk in doorways. It's rude." She wandered to the right where a huge walk

in closet and the master bath sat with doors wide open. The floor and walls of the bath were covered in a mosaic of tiny ceramic tiles arranged in runic patterns while the tub itself resembled a small swimming pool. Kaylas walked past it to the south outer wall which was again, floor to ceiling windows out of which almost the whole of Refuge Isle could be clearly seen. Kaylas glanced out as he watched a few members meander about.

He had to admit it. He was impressed. In fact the only thing that he hadn't been impressed with so far was the selection of clothing in Jewels' closets. Only a handful of dresses hung in a corner of the expansive room next to a pitiful mop and a bucket of cleaning supplies. "Looks like someone needs to go shopping," Kaylas laughed as he watched Jewels decide on a dress. "Your cupboards are bare!"

"What you see in this room are the only things in the entire place that are actually mine. Everything else was given to me."

"Wow!" he quipped. "You already have them treating you like royalty here."

"Not 'they'," she answered evenly. "Only Will. Everything was provided by him, just for being an admin. He calls them perks."

"What do you actually do as an admin here?"

Jewels paused thoughtfully. "I'm not sure. I don't really do anything. At least I haven't yet besides using the priestly powers that come with the job. I've probably caused more fights then I've squelched to date."

"Why would he give you all this when you don't really do anything for it?" He was answered with a dumb stare as if it should be obvious to him. "Well?" he pressed.

"I've had my suspicions after I told him I wasn't qualified for the position and he still insisted. He probably has the whole place bugged, with cameras no doubt."

Kaylas couldn't help but look around the room for evidence. "Even the bedroom?"

Jewels shrugged while walking out the closet having decided on a simple off-white dress. "Most likely. Bathroom, too," she quipped as she entered it and started drawing a bath.

Kaylas stared at her in disbelief. "And you stay here anyway?! Don't you care about your privacy?"

"From Will? Not really. I have nothing to hide from Will." She paused from retrieving a towel from the closet, taking in his distasteful expression. "Does that bother you?"

"Yes!" he exclaimed as if nothing else could be truer. "No one should be allowed to..." Kaylas' voice trailed off. He couldn't even bring himself to say it.

"Not even you?" she asked while deftly slipping her arms out of her robe and letting it fall. "I have nothing to hide from you either, Kaylas."

It might have unnerved him less had she been wearing a smirk or a playful frown. Heck even a genuine frown would have been better, but without expression or a single feeling behind it... it felt more like an insult. He turned away. "I'll wait out here."

"But we have business," she hollered after him while sloshing water told him she was climbing into the tub.

"*It can wait*," he hollered back walking across the room. There was a closed door to the left of the bed that he hadn't seen yet. Curiously he opened it to reveal a study. Tall potted plants adorned the corners of the room while hundreds of books lined the walled shelves. A big gleaming desk sat in front of more floor to ceiling windows.

Kaylas sat in the plushy office chair thrusting his head into his hands in frustration. What was wrong with her? She had shown nothing but anger since being poisoned. It wasn't like her at all... or was it? Could he really know what Jewels was really like? Maybe this was normal for her... No. It couldn't be. Something *had* to be wrong.

Jewels finished her bath and got dressed rather quickly. No need to soak today. Not seeing Kaylas in the bedroom, she went out to the garden. He wasn't there either but Jewels stopped to look at the flowers around her. Usually they filled her with pride and gave her joy but today... today they were just flowers. *How can they be just flowers?* she asked herself. She waited a full minute, expecting some sort of response *from* herself. Nothing. She didn't even seem to be surprised but it did make her mad. What was wrong with her? She just didn't feel like herself... in fact, she realized, she hadn't been feeling at all, well except for anger, which currently, only made her more angry. Her garden usually made her feel better. She caressed the tiger lily in front of her in an attempt to... well, to feel something, anything... Nothing. *Nothing!* she screamed at herself. *Absolutely nothing! Not even a...* Jewels noticed something that would have frightened her had she been able. Since she was not, it came out in unbridled rage. She ripped the bloom off the stem and stared at it, concentrated, concentrated so hard that she became white hot. The flower ignited in a plume of flame as other flowers around her started to wilt. "*KAYLAS!!*" she screamed, crushing the lily in her palm.

The angry cry pulled Kaylas out of his thoughts. He jumped up and rushed out the door coming up behind her, his eyes wide with concern. "What?! What's wrong?"

"They won't move!" she yelled but Kaylas didn't understand.

"*What* won't move, Jewels?"

She flung an angry arm at the flowers that actually did seem to move away as they shriveled in her heat. "The flowers! The flowers won't move! I can't make the flowers move, Kaylas. They're supposed to move!"

"They seem to be moving to me," he offered cautiously. "They're wilting quite nicely."

"Not like that!" she snapped. She paced in front of him seeming to try to calm down. When she had sufficiently cooled, she walked to an un-wilted flower and cupped her hands around a small bud. "Normally, it would open for me," she explained. "I'm trying to make it *do* something... *anything*..."

"...but nothing," he finished for her. She looked into his eyes blankly. "Nothing," he repeated softly, voice cracking.

"Something's wrong with me, Kaylas."

"I know," he whispered tearfully pulling her into his arms. When she didn't respond or return his embrace, they flowed all the more.

Kaylas had taken her back to the fire plane where the best medical doctors were called upon to treat her. He had explained about the poisoned dart, and her being treated by a human Shaper, but left out the miscarriage. They had ushered him to a waiting room hours ago where he sat impatiently. The fire doctors had almost immediately called for dryad researchers to aid in their diagnosis. For the first couple of hours he'd stand every time one of them came out of the room but none ever came with news for him. Eventually, he had given up on paying attention and just sat head in hands wishing, hoping, praying.

"General Kaylas?" The words startled him, but in an instant he was standing at attention.

"Yes! How is she? Have you found anything?"

The doctor looked at him a little nervously. "I believe we have, sir..." He hesitated.

Kaylas was impatient. "Well, spit it out! What is it?"

This comment didn't set the doctor any more at ease but he managed to continue with his report. "We think, sir... that, uh... that we've found a parasite." Kaylas furrowed his brow but gave the doctor a gesture to keep going. "The, uh, basic structure of her DNA has been, well... for the lack of a better word, added to. You had said that Lady Jewels was treated by a Shaper using a 'living antidote', correct?" Kaylas nodded impatiently. "Well, our group thinks that this 'antidote' has attached itself to Jewels' cells and effectively neutralized her dryad nature. It's not the same way a poison would be neutralized but the outcome is similar. It is possible that this living antidote somehow considered her dryad nature to be just as... *foreign* to her body as the poison." The doctor stopped, still looking uncomfortable which did not help set Kaylas at ease.

"But her emotions... how are those connected to this?"

"There is still much we don't know about half-breeds. Many case studies have shown a split-personality mesh where one half is more dominant than the other, rather than a complete blending of elements. Personally, Lady Jewels is the first half dryad I have worked with, and there are very few cases which have been studied, but it is not unlikely that Jewels' dryad nature was in control of all of her emotions... well, except for her anger. Which is why she still exhibits that."

"And the treatment to get rid of the parasite?" Kaylas ventured.

"We, uh... We don't know how to remove it, at this time. Nor do we know if it, ah... if it can be removed safely at all. Or if removing it would even reverse the effect. We have no shaping technologies on this plane and have no experience in dealing with this type of genetic modification."

Kaylas' head fell. He'd have to go back to the humans for help? The same humans that had done this to her no less. It was outrageous, but it was inevitable.

Jewels watched Kaylas shuffle into her hospital room. "Did they debrief you on everything?" she asked. He nodded. "Good, then back to that business, do you have a pen and paper? I have a lot of stuff I want done, and I want it done quickly."

"But..." Kaylas started to protest but she cut him off with a wave of her hand.

"They can't do anything for me here so let's not dwell on the negatives and work towards the positives. Now are you ready?" Kaylas grabbed a doctor's notepad off of the desk and nodded. "I need a portal nexus. I'm getting tired of getting stuck in one plane or another. I want mobility. To be centralized in my royal suite here and completed with a rechargeable recall ring." She paused to watch him write. "That's very important now, I wanna be able to sweep myself away at any moment just by *touching* my ring. I want it covered in runes made of tiny jewels. All types, now, don't miss a single one. And I want it connected to my penthouse suite at CRF and right outside the castle of the water plane and... well, I'm not sure where else yet, but it needs to be able to be added to."

Kaylas shook his head as he wrote furiously. "And just how are we supposed to accomplish all this?"

"Don't question your Fire Lord, just make it happen. Now, next item of business, send someone to the dungeons and bring me the sword the prisoner dropped." Jewels' eyes started to glowed blue as her voice started to raise. "The sword that almost killed me. *Bring me Crusader's Protectorate!*"

A New Dawn, Part I

By Sylae and Nioca - Mar 4 2009

Nioca marched dejectedly back to his citadel. He didn't know how long he had stayed in the Blades of Avernum forum, but, odds were, Syla had settled down somewhat. The thought of having to kill her in the morning was... too much. Too much to bear. He couldn't stand it; why was this happening to him? Why her?

A small, still alert part of his brain told him to stay on guard. Odds were, Syla had killed the noob that attacked her. But there was no guarantee that it hadn't been merely scared off. However, Nioca met no resistance. He wished he had; he wished something had been there to forestall his task ahead. To get his mind off it.

Yet he arrived at the Citadel without incident. Nioca brooded as he approached the front doors.

"It's a nice night, isn't it?" A voice came from the left, startling Nioca out of his reverie. Avenger flashed to his hand as Nioca prepared to unleash fury on the poor soul who dared to cross his path. However, it was no ordinary person; it appeared the stranger had left his quarters.

"Nice?" Nioca said, his voice mimicking the sound of a wounded, cornered animal. A combination of rage and sorrow danced through the word.

"Well, the weather is. Unfortunately, it's prime noob hunting conditions, and noob mating season as well. Perhaps that's something you should have kept in mind before sending young Syla to her unfortunate demise." The stranger said cheerfully. The effect was disturbing, to say the least.

"You... you blame me?" Nioca said. His voice wasn't accusatory or enraged; it was deflated. Defeated.

"You do shoulder a small part of the blame, Mr. Galton." The stranger confirmed. "But the odds of such an attack were low to begin with, so perhaps it is fate that should be brought to question."

"Please..." Nioca pleaded, "please stop. I don't want to... can't talk about this. Not now. It's..." Nioca trailed off.

"Too much? For the great Designer that struck a devastating blow against the demons when most of Ermaria could hardly keep them at bay?" The stranger scoffed. "I hardly believe that."

"Believe what you will." Nioca responded stiffly. He turned and entered his citadel, ignoring the stranger.

The stranger, however, didn't give up that easily. "Your feelings for her ran a bit deeper than that of an old friend, didn't they?"

"You already know the answer to that; it seems nothing gets by you." Nioca respond dejectedly.

"Indeed." The stranger responded. "You should-"

"Get some sleep." Nioca cut him off. "I have no interest of discussing anything. Especially with you."

The stranger stopped short as Nioca headed off to his quarters. Then, as if nothing had happened, the stranger turned and headed back to the parlor.

Nioca awoke with a start. A cold blade had been pressed to his throat, and his room held an orange glow. "More proof that there isn't a God." Nioca snarled.

"I doubt God would listen to a murderer like you." A harsh, demonic voice came from beside him. "I took the liberty of bringing you your sword. Crusader's Protectorate, is it? I thought it'd be fitting for your execution."

Nioca turned to face his assailant. A demon. In fact, he'd bet it was the same demon that he had taken a swing at on the Netherplane. "You couldn't even have the decency to die, did you? No matter; it's something I'll have to rectify myself." Internally, Nioca started thinking of ways to defend himself. Once again, he had been caught completely off-guard.

"Well, listen to you." The demon said mockingly. "Ready to murder again, are we?"

"You have the audacity to call me a murderer?" Nioca said with a lethal whisper. "Tell me, how many people have you raped, tortured, and killed today? How many families did you tear apart? How many people did you run down in cold blood, how many innocents that never slighted you?"

"*None!* In my entire life! Your execution will be my first act of justice." The demon screeched.

"Liar! You don't even know the meaning of the word justice!" Nioca replied coldly.

"Taking the moral highground? Do you forget your little visit to our realm? Where you, by yourself, killed 73 of my people, just because they stood in your way?" The demon quaked slightly with anger. Nioca couldn't help but feel grim satisfaction. "*You sent them to the abyss!* Each one was worth more than you could ever hope to be."

"Maybe to you." Nioca snarled. "But I have a feeling that the rest of the world would disagree." Nioca leaned forward toward the demon slightly. "You and your 'people' are nothing. Worse than nothing; you're parasites! Feeding off of honest beings, souls that actually are sentient! You could only hope to acheive what they have."

"Of course. Human scum couldn't hope to understand us."

"Human scum..." Nioca echoed. "Well, I guess I know what to do the next time I see Kaylas."

"You'll never lay a hand on Kaylas." The demon responded, startled. "You're not making it out of this room alive."

"Maybe not... But death tends to be funny that way, no? Even if you do manage to kill me, it won't make a difference. I'll just come back." Nioca smiled at the demon, who shook with anger.

"No." The demon said defiantly, anger surging through its voice. "You. Will. **DIE!**"

"Not today." Nioca responded. Whilst the demon had been preoccupied with Nioca's taunts, Nioca had been running a chant through his head. With a swift motion, Nioca brought his hand up, an icy nimbus surrounding it. The demon realized its mistake too late as a bolt of ice slammed into its chest and threw it across the room. Nioca rolled out of bed and hit the floor ready. A quick glance showed Avenger to be behind the demon, and his pack with submission batons was currently under his bed; in reach, but not without inviting a fatal blow.

Nioca hated his odds. He was fighting purely with magic against a powerful, ethereal being. It was certainly manageable; but as far as fighting went, he preferred his opponent to be at a severe disadvantage. The one factor on his side was Aryll; he called for her mentally, hoping she arrived in time to finish the hellspawn before him.

The demon was infuriated. With an ear-splitting scream, it released a massive fireball. Nioca raised a magical shield, which absorbed the hit. Nioca noticed his robes had started to smolder slightly. Angered, Nioca shouted, "REPEL SPIRIT!" A bolt of holy light struck the demon dead-center, but left it unharmed.

The demon let loose a harsh laugh and formed a fiery fist. Nioca suddenly felt as if all the air around him had been sucked away. Gagging, he fell back against a dresser for balance. The demon, glowing brightly approached with Crusader's Protectorate aloft...

Aryll suddenly phased through the door as an orange shadow. Without even hesitating, she raised her hand and fired a beam of magic at the demon. The demon collapsed against the bed, stunned. Crusader's Protectorate dropped to the floor. Nioca lunged for the dropped sword, but the demon recovered. It retrieved the sword first and delivered a blow across Nioca's chest, punching between his ribs. Nioca hit the floor, the wind knocked out of him. Blood poured from the grievous wound, and his life energy flooded out.

Aryll let loose a scream of rage, one that sounded as if eldritch abominations had come to screech curses upon the demon's name. The demon stopped, and what could be seen of its eyes were wide. Aryll rushed forward, and ripped through the demon's torso with a clawed hand. As ashes flew from the wound, Aryll struck another blow across the demon's face, one claw attempting to rip out the creature's jugular. The demon cowered back from the strikes, ashes pouring from its chest and face, and the fire around it growing dim. It turned and tried to run, but Aryll's claws raked across its back. The demon hit the ground on its knees, the fire starting to sputter slightly. Not content with the damage done, Aryll struck again, this time firing an ice ray into the demon's skull. Frost erupted outwards, and the demon lost all flame. It had only a slight glow around its ashen form.

Nioca gasped out a healing spell as he coughed up blood. The wound clotted, but didn't seal. Pulling himself away from the demon, he grabbed Avenger and started a longer healing chant. Aryll stood over the ashen demon as it pathetically tried to get away. It could barely manage a crawl. Aryll watched it mercilessly, drawing out the demon's inevitable demise.

Then, without warning, a harsh language crossed the demon's mouth. Its hand took on a golden aura, and its body burst back into flames. Aryll drove her claws deep into the demon's back, but the demon responded by striking the shade with Crusader's Protectorate. Aryll backed up slightly, shaken by the blow. As Aryll prepared to attack again, the demon unleashed a torrent of flame. The fire caught in Aryll's form, and she flailed wildly to rid herself of it.

Nioca, now healed enough to stand and fight again, blessed himself. "Alright, you worthless piece of flaming garbage." He growled. "Now you're going to pay." Raising Avenger, he took a swing at the demon. It only just got Crusader's Protectorate up in time to parry, and it almost had the sword ripped from its hands. The demon backed off several paces. Nioca held Avenger parallel, and waited carefully. Aryll, recovered, and took a position on the other side of the demon. The demon kept trying to watch both of them at the same time, a fiery hatred dominating its eyes.

The demon switched its attention to Nioca. Aryll, seeing the opportunity, raised her hand to fire a ray of ice. Nioca, however, let his gaze briefly wander to Aryll, and the demon, picking up on the subtle cue, threw itself out of the way. The ice ray flew past the demon and struck Nioca, flinging him back into another dresser and nearly knocking him out cold. Avenger was sent flying across the room, landing out of Nioca's reach. Aryll paused, stunned at what she had just done. This provided an opportunity for the demon to retaliate; it launched another fireball at Aryll, completely disintegrating her form.

Nioca struggled upright, muttering another healing spell. The constant healing was draining his energy; he lacked the ability to continue the fight for much longer. The demon approached, its eyes still holding anger. "Look at you." Nioca spouted. "You can't even extract joy from this... All you are is hatred. Anger. Destruction..."

The demon didn't respond, but he could tell he was pushing the right buttons to tick it off. Nioca quickly thought of ways to get out of the situation; his energy was too low to reliably cause a finishing blow. He had a few more smite spells, at best, or one cloud of blades. But it wouldn't work; the demon could simply heal after either attack. However, an idea was forming. Under ordinary circumstances, it would never have worked; but this demon seemed so angry that such a

tactic just might have a chance at succeeding. It was a dirty tactic; but the demon didn't exactly start the fight fair, so what was it to him to end it unfairly?

"You know, the one thing that surprises me about you is that you don't eat yourselves alive." Nioca spouted off. "But I imagine that, once you run out of things to kill elsewhere, you'll eventually turn on yourselves. Tell me, how does it feel to butcher innocent souls? Does it give you a rush? Or do you just not care?"

The demon opened its mouth to reply, but Nioca didn't give it a chance. He screamed out, "CONTROL FOES!"

The odds of a successful mental attack were low, at best, especially against a demon. However, it was so riled up that its mental fortitude was shaky. Nioca's mental blast shattered its defenses, and Nioca took control of it. It startled Nioca how humanoid its mind seemed, but he quickly rallied. He could feel the demon mentally recoil in revulsion, and its anger became directed at forcing Nioca out of its mind. It was too late to stop the attack; every conscious limb came under Nioca's control, ready to do his bidding. The demon's eyes went blank.

But it wasn't going to last. Already, he could feel the demon start to force him back out. Focusing, Nioca took control of its arms. It held Crusader's Protectorate at arms length, turning the tip of the blade back on itself. He felt, with satisfaction, the demon raging against its unwilling action. Nioca then thought of the atrocities the demons had committed. Cities burned, families torn apart... Conjuring these mental images, he then forced them into the demon's mind. Each painful memory, each atrocity became irrevocably imprinted on the demon's mind. Finally, he finished with the burnt corpses of his family. "*This. This is justice.*" He mentally transmitted.

Then he committed to the final task. With a surge of venom, he willed the beast. Willed the demon to guide Crusader's Protectorate into its own heart.

A low moan left w-dueck's lips as a loud thump resounded throughout the room. "Ooohhhh..." Another loud thump, and, he struggled up, almost passing out from the splitting headache. "Never...again..." He looked around for his staff and found it propped in the corner of the room...Nioca's guest quarters? What had happened last night?

Following the repeated thumping...not the ones in his head, he finally found the source of the hellish noise. An orangish glow filtered out of the door, but w-dueck barely hesitated before kicking it open. His movement wasn't the only thing he regretted.

"Nioca, what is that fuc...NIOCA! WHAT THE make love ARE YOU DOING?" Nioca's head snapped around, and the intense energy swirling about the chamber lessened but a fraction, "WHAT THE make love IS WRONG WITH YOU!" he raised Anzamas and directed an energy bolt at him, ignoring the pain it brought. Nioca deflected it and threw a spell, but it too was deflected.

"What are you doing? Can't I carry out justice against the demons?" Nioca directed Crusader's Protectorate again, to Jewel's heart.

"Okay, now I'm making love angry." w-dueck quietly stated. He threw Anzamas down and stepped forward, "You are going to stop. Now. Before I start throwing poop around." Nioca opened his mouth, "No. Shut up. I don't care. Release Jewels before..." w-dueck stopped.

Nioca stared, "Jewels? Where the hell did you get that idea?"

"Just trust me on this one, Nioca. She's not a demon. She's not evil." His voice broke, so he just stood there, waiting, ignoring the headache.

Nioca sighed and shook his head, "You'd better be right about this." He cautiously lifted the spell.

"I am," Will stated confidently but then murmured under his breath as he turned to face the pillar of flame, "I hope." She staggered back slightly, recovering strength. "Now, Jewels, I don't know what's gotten into you but you. are. acting. seriously. screwed. up..."

Without warning, she flared, shooting herself up and over w-dueck with Crusader's Protectorate firmly in her grasp. Nioca saw her coming and managed to dodge a fatal blow, but the sword still gashed his arm.

Will swore grabbing up Anzamas and projected a wall of energy between the two. "Jewels? Stop!"

"Stay out of this, Will," she intoned flatly. "It is none of your concern." A few more harsh words and the energy barrier dissipated. Jewels let a torrent of flame fly from her hands at Nioca who was barely able to get up a protective shield before being hit. Nioca was thrown back against the wall. His head made a sickening thud upon impact and his shield almost flickered out.

Quickly w-dueck readied his own protective barrier and jumped into the flaming stream between Jewels and Nioca as he slumped to the floor. "You've made it my concern!" he yelled at her over the raging crackle while pushing it back. "Why are you trying to kill, Nioca?"

Jewels slit his eyes at him keeping up her flame. "Because he is a MURDERER!" she screamed. "Now step aside before you share his fate!" A new burst of energy to her flowing flame threw w-dueck back a few steps but it was obvious she wouldn't be able to keep it up long.

He spoke gently with concern as he stepped back towards her. "I don't understand, Jewels. Who? Who did Nioca kill?" w-dueck watched as in her frustration she strained to keep up her attack. Step by step he slid closer to her, sweat dripping from his face in the heat. Her flame started to dim and her face grimaced as she realized she was losing the battle. A few steps closer and the stream was little more than a sputtering heat wave. She was breathing heavily with her exhaustion as she gave up completely flaming down to corporeal form. w-dueck put down his shield taking the last few steps to her and put his hands on her shoulders. "Who?" he repeated softly.

Jewels heaved in anger. "Me!" she hissed. "He killed ME!" Before w-dueck had time to respond she shoved him to the side. Screaming in rage she desperately lept at the still dazed Nioca with sword held high.

"No!" w-dueck yelled sending out a bright blue ball of energy from his staff.

It struck her hard, throwing her sideways into a desk. It splintered to pieces from the impact. Crusader's Protectorate clattered to the floor across the room. Jewels sneered. "Human scum! You will regret this." She fiddled with her hands gathering energy about her.

w-dueck lifted his staff, and the chamber flashed. Jewels was gone.

Nioca managed to pick himself up, retrieved his blade and glared. "So you're just going to send a demon away like that with your fancy stick?"

"I didn't do anything. She left... by herself." w-dueck lifted the hood of his robe to hide the lone tear that rolled down his cheek, turned, and left.

Jewels picked herself up off the floor of her royal suite seething and empty handed, a string of foul expletives streaming foreignly from her delicate lips. She started pacing completely lost in her angry stupor. "Stupid, idiotic, human scum! Making me lose my sword... Who does he think he is? Who is he to *deny my vengeance?!* I have more power in my little pinkie than he has in his entire Refuge! I could crush him... I *will* crush him! *I WILL CRUSH THEM ALL!*"

A small hesitant voice said her name, "Um... Jewels?"

Her head whipped towards the sound. "WHAT!" she roared seeing Kaylas for the first time. He seemed apologetic as he glanced at Vergil who stood next to him smirking. "Why is he here?!" Jewels demanded. "How dare you let him into the royal suite... *My royal suite!*"

"He's your brother, Jewels. He cares about you, too."

"HALF-brother," Jewels spat at them, "but family means nothing to him! *NOTHING!* He is no brother of mine. Send him back to the dogs he shows his true loyalty to. I want him out of my sight! NOW!"

"Jewels," Kaylas tried, "please calm down. I need you to calm down."

"I will NOT calm down! Not until this *traitor... this MURDERER* is out of here. He *should* be put to death! *He killed my father!* Kaylas..." a new spark of fire set itself in her eyes. "I ORDER you to put Vergil to death for the murder of my father!"

Vergil had been standing with a rather bemused look on his face as if he enjoyed his sister's tantrum, but at hearing his own death sentence coming from her lips, his smile turned to a frown as he took on an alert defensive pose and eyed Kaylas warily. Kaylas shook his head returning Vergil's gaze. "No, Jewels. You are not yourself. I will not carry out an order I know you will regret making later."

Jewels fixed a steely glare on him. "You didn't seem to be so concerned when I asked for Crusader's Protectorate," she countered. "No hesitation at all when I told you my plan to go kill the escaped prisoner. The one who plagues my body with uncontrollable fears when it is able to feel fear." Jewels stepped closer to the pair, voice dripping with malice. "You know as well as I do that my heart would mourn pitifully for him if it was ever able to do so again. And yet... I seem to remember you being very supportive of *that* regrettable decision. Don't be a hypocrite, Kaylas,*follow my ORDERS!*" Kaylas made no move to do anything of the sort only staring at her

in defiance. "Fine," she stated stepping back a few paces. "If you won't do it," Jewels clenched her fist into a chokehold, *"I will do it myself!"*

Vergil gasped, hand flying to his throat and fire dimming as the oxygen around him was sucked away. Almost immediately Kaylas tackled Jewels, disrupting her spell. She screamed in rage struggling against him, but he pinned her down with his weight, securing her hands against the floor with his. *"Get off of me! Traitor! This is INSUBORDINATION!"*

Kaylas stared at her, concerned face inches from hers. If Jewels didn't know any better, she'd say he was on the verge of tears. Of course, his voice cracking while he begged added to the illusion. "Calm down, Jewels. *Please!* Please calm down..." His eyes closed and his forehead rested on hers as he continued. "This isn't like you. This isn't like you at all. We need to find a cure. I..." his voice caught in his throat and he continued in a whisper. "I *need* you to be *you* again."

"This *is* me," she whispered back, voice losing it's harshness. "It is me without fear or pity. Me without sadness or regret. Me without hope or delight... without tenderness... compassion... love. This is me with nothing to hold back my wrath." Jewels' body relaxed, her rage subsided. "So are you going to get off of me, or what?"

"Yeah," Vergil cut in. "Quit your blubbering and get off of her. Pull yourself together, flame, it's unbecoming of a soldier." Kaylas got up silently, helping Jewels up as well but avoiding eye contact with Vergil.

"So," Jewels started flatly, "I suppose you two have been talking. What does he know?" she asked Kaylas.

"Everything," Vergil answered for him matter-of-factly.

"Everything... Really?" she still looked to Kaylas for the answer who only nodded. "What exactly *is* everything, Vergil?"

With a condescending smirk, Vergil lifted a hand to start counting off things on his fingers. "Signing a trade agreement for oil that dear old dad refused, for one. So nice to see how far you're willing to go for your people. A mating with Prince Darius... That must have been fun. And look on the bright side, because the poison caused a miscarriage, you get to do it again!" Vergil started laughing while Jewels just stood there. His laughter petered out lamely. "Aw... it's no fun insulting you if it doesn't bother you."

Kaylas stepped forward annoyed. "Please, Jewels, we want to help you. And it sounds like Nalyd is the only one who can help us."

"Nalyd?" Jewels would have laughed aloud if her sense of humor was still intact. "Have you forgotten that Nalyd's incompetence is the entire reason for our problem. His poison antidote did more harm than good and he wasn't even able to accelerate the baby's growth properly..."

"Wait a minute..." Kaylas burst out. "You let Nalyd do what?"

Jewels blinked at him. "Speed up the growth of the baby in the womb. But he couldn't even manage that. It was stillborn."

Kaylas looked in disbelief at the emotionless Jewels. "And?"

"And what? That's it. He offered to dispose of it for me and I left. Even if he says he knows how to cure me I don't know that I'd trust him to do so. Besides, I doubt that w-dueck will let me just wander around the Refuge. He... interrupted me on my last venture."

"You mean trying to kill Nioca?" Vergil smirked. "Hey, I don't blame you. If Nioca sliced me open and left me for dead, I'd return the favor, too. But, yeah, w-dueck doesn't take kindly to murder, even if it is only attempted."

"We still must try," Kaylas insisted. "You could talk to him, Vergil. You could convince him that she needs his and Nalyd's help."

"What makes you think Dubya's gonna want to help?"

Kaylas met Vergil's gaze squarely. "Humans are sentimental and w-dueck is weak-minded. You could talk him into jumping off a cliff if you wanted him to."

Vergil nodded with a smile. "That I could. I *can* be very persuasive. All right then. I'll see what I can do." Kaylas made some adjustments to the portal he had installed in the suite and Vergil walked through.

Jewels turned to Kaylas "Weak-minded? As opposed to 'in love with Jewels'? So you *didn't* tell him everything then?"

Kaylas shook his head. "I don't even want to think about that..."

"I don't supposed I have a say in any of this?" Jewels asked. "I don't want to become some weird science experiment... again."

"Nope," Kaylas answered. "Not as long as you're making regrettable decisions."

"Fine, but when I wind up dead, don't say I didn't tell you so."

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w-dueck had returned to Nioca's guestroom and attempted to go back to sleep, but with his head pounding from the hangover and his heart aching over Jewels, just laying still was impossible. The tossing and turning soon became relentless pacing. Something was wrong with her. There *had* to be something wrong... some explanation, but he was at a loss. He would have went after her if he knew where she'd gone, but braving the fire plane on a hunch? After the way Kaylas had treated him, he didn't think he'd get far. He wanted to do something... *anything*... but with nothing to do Will felt helpless.

The SimpleBot hummed in through the open window and stopped in front of w-dueck. "[tt]SimpleBot package has arrived[/tt]." It flew back out to the starlit sky.

The interruption startled him. *I guess I might as well go do that. It's not as though I have anything better to do*. w-dueck thought. Hopefully it would put his other troubles out of his mind. He stood and walked out to the piers.

"Well, what kind of asshatism is this?" w-dueck said to himself. A crate, easily ten feet on a side, stood on a stone pier of Refuge Isle.

"[tt]My sensors indicate that this package will not be installable with the current configurations of the Administration Tower's entryway.[/tt]" A SimpleBot piped up.

"Well then, we will have to make ends meet." w-dueck lifted Anzamas and the wood of the box sprayed against the hastily lifted shield. By the time the smoke cleared, the contents of the box had been revealed.

"Why do they always have so much packaging on crap these days? Seriously, tarballs can take the stress! Gah, get this tarball over to the Admin Tower, and then get the contents out of it." The SimpleBot lifted the three foot tarball with precise movements and hummed off toward the Tower.

"Insert panel H into slot Q? What the...? This is an upgrade, not an entertainment center!" w-dueck rifled through the mess on the floor. "Ah, now *this* is not an entertainment center." He hefted the large three barreled weapon out of the mess. Standing on it's end, it went to his shoulders.

"[tt]The T8-47 chaingun is hardly a stand for your television, ser. 400 rounds per minute is hardly suitable for holding up stereo systems.[/tt]"

"Well, its nice to see your language module installed correctly. Although I'd ask that you not use the humor scripts until we get the voice modules up. Sarcastic robot-voices are just creepy." w-dueck used one of the many tools scattered around the room to open another panel on the SimpleBot, and deftly installed the weapon onto one of the stubs, and attached the power cord to the reactor on the inside of the machine. "We're going to have to find some way to get more ammo storage. Currently, you might have enough for five minutes of battle. Maybe we can get Nalyd to make some poisonous crap to put on them. That might save some ammo."

"There, done." w-dueck shut the panel on the machine. "How long did that take? That was a crapload of upgrades. But now you might just be a sentient being in a metal skin. Well, more like a hive being, but still..." w-dueck quirked a smile.

"Approximately three hours and fourteen minutes."

"That long? How long could you install it? You know what to do."

"Well, I would calculate a fifteen minute downtime for each bot. I don't have to talk with myself, nor do I have to figure out why the installation manual is in every language but English."

"Well then, You should get to doing that. I have to go anyway."

"Ser? You might wish to check the Isle's security. I have detected several vulnerabilities, and it appears that [abbr=Virtual Tower Access]VTA[/abbr] security has been breached. I am unable to detect anything else without accessing via a direct link."

"I'll look into it, but it may not happen for a long while." w-dueck left the room, and headed upstairs to the rotunda, and out the Tower.

The sky had brightened to morning while he had worked and the sun lit the landscape before him.

w-dueck was looking into the Spam board when he heard footsteps behind him. "Oh, Azuma! I get the feeling that I should talk with you! Why don't we get some coffee over in the Chat?"

"Um, OK..." Azuma nodded and feel into step with the ArchAdmin

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The two Authorities were sitting at one of the tables in the Chat forum. Both were silent, as the conversation had lulled off a while ago. The door opened with a bang and Vergil strode in. "Ligrev! Some coffee! On the double!"

w-dueck stood, "Azuma, I need to speak with Vergil. It was...interesting talking to you. Vergil! A word over in my channel, if you please."

Vergil grabbed his coffee and a donut and followed Will through the door labeled *w-dueck - Private.* "Dubya, I need to talk to you, too."

"Listen, alright? I don't want to talk about this for very long, so here's the thing. Something is wrong with Jewels. I don't know what, but it's like she... like she doesn't care anymore. We need to find her. Do you have any idea...?"

"Will, you'd better sit down." Vergil stated.

When Vergil was done, w-dueck stood. "Well then. I guess I'd better go find Nalyd." he stated coldly, and left.

Vergil looked down at the empty mug, half-expecting to see frost on it. *I wouldn't want to be Nalyd right now,* he thought to himself. "Hey. Wait a minute, Dubya. I'm coming with you." He hurried to catch up. *I wouldn't want to miss it either,* he chuckled under his breath.

A New Dawn, Part II

By Sylae and Nioca - Mar 4 2009

Nioca was cursing under his breath back in his citadel's parlor. Jewels. A demon. How did he miss...?

Nioca collapsed onto his couch. Once again, Aryll was gone. Summoning a shade, he had it go off and prepare some Amritae. He needed to think. Think... What now? w-dueck was a lovestruck fool... He knew it. w-dueck wanted to play hero, to 'save' Jewels. But as sure as day, Nioca could tell that it was going to blow up in their faces.

Nioca buried his face in his hands. Why? Was there some sort of hex on the Refuge? How could Jewels possibly be...?

"Your Amritae, massster." The shade brought a glass of the glowing substance. Nioca grabbed it and downed half with a single gulp. He felt his extraneous thoughts fade away, and his focus sharpen. w-dueck didn't want Nioca to kill Jewels? Fine. Let him have his own way, however deluded it may be. But he sure as hell wasn't going to let her do harm to w-dueck. Not if he had anything to say about it.

"Sulking, are we?" The stranger sat down next to Nioca.

"Why the hell not?" Nioca responded bitterly. "Someone I used to care about lost its baby, I have to kill someone close to me in a few hours, and someone I thought I knew turns out to be a demon." Nioca took a sip of Amritae. "So tell me, why shouldn't I be bitter?"

"It is a pity about Miss Prescot." The stranger acquiesced. "Though I'd think you'd be by her side."

"I... I can't take it. That's not..." Nioca shook his head. "I can't stand to see her suffering like that."

"You owe her." The stranger commented. "Maybe it shouldn't be about you this time."

Nioca stared off into the distance. "I know... I know..." He murmured.

"Well, Mr. Galton?" The stranger urged.

"Why do you even care?" Nioca snapped.

"I don't. But I know how sentimental you humans can get. How emotional you can be. Not that it's a bad thing, not at all." The stranger replied smoothly. "It's you I'm interested in. But in order for you to be of any use to me, you have to be in good health. Physically and emotionally. So if you have extraneous baggage, it's going to put a damper on my plans."

"You talk about humans as if you weren't one." Nioca scoffed.

"Some would say I'm not, Mr. Galton." The stranger stated bluntly. Nioca gave him an odd look. "I assure you, I am human. Just... evolved. Evolved beyond your ways."

"I see." Nioca said. He watched a fire dance in the fireplace.

"Are you going to visit her?" The stranger asked.

Nioca paused. Finally, taking a deep breath, he stated rhetorically, "Why not?" Getting up, he meandered toward the guest quarters. The stranger followed at a distance as Nioca opened the door cautiously to Syla's room. Inside, he could see her curled into a fetal position on the bed, with the covers draped gently over her, covering all but the top of her head.

Nioca balked. It wasn't a good idea; who knew what havoc would be unleashed if she woke up? Still, as if dragged forward, Nioca approached. Cautiously, he sat down on the side of the bed, watching her sleep. He fought back tears; when she woke, she wouldn't be Syla. She'd be a ravenous monster, foaming at the mouth and out to tear into whoever had the misfortune of crossing her path.

Nioca ever-so-gently reached out and pulled the blanket away from her face. He knew what he'd see; Syla's face, disfigured into a hideous shadow of what it once was. He closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. Then he opened his eyes to see the damage.

But there wasn't any. No grotesque transformation at all; indeed, she looked pristine. Startled, Nioca leapt up from the bed. How? He had seen a noob bite transformation; at the stage Syla had been at, it was incurable and irreversible. Yet it had been reversed. Syla was whole. Intact. Sleeping gently as if nothing had ever happened.

Nioca was at a loss. A maelstrom of hope, shock, and disbelief welled up inside him, overwhelming him. Could it be? Was it real?

"You see, Mr. Galton, working with me has a few benefits. Humility aside, I possess powers beyond what you can imagine. Even if you disagree with the magic being used, you cannot deny the results." The stranger got Nioca's attention. "But for now, I'd recommend letting her sleep. She needs her rest."

"She..." Nioca began, stunned. "She'll make a full recovery?"

"Of course." The stranger replied simply.

Nioca turned back to the sleeping Syla. Then he got up and left the room with the Stranger. Closing the door behind him, he addressed the Stranger cautiously. "Not to sound rude, but what's the catch? What do you want in return?"

"Hospitality. Trust. Maybe being open to my ideas." The stranger said. "As I said, you have the potential to be useful to me." The stranger stalked off. "Very useful indeed."

Nioca walked out into the fields of Calamity Refuge. A rather plain shortsword sheath hung by his side; he'd need to have one crafted befitting of the sword it now carried. Still, it felt good to have Crusader's Protectorate back; it was one more sign that things were finally starting to go right again.

A google vehicle landed at the station. Nioca watched curiously as w-dueck and Vergil got out of the vehicle and marched toward the Admin Tower. As he watched, he saw w-dueck notice him and change course straight for him. Nioca came forward to meet him. "And where were you?"

"Trying to fix this mess." w-dueck stated. "And failing. We were hoping Nalyd could fix the damage done to-"

"Damage?" Nioca laughed. "Is that what we're calling Jewels little demonstration now?"

"Actually, I'm rather upset she didn't stab you, you-" Vergil degraded into a small string of obscenities. "After what you did on the Fire Plane, intent on murdering Jewels... not to mention the other 73 deaths by your hand. You deserve to die for that." Vergil's eyes burned.

"You worthless hypocrite. You're bitching about a mere 73 deaths after the countless thousands that died in Ermaria?!" Nioca spat, angered. "73 deaths isn't *enough*! It doesn't even begin to cover the damage inflicted by Jewels and her kind!" Nioca stepped closer. "They were the ones that wanted war on Ermaria. Guess what? They got it. And in a war, there are losses."

"I'm on your side! And so is Jewels. We wanted to stop the killing, not even it out!" Vergil snapped back. "Why do you think the war ended? Because of you? No! Jewels did that... right before*you sliced h...*"

"Stop! STOP!" w-dueck shouted. "Look, I wanted to ask you whether you happened to know how to cure whatever's going on with Jewels."

"I can't fix nature, w-dueck." Nioca snarled.

"No, it's a parasite that's causing Jewels to behave oddly. It's the antidote Nalyd created." w-dueck took a pleading tone. "I know that you find Fire Elementals... That you have a grudge against them. But please. Think of Jewels. She's not a monster, she's a decent person with thoughts. Dreams. Hope. *You know that.* Deep down... I think you know that."

Nioca stared w-dueck in the eyes for a moment. What he saw startled him; a desperate plea reigned in w-dueck's gaze. With a look like that, it almost surprised Nioca that w-dueck wasn't on his knees. But then, they all had secrets to hide. Dark corners of their history. And now, someone was taking a flashlight to those dark corners.

Nioca looked down for a moment. Then he returned w-dueck's gaze. "I can't help her."

"You can't..." w-dueck said, a slow rage rising in his voice, "Or you won't?"

"I'm not a Shaper, w-dueck." Nioca replied. "I only have a passing knowledge of the Shaping arts, and no competency in them. Whatever antidote Nalyd gave her likely is designed to resist magic and other such removal attempts. My powers won't be able to effect that. So unless you want me to bleed her dry, which has a nasty tendency to be fatal to the person undergoing it and has almost no odds of success, *there's nothing I can do.*"

w-dueck stared back at Nioca. It was clear that Nioca's explanation wasn't believed. "You know what, I didn't realize what a sadistic bastard you were until now. Thanks for nothing." w-dueck started to walk away.

Nioca looked down again. He didn't know how to cure Jewels, if it was indeed curing she needed. But maybe... There was another option. What if he was wrong about Jewels? He knew that Jewels would be an inevitable disaster. But a tiny spot of doubt kept getting his attention. Finally, he made a last-minute decision. Play it w-dueck's way; and when it went wrong, he'd be first in line to remind him who held reservations about it. "I said *I* couldn't cure her. But we both know someone who might."

w-dueck turned around to face him. "Who?"

"It's, um..." Nioca stopped. What was his name again?

"Who?" w-dueck pressed urgently.

Finally giving up on a name, Nioca jabbed a thumb over his shoulder toward the citadel and said, "Him."

"You mean...?" w-dueck questioned.

"Did someone call?" The stranger came striding up.

Nioca gave him an odd look. "How do you keep doing that?"

"I pay attention, Mr. Galton." The stranger stated, making Nioca wince.

"Well, w-dueck has some business to discuss with you." Nioca said, a smile playing across his face. Then he turned to w-dueck. "Have fun."

Nioca walked off toward the Geneforge forum. He had his own business to attend to. The GeneNexus wouldn't modify itself.

The stranger raised an eyebrow. "Business?" he intoned.

w-dueck began uncomfortably, "Um, yes. Do you think... maybe we could talk privately?" The stranger nodded and headed back towards the citadel while w-dueck followed.

The stranger started helping himself to Nioca's Amritae when w-dueck came around the corner of the parlor. "Ah, Mr. Dueck. Come, take a seat." The stranger offered. w-dueck sat down hesitantly. "Amritae?"

"No. Um..." w-dueck seemed nervous. "I heard that you might be able to help with something. You see-"

"Yes, yes, I know. It's why you should never mess with Shaping." The stranger cut him off.

"You- you know?" w-dueck asked, agape.

"Of course. Mr. Galton made a mistake not confiding in you." The stranger stated bluntly. "But I'm sure he has his reasons. Every man does. Just as you do."

"I... I'd do anything for her..." w-dueck started solemnly. "Can you help her?"

"I could." The stranger said. "But I don't see why."

"Why not?" w-dueck demanded.

"Well, you see, such a procedure is complicated. Draining. Tedious. And, quite frankly, it doesn't hurt Miss DeForestal to keep the parasite in her system. My only interest is in Mr. Galton, I'm afraid, and curing Miss DeForestal is too much effort for naught." The stranger took a swig of Amritae.

"You'd be doing the right thing!" w-dueck protested.

"It's funny. Things that often are considered the right thing often do more harm than those things that are not. And, quite frankly, I can see leaving Miss DeForestal alone doing a lot of good for the Fire Plane." The stranger stated succinctly.

w-dueck looked at his feet. Then he looked back up with an idea. "What if I made it worth your while?"

"How so?" The stranger asked. It was impossible to tell whether or not he was at all interested.

"I keep a journal. All my travels... after all you look into the Designers' pasts, right? Well, I'd be giving you my entire history. All in exchange for Jewels." w-dueck said fervently.

"I see." The stranger stated. "Bring me the journal. If I find it satisfactory, I'll cure Jewels."

"Good! I'll go get it. Where do you-?"

"Here. I'll get things set up." The stranger stated, cutting him off. w-dueck bolted out of the room, and the stranger sighed.

A ball of blue flame streaked upwards through the sky.

"That's Vergil's signal for an all clear. It should be safe to come down." Kaylas stood next to Jewels gazing out her bedroom windows once again. The sun rising in the east cast it's golden rays about the whole of the Refuge, brightening the landscape and glistening off the pond.

Jewels made no move to leave. Instead she posed a question. "Why am I here, Kaylas?"

He gave her a funny look. "To be cured, of course."

"No. I mean why did I come here? Why do I stay here? Why do I even bother with this place at all? It is so small, so insignificant. And yet... yesterday I would have been content to never leave. Why is that?"

Kaylas shook his head at her. "Don't ask me. I have no idea why you like this place."

"It's funny... or at least I think it is... but without my emotions, I'm starting to forget the reasoning behind them. It just doesn't make sense any more. I was willing to protect Nioca after he tried killed me and now they're still willing to help me after I turned on them? It's just not rational."

"Perhaps..." Kaylas offered. "Perhaps love is not rational."

"Could *you* love them?" Jewels turned to him searchingly. "Could you love the humans?" Kaylas was caught off guard and started to stammer. Jewels continued, turning back to the window. "Nioca calls us demons, monsters capable of only hatred and destruction. It is how I see myself now. For me it is true. I **am** a monster." He tried to protest but she waved him off. "But you... our people... the living fire is capable of love, right?" He nodded taking her hand in his. "Then why not love the humans, too? It can't be that difficult or different from loving our own."

Kaylas was at a loss for words. "I... I just don't know," was all he managed.

Jewels' mind reviewed the last day, stopping on her confrontation with Nioca yet again. There was so much new information... so many... *atrocities* that her people... that *she* had committed against the humans. For in her mind's eye, she really had done them all. She had thought of little else while she had waited. Pouring over the countless deaths of innocents, their torture for the sake of hearing them scream, the mindless hatred and destruction yet thoughtful and calculated malice aimed towards causing the greatest suffering possible. She didn't know how much of it was actually true or how much Nioca had just made up to justify his own hatred for her species but more vividly than any dream, they were real to her. It almost seemed a gift now, to not have any other emotion.

"What if I don't want to be fixed?" Jewels asked, ready to decide against it. "What benefit is there in emotion for a monster?"

Kaylas' tone was incredulous as he took her face in his hands. "You are **NOT** a monster! I refuse to believe that! Jewels, your heart is *who you are.* You have no idea how it pains me to see you stripped of it. Your love for these... people? I have never understood it, and I don't think I ever

will. But I know enough to know that it is *good*. Jewels... *you are good.* And I am going to do*everything* in my power to make you whole again! Even if that means putting you in a coma to get it done." He smiled at the words as if in jest but the look in his eye belied the truth behind them. Jewels would be whole again. One way or another. Best to go in with eyes wide open.

Another fiery blue ball sped past the window, closer this time. Vergil could be seen just a few yards away from the base of the Admin Tower. Kaylas caused a ball of fire to glow brightly in his hands, grow dim, and then bright again. "He's getting impatient. He wants to talk to us."

"Just how long have you known my brother?"

"Oh... a couple hundred years, give or take a decade."

"Good friends then?"

"Yeah, I guess you could say that."

Jewels nodded as she silently led the way to the first floor deep in thought. She wondered if Kaylas was really trustworthy given their past together. They were close... too close.

Vergil hurried to the Admin Tower door when he saw them coming out.

"Well," Jewels asked, "did you find Nalyd? Can he reverse whatever his antidote has done to me?"

"Um... Not exactly," came Vergil's reply. "Dubya and I looked everywhere. Nalyd's no where to be found. Records show that he left almost immediately after your... procedure. And he hasn't been back since."

"Perhaps he'd had enough drama for one day," Jewels remarked moving on. "Why did you call us down here then?"

"Well, Nioca has this friend..."

"Wait a minute," Kaylas cut in. "We're putting our trust in one of *Nioca's friends*? How do we know he won't just kill her?"

Vergil looked at him narrowly. "Don't interrupt again... please." Kaylas yielded demurely. "I use the term 'friend' very loosely. They're about as close as, say, you and Nalyd. w-dueck doesn't exactly trust this guy either, but says he can do it. Dubya went off with him to try to convince him to actually go through with it. Right about now it's our best bet, and I don't see any other options unless you want to wait around for Nalyd to get back."

"No," Jewels spoke up. "There's no guarantee that Nalyd would be able to help, or even if he'd admit it if he couldn't. If this stranger has the ability... I'm willing to let him try." She looked to Kaylas who nodded in support.

"Follow me then." Vergil took off to the east.

"That should work..." Nioca muttered to himself. It was an educated guess, but Nioca's forte was not GeneCraft; whether the modifications worked or not remained to be seen.

"Massssster." A shade hissed in Nioca's ear. Nioca jumped, startled. "They are gathering in the Citadel."

Nioca winced slightly. "Ah. Alright, let's go."

"...you must understand, Mr. Dueck and Miss DeForestal, that, despite sedation, this ritual will be extremely painful. So, if anyone wants to leave the room or back out, now is the time." The stranger lectured. He stood next to a large table that had been moved to the center of the Audience Chamber of Nioca's citadel. "That won't be necessary, Mr. Galton." He amended, noting the new arrival.

Nioca's hand left the hilt of Crusader's Protectorate as he shut the door to the audience chamber behind him. "Fair enough."

The stranger had turned back to Jewels. "Any objections?" Jewels shook her head in a sluggish manner. "Good. I suggest none of you interrupt me, for Miss DeForestal's sake."

The stranger closed his eyes and spread his arms. All light in the room went out, plunging it into total darkness. Then, as an unearthly chant filled the air, sickly yellow tendrils snaked out from the Stranger's hands. They slowly traveled, illuminating the room in a yellowish light. The tendrils slowly started wrapping themselves around Jewels' form, entangling themselves like a golden net.

Six more tendrils of light, blue this time, shot from the Stranger's hand. The tendrils bound themselves to Jewels' ankles, wrists, midriff, and throat, effectively holding her in place. Then the glow of the room changed; dark motes of energy that seemed to draw all light floated over Jewels. Hundreds of tiny specks hovered, forming a vaguely humanoid shape to match Jewels position.

The stranger stopped chanting. For a moment, everything froze.

Then, the motes of anti-light floated gently downward and melted right into Jewels' body. The reaction was instantaneous; Jewels convulsed, straining against her bonds, groaning in pain. The yellow tendrils of light turned red, and a smell that could only be described as rotting flesh filled the air. The red bands of light then sank partway into Jewels' skin. She let out a scream of agony, thrashing as the spell worked its way through her system. Her hands started shaking and trembling, her palms forced upwards. A dark sludge forced its way through the skin of her palms, oozing off onto the table.

w-dueck turned away, unable to watch. Vergil stared, unable to look away. Kaylas looked as if he wanted to act, but lacked any appropriate action. Even Nioca felt slightly ill at the sight of it.

The tendrils of red light flashed yellow again. Jewels let out a howl of pain as more of the substance forced its way out of her body.

Then it stopped. Jewels collapsed against the table, breathing laboriously. The tendrils of light faded, as did her bonds. Vergil and w-dueck rushed to her side.

Jewels trembled uncontrollably. Pain still radiated through her entire body as she gasped for breath. She could think of nothing else. There *was* nothing else. Just Jewels, her breath, and the

pain. It subsided slowly and eventually she became aware of her other senses. Someone was calling her name. She opened her eyes sitting up slowly. To her left, the stranger. To her right, Vergil stood at her side. "Jewels?" he asked hesitantly, "How do you feel, Jewels?" The question sounded so trivial and yet... she knew it was important... the most important question in the world.

How do I feel? she repeated to herself waiting... hoping for an answer. *Besides like I've just been put through a meat grinder? I... I...* Vergil's concerned face filled her view as memories started coming back. And her anger rose. She fixed him with a steely glare as she swung her legs over the edge of the table to face him. "I feel..." she began slowly, "like you... are a *complete jerk*!" She deftly slapped him across the face and yelled, *"You inconsiderate! Arrogant! Ill-bred monstrosity!"* To which Vergil just smirked. Jewels grew a fireball in her hands, throwing it at his grinning face. Frustratingly it did little more than muss his hair so she slapped him again. "That's for all those *wiseaaaahhhh...*" Her words were cut short as a blow to the back sent her flailing into Vergil's arms whose eyes were wide in disbelief.

Angry voices were raised in protest as Jewels turned to face Nioca across the table holding a blood stained Crusader's Protectorate aloft. "It didn't work!" he yelled with venom. "I *told* you w-dueck. You *can't. Fix. Nature!* And I am *not* going to sit by while she hurts anyone else!"

Everything came flooding into her mind at once. The fear of his hatred, the guilt of her actions, and the horror of all the graphic images he had forced on her. It overwhelmed her as she stumbled backwards into Vergil screaming and clutching her head as if squeezing could make it stop. She was vaguely aware of Will running to step in front of her and Kaylas unsheathing his sword. "NO!" she managed to scream as Nioca parried a blow from him, the clashing of their steel ringing in her ears. "Don't touch him!" she pleaded as Vergil grew a blue ball of flame in his hand. "Everyone leave Nioca be!" she begged as Will raised his staff, an administrative banning spell on his lips.

And then there was silence. The yelling stopped, the clashing ceased, the chanting hushed. Everyone was lined up, unmoving at the north wall save Nioca and the stranger who moved to stand there himself. "As you wish it, Miss DeForestal," he intoned with a raised eyebrow. "They are now only spectators."

Jewels glanced, panic-stricken, from the stranger to Nioca who started advancing on her, eyes still livid with hatred. She staggered backwards a step still woozy from the whole ordeal, not helped be the new blood loss, but she made no attempt to heal herself. "Nioca..." she began tearfully, voice cracking in fear, "I'm so sorry... It's no wonder you... why you hate me. I... I don't blame you. I... I deserve to be hated."

"Yes..." he seethed. "Yes you do. You're a liar!" She continued shambling backwards as he quickly closed the distance between them, lifting his sword to strike. " Your whole life has been nothing but *one. big. lie!*" He slashed at her with each word. Jewels raised her arms in an attempt to shield herself. She cried out as each strike left a diagonal gash on her forearms. Involuntarily her body pulsed with heat and he took a defensive pose conjuring a shield. "Go ahead demon. Take a shot!"

But Jewels refused to fight back, instead taking the opportunity to run to the other side of the room putting the table between them. "Please, Nioca! Please don't kill me. Don't... Don't send me back to the abyss. You don't know what it's like there."

Nioca ignored her preparing a smite spell. "I can't believe I *trusted* you." He threw it at her viciously.

She dove out of the way and continued to back away on her arms, slipping in her own blood. "I can't help what I am, Nioca. No one can choose that."

"I can't. believe. we *ALL trusted you!*" Nioca nimbly jumped over the table backing her into a corner.

Jewels was losing hope as he advanced, sword raised. "This won't bring them back! I... I can't bring anyone back, but I... *I can leave*," she tried desperately. "I'll leave the refuge, Nioca! You'll never have to see me again. I know I don't deserve to live but *please*, the abyss is unbearable!"

Nioca paused, but only long enough to whisper in merciless delight, "Good." Jewels watched in despair as Crusader's Protectorate came down at her head, the fire in her eyes reflecting in the steel. There was nothing left to do but wait for the blow. A flash of light. A clang of metal. A sickening thud. The fire in Jewels' eyes flickered out.

She couldn't believe she was still alive. And she couldn't believe the look on Nioca's face. One of unbelief, concern, and regret. Crusader's Protectorate vibrated slightly as it stuck out of the wall a few feet away. A bolt of energy from the doorway had sent it there. The hand that had conjured it was still raised. The figure walked silently towards them with determination and chanted a spell of healing over Jewels. With eyes slit the woman glared at Nioca briefly then turned to leave.

"Syla, let me explain," Nioca began, but she cut him off with a wave of her hand.

"I don't even know who you are anymore," she whispered fiercely. "I'm going back to bed."

When she had left the room, Nioca looked back down at Jewels who hadn't dared to move. After a minute of thoughtful silence he offered his hand. Jewels took it hesitantly and let Nioca help her up. Her eyes searched his for any hint of goodwill but nothing discernible was there. "Truce?" he asked overly loud.

Jewels nodded daring to smile. "Truce."

Surprisingly Nioca put his arm around her in a hug but whispered in her ear out of the others' sight, so quiet she could barely hear him herself, "w-dueck thinks you're cured. Like you can fix your nature. I know otherwise. You can't fight it forever. Sooner or later, that bloodthirst, that hatred that's lying just beneath the surface... it's going to come back. And when it does, the last thing you'll ever see is me cutting you down where you stand."

It was far less than ideal, but at this point Jewels was willing to take anything. She couldn't help herself as she threw her arms around him in return. It was definitely not what he expected but he couldn't spoil the illusion now. "I'll make it up to you, Nioca," Jewels whispered back tears running down her face. "I *will* prove myself to you."

A sharp, steady clapping was heard from the wall of spectators. "Bravo, Mr. Galton. Quite... entertaining, to be sure. I think we're done here." The stranger moved to leave as the rest of the spectators moved to circle Jewels. Nioca backed away as they gathered round, heading towards the door, too, but not leaving.

Vergil was the first to Jewels. She punched him in the arm. "You're still a jerk."

"Yeah," he laughed, "but I'm *your* jerk." They hugged warmly, literally warming up the room as they laughed, trying to see who could squeeze the tightest.

Next up was Will. Neither could stop their tears as they embraced. "It wasn't your fault," she whispered. "I'm so sorry, Will. I know it wasn't your fault."

"But you *should* be safe here," he insisted. "I... I should have..."

"No," she cut him off. "Don't you *dare* blame yourself, you understand me?" She took his face in her hands staring at his eyes... those unforgettable eyes. "Understand?" she urged.

He nodded closing his eyes and she kissed his forehead before letting him go.

Kaylas stood a bit dejectedly but he wrapped his arms around Jewels the second she opened hers. "Thank you," she murmured. "Thank you for sticking with me." After a few moments she looked up at him playfully. "Up for a group hug?" she joked.

Kaylas' eyes went wide as he glanced over at Will. "Um, I don't think I'm ready for that."

"You will be," Jewels cooed. "One of these days you will be. I'll make sure of it." Jewels glanced back over at Nioca who almost looked like he was about to be sick and headed for the door.

Everyone filed past Nioca to leave. Will and Kaylas doting over Jewels while Vergil hung back. When the others were out of hearing range Vergil grabbed Nioca by the collar and hissed, "Jewels only tried to kill you when she could feel only anger. What's *your* excuse?" With that he shoved Nioca back leaving a smoldering hand print on his robe.

For Good Measure

By Jewels - Mar 7 2009

Stop smiling. ... I can't. ... You look like a dufus and my cheeks hurt. ... So what? Suck it up. ... Ingrate. ... Party pooper. It felt good to be talking to herself again, even if it was petty bickering. Jewels smiled all the more at the thought. *Ow! For the love of cookies, cut it out! ... Oh, come on. You know you like it. ... Yeah, sure. And I suppose next you'll want me to admit that I missed you and that I'm glad to have you back. ... You don't have to admit it. I know. ... Oh, shut up. Just. Shut. Up.* While one half of her pretended to pout, Jewels kept on smiling. For the moment, she was happy. Happy to be alive, happy to be whole, happy to be the center of attention... and be able to enjoy it. It felt good to be happy. But Jewels was tired. So tired. Every inch of her body

still shuddered from the pain of the stranger's spell. It must have been evident because all three of her companions were urging her to get some rest.

"But I don't want to go to sleep," she protested.

"Jewels," Vergil admonished, "you can barely keep your eyes open. You need to go lie down."

"And you're shaking," Kaylas put in. "After what you just went through, you need to rest."

"I feel fine," she argued. "Just give me some coffee and I'll be fine."

"I don't think so," Will shook his head at her. "You are going to your room, and that's final. Come on, I'll personally make sure you get there."

Kaylas frowned. "I could take her to her room," he offered.

"No," Will insisted giving Kaylas a scowl. "I need to go to my place anyway. I can take her."

"Well..." Kaylas stammered, "Maybe I should go with you..."

Vergil put a hand on Kaylas's shoulder. "Aw... come on, man. Don't leave me all alone here. Dubya can handle it."

"Yeah, Kaylas," Will jumped in, "I can handle it. You stay here and keep Vergil company. Don't worry about it. I'll make sure she gets all tucked in..."

Jewels hit Will's arm with a swat. "Cut it out," she mouthed at him. "OK, fine," she said aloud putting her hands on her hips, "I'll go to my room. But I'm not going to like it. The Administrative Fire Lord getting grounded?" she mumbled. "It's just unheard of."

Laughs and final hugs were exchanged before Jewels walked off towards the Admin. Tower with Will. He headed for the elevator once they got inside but Jewels held him back. "Let's take the stairs," she urged.

"You're stalling."

"Please?" Will rolled his eyes while smiling and offered his arm. "Wrapped around my little pinkie," Jewels quipped in a sing song voice while taking his arm. They started up the stairs chatting casually.

"You know," Will hesitated as they neared the top, "you never did answer my question."

"Which question?" she asked innocently.

"You know... *the question.*" Will stopped climbing stairs and waited expectantly but sighed at Jewels' confused look. Then on the seventh step of the twenty third flight of stairs, Will got down on one knee taking her hand in his. "Jewels, will you marry me?"

Jewels stared at him just as dumbfounded as the first time he had asked. "I... You... You don't know what you're asking." she stammered. "You don't want to marry me."

"Yes. Yes I do," he insisted getting up to stare her in the face.

Jewels pulled away from him and started back up the stairs at a quicker pace. "Trust me, Will. You *don't* want to marry me." A nagging fear crept into her mind. "My life is *really* messed up

right now. It's not exactly something you'd want to be a part of." Suddenly she regretted asking to take the stairs.

Will started after her, struggling to keep up. "You mean like what we just went through?" he asked sounding hurt. "Jewels, *I was there.* I've seen you at your worst. After everything I still want to be with you."

Jewels spun around whispering harshly, "And what if I turn on you next time?" A tear rolled down her cheek. She wiped at it as she started climbing again.

"There won't be a next time," Will reassured. "You wouldn't do that."

"How do you know?" Jewels burst out, her voice catching in her throat. Nioca's words still rang in her ears. *You can 't fight it forever.* "How can anyone know? I can't even be sure."

Will had managed to get in front of her making her look at him. "I don't care, Jewels. I want to be with you through it all, no matter what." His sincerity touched her. The truth in his eyes beckoned to her, but still she fought against giving in.

"I'm too old for you," she stammered out frustrated. "There's over a century between us. Talk about robbing the cradle..." she tried to concentrate on the stairs.

Will was trying to walk backwards now, or rather run to keep up and keep her face in view. "Age doesn't matter to me, you know that."

"And what about when you start turning all wrinkly and gray and I still look young as I do today?" Will smiled big raising an eyebrow. "Well, OK, so that's not a very good argument. But what about... what about my duties? I'm going to be practically married to my work once I learn how to run things. I'm going to be gone to the fire plane all the time and you're not going to be able to keep up a fire protection all the time." *Only one flight of stairs to go.* She passed him again as he answered.

"I'll figure it out, Jewels. Whatever it takes as long as we're together." He tripped rather ungracefully on his robe as he tried to take the last steps a few at a time.

Jewels sighed going back to help him up. "And what about Darius?" she whispered. "He... He still needs an heir."

Will frowned. "Well, Darius can just go shove it up his..."

"Will!" Jewels cut him off. "I *can't* let the war start again. I'll have to... I'll..." She looked at him helplessly. "I have to. Until it works. No matter how long it takes. My people depend on me. I have to think of them. It wouldn't be fair to you." She turned away walking to her door and fumbled with her keys.

He put a hand on her back. "Just... just say yes and let me worry about the rest. I'll deal. Jewels..." he leaned in close to whisper in her ear, "I love you." Jewels mumbled something too quiet for him to hear. "What?" he asked hopefully.

Jewels shook her head. "Nothing," she whispered as she wiped away another tear. She managed to get the door open and turned around to face him though she still kept her gaze down. "Never mind. I... I'm really tired. Goodnight, Will."

He looked lost, desperate even, for an answer but he didn't push her further. "Goodnight."

Jewels closed the door and locked it resting her forehead against it while she strained to hear the sounds on the other side. A full minute passed before she heard his footsteps start to leave. When they faded out completely she turned the deadbolt for good measure before she dared to repeat her mumbled question. "But why?"

She was alone... the one thing she didn't want to be. The one thing she had been fighting against... because alone meant there were no distractions from her thoughts.

The sobs came slowly as everything she had been holding back surfaced. Everything that her blessed pride had not allowed her to let out in front of her friends. She mourned the loss of her baby. For the first time she really mourned. Not that she'd had much time to get attached but still, after giving birth, she felt the loss. She wished she would have held it, even if it was deformed. Now she just felt all the more empty. She stumbled forward to the fireplace setting it alight as she knelt holding her stomach and rocking herself. How heartless she had been... how cold. Maybe... maybe she could ask Nalyd about it. Have a funeral... something.

Her mind started to stray as she watched the fire dance in front of her. She reached out to feel the flames musing over their destructive capabilities and how she had almost used them to destroy. What if Nioca was right? What if she lost control again... if she couldn't fight herself forever? She'd never be able to forgive herself if she killed anyone. *What do you mean 'if'?* The accusing thought reverberated in her mind as loud as any normal voice would have. *You already have!* The vision of Nioca's family filled her mind. Jewels screamed aloud in anguish, "No! It wasn't me!" *Oh yes it was.* The scene played of them pleading for mercy when a hand... *her* hand raised in flame. "Stop!" she screamed but was powerless to halt her thoughts. They writhed in agony before her eyes as flame flew from her fingertips and laughter rang in her ears. Her own gleeful laughter. *My laughter!* "No!" Jewels screamed again squeezing her head to no avail. It played in her mind again and again in every gruesome detail.

She hadn't realized that she had started a constant scream until the loud pounding on her door startled her enough to stop. "Jewels!" Will's concerned voice echoed from the other side. "Open the door!" The sound of keys jingling and the knob turning in vain led to more pounding before he shouted again. "Open the door, Jewels! Let me in!" *Pound, pound.* "Let me help you!"

A moment passed where she allowed herself to imagine it. How comforting it would be to let him hold her. How soothing to cry in his arms. To just sink in and never leave... to never be alone again... but she didn't deserve it. "No," she cried trying to back away from the door. "You can't help me. No one can." She was backed against the fireplace and then climbed in wishing her skin would burn like that of the people she saw in her mind. "I'm a monster!" Jewels screamed it at him as if he should already know. As if it should be obvious. "Why?" she whispered again knowing he couldn't hear her. "How could you possibly love me?"
Nioca *was* right. One day she would wind up killing someone she loved. She couldn't fight her nature forever... or could she?

Will raised Anamzas letting out a giant blast of lightning. The door blew away in a flash of light. He hurried into the room but he was too late. She was gone.

Avoidance Faliure

By Azuma - Mar 7 2009

Azuma slammed the cab door as he walked out. There was a lag accident on the Google highway, requiring the cab to go through the Yahoo underway, which turned out to be worse, the driver took another detour but the cab went defunct. Bad scripting the driver says, leading Azuma to hail out a new Google cab, which inevitably led him back to the Google highway then finally to Refuge Isle.

He walked slowly to the tele-platform he used to get in the Refuge and used it. He was in the same spot, near the Spam Forum but not near enough. The entrance was on the other side. He didn't try to sneak this time, he just went on, slow, clearly exasperated. Nothing could have prepared him when he saw w-dueck standing on the entrance. He was about to trudge of when the staff w-dueck held glowed, notifying him that Azuma is near him.

"Ah, Azuma, rumors were that you came back. " w-dueck greeted him.

"Err..." Azuma was cringing. *I guess that camera has to wait.*

"Well? There's a coffee machine loaded in the Chat. We could get some while we... talk." w-dueck's staff flared up a deadly red.

"Uh. Sure!" Azuma forced a smile.

"Shall we then?" w-dueck ported them to the chat.

It was a a nice place. Clean, the coffee machine never went empty, no noobs, and the scent of Fluffy Turtle perfume No. 9 was in the air. It was peachy, until w-dueck locked the room.

"Now..." w-dueck's staff flared up again.

Azuma was sweating beads as he watched w-dueck move from one spot to another. Will he torture him? Unleash a thousand fluffy turtles to him? Send him to the darkness of the pit? Or make him eat spam?! He hoped for the last one.

w-dueck noticed Azuma's nervousness. He furrowed his eyebrows then sighed.

"Look Azuma, I'm not here to torture you nor unleash a thousand fluffly turtles nor send you to the darkness of the pit nor even forcibly feed you spam. I'm troubled enough to do those... times are hard here at the Refuge." w-dueck sat aside the counter near the coffee machine and took a cup.

"Err..."

"To be frank, I need help. The Refuge itself need help." w-dueck's voice trailed off, as if deeply thinking.

Azuma was quiet and looking down on his hand that were making a small pyramid on the table. This was the sort of thing that he was hoping to avoid. w-dueck noticed him.

"If you don't want to help Azuma, it's ok. But know you'll be part of the cause on why a community has fallen." w-dueck took a sip of off his cup.

"That's just low w-d. I'm not a heartless bastard you know..." Azuma crossed his arms against his torso. "Still, to be honest. This was the sort of thing I was avoiding. I don't want to get involved in anything serious but..." Azuma walked off and got himself a cup of coffee too. The sword on his belt glowed blue but w-dueck didn't notice.

I know, I know! I'm part of this community too. But... you know why I can't join them.

w-dueck took note on how Azuma is just staring at his cup

*Fine then! If I *kill* them all, I'm holding you responsible.*

w-dueck was just plain weirded out by Azuma's strainious staring at the single cup of mixed solution of singed coffee beans mixed with surplus supply of water.

Azuma took a sip and nodded with streaks of possible regret over his face.

w-dueck sighed. "Thanks. It does mean a lot." w-dueck finished his cup and unlocked the room. "Well, I suppose we ought to return to the Refuge." He said. His tone was laced with positiveness though only slightly so.

"Wait a sec." Azuma waved his hand around, signaling w-dueck to stop. "Lemme finish. The coffee's good here."

w-dueck chuckled.

The two where both sitting idly when someone busted in the chat room, quickly demanding a cup of coffee.

"Well, it's been a nice talk Azuma. See you later, I hope."

Azuma nodded and exited the room.

Azuma sighed as he stopped in front of the Spam Section entrance. 3 hours has passed. He can travel to the Spam Plane from here. His sword glowed blue again.

What's the matter? You very well know what's the matter. If IT happens agains... bloody hell.

His sword returned to normal and emanated a childish sense of anger.

Oh, pshaw. Don't be a hero now. I'm tired. I wanna sleep.

He stepped in, clicked his soles three times, and Azuma was home.

Good Help is so Hard to Find

By Sudanna - Mar 7 2009

Nalyd stared, bewildered, at the squalling baby. Now that it was alive, he was rather at a loss for what to do. He had no shortage of work to do on it, but he needed the delicate instruments of his laboratory to get the child back to a point where he could actually do that work. It was difficult enough to accelerate growth, and much more difficult to undo that acceleration. Easier than actually reversing aging, but still monstrously hard. He could fashion a substitute womb once he returned this child to the fetal stage, but until he did that, he was stuck with a baby.

And, of course, he couldn't leave here. But that was the price for security, eh?

Most creations couldn't be trusted with the fragile or volatile machines he relied upon for the more complicated shaping, but he recalled a few theoretical creatures that might suffice. Vlish with softer, more dextrous tentacles, or enhanced telekinesis. Roamers with secure, fluid-surrounded pouches. Fyoras with the addition of some pieces of pelican beaks. Yes, he had options.

But this noisy child annoyed him. He wasn't about to risk killing it with paralysis, so he just disabled the vocal cords, which made the thing much more manageable. Turning his back to the writhing baby, Nalyd reviewed the designs again, and tried to recall all of the equipment that he needed from his lab. Yes, a roamer would be best suited for carrying that, and a Vlish would excel here. Only a Thahd was strong enough for that piece. But he mustn't send an army into the Refuge. Prioritize!

He managed to reduce his list to about a half-dozen smaller devices and one big machine, some of which he would have to cannibalize for parts. But they were cheaper ones. He had replacements. Perhaps it wouldn't be smooth or pretty, or reliable for that matter, but it should get the job done well enough.

He set to his craft, and the pack animals blossomed before him. He carefully imprinted into their minds the things he needed, and watched them shuffle into a dusty Google transport and were whisked away. Watching them go from the mouth of the cave, Nalyd realized that he had probably made a few mistakes when making his command center. He was rushing. To correct them now would be painful, but what did he care for his creation?

Spy Me a River

By Zoe - Mar 8 2009

The Aracian Counsulate appeared in front of Iffy as the Google cab moved closer. Iffy sometimes likes to look through long forgotten threads that he had posted in, just for the memories. Why, not even Iffy himself could answer.

Iffy wandered around for the next hour, looking through things. He found a distastful post and stabbed it. No one here, so who cares if he does? Iffy then heard sounds. He sneaked over to wear they were coming from. *You idiot, Iffy! How could you not notice the open door to the administration forum?*

He, because of the sounds, moved very silently and slowly. And saw Nalyd. *Nalyd!* And isn't that a baby? Iffy pulled out a script and cast an identification spell. *Hmm...this must be...no it can't be. But it's the only thing it must be! Jewels must know!*

Iffy sneaked out (Nalyd paused and looked around, but then went back to his work, not seeing anything). He went into the Google cab and made his way for the Calamity Refuge isle. As soon as he got there, he told the first person he saw to tell him where Jewels is. He didn't know where, so he found Will again (how good he is at that!) and asked him where Jewels was.

"Sh..she's gone, Iffy..." Will stamered. "What could you possibly want with her right now anyway?" "Her baby," Iffy said. "Nalyd has her baby!"

Overload

By Nioca - Mar 8 2009

Nioca leaned against a wall, pondering the day's events. What he wanted more than anything else was... Syla. To talk to her, to explain why he had needed to kill Jewels. But he knew she wouldn't listen. Not yet, anyway.

Nioca looked at the table. The dark slime that had forced its way out of Jewels' palms was still splattered on the table and floor. He noticed it was oozing gently away from him, purple vein-like lines running through its form. Nioca exited the ballroom and went into his now-wrecked bedchambers. Fishing under the bed, he gathered his pack. He pulled out a large beaker, a small test tube, and grabbed a shattered fragment of desk from what remained of it. Heading back to the ballroom, he carefully positioned the beaker by the sludge, and used the desk fragment to scoop it into the beaker. Who knew what use it could be put to? He gathered all of the sludge, then poured a tiny portion into a small beaker. Nalyd might be interested in what became of his handiwork.

He then headed back to his bedchambers. Approaching the blank stretch of wall, he cast a Detect Life spell. No one was watching, so Nioca intoned "Sereota emgas phtros!" The wall faded to its natural form, a blue barrier, then faded entirely. Nioca grabbed his pack and stepped across the threshold, whereupon the barrier reformed and took on its appearance as a normal wall.

The complex buzzed with inactivity. Lit only by a pair of torches, it was as bare as it had previously been. Only a computer center and a few other devices occupied the room. Nioca set his pack down and stepped through a door on the other side of the room, entering a small lab

clearly set up for small alchemical experiments. Various counters and pots filled the room. At the far end was a large power spiral, pulsing with light and powering the underground complex.

Nioca first tracked down a pair of corks for his test tube and beaker. No need to have the corrupted antidote escaping and doing lord-knows-what. He stowed away the small test tube, with a mental note to give it to Nalyd the next time he saw him. He then got an idea; he knew someone at Tesara Post that could examine the antidote. Pouring out a little more into another test tube, He then put the large beaker of the antidote into a large cabinet along with other ingredients.

Nioca sighed. He had a lot of work to do.

Nioca lifted his head from his hands. The work was so tedious... so mind-numbingly tedious...

He decided to chance a look at a clock. Almost noon... The machinery he was assembling was almost complete. An augmented shaping platform, check... New power spiral, check... And then the incomplete transference gizmo. Nioca knew what part was needed for it, but there was only one way to get it.

"You've been busy." A voice drifted from the stairs down into the complex. Syla stared at Nioca, no hint of emotion in her gaze.

"Yes, I have." Nioca replied, standing up. "Syla, I-"

"I just wanted to let you know that I'm leaving." Syla stated blankly.

"You're... what?" Nioca asked, startled.

"I don't want to stay here. Not after the attack and watching you try to cut down an innocent woman. So I'm leaving." Syla said, a frown on her face.

"Syla, listen to me. Jewels is not innocent. It tried to kill me in my sleep! It's the leader of the demon army-" Nioca exclaimed.

"*It*? Are you even listening to yourself? Have you lost your mind?" Syla asked, outraged.

"Syla, I know I sound crazy, but please, listen. I can't let it loose. I can't let it hurt the others at Calamity Refuge. That's why I was trying to kill it, it's a monster!"

"A monster? She was pleading for her life! Begging you for mercy! If I hadn't intervened..." Syla shook her head. "I can't fathom why you'd even do such a thing in the first place. It's..."

"I know." Nioca said. "Syla, I was doing what needed to be done."

"So am I." Syla started ascending the stairs again, but paused for a moment. "What happened to you? Before you became a Designer... you were compassionate. Caring. Now, it seems..." Syla trailed off. "Never mind." She started back up the stairs, then paused and tossed Nioca a key. "I don't think I'll be needing that."

Nioca caught the key. "Syla, wait!" He shouted. He caught up with Syla, who sighed and turned to face Nioca again. Nioca took Syla's hand and placed the key back in her palm. "You're always welcome here. Always. So if you ever change your mind..."

Syla nodded and pocketed the key. She then turned and headed back up the staircase. Nioca paused. Half of him wanted to catch up with her and stop her. Explain to her, implore the necessity of his acts. But the other half... the other half realized that it might be better for her to leave. To get out of his influence and away from the threat his presence posed. Bitter, Nioca returned to the console and sat back down.

Nioca stepped back into his bedchambers as the barrier reappeared and reformed its illusion as a wall. Rummaging through his wrecked desk, he pulled out an unscathed piece of parchment and a pen. Placing the parchment against a dresser, he then quickly wrote out a letter.

"Eghastar, Included in this message is an unusual substance I recently came across after the rather violent curing of an unusual creature. It was originally a hastily-made Shaped antidote that somehow became a parasite inside the host's body. It was further touched by Black Magic, and corrupted into its current form.

What I want is a thorough examination, and a list of its current properties and applications. I've included sufficient payment to cover any costs incurred plus the labor. Respond as soon as possible.

- Anidon"

Nioca stalked to the Google platform, and pressed a button on the console. Reaching into his robes, he pulled out the letter, a small bag of large denomination coins, and the small vial of the corrupted antidote. Sighing, he leaned against a wooden beam as he waited. The day was cloudy. Dark. Not pleasant. Apparently, the weather was feeling emphatic.

A small rocket-shaped vehicle landed at the station. It was only two feet tall, and four feet long. A Google Messenger rocket. The top of the rocket opened, and a canister popped out. Opening an end of the canister, Nioca dropped the vial of antidote, the coins, and the letter inside. He then closed the canister and stuck it back in the rocket. "Addressed to Eghastar in Tesara Post, from Anidon. Priority 1." Nioca stated, pushing a button on the side of the rocket. It's engine suddenly roared back to life, and it took off toward Tesara Post.

Nioca walked into the Geneforge forum. Pulling out his keys, he walked toward the Moderation Centre.

"You're sick."

Nioca jumped, dropping the keys and firing a smite spell wildly over his shoulder. He heard a squeak of shock, and something fall to the ground. Crusader's Protectorate was yanked out of its sheath as Nioca spun on the person. "Who are you? Why are you here?"

"I'm Pestilence!" The man yelped. "I didn't mean to startle you!"

Nioca sighed and picked up his keys. "Sorry. I've been a bit jumpy lately. What do you mean, I'm sick?"

"You're ill. You're radiating the aura of a disease." Pestilence stated. "And one I've never seen before, either."

"I feel fine..." Nioca said carefully. "Are you sure?"

Pestilence gave him an odd look. "I have been known to be mistaken..." Pestilence shifted uncomfortably.

Nioca paused for a moment, then rifled through the pockets of his robes and pulled out the vial of the corrupted antidote. He tossed it to Pestilence. "Is it this?"

Pestilence stared at it. "Yes... It's... what is it?"

"Beats me." Nioca stated. Pestilence handed the vial back to Nioca. "Well, nice meeting you." Nioca walked off, unlocking the Moderation Centre. He then stepped inside. Pestilence waited a few minutes, then followed him inside.

Nioca was busily typing away at a computer. "Hey, you shouldn't be in here." Nioca stated.

"Why not?" Pestilence asked.

"It's private. For Administrative and Moderator usage only." Nioca said blithely. He got up from the console. "Come on, out." He said, ushering Pestilence back out of the Moderation Centre. Pestilence walked sullenly out, and Nioca followed him, locking the door behind him. "Now, I'd appreciate it if you could leave for a while."

"What? Why?" Pestilence asked.

"I have things to do here. Right now, it's probably best you weren't here." Nioca stated.

"What if I don't want to leave?" Pestilence pestered.

Nioca sighed. "Right now, I'm about to try a spell that requires my full attention to complete. If you distract me, it could result in a catastrophe."

"Well, maybe I could help you." Pestilence stated.

Nioca looked at Pestilence, surprised. "Why?"

"I'm new here. And I'm interested in what you're trying to do. Plus, I'm a bloodmage. So... how about it?" Pestilence pressed.

Nioca was taken aback. So far, most of the members were busy hating him. So having someone want to help him was a bit of a shock. "Um... Okay, I guess... Um..." Nioca struggled for something he would need an assistant for. Then it occurred to him. "Actually, while you can't help with the spell itself, there is another way you can assist. See, the spell will likely have some... unusual side-effects. So, just make sure that everything keeps running smoothly. Put out any stray fires, disconnect any machinery that starts to malfunction, make sure nothing eats me..."

"Wait, *eats* you?" Pestilence asked, alarmed. "What kind of malfunctions would eat you?"

"Don't worry, it shouldn't be anything you can't handle." Nioca said matter-of-factly. "A mage like you shouldn't have trouble at all." Nioca suddenly perked up. "Aryll! Nice to see you back again."

Aryll strode forward and hugged Nioca. "Thank the gods you're okay. I was worried you might have-"

"I'm fine. Don't worry, I can take care of myself." Nioca broke apart from the hug. "Listen, I'm about to try the spell." Nioca said. "I need you in the Moderation Centre to keep an eye on things. Here," Nioca fished out his RMM, "take it. You know how to use one of those. And if it looks like things are about to go bad, you get Pestilence here out."

Aryll nodded and walked toward the Moderation Centre. Nioca guided Pestilence toward a healing and essence pool as Aryll faded through the door. Nioca positioned himself between the two swirling pools which grew agitated, the liquid in them getting drawn slightly toward him. Nioca closed his eyes. He felt BladesCraft close at hand, ready to be unleashed on a moment's notice. It took more concentration to get a feeling for GeneCraft, but he soon had both firmly in mind.

A white outline formed near Nioca. The outline then filled in, revealing a Wingbolt. Pestilence raised a palm to fight the creature, but with a flash, it was gone. Another creature formed, a hairy thahd. It promptly caught on fire and burned up within a moment. A Fyora formed, then got dissolved by a powerful acid. A Gazer formed off in the distance, and was hit with an array of magically-conjured shrapnel. More white light filled the injuries, healing them instantly, but with a blue aura, the gazer inexplicably froze to death. The pools behind Nioca started glowing brightly, energy flowing into Nioca to replenish the life energy and power he was expending. A Drakon appeared, only to vanish into oblivion. Several small plants sprouted up, a large tree withered instantly, and another was rejuvenated. Various unusual magical effect continued to occur and be undone just as quickly, much to the confusion of Pestilence.

Then it stopped. Everything was back to normal. The essence and healing pools resumed their normal appearance.

Then the magic started back up again. This time, though, it was clear the energy was different. Nioca focused on both BladesCraft and GeneCraft, using an amalgam of the two in the various tasks he was doing. At first, it was just using them side-by-side. GeneCraft to create, BladesCraft to destroy. But then, he started pushing them together. Bringing the two magic circles into active conflict by having them perform the magical equivalents of logic bombs, with each undermining the other. Trees simultaneously withered and revived, creations would form only partway by each circle, competing spell effects bombarded the forum. The essence and healing pools came back to life, recharging Nioca and keeping him supplied with energy as chaos reigned in the forum.

Pestilence started having to fight as horrific mutants started coming after Nioca. He brought down creation after freakish creation, combinations of Geneforge lifeforms and Avernum lifeforms. Such monstrosities as oozing alien beasts, Rotgroths with skeletal fyora heads, and other nasty creatures. Pestilence flung various spells and poisons, and corrupted the blood of the attacking hordes, staving them off by only a little.

In the Moderation Centre, Aryll watched the console with concern. The GeneNexus was heating up rapidly, beyond normal operating temperature. It was drawing massive amounts of energy, several times what it would normally. Its power supplies were becoming taxed.

Nioca surged more energy into the forum, making the two circles clash ever more. The essence and healing pools started to squeal as more energy was getting sucked out of them. An audible hum filled the air mingling with the horrific cries of the mutant creatures. Suddenly, all sound became distorted within the forum. The air started to waver, and time seemed to visibly warp. Nioca's eyes snapped open; it worked! He mentally reached out to grasp the untamed magic he knew was present, trying to harness it. It eluded him, continuing to warp and contort reality.

Then, suddenly, Nioca let out a cry. He had connected to the untamed magic, and he felt power as he never had before. The distortions stopped as Nioca bent the magic to his will. A new outline formed, indistinct but composed of various colors of light. More of the untamed magic was generated as BladesCraft and GeneCraft continued to conflict, and Nioca directed it into the coalescing form. The forum took on various hues, centering on the new form.

Aryll was ready to panic. Klaxons were sounding in the Moderation Centre, and warnings were flashing across the console. The GeneNexus was starting to overheat, the Blades Nexus was likely the same, and power was being drawn like it never had before. The entire Geneforge forum was pouring all its energy save a smidgeon into the GeneNexus. In fact, so much power was being demanded that the forum was tapping into the primary Calamity Refuge power grid. Aryll examined the other forums with the RMM; The forums around the Geneforge and Blades of Avernum forums were completely dark; all of their energy was being rerouted to the Blades Nexus and GeneNexus.

Suddenly, the RMM let out an alarm; the forums were automatically setting off alarms, with two separate Code Black-Alphas going off in the Geneforge and BoA Forums. Shortly after, a third Code Black-Alpha sounded on the fifteenth floor of the Admin Tower. The mind-bogglingly vast amounts of energy were pushing power supplies past the breaking point.

The glowing form started taking on a more concrete shape. Pestilence was running out of energy, and the horde of slavering monsters pushed ever closer. Nioca started glowing brightly, light pouring from his eyes, nose, and mouth. He felt lost in the rush and euphoria that was coming with the magic. The raw power was intoxicating; his mind felt separate from his body, his spirit felt alive as it never had before. He started drifting in and out of consciousness, his mind lost in a blissful fog.

The healing and essence pools screamed in agony. A power spiral that originally powered some random equipment exploded violently from the strain. Pestilence howled as a piece of crystalline shrapnel embedded itself in his chest. Another power spiral detonated, decapitating a mutant creation and blasting apart another. The object turned white, and the forum was filled with blinding white light. It was impossible to see. Pestilence shielded his eyes from the light, his retinas feeling as if they were being burned out of their skull.

Massive bolts of energy shot from Nioca's hands, annihilating the mutant army of creations. The power thrumming throughout the forum died down as he disengaged the various magics he had held for so long. The light faded, and his appearance returned to normal. Aryll breathed a sigh of relief as the temperature of the GeneNexus started dropping along with the power consumption. The Code Black-Alphas were canceled in the Blades of Avernum and Geneforge forums, and power started returning to the other forums.

The white form in front of Nioca faded to different colors. A large, gold four-pronged device holding a similarly large, bright green orb formed as the last of the untamed magic finished its work. The orb itself had to be about four feet in diameter, putting off a gentle glow belying the chaos required to create it.

Nioca suddenly collapsed against a ruined tree. His energy was completely drained. Now, it felt as if the world had gone out from underneath him. His legs felt weak, unable to hold him. Incredible vertigo wracked his body, his vision had red streaks across it, he felt sick to his stomach, his entire body was chilled yet he was sweating profusely, and his skin had taken on a yellow, pasty hue. It felt like he was going to die. Yet he started laughing in blissful agony. He never got before why mages would sometimes go crazy with power. Now he knew; it was paradise. Euphoria. Epiphany. Nioca slowly slid down the tree, his consciousness fading.

Pestilence was similarly exhausted. Gritting his teeth, he pulled out the piece of shrapnel lodged in his chest, bunching his robes up around the wound to stop the bleeding. The healing and essence pools curdled, their elements separating as they died. The forum was a wreck; various machines were blown up and ruined, the ground was scorched from various fires, frosts, magics, and acids, the walls were pockmarked with damage.

Aryll rushed out of the Moderation Centre, a Healing Pod in hand. She quickly force-fed the gooey contents to Nioca, who protested only slightly. His skin took on a healthier tone, the vertigo stopped, and his head cleared. He staggered upright and surveyed the results. "It worked..." He panted. He meandered over to Pestilence and healed the shrapnel wound. Pestilence nodded in gratitude as Nioca helped him to his feet.

Suddenly, a loud boom echoed through the forum. The lights in the Geneforge forum went out, and all of the still-functional machinery shut off. Nioca's RMM sounded another alarm, and Aryll looked down at it. Then she handed it to Nioca. The Code Black-Alpha had expired in the Admin Tower, replaced by a Code Red. Nioca sighed; it appeared that while they had been fortunate enough to avoid an explosion in the forums, the power supply in the Admin Tower was unable to take the strain. He looked at the image of the damaged tower; the explosion had been powerful enough to blow a hole clean through the tower's wall, and smoke slowly drifted from the gaping hole. The lights in the Geneforge forum flickered back on as the forum's power supply took over for the Admin Tower.

"Pestilence, you have a place to stay here?" Nioca asked. Pestilence shook his head. "I'll tell you what, then. Since you helped me with this little project of mine, I'll return the favor." Nioca rummaged through his robes and pulled out his key ring. He detached a key and handed it to Pestilence. "A key to one of my guest quarters. Make yourself at home."

"Thanks." Pestilence beamed.

"Oh, and can I ask one more favor?" Nioca asked.

Pestilence stared in abject terror.

"Can you help me carry this back to my Citadel?" Nioca pointed at the alien device.

"Wha- oh, sure." Pestilence breathed a sigh of relief. They each grabbed ahold of it and left the forum, headed back to the Citadel.

Toward the Smoke

By Sylae - Mar 9 2009

w-dueck stared at Iffy. "What...What the hell are you talking about? It was stillborn!"

"My scripts don't lie, Will. Nalyd has a baby and it-"

He was cut off abruptly as w-dueck's RMM-A blared. he looked down at it. "Black-Alpha? What the make love? Iffy, I have to go-" The chat forums shuddered, and the lights flickered. Ligrev fell to the floor. w-dueck hastily left the chat without saying anything. He almost turned back.

Black smoke plumed out of the middle of the Admin Tower. Debris lay shattered on the ground. A nearby SimpleBot had been hit and as he was watching, it exploded in a blue flare, leaving a greasy spot on the pavement.

w-dueck ran to the double doors of the Admin Tower through the mod Board, and up the stairs to the fifteenth floor, the location of the primary reactor.

A nearby SimpleBot hummed forward, "Ser, the reactor was overpowered. It appears that a surge in the Geneforge forum, and to a lesser extent the BoA forum, overloaded it."

w-dueck sighed. This couldn't be happening... "Okay, here's what's going to happen. First of all, the Admin Tower is a code red-alpha for now. I want the backup reactor, the one in the basement, put online immediately. Then, I want the Isle in complete lockdown. Nobody in, nobody out. If someone tries too hard, use those T8-47's."

The SimpleBot beeped, "Of course. We will get the auxiliary generator up, and nobody without Admin privileges will be going anywhere soon."

w-dueck was silent for a second, then nodded, and left the scene.

Using his RMM-A, he did a search for Nioca, and, when it showed him that he was near his Citadel, he stormed off to it. By the time he got there, the dreary sky was beginning to turn darker. w-dueck knocked. Loudly.

The door was answered by the strange fellow from Ermaria. "Ah, Mr. Dueck. What a pleasure. I've been reading your journal and-"

He was cut off, "Good for you. Nioca?"

He sighed, "Let me continue. I was-"

"Look, alright, Mr. Creepy God Ermaria Past Spy Man, in case you haven't noticed, there's a hole in my tower, and I'm going to find out why, and may the gods strike down anyone who gets in my way." w-dueck shoved him over to the side and made his way into the Citadel.

Nioca ran down the stairs. "Hey! You can't just come storming in here!"

"Well, I just need to call you out on something. What did you do in the BoA and Geneforge Forums?"

"Um, I haven't even been over there for a while. I don't think anyone's been over there...Why?"

"Why do you think? Haven't you noticed anything that's happened in the past hour?"

"Of course I have! Do I look blind or deaf?" Nioca looked insulted. "I was making sure the Citadel was secure before checking it out. What exactly happened?"

"The Admin Tower exploded, that's what. Thank the gods that nobody was in it at the time...Any ideas on what happened? Because towers just don't explode randomly."

Nioca rolled his eyes. "That much is obvious. This place does have windows, you know. I would assume somebody who doesn't really care for the Refuge would have done that and-" Nioca grabbed at his pocket. "My spare key! It's gone!"

"Oh great. Where'd Mr. Creepy God Ermaria Past Spy Man go?" he consulted his RMM-A, noting that the code red had been revoked and that the auxiliary generator had been activated, and saw that the stranger was wandering off around the General Forum."

Nioca could see what w-dueck was thinking, "Hey, you know he can destroy you in a one-one-one battle. Don't try it. The only way you can defeat him is by working behind his back. You know that, Will"

w-dueck smiled, "You just gave me a great idea. Nioca, you're in charge until I get back." w-dueck tossed Nioca a set of keys, ran toward the door. Toward the smoke.

The low wind blew and moaned under the cloudy night. The smoke had stopped, but the smell of ozone still covered the night. w-dueck walked across the runes and to the SSMT. "Last time I used this, The VRP attacked me" he said to himself, "The tables have turned."

He logged in to the system and pulled up a list of available systems. Three locations flashed up. w-dueck picked the third plane. The one he said he'd never return to.

As the system was activating, w-dueck turned and surveyed the Refuge. "Until we meet again--if we meet again." The runes flashed, and he was gone.

The Oncoming Storm

By Nioca - Mar 10 2009

"For the time being, you're in charge. Don't make me regret it."

w-dueck's words echoed in Nioca's head. In one hand, he was holding a set of keys. In another, an RMM-A. It surprised him that w-dueck still trusted him that much.

"Nioca?" A voice came from behind him. Nioca turned to see Syla standing behind him. "The portal back to Ermaria isn't working."

"What?" Nioca asked, confused.

Syla waved him toward the basement floor, descending toward the portal crystal back to Gvelston Sanctuary. The crystal was glowing as brightly as ever. Nioca examined it carefully, looking for any flaws or damage. However, it seemed perfectly fine. Reaching out, he touched it. The crystal's glow increased momentarily, then faded back to nothing. "That... The crystal's working fine, but it can't find the target..."

"What do you mean, can't find the target?" Syla demanded.

"I mean, it can't lock on to the other crystal. Something must be interfering." Nioca stated.

"Nioca, that crystal was carefully placed in Gvelston Sanctuary to prevent interference. There's nothing to interfere with it at all." Syla continued.

"Syla, you better hope you're wrong." Nioca said hollowly.

"Why?"

"Because the only other way it'd lose the target crystal is if the crystal was destroyed. And the only way the crystal could be destroyed is if Gvelston went with it." Nioca said quietly, dread in his voice.

Syla stared, horrified. "You mean..."

"We'll have to try it again in a while." Nioca said, feigning ignorance of Syla's growing horror. "It may just be getting interfered with." Nioca sighed.

Syla choked back a sob. "Nioca... For twenty-eight years, Gvelston Sanctuary... *That's my home!* My... my family... I..." Syla's eyes teared up. Nioca was fighting back the urge to cry as well; yet another part of his past, destroyed. It had been the one place Nioca had felt safe. Now...

Nioca embraced Syla, trying to comfort her. "It'll be okay. Syla, it'll be okay."

"Liar!" Syla's voice cracked.

Nioca didn't know what to say. What was there to say? No words were prepared for a situation like this. Nioca decided to simply hold Syla, joined in their grief.

Syla was settled back down in her guest quarters. Nioca carefully headed back up the stairs to the second floor, finding Aryll waiting for him. "I'm sorry."

Nioca simply nodded. "Come on. That device won't move itself."

"You still are going ahead with this as if nothing had happened?" Aryll asked, concerned. "You nearly killed yourself in the Geneforge forum today! Not to mention blowing up-"

"Don't mention that out loud, Aryll! All it takes is for one hint of this to reach w-dueck and I am screwed in ways you can't possibly imagine." Nioca belted out, alarmed.

"Fine. But you should be resting. Grieving. Comforting Syla. Not proceeding with your experiments." Aryll said.

"Aryll," Nioca said agitatedly, "I need to keep moving. Keep doing something, just... Just keep everything running smoothly. At least keep my corner of the world working right." Nioca and Aryll lifted the device. Carefully and silently, they moved it back downstairs, managing the halls and finally arriving at Nioca's bedchambers. Nioca kicked the door open, shuffled the device in, then shut the door behind him. After muttering an obscenity-laced Detect Life spell, he spoke the password to the secret passage. It opened up and allowed them through.

Nioca carefully worked the device down the stairs. Stepping off the staircase, he then lifted it higher and brought it to the incomplete transference gizmo. He set the alien device on top, and it seated itself securely. Nioca panted slightly, looking at the completed device; a metal stand with the gold-pronged green orb on top. Small lights in the base had come to life, flashing gently. Nioca felt an aura of energy wash over him. Something entirely different; not BladesCraft, not GeneCraft, but something... different. A new magic.

Nioca turned and headed back up the stairs, with Aryll following silently. The mysterious device glowed gently.

Nioca meandered up the winding staircase of the Admin tower. He decided to see the damage for himself; maybe he could fix what he caused.

On the fifteenth floor, he noticed the wall was partially shattered. Burnt stone was scattered across the staircase. Comically enough, the door was left on its hinges, despite the wall around it being completely blown out. Nioca stepped around the door. The fifteenth floor was completely wrecked, and the explosion was fierce enough to damage the floors above and below it. Indeed, he could see down into the thirteenth story through the damaged floor, and up into the eighteenth through the collapsed ceiling. It appeared that, for once, it looked better than it actually was. Crystal shards were embedded in the nearby walls, and bits of metal were scattered about what remained of the room.

A SimpleBot flew up to him. "Global Mod Nioca, you should not be here. This was a fusion/magic reactor. High radiation levels." The bot said simply.

Nioca knew immediately that he couldn't do anything here. SimpleBots were already working on repairing the damage. Nioca nodded to the bot, turned, and stepped out again. He meandered back down the staircase, exiting out on the Administrative Discussion Board. He rifled through the discussions to see if there was anything that he needed to know in his new-found position. Unfortunately, all he could find were ledgers and database records. Nothing useful.

Nioca sighed, then sat down in a plush seat. He enjoyed the moment of power, but realized he had things to do. Getting up, he walked out of the board, through the Moderation Forum, and out of the Admin Tower.

The sky was growing darker still. Small streetlights glowed brightly to stave off the darkness cast by the cloudy sky. Aryll was watching the sky carefully across the field, a long white dress flowing in the growing winds. Nioca glanced down at the RMM-A. Auxiliary Generators were

running at full. All systems were relatively normal, considering the recent explosion and chaos. Nothing was amiss.

Nothing, save the weather. The wind grew cold. Nioca pulled his robes about him tighter, pondering this foul omen. Deciding he didn't want to be out in the cold, he made his way to the Meeting Hall.

Shutting the door behind him, he noticed that the meeting hall was quiet. Vergil was in a corner with the demon Kaylas. Iffy sat at a center table, shifting anxiously. A few other people were sitting quietly at tables. Ligrev was washing dishes and serving up various dinner items. The second he shut the door, however, all eyes settled on him. The room went deathly quiet, more so than it was before. Everyone, it seemed, was looking for an answer.

Vergil stood up and approached Nioca. "What happened? Where's w-dueck?"

"He left." Nioca said succinctly. "There was an overload in the primary reactor. No one was hurt, and the damage can be repaired." He said loudly enough for everyone to hear. Nioca then made his way over to the bar. Ligrev quietly served up what looked like some kind of misshapen ravioli, along with a cup of coffee.

Vergil took a seat next to Nioca as he started into his dinner. "Reactor overload... That's what you're going with, huh?" Vergil said skeptically.

"What makes you think otherwise?" Nioca asked curiously.

"The Primary reactor had failsafes in place to prevent such an event. If the power ever hit unmanageable levels, it'd shut down." Vergil stated coolly, his voice low to keep the conversation private. "So there's no way for the reactor to simply overload."

"Failsafes..." Nioca trailed off. He no longer was looking at Vergil, but seemingly at some point over his shoulder. "But the reactor could overload if those failsafes were deactivated, right?"

Vergil have him a strange look. "I suppose..."

Nioca didn't wait for further confirmation. Draining his cup of coffee in one swig, he jumped up and ran out of the building.

Nioca gave a dubious glance to the shattered door. He had wondered whether his keys would allow him into Jewels' room. However, the point was moot; apparently, someone had taken care of that for him.

Stepping over the wreckage of the door, he moved carefully into the room. He kept his hand near the hilt of Crusader's Protectorate, in case Jewels' was still there. He kept his eyes open for anything that might suggest Jewels was doing some recent tinkering. As it was, Nioca felt somewhat overwhelmed by the spaciousness and luxury of the floor. Or maybe it was being out of the cold weather; it had started pouring rain outside.

Nioca tore his eyes from the luxury and started looking gently through drawers and cabinets. He worked his way through the various rooms, but found nothing. He finally made his way to the bathroom and looked through the cabinets there, when he felt something. A presence.

Just a Little Distraction

By Jewels - Mar 16 2009

She was so excited! She could hardly contain herself. After so much searching... She teleported back to Calamity Refuge landing in the middle of her bedroom. She *had* to find Will! Tell him the news and... oh, she just couldn't wait! The sound of a footstep in her bathroom caught her attention. He was still here?! Had he missed her that much? Tiptoeing to the open door, she snuck a quick glance only long enough to see that his robed form was standing with his back to her. Jewels grinned from ear to ear, a play of mischief in her eyes. She'd surprise him. Rounding the door frame with silent fluidity, Jewels energetically wrapped her arms around him in the biggest spinning bear hug she could muster while exclaiming, "Will! Will! I found it! I found it! It took me forever but *I finally found it!*" He was so tense and cried out in shock. He struggled to rip out of her grasp as they stumbled in a circle together. "Whoa!" Jewels laughed as she lost her balance. "It's only a hug, Will." She loosed her grip before she fell over and caught herself against a wall. But her joyful laughter turned to a dreaded moan when he twirled on her.

His hand gripped the hilt of Crusader's Protectorate tightly, *that accursed sword*. His eyes still held their hatred. The hatred she deserved... "No!" she cried out. "Stay away from me!" Jewels fumbled against the wall trying to back away. She needed to escape. She needed to get out, but the door was on the opposite side of the room. On the other side of Nioca. He had her backed into a corner... again. "You've come to finish me off?" she whimpered, as if pleading for him to say no even though she knew the answer was yes. "Come to cut me down in my sleep? Return the favor? Get your revenge?" Nioca said nothing and he still hadn't drawn his sword though it looked like he was waiting for an excuse to. "Revenge... revenge..." Jewels voice became a solemn sing-song as she looked to the floor. "The thirst for it drives a person like nothing else. It blinds you to all else until... there **is** nothing else. The pain... the bitterness and anger... the hatred..." Her voice caught as she looked up once more with tearful eyes. "It consumes you," she whispered. Jewels slowly raised a hand in front of her face, lit a tiny flame in her palm and watched it flicker. "Like a fire that ravages everything in it's path, it consumes your very soul."

Nioca took his hand off of his sword still uneasy. "I didn't come to kill you Jewels..." He stepped back so that the way to the door wasn't blocked.

"Then... then why are you here?" Jewels' mortal fear gave way to concern. "How did you get in? *Where's Will!*" she demanded. She stormed past him without waiting for an answer and headed to her office. Nioca followed at a distance while she sat in her chair and pulled up the 'Who's Online' screen on one of her consoles. Will's name was not on it. Panic stricken she looked up and demanded again, "Where's Will, Nioca?!"

"I don't know where he went," he stammered out. "He left in a hurry... Put me in charge."

"*What?!*" Jewels couldn't believe it. She wouldn't believe it. *Will couldn't possibly trust him after...* Fingers flying on the console amid her thoughts, the Official Authority Roster came up and there was Nioca's name... *Global Mod*. It looked like Will had the whole place on lockdown as well. Jewels just sat shaking her head. Reaching into her pocket she pushed a few buttons on her RMM-A without taking it out. "Global Mod," she mused aloud.

"Global Mod," Nioca echoed. "I'm supposed to be here. W-dueck gave me a set of Admin. Tower keys."

"Heh heh..." Jewels laughed then looked at him slyly. "How does it feel to have a set that isn't stolen?"

"Hey... for the record I didn't steal your keys. I rescued them from the tree that ate you."

"Ate me..." her laugh was short. "O how little you understand..." Jewels got up from her desk as was about to leave when Nioca blocked the door.

"What did you find?" His voice was more demanding than curious. Jewels didn't know if she should tell him. Would he try to stop her? Would he even believe her? But she needed to stall. Just a few more minutes. When she didn't answer Nioca asked again a bit more forcefully. "What were you going to tell w-dueck you found?"

She looked him right in the eye. The emotional turmoil that stirred in her heart because of it brought another tear to her eye. The vision of his families last moments played in her mind once more, just as vividly as the first time and Jewels was reminded that this vision was just as vivid in Nioca's mind as well. How often had he seen it? How many nights had he laid awake because of it or awoke because of the nightmare of it? "I found... freedom," she finally whispered, "hopefully for both of us."

"Freedom from what?" Nioca started when three Simple Bots whizzed up behind him.

"*Your request, madam?*" one of them droned.

The sound startled Nioca while Jewels gave them sharp orders. "Global Mod Nioca had wandered past where his position allows. I need one of you to escort him out of my room and supervise him any time he is in the Admin Tower. Keep a record of everything he does while he is here. Another one of you needs to make repairs to my door then stand guard at it, and I'd like the third to update me on our status and why we are in lockdown mode. Orders understood?"

"*Unable to comply.*"

"What?" Jewels was ticked. "What do you mean you're unable to comply?"

"'*Priority one orders, after emergency situations, are to repair the Admin. Tower. Only the ArchAdmin may change a priority one that he has given. Guarding a bedroom door and... babysitting a Global Mod are not productive.*"

"Damage to the tower?" Jewels looked at Nioca who stubbornly folded his arms in front of himself. "Can you at least eject this errant Mod from my room and tell me what the ice is going on?"

"*Yes, madam.*" Nioca was not-so-gently taken by the arm out of her sight. He didn't protest but he didn't look happy either.

After keeping her own eye on Nioca till he left the tower for his citadel, Jewels made her way into the chat lounge where everyone seemed to have gathered since they couldn't leave. "Jewels!!!!!"

"Hi."

"G'diday." She couldn't help but smile at the welcomes.

Kaylas had stood at her arrival and walked over eagerly. "How was your rest?"

"Great!" she answered, enthusiastically giving him a hug. Truth was she hadn't actually slept since they'd last met. She was running purely on adrenaline. Her excitement was all that kept her going.

"Really?" he gave her a confused look. "Even with the giant explosion and everything?"

"Uh.. yeah. Heh, heh... Barely even noticed it. I must have really zoned out." Jewels looked around at all the new faces. "Hey, Kaylas? Would you mind if I went and mingled for a bit... without you?" Once again Kaylas gave her a strange look. "There's some people here I haven't met yet and I don't think you'd be very interested in tagging along. Just go talk with Vergil some more."

"Fine with me," Vergil piped up. "We were in the middle of my Discovery mod rant anyway." Kaylas nodded and went to go sit with him, though a little reluctantly. Jewels noticed that he kept his eye on her none-the-less.

Walking over to a table with three new faces, Jewels sat down. "Hi, I don't think I've seen any of you around here lately. I'm Jewels."

She thought she recognized the first to respond from Spiderweb. It was hard to forget his skinny little form though it'd had been a long time since she had seen him around. "I'm Iffy," he replied.

The next was a foreigner she didn't recognize. He wore the robes of a mage and spoke with an accent. "My name is Pestilence. I am new member."

The last was truly odd wearing a hooded cloak so Jewels couldn't see his face. He seemed rather uncomfortable to be stuck at the Refuge and even more uncomfortable to have had another person approach him. "Azuma," he finally muttered not willing to say more.

"Nice to meet you all. And nice to see you back Iffy and Azuma. You haven't been here since I came." Iffy nodded and Azuma grunted. "And how is everyone today?"

"Fine," came the consensus.

"That's good. Now... how do you *really* feel?" The sideways glances she got told her they weren't really up for talking about it. "Aw... come on. No one wants to talk about the explosion or not being able to leave? Anyone?"

"Actually," Iffy started hesitantly, "I did want to talk to you Jewels... in private?"

"I'd be more than happy to, Iffy. If you want to just follow..." Jewels' voice was cut off by a commotion near the bar.

"For the last time," a stranger shouted. "I don't. Want. Coffee!"

Ligrev's high squeaky voice was not detoured by his insistence. "It's really good coffee though. I can serve it black or with cream and sugar or flavored even. We have French Vanilla, Irish Cream, Hazelnut, Raspberry Mocha..."

She continued to list off about about ten more flavors while the man covered his ears yelling in frustration. "No, no, a thousand times NO!"

Jewels turned to Iffy. "I think I should deal with this first. We can talk in just a bit." Iffy started to protest but Jewels was already headed to intervene. She walked up putting a hand on Ligrev's shoulder as a distraction. "Hi, I'm Jewels. I don't believe I've seen you here before. Is there anything I can help you with?"

The man, clad in leather chestpiece and pants, gave a good long stare at Ligrev who was still trying to feed him some coffee. "Getting her to go away would be an excellent start."

Jewels gave him a sympathetic nod and gently took the coffee pot from the insistent barkeep. "Ligrev, I think it's time for Vergil to have another popsicle. Why don't you go see what kind he wants." Enthusiastically she ran off at the suggestion. Jewels sat down at the stranger's table. "Sorry about that. Good help is soooo hard to find. So what's your name and what brings you to Calamity Refuge?"

A tiny smile of gratitude showed on his rugged face. "Thank you. The name is Ackrovan." He paused to frown while looking at a bracelet on his wrist. "I suppose I'm here to find a place of refuge from calamity."

Jewels laughed a little too loudly before clearing her throat. "That's what I was hoping this place would be, too. But so far it's been... well... a whole lot of calamity and not so much refuge. I'm hoping that will change."

"You're not the only one. Not even been here a week and I've had to deal with all sorts of... problems." He sat, tapping his bracelet.

"What kind of problems? I'm an admin. I may be able to help."

Ackrovan's mood perks up a bit, "Really? An admin that actually cares about my problems? Well, lets see: Having a bad sea trip, getting my foot roasted by an incompetent priest, having to pay a precious many coins to repair my armor and weapons, hence the damn leather, getting this damn bracelet on like I'm some sort of prisoner, getting stuck with a shack near the exit, and not even being able to get my equipment back." His continued tapping got louder. "I thought this was suppose to be a refuge. Not a damn shooting gallery."

Foot roasted? "Wait a minute... you're the one that slashed Nioca's leg?"

"Only after he attacked me! It was in self defense. If he said otherwise, he's lying"

Jewels sat nodding her head. She couldn't argue that Nioca could be aggressive at times. "Oh I believe you. He's not always the most... trusting person." Jewels paused thoughtfully before adding quietly. "He's even attacked *me* physically on more than one occasion..."

Ackrovan sat back in shock. "No! How could anyone harm that precious face or the elegant voice that flows from it?"

Jewels blushed, waving him off with a hand. "Shameless flatterer. But, yeah, Nioca and I aren't really the best of friends. Mostly because he is... paranoid."

"Yeah, he is. Striking a defenseless man while he tries to catch his breath. He's why I'm not even a member yet!" Ackrovan banged the bracelet with his fist, "And I'd show him if it wasn't for this stupid restriction bracelet!"

"Restriction bracelet?" Jewels' interest was piqued. "I haven't heard of that yet. I haven't been an admin all that long. What exactly does it do?"

"It stops you from harming other members. That w-dueck fellow claimed that it would turn off if I was attacked, but I doubt it."

Jewels' mind began to work. *This could be perfect. ... But it'd be mean. ... A necessary evil under the circumstances. ... Hmm... I think I actually agree with you.* She didn't really trust Nioca in the Admin Tower as far as she could throw him, which wasn't very far without a fireball, and this might just be able to distract him a bit. She leaned forward with a smile on her face. "So Ackrovan, as an admin I'm charged with keeping the peace. Of keeping members in line and such. Now I'd love to be able to help you out here but I'm gonna need you to promise me you won't... maim Nioca again." Jewels noted his frown but continued adding, "Of course that doesn't mean you can't go talk to him... hash things out... between you civilly." His frown didn't move. "And if I just happen to be, oh, looking the other way and Nioca accidentally trips... well who's to say you didn't come to help him?"

Ackrovan let his head lean back onto the chair as he stared into the sky seemingly pondering. Would he take her bait? After a minute he looked back at her. "I'd love to help Nioca if he falls, but I don't really see why I should when I'm not a full member here. And what if he accuses me of trying to hurt him again? Who would believe the word of just a regular member? I wouldn't mind moderating one of the forums. A beautiful woman such as yourself should not have to work harder when others can do it."

"I would love to have you as a member! And there *are* mod positions open. I know Will is always griping about not having those spots filled. A trustworthy fellow such as yourself? I'm sure Will would love to have you on board just as much as I would. Let's see..." Jewels pulled out her RMM-A and pressed a few buttons. "We have the Avernum 4-5 forum, the... Nethergate forum, and... the RP forum, too. Any of those sound interesting to you? You can even have two of them if you like." Jewels put on a winning smile. She didn't even have to fake it. This parlay with the newcomer only heightened her adrenaline levels.

Another thoughtful pause before he responded. "The RP and the Nethergate forum please. Oh, and one more thing, my goddess. I need access to an Esscence Pool. Or a source of Esscence pods. Are either possible?"

Jewels thought for a minute. "Those are from Geneforge, right?" She watched him nod. "There might be some in the Geneforge forum but that's Nalyd and Nioca's territory... You can look around if you like but the Moderation Center will most likely be locked. And I can't very well demod either of them just to give you access. Foul play would be sure to be called then. Maybe I can ask Will or Nalyd about it... on your behalf. Will's wrapped around my little pinkie so we can probably work something out." Jewels hoped it would be enough, not that she

really *needed* him to go bug Nioca at all. It would just be really convenient to know that he was busy with things other than snooping around the Admin. Tower. And it would be nice to have someone with such a gentleman's manner around the place. Well... gentleman to her anyway. One can never have too many flatterers. "So what do you say? Ready to make the commitment? Take the plunge? Tackle the responsibility?" She paused only a moment drawing in closer. "Or do you want to sit around all day with that unbecoming bracelet around your wrist?"

Ackrovan shook his head, "Very well. Thank you for all of this. Only your beauty can outmatch your kindness. But, in the event Nioca falls, I'll need a staff to help him up. Do you know where I can find one?" Ackrovan used his finger to draw a sword in the air.

Jewels sat back. The whole distraction thing would be great but she couldn't, in good conscious, send this newcomer to seriously battle with Nioca. Not when he had almost bested herself. "Listen... I know you have an ax to gri... Uh, that you really want to talk with Nioca but he's not all that incompetent. He has a guardian shade that is vicious. Maybe... helping him up with a staff isn't the best thing you could do. At least not if you really want to stay on as a member and a mod. Maybe what you really need to do is look for... some way to... help him be humble."

"I need essence for that. What do you think I am?"

Jewels was getting exasperated. This was becoming more work than it was worth. Time to play hardball. "I *think* you are a nice guy, who got a tough break because of a not-so-nice guy. I want to help you with your problems, really I do, but I do have work to do. I think you look strong enough to help Nioca up with your hands, if he were *surprised*, but if you don't think you can handle it than maybe I'll just move along."

Ackrovan, seemint to realize that he has pushed too far, relented, "Very well, my fair lady. Your declaration is both wise and fair. Please, do not let my incompetence affect your grace, but that wasn't what I was asking. What do you think I am? For instance, Nioca is a priest. What about me?" He waited expectantly.

Finally... Jewels rustled in her pocket for her keys. One of these *had* to open the bracelet... "Give me your arm." After fiddling with a few of them she finally found one that fit. She turned it in the lock and the bracelet popped off. He looked very relieved. "I thought you were a soldier. Am I wrong?"

Ackrovan smirked, "What soldier requires Essence?"

"Well, I have to admit. I've never actually learned about Geneforge. I'm afraid I'm clueless when it comes to Essence and it's proper uses." Jewels pushed a few more buttons on the RMM-A to set up his account and modship while he rubbed his wrist.

"Thats a shame. Look it up, 'cause this war with the fire plane has taken all the attention away from the Shapers." Before Jewels could respond, Ackrovan rose and began to leave for Nioca, "May the Gods give you their smile. Oh wait... they already have."

Jewels grabbed on to his arm. "You can't go yet. As an official member you get a couple of perks. Number one, a nickname. How does Acky sound?" Jewels didn't wait for him to approve it. "Number two, a proper welcome." Jewels stood up in the chat lounge and spoke loudly above the din. "Attention. Attention everyone." When all their eyes were on her she continued. "I

would like to formally welcome our newest member, Master Ackrovan!" Hoots and cheers went up from various members as Acky waved shyly. "Number three, a party!" Many more cheers were heard around the room as Ligrev excitedly pulled the part chord. Balloons and streamer floated down from an opening in the ceiling while she proceeded to get out cake and punch. "And..." Jewels drew out the word, "*Group Hug!*" Jewels wrapped her arms around him unabashedly. Vergil came over grinning to join in though Kaylas stayed where he was. Iffy, Azuma, and Pestilence all came over as well as Ligrev and some other lurking members.

"...Thank you." Ackrovan spoke tersely and tried to shove them all off. When the rest had dispersed to the refreshments table he addressed Jewels again. "Is there anything else you wanted to discuss?"

"No... not at the moment. Unless you have questions." He shook his head. "Your keys then," she handed him a small silver keychain. "For your forums and for your new residence in the Members Quarters. And an RMM to... call for help should you need it. Then... last I saw Nioca he was headed for his citadel. I'm sure you remember it. It's where he roasted you." Jewels chuckled a little bit then said quietly, "Just... be careful." She reached up and tussled his hair before watching him turn to go.

Jewels grabbed up the restraining bracelet and her RMM-A to stick them in her pocket when Kaylas walked up. "What was that?" he demanded.

"What was what?" Jewels laughed at him.

Kaylas crossed his arms in front of himself. "You were flirting with him."

"I was not," she asserted. "I... I just was not. If anything he was flirting with me. Why do you even care? Jealous?" Jewels saw the spark flicker in his eyes though he didn't respond. "Umhmm... Don't worry about it Mr. Green with Envy. It was nothing."

Iffy walked up to the pair. "Um, Jewels? Is now a good time for our... *private* chat?"

"Private?!" Kaylas asked indignantly.

Jewels elbowed him hard in the arm. "Yes, private. Like when two people talk... *alone.* Which means you have to stay here."

"But... but," he started to protest but Jewels walked off with Iffy anyway leaving him to fume by himself.

She led the way to a smallish room and closed the door behind them.

"So what's on your mind, Iffy?"

He looked nervous as he sat down avoiding eye contact. "Well, you see... It's about Nalyd." He stopped but she signaled for him to continue. "He... uh... Well, I... I was just surfing the web and... and visiting old places that I used to go to and, well, I ran across Nalyd."

"Oh good. Where did he disappear to?"

"Um... Well, you remember The Roost?" Jewels nodded though she had never been there before. "Nalyd and I used to go there a lot together and I saw him there."

"Did you two talk? Did he say why he left in such a hurry or why he was there?"

"We didn't exactly talk together. I... I think I saw something he didn't want me to see. Nalyd's always been real uptight about his privacy so I didn't stick around to find out."

"And you think I should know about it... whatever it is you saw?" Iffy nodded without responding. "I'm listening. Go ahead and spit it out."

It still took him a minute to work up the courage before he managed to say anything. "He has... your baby."

Jewels frowned. The reminder of her stillborn child was not plesant. "It's okay, Iffy. I know. He offered to... to bury it for me."

Iffy started shaking his head. "No, you don't understand. Jewels, it's not dead."

"What?" She could hardly process this information seriously. "Nalyd said it was stillborn... and deformed. It didn't cry at all. Are you sure?"

Iffy nodded vigorously. "I saw it moving myself."

Once again Jewels' mind raced. How could it be? Her over extended capacities whirred from one possibility to another, but there was only one that made any sense. She had to go to The Roost. Now! She stood and thanked Iffy a bit teary-eyed. She gave him a hug before exiting both the private room and the chat lounge.

She was so focused that she didn't even notice Kaylas following her until he caught her arm just inside the Refuge's exit. "Jewels, wait! Where are you going?"

"I... I have to go, Kaylas." Jewels spoke quickly pulling away from him and walking away. "I have something I need to do."

"Wait! Jewels, what did that guy say to you?"

"I have to go," she repeated, not slowing down until the SimpleBots guarding the exit stopped her.

"*No one is to leave Calamity Refuge by order of ArchAdmin w-dueck.*"

"Move aside bot." Jewels tried to walk around but it stood in her path.

"*No one is to leave Calamity Refuge by order of ArchAdmin w-dueck,*" it repeated.

Jewels' eyes flared for the delay. "Maybe you haven't noticed, but I'm an admin too. Now step aside. I have urgent business. Unless you'd like to spend the rest of your days as a pile of smoldering parts." She didn't know if it was the threat that did it or the bucket of bolts recognizing her authority but it stood down and let her pass. Kaylas tried to follow but it stood back in his way.

"*No one is to leave Calamity Refuge by order of ArchAdmin w-dueck.*"

"I heard you the first two times," Kaylas said annoyed, "but I'm with her."

"Oh, no you're not," Jewels hollered over her shoulder. She turned around when he started to protest. "Stay here, Kaylas. Just please stay here. I'll be back soon. I promise." With that she ran down to a waiting Google car. She just *had* to get to The Roost.

It took a little searching to find a working url for the place. She grumbled at herself for not just asking Iffy about it before she left but she had been in too much of a hurry. How much time could she had saved just by slowing down? Luckily the link had been preserved in Aran's Archives. Jewels fidgeted nervously the whole ride there.

When the transport stopped, she stepped out uneasily. She had no idea what to expect. "Nalyd?" she called. "Nalyd are you here?" A bit of snooping around revealed a cave entrance that she hesitantly walked into. "Nalyd," she called again. Her voice echoed off the cool walls. Jewels shivered. She followed the cave until she got to a fork in the path. "Nalyd, Nalyd are you here?" She turned to look down one corridor calling his name and was about to do the same at the other when she turned around to find him standing not two feet from her.

"Jewels," he sounded surprised. "What are you doing here?"

She couldn't hold back any longer. Jewels smiled the biggest smile and quickly grabbed him up in her arms. His small frame was much easier to spin than Nioca had been. "Nalyd, you little miracle worker you."

"Whoa," he yelped. "Need Nalyd remind you that Nalyd does not like getting dizzy?"

"Sorry, sorry." She stopped spinning and put him down. "I just couldn't wait for you to come back." Joyful tears started to form in her eyes.

"Nalyd did not realize how much you cared," He quipped. "How do w-dueck, Vergil, and Mr. Let's-Tackle-Nalyd Elemental feel about this?" His tone was sarcastic but Jewels ignored it.

"You know, I knew you were nice but I never realized how big your heart really was until today."

"Oh? Nalyd has a big heart? That is news to Nalyd."

"Don't be so modest, Nalyd. You are pure genius and you know it. Master of death and *life*!"

"Well," he shuffled his feet a bit abashed. "Nalyd can't argue with you there."

Jewels had told herself she wouldn't be too pushy but she couldn't wait any longer. "So... where is it? Can I see it? Oh, please?"

Nalyd stepped back a couple of paces feigning ignorance. "See what?"

"Nalyd, don't toy with me anymore. You know exactly what I'm talking about. Where is my baby?!"

The Definitions of Melee

By Nioca - Mar 17 2009

Nioca stood outside his citadel. He hated to do this when the weather was bad, but it needed to be done. He didn't want to waste the SimpleBots' time with such a matter.

He looked up at a second-floor window. Syla could be seen, watching worriedly. She waved cautiously at Nioca; Nioca waved back, then turned his attention to the field. Taking a deep breath, he let out an odd, shrill shriek. It echoed across the island, barely audible over the raging storm. He let out the cry repeatedly, keeping a watch on his surrounding whilst huddling up and trying to wring some of the water out of his robes. A flash of lightning arced across the sky as Nioca let out yet another loud cry.

Suddenly, something knocked him off his feet. A hard blow had landed across the side of his face as he heard something to his left, and, losing balance, he tumbled to the soggy ground. He started to pick himself back up, but felt someone kick him in the chest. He collapsed against the ground, his hand reaching for Crusader's Protectorate. Another kick landed, striking his hand. He howled in agony, instinctively clutching his hand; it felt like it was broken. His assailant landed another kick between his legs, then another in the stomach.

"Hey! What are you doing!" Pestilence shouted. He grabbed ahold of Ackrovan to pull him off. Ackrovan, on instinct, slammed his elbow back into Pestilence's face, knocking him flat. Pestilence quickly stumbled upright, one hand held to his nose to stem the flow of blood pouring from it. He raised his other hand and started a spell, but Ackrovan leapt forward, tackling him and delivering another punch across the face. He punched Pestilence twice more, than got back to his feet. "That's for helping a cowardly, sniveling rat." He snarled. He then turned to Nioca. "And that's for all the trouble you've caused me!"

As Nioca groaned in agony, Ackrovan turned to walk away. He only made it one step, however, before he bumped into Syla. With an all-consuming unbridled rage in her eyes, she drew back and landed a solid punch to his gut, followed by another across the face. Caught unprepared, Ackrovan was knocked flat on his back, winded and sprawling in the mud. "You screw with Nioca, and you screw with ***me***." Syla snarled. One of her hands glowed with a deadly dark aura.

A low growl sounded behind Syla. Her face showed an instant transformation; one moment was of rage. The next was utter terror. "No... not again." She whimpered. She turned. A noob growled at her, fangs bared. Not just any noob; the same one that had attacked her before. "No... Wound!" She shouted. A bolt of light flew from her hand, but the noob leapt aside. It then leaped at her face, fangs parting to rip into her flesh. She stumbled back with a cry, falling. The noob shot over her, missing her by inches. It then wheeled and leaped at her again.

Syla jumped out of the way. Making her way over to the recovering Nioca, she yanked Crusader's Protectorate from its sheath and waved it in front of her. The noob paused for a moment, then rushed her again. The noob feinted to the left, causing Syla to swing wide. It then pounced, knocking the blade away and pinning her to the ground.

Suddenly, the noob was knocked aside; Ackrovan dove headlong into the noob, pinning it to the ground. He then proceeded to beat on the squealing noob as Syla got up and backed away in terror. The noob, recovering from being startled, sank its fangs into Ackrovan's arm. He yelled in pain, trying to shake the noob off. It held on with its teeth, growling and clawing at Ackrovan's torso. Without a weapon, Ackrovan was quickly getting overwhelmed by the noob's ferocity. As Ackrovan fell backward, the noob released its grip on Ackrovan's arm. It then snapped at his throat.

"Control Foes!" Nioca wheezed out. The noob stopped its bite just as its jaws had closed around Ackrovan's throat. Calmly, as if nothing had happened, the noob released Ackrovan and walked into the citadel. Ackrovan rubbed his throat, then looked at his tattered arm. Syla shrank against the citadel wall, staring blankly ahead. Pestilence slowly got up and proceeded to look about sharply for Ackrovan. Nioca got up, muttering a healing spell. A glow surrounded his hand.

Ackrovan looked at Nioca. "I know I just attacked you, but... can you heal this?" He said somewhat uncomfortably, holding his arm out.

Nioca stared at the gaping wound for a moment, then turned and approached Syla. "Are you okay?" He asked urgently. She stared numbly ahead. "Syla, are you injured?" A note of panic entered his voice. "Syla!" He shouted.

Syla jerked slightly, looking into his eyes for a moment. Then she shook her head, muttering disconnected, vaguely coherent syllables. She looked ready to run away screaming, but regained her composure.

"Do you have the antidote?" Nioca asked her. She nodded, reached into the breast pocket of her robes, and pulled out a small vial. He took it and quickly hurried back over to Ackrovan. "Now," he stated, roughly grabbing ahold of Ackrovan's wrist, "hold still. This is going to hurt." Uncorking the vial with his free hand, he then poured the contents into the bloody wound. Ackrovan let out a yell of pain before clamping down. He still groaned loudly, biting down on his lower lip to keep from crying out. Nioca turned to Pestilence. "Go into the parlor and bring me the Med kit hanging on the wall. Quickly, now!" Pestilence nodded and ran into the citadel. Motioning for the rest to follow, he turned and walked inside. As Syla and Ackrovan sat down on a nearby bench, Nioca shut the door behind him to close out the harsh rain. A rumble of thunder was heard.

A few moments later, Pestilence came back out with a large, awkward pack. He set it on the ground at Nioca's feet. Reaching down, Nioca rummaged through it until he found a roll of bandages and a towel.

"Can't you just cast a healing spell?" Ackrovan asked through gritted teeth.

"Sadly, no." Nioca stated tritely, drying the area around the injury with the towel. "The magic in the spell can interfere with the antidote. And unless you want to turn into a monster within the coming hours, that's a bad idea." Nioca ripped off a large segment of bandage and wrapped it around Ackrovan's injured arm. He let out a groan as Nioca tightened it. "Don't mess with that until tomorrow morning. Sunrise, at the earliest. If you want, tomorrow I can cast a healing spell on it, but for now, a bandage is the best you're going to get."

"Great." Ackrovan groaned. "Can I at least get access to an essence pool?"

"Erm..." Nioca started hesitantly. "Unfortunately, no."

"Let me guess, it'll interfere with the antidote?" Ackrovan stated bitterly.

"Eh, more that the essence pool died recently." Nioca responded. "Will essence pods work?"

"I suppose." Ackrovan conceded.

"Good. I'll bring a couple back here from the Geneforge forum." Nioca rummaged through his pockets and tossed Ackrovan a key. "You are not to go out in this weather. The odds of getting an infection in this are too great. That key will only fit in the appropriate guest quarter, so you'll know when you found the right one."

"Why are you doing this?" Ackrovan asked, confused.

"Because you're a decent person." Nioca said. Ackrovan gave him an odd look, but he merely nodded at Syla, who still appeared shaken.

Nioca wrung out his robes again before entering the meeting hall. It was starting to empty out slightly. He made his way over to the bar, where Ligrev cheerily served coffee. "Regular, extra strength." Nioca stated to her. She giggled and quickly poured a steaming cup of coffee. "So, Ligrev, how would you feel about turning this into a fully-functioning inn?" Nioca asked.

"As in being an innkeeper?" She asked excitedly.

"Yes. As in renting out rooms, and such. I've noticed that some of our members lack residences, or have inconveniences with finding a dwelling whilst residing on the island." Nioca said smoothly.

Ligrev gave him a baffled stare. "What?" She asked, confused.

"They don't have a place to stay while they're here, or are homeless." Nioca simplified, annoyed at her failure to comprehend him.

"Oh! Oh, that's awful!" Ligrev gasped, horrified.

"Well, I plan to fix that. I plan to turn this into a full inn, complete with rooms. Would you be up to that?" Nioca asked, taking a large swig of coffee.

"Of course! Oh, I'm so excited! Me! An innkeeper! It's like a dream come true!" Ligrev squealed.

"Of course it is." Nioca said, straining to keep the sarcasm out of his voice. Ligrev didn't notice. "All right, if I could have your attention!" Nioca raised his voice for everyone to hear. "I need everyone to move toward the front of the room and stay there until further notice! I apologize for any inconvenience, but this should be resolved quickly." Grumbling echoed through the room as everyone started moving to the front of the inn. "You too, Ligrev. Take some coffee and beverages with you so you can keep serving." Nioca added to Ligrev.

Nioca then pulled his robes tighter and left the hall.

Nioca slowly ascended the Admin Tower. He was feeling weary from the events of the day, but he knew that he wouldn't be able to sleep until he finished his task. Arriving on the 22nd floor, he unlocked the door and entered. A computer console stood in the center, massive displays surrounding it. Stepping up to the console, he started typing. The screens zoomed in on the meeting hall, with various schematics popping up across the screen. Sifting through various options, he hit upon an option labeled, 'Modify'. Selecting it, the various schematics organized themselves, along with a grid layout of the building.

Nioca typed quickly, but soon discovered that making actual modifications to the building was a far greater task than he realized. Every detail had to be checked, multiple variables had to be configured, and the modifications had to coincide with the original building. Nioca groaned five minutes in; it was more than he had bargained for. He couldn't help but feel that the human mind wasn't made for such calculations.

Nioca then smiled. Pulling out his RMM-A, he called for a SimpleBot. Soon, one zipped into the room. "*Awaiting orders.*"

"I need some calculations to be done regarding some building modifications." Nioca said. "Fitting on the existing building, I want to build several guest rooms above the meeting hall. Each room needs to be rectangular in shape, with dimensions that would fit a standard-size bed with a dresser, along with some empty space for a person's belongings. This also needs to take in account a room with four chamber pots for the residents to use, and a storage cupboard for various goods and cleaning supplies." Nioca took a breath. "I also want each guest room to be congruent in size and shape. And all of this needs to take in account the integrity of the structure beneath it."

"*Processing...*" The SimpleBot said monotonously. "*Complete. Would you like me to input the results?* "

"By all means." Nioca said, impressed. The bot hovered forward toward the console. Instead of typing in the data, as Nioca expected it to do, it extended a cord and plugged it directly into the console. Schematics and outlines quickly morphed and changed as the bot inputted the data. Soon, he was looking at the building, his idea of the guest rooms completed.

"*Global Mod Nioca, the system is ready to effect modifications. You should know that the backup generators only have a limited reserve of power, and that performing the requested operation will drain most of the power out of the system.*" The bot warned monotonously, pulling its cord out of the console.

"So w-dueck will have to light a candle at night. Not a big problem." Nioca reached forward and pressed a button on the console. The displays lit up with the same warning that the SimpleBot had given him. Annoyed, Nioca had it proceed regardless.

The runes at the top of the tower lit up, a bright yellow light illuminating the dark, cloudy night. Massive motes of light poured from the top of the tower, flying toward the meeting hall. The roof disintegrated as the light formed brilliant walls of energy on top of the existing walls. The form then seemed to cool into a corporeal form. Wooden walls formed on top of the original stone walls as a staircase formed inside.

Nioca entered the chat hall again, noting the displeasure of some of its inhabitants. Ligrev in particular was complaining about the rainwater that had gotten in during the modifications. Nioca walked over to her and addressed her. "Ligrev, the modifications are complete. Members of the Refuge can stay here for free, whilst anyone who isn't a member is to be charged 40 coins a night. And know that w-dueck may change those rates once he gets back."

"Okay." Ligrev nodded. Nioca, headed up the staircase to examine the results. It looked cozy. Not what Nioca would prefer, but it definitely was better than living in a storage unit on the docks. He used his master key to open the door. A simple bed, a dresser, and a brazier were all that adorned the room. Exiting and locking the door, he counted up the rooms. A total of twelve, not counting the washroom and the closet. Satisfied, Nioca headed back down the staircase.

Nioca wrung his robes out yet again as he leaned against the Citadel wall. Accursed rain... When will it ever quit?

"Nioca, if I may speak to you, for a moment?" Pestilence asked.

"Yes?" Nioca asked wearily. "And make it quick, I'm looking forward to getting a good night's sleep."

"Well, you know that substance you're carrying?" Pestilence asked.

"What about it?" Nioca perked up, alert.

"I'd like to study it... if it isn't a problem, of course." Pestilence cautiously ventured.

Nioca watched him for a moment, then reached into his sodden robes and tossed the vial of corrupted antidote to him. "Make sure to take the proper precautions with that. I have no idea what it's capable of, and would prefer not to find out by having it crawl into my skin."

"Of course not." Pestilence stalked off. Nioca fished the essence pods out of his robes and walked toward the guest quarters. Finding Ackrovan's door, he knocked on it.

The door opened slightly, and Ackrovan peeped out. "Your essence pods." Nioca said, holding them up for Ackrovan to see. Ackrovan opened the door a little wider and allowed him to put the essence pods on Ackrovan's bed. "Sleep well." Nioca said to him, getting unnerved by his silence. He exited, listening to the door shut and lock behind him. He walked into his own quarters, and quickly changed into dry nightclothes.

Suddenly, the secret passage down to the bunker lit up and dissipated. Aryll stepped through as the barrier reformed behind her. "The noob is tied up. And I'm afraid to ask what you have in mind for it."

"Come now, Aryll." Nioca stated, nonplussed. "I'm not going to test a device like that on *myself*. Something else has to get the first run." Nioca paused. "And speaking of which, where were you?"

"I couldn't get a clean shot." Aryll stated. "I was watching from the BoA forum, but when Ackrovan got in the way..."

"Of course." Nioca said. "I'd like you to stay outside my door tonight. Just in case I get any nighttime visitors again."

"Syla's rather shaken." Aryll said morosely.

"I can't blame her. She's... been through a lot today." Nioca said thoughtfully.

"You both have." Aryll pointed out. "Good night." Aryll finished, stepping through the door and closing it behind her.

Nioca settled down under the blanket of his bed, eager for a respite from the day. However, not a second later, the door opened again. A SimpleBot came through. "*Global Mod Nioca, you have a message.*"

"Not now. It can wait till tomorrow." Nioca groaned.

"*It's from Tesara Post. High Priority.*" The bot intoned.

"What?! Bring it here, quick!" Nioca yelped. The bot carried the canister over and dropped it on Nioca's lap. Nioca eagerly opened it and digested the contents. Various minute details flashed through his mind as he looked the letter over repeatedly. It was something beyond what he could have imagined. Something truly unusual. A true testament to the power of shaping, and more importantly, how it could be corrupted.

Nioca ushered the SimpleBot out. He uttered the pass-phrase to the secret passage, and quickly ran down into the bunker. Depositing the letter, he then ran back up. It appeared that the gods had smiled upon him... and granted him just what he needed.

However, try as Nioca might, he couldn't get to sleep. He was too giddy, too excited about the discovery and his experiments. Pulling himself back out of bed, he yet again entered the bunker. The machines whirred excitedly, and the noob growled menacingly. Casting control foes on it again, he untied it and guided it to the Shaping platform. He tied the noob to a nearby pole, then adjusted the alien device. He felt the various magics inside whir to life, the orb now pulsing with green light. Activating the power spiral, he then turned and allowed the energy to flow into the platform.

The platform took on a gentle green glow. The alien device turned to a steady green, illuminating the bunker. The blue power spiral started cycling faster, to keep up with the sudden draw of energy.

The noob shifted restlessly as the control foes spell wore off. It struggled to get away, but was bound too tightly to get off the Shaping platform. It didn't seem to be in any sort of pain; Nioca wondered why, considering that most magic performed recently tended to be agonizing.

Then the machinery stopped. The power spiral automatically clicked off, and the alien device disengaged. The noob sat there, snarling at Nioca.

Nioca nodded. It appeared as if all was going well; the noob was radiating an unusual aura that felt comfortable and familiar. Nioca approached the alien device and adjusted it again. Then, placing a hand on the orb, he muttered a single sentence under his breath. The glow of the device changed imperceptibly. Nioca then turned the alien device back on.

For a few moments, nothing happened. Then the device had its green glow turn red. It started letting out massive amounts of violent red light, with the Shaping platform glowing to match. It held for three seconds, then disengaged again.

The change was immediately perceptible. The noob had stopped snarling. Instead, it merely gazed up at him.

His work done for the night, Nioca headed back upstairs. He needed sleep, and to see whether the effect would hold.

Stillborn

By Sudanna - Mar 26 2009

Nalyd did not hesitate. His reactions were impeccable. He had been expecting this exact situation from the moment he sensed Jewels entering the complex. Like a beartrap, Nalyd snapped into the response he had determined he would use.

Nalyd whirled and ran, snapping off a hasting spell along the way. From his robes he withdrew a vial of what looked like watery honey. Tossing the hastily-made bacterial accelerant over his shoulder, he dashed to the baby's room. He sent mental trigger commands to the Rot.

As the clouds of vapor cleared, it revealed a twitching forest of thick, wet, multicolored tentacles. As they lengthened and livened, twitches turned into stone-shattering thrashes, and the simple tentacles mutated and split, growing strange, vicious-looking appendages or sloughing off patches of themselves to crawl blindly about. Soon, the entire tunnel was covered in a growing mass of hungry, amoebic monsters.

Jewels was less reflexive. Nalyd had been there one moment and gone the next, and the one after that had her squared off against a tentacular menace. Fireballs flew, but she would be occupied for a time. And she didn't know her way around these caverns well enough to merely take a different route.

Nalyd flew into the makeshift laboratory and wrenched the broken, rusting metal door into the door frame. Tracing along the edges (Though he had to hop to reach the top), he grew creeping molds around the door. They soon faded into stone, crackling as they secured the heavy slab of metal into place. Nalyd put on another layer, and then turned and leaned against what now might as well be a wall. Sliding downwards, he rested his head in his hands and moaned. He was so close! So unbearably close! He could taste completion, satisfaction! Taste fulfillment! He could not allow this. . . sentimental fool to interfere with his plans! She would not stand in his way, not in the way of progress, of his great project! He had taken too much risk, sacrificed too much, gotten by on too slim of a chance to stop now! He would not stop, and he would not allow her to stop him!

Consumed by a new resolve, Nalyd stood and briskly walked to the table of the baby. It had been slumbering, but the screeching and wrenching of the door had woken it, and now it writhed mutely. If he had allowed it to, it would be crying.

Nalyd raised his hands and, with a single flash of light, returned it to sleep. This would not work, he knew. It would not work. But he was desperate, and it might just not work in a way that was advantageous to him.

Nalyd looked forlornly over the many shattered, broken, rusted, decrepit, cannibalized, gutted, or otherwise useless instruments covering every available surface, and much of the floor. The remains of a power spire sat inert, delicate detection instrument sat with probes bent and broken,

conduits lay in pieces on the floor. One of the scroll-viewing devices was there, constructed at enormous expense. Now it was covered in the molding, desiccated remains of the creature that was a part of it. Several control panels were in similar states. The finest constructs in Shaping had once populated this place, and he would gladly lose several limbs for any one of them. Gladly kill for any one of them. To rely on nothing but his own skill and power in a situation such as this was madness, going against every Shaper teaching he had ever been taught. This was what created wastelands, monstrosities, rogue hordes, unspeakable evils. This was what raised black demons from unutterable depths of hell, what made these hells in the first place. This was what spawned great and unknowable alien sentiences, what led to world-eaters and soul-stealers.

But Nalyd was desperate, and quite insane by this point.

He did not have his plans for the ultimate human. He did not have the machinery that he needed to create that ultimate human. But he would try.

From memory and from desperation did his modifications now flow. Rather than subtly alter over the course of weeks, months, years, he would wrench this little being into the shape he desired in a few moments.

Essence flowed from him like water from a sieve. He bled it, oozed it, drooled it. Threw great dripping rivers of it onto and into this baby. His own gone, screeching now for more. Conduits grew from the rock, connecting him to the Rot, giving him greater, grander stores. Power flowed into, through, out of him, burning in entry and leaving indescribable loss in it's wake. Great lightnings crackled and sparked, sputtered throughout the chamber, arcing everywhere, uncontrollable. But in the end, all ended their trail in the baby. Monstrous shapes took form in the moving essence, threatened to break through from their death into new life. These he smashed and shoved to his goal. Whispering, now speaking, screeching, yelling, bellowing voices rose around him in a torrent of noise as the alien intellects spun off. These he smacked to their knees and crushed underfoot. Unnatural quickfire bounded from place to place, eating, taking, scarring. This errant power he twisted into shape, slammed into place, shoved into being.

Great winds tore throughout the chamber, whirling debris everywhere and tearing into Nalyd. His robes were plastered against him, his hair escaped it's tie and whipped everywhere. Fires belched from him, lightning leapt from him. Here, he embodied power.

His mind worked in a mad, mad fog. What had he done with kidneys? No matter; this would do! Where had he placed the brain's many compartments? No time! There, there, there! Were those phantoms a threat? They leech from you! Take it back! On a hundred things he looked, judged, decided. His mind burned through it's life, faster and faster. He must finish! Must succeed!

The small, small person on the table before him was obscured by the brilliant, blinding light. But here - was that a claw glimpsed? Or that, a wing? There, was that the first or second spine? The pelvis? There, a brain? It had grown, that much could be told.

In the end, when the lights faded, the last demons were eviscerated and inserted, the intellects smashed and assimilated, the fires burned into the core, the sweet essence infused into every cell, Nalyd stopped. Still his mind burned, but he looked upon his creature. He saw success, saw victory! But his eyes glittered with the stars of madmen, and perhaps they lied. No matter, he-

And his mind burned out. It had been running on energy created mostly by imagination for several weeks, and now the limit was reached. Nalyd fell into a coma then and there, dropping into recuperation.

A pounding on the door. Stillborn stood up, walked over. Utterly, monstrously alien, but hauntingly, disturbingly human, it calmly grabbed the metal with one hand, bending it into a grip. Ripped the door from the stone securing it, dropped the mangled slab of metal.

And Stillborn greeted his mother.

First Impressions

By Azuma - Mar 28 2009

Azuma's sword was floating mid-air while he himself is pacing around, flailing his arms around.

"$ur3! Join dem in their troubles nd add moar!11!!!" Azuma shouted at it.

The sword glowed blue. Bright, burning blue.

"Right, ryt. C0munitie... w00p dee du." Azuma turned his back at the sword. He folded his arms, indicating he's quite irritated.

"Sentience, damn it... why'd you have to bring that up? You saw how I brought that small lair down all by myself when *I* changed into that!"

Sentience changed hue to a lighter one.

"Right, right. And a chance for what? Transgression for my past sins? I'm holding you responsible for anything that will happen."

Azuma grabbed Sentience off in the air and put on his cloak and ported to the Calamity Refuge Spam Section. ---

The Section was quiet which it shouldn't be as he believes. He walked outside, towards the chat area. The cook was there preparing meals. Other people were inside the chat area too. He surveyed around while he drank the fresh coffee Ligrev, as Azuma read from her nametag, gave. There were at least four more inside the chat room. Iffy, the other guy that was with Iffy, a large, burly looking man with a sharp blade, and an elemental. *ELEMENTAL!* Azuma eyed him carefully. He's sure of it. That person's life signature rhythm was different from the others. He knows enough about them to identify the person to be an elemental though he doesn't know about them enough to identify what kind of elemental he is but the premise of one being this near to him is quite exciting. Sentience glowed blue, noticing on how Azuma was giggling like a cheerleader.

Shut it. I've looking for one of them for a while now and here's one, in the same room with me, drinking coffee! Sure I don't know what kind of elemental he is but hell I don't care!

Sentience gave an image of a child blurting out his tongue.

Pshaw.

Azuma sided himself again the wall near the counter. Ligrev was continuously, and seemingly endlessly, working serving out pizzas and coffee. Azuma grabbed another cup and stared at the elemental.

How to interact with him... elementals are known to be quite finicky and I even don't know what kind of elemetanl he is.

Azuma clicked his teeth and continued on to see the brooding elemental. Brooding? He thought. Interesting. He thought again. He was dumbfounded on how to interact with the elemental and was already in the hand-to-forehead position. Ligrev saw him and asked why.

"Oh nothing. Nothing. Say, who's that dude over there?" Azuma pointed to the person in the far table.

"Oh, he's Kaylas. A fire elemental if I heard correctly... then again, I'm just a cook." Ligrev went back to cooking.

"I see." A male fire elemental. that would prove to be hard. Just thinking of examining a ***male*** fire elemental is not healthy. Azuma gave out an exasperated sigh then walked outside the chat room.

What? I'm troubled. I'm going to do what I do if I'm troubled.

Sentience sighed. ---

Azuma returned to the Spam Section, but not to go back home. No. He was on a divine mission here. He was going to spam! He set Sentience down on the floor and, of course, as a precaution, he shapeshifted himself to the proper being for this event. A n00b. It didn't really take much out of him. He's quite experienced enough to do slight shapeshifting without it taxing him.

Azuma focused on himself. Deeper, deeper, to his innermost core. The self that never change, he drew it from there. It wasn't long before the change was apparent. He became more stocky, his hands grew small, claw-like nails. The minor changes crescendoed to a climactic finale. Azuma wasn't himself but he remained as Azuma. In the inside he is, on the outside he is not.

"lolololo100... aherm, ahem. Damn shifting jitters." Azuma's tone changed. His usual baritone now changed into something more shrill and shriek-like. Sentience glowed, notifying Azuma that it has no responsibility whatsoever to what will happen.

Pshaw. Don't get uptight with me. Just be a good sword and stay there.

n00b-Azuma snapped his clawed fingers. A peculiar-looking box flashed into existence. A label identifies it as "T3|-| $p4|\/|". As surely as it stabilized into the internet reality, it began to quiver, then rattle, then downright quaked the whole section.

"0o0oo|-|,,, $om1 mayt hav f3lt dat!1!11"

Not even quite finished with the statement, n00b-Azuma was corrected. Someone came to the section to investigate. A robed figure, accompanied by a numerous sqaud of bots greeted n00b-Azuma surprise.

"How did a noob get in here? Anyways, get rid of it." The figure pointed to n00b-Azuma and the bots complied. He, as Azuma noticed even though he was wearing a dress... or a robe? Azuma never did differentiate the two. The man started to turn away but not without noticing Sentience on the floor. He picked it up and went off.. The bots charged at n00b-Azuma who, in turn, was already running away. The bots sped up and was continuously speeding but, cursibly, Azuma was already in his form's limit.

Crap. I can't port into the Spam Plane! And that guy just sword-napped Sentience!

n00b-Azuma almost fell victim to the cliche'd dead-end face plant routine but otherwise, he is cornered by the bots. No other way out, n00b-Azuma thought. He sighed. The bots remained their eternally stoic output display.

"$0 c4n't w3 discu$s th1s 0v3r s0me c0ff3e?????" n00b-Azuma said dryly.

"Pzzzt. Noob intelligence detected. Wrrrrr. Operation. Bzzzz ping pong. Destroy." The bots proceeded with the disposal.

"FFS..."

n00b-Azuma jump-clawed one of the bots, highly alerting the whole platoon. A lot of metallic crashed soon followed. ---

"Interesting. Mithril inlined with gold or is it the other way around? "Nioca mused over his newly attained blade from the Spam Section. *Hopefully, the SimpleBots can take the noob intruder out.*Not soon as the thought left his mind, he heard a metallic crash.

"What in Ermaria's name?" He hurried back to the Spam Section, holding the hilt of the blade tightly. ---

"Warning. Warning. Target isssszzzzz..." A deftly handled cross-slash across the bot's mid-section decommissioned it.

n00b-Azuma was already breathing heavily but not because of fatigue. Adrenaline was kicking in, making him gasp for more oxygen as he continued his frenzy.

"Vzzzt. Rrrr. Target is too overpowering. Assissta... wwwzzzzz". The bot went off-line as Azuma ripped towards its wiry innards.

"Bzzzt. Change operation. Plink plink ping pong. Retreat. Regrou... zzzzzrt." A flunged bot slammed onto the output panel of this one, causing them to go boom. ---

"What in the name of the fluffy turtles happened here?" Nioca gawked as he surveyed the chaos before him. The SimpleBots were severed, dislocated, and shredded. The last of them fell with a clank, revealing the noob assailant still unhurt.

"You've picked the wrong day to mess with me noob." Nioca waved his new-gotten blade around an casted War Blessing and charged. The noob replied in kind.

The noob was clumsy and blindly berserked enough for Nioca to evade its attacks but he was still cautious. Anything that did what it had done was sure to be dangerous. Seeing an opening, he called upon the Ermarian gods and casted Smite. The desired effect was attained, or so Nioca thought. The noob surely reeled in pain but soon recovered. It snarled and snortled at him and its

barrage started again soon. Nioca parried them all though he was a bit surprised as he did but not surprised enough to marvel, he has other concerns, and it was a fatal concern indeed. ---

n00b-Azuma attacked the stranger relentlessly furious, which he shouldn't be doing. Azuma is no longer in control. His inner self was slowly being over-shadowed by the form's own will but it was not enough to take full control. Azuma can take back command but he needed an outside help.n00b-Azuma continued its assault. The stranger was occupied enough to not be able to cast any more spells. n00b-Azuma could clearly hear the stranger's heartbeat getting faster, louder, and oh how it craved for it. A near fatal blow was almost delivered but... ---

Nioca, seeing a small opening, tried his luck the lunged the sword into the noob's chest. He was lucky enough to be successful but not enough to be unscathed. Both of them reeled away from each other. Nioca was pained enough to not cast any healing spell on him, or any other spell for that matter, rendering him quite helpless. He looked at the noob. The sword was still plunged into its chest. It was quiet and stationary. He sighed relief. The pain subsided enough for him to cast heal. He did. He fell to the ground, breathing heavy, letting the adrenaline die down then he noticed its hand twitched.

"This... is... impossible..." Nioca cursed as he drew out Crusader's Protectorate. ---

n00b-Azuma shook himself awake. Disoriented, but not invalid, he saw the stranger, standing up, with a wicked looking dagger in his right hand. n00b-Azuma tried to speak but only gurgle came out. That was enough for the stranger to have reason to attack. n00b-Azuma was still half paralyzed when the stranger attacked. The dagger's blade almost had contact with his skin but he held the man's arm back and successfully forced him to fling his blade away from his hand but the man has recovered enough to cast spells again. And this time, n00b-Azuma is not raged enough to ignore most of the pain.

Flames started to coalesce aroung the man's arms, ready to be set upon a victim. The flames leaped n00b-Azuma, a divine fire commanding respect. With pure reflex, n00b-Azuma drew out the sword effectively stabbed in his chest and knelt, the blade piercing through the ground. ---

Nioca casted Divine Fire ferverously. When he thought he casted enough, he casted more. His magical reserves depleted quickly and he was satisfied but his satisfaction was short-lived. He saw the noob holding down the blade, grasping the hilt tightly while the blade itself, plunged into the ground and emanating a sort of barrier. It was wavering. An assault like that surely can put a strain on something, the barrier was not an exception but it did its job well. The was unburnt but the slight hint of singed flesh is apparent. Then...

"Nioca?" ---

n00b-Azuma stood up and finally made himself speak clearly and un-l33t.

"Nioca?" he repeated.

The man was clearly surprised at n00b-Azuma's utterance of his name. Of course, in shock, the man was speechless.

"You 4re," Azuma paused, he started to speak l33t again. He breathed deeply and started again. "You are Nioca, right?"

Nioca nodded, still dumbfounded.

"Ah yes, I could notice that dumbfounded look. I get that a lot of times. Wait." Azuma focused on himself, this time a less streinous activity. It wasn't long before he has reverted back to his original form.

"Better?" ---

"Y- yes. Err, I don't know. Maybe?" Nioca was still quite shocked by the current happenings.

"Ah straigthen up!" The once-noob helped Nioca up who was down on the floor sitting due to his surprise.

"It's me. Azuma. From the SpidWeb forums." the once-noob explained.

"Uh, yeah..." Nioca was still dazed by this revelation but he was recovering.

"So... you can shapeshift?" Nioca asked.

"To some extent, yeah." Azuma straightened up his slightly crumpled cloak. Shifting tends to do that. "I could only shift into something I've analyzed enough, even with that, I still need to practice."

"I... see." Nioca went to get his dagger back. He drew it from the floor and while turning back to Azuma, noticed his sword. "That sword," Nioca pointed to the object of interest, "was stabbed in your chest."

"It was." Azuma replied.

"You're still alive." Nioca said dryly.

Azuma laughed. Nioca gave out one breath of a chuckle.

"Sentience wont harm any living being." Azuma explained.

"A sword that doesn't kill?" Useful much?" Sarcasm was apparent in Nioca's tone.

"Does it have to to be useful? And we're both quite tired to discuss philosophies here. How about some coffee?" Azuma said.

"Can't. w-dueck adminously made me head overlord of the Refuge. The bastard." Nioca did a fist-shakey.

"Well, I'm not really craving for coffee right, now, so do you need help with anything?" Azuma tightened his grip on his sword which showed a tinge of blue. Nioca noticed him and asked if he's alright. Azuma said he's just fine.

Damn. Did I just say I'll help?! ... Don't even answer that.

Sentience replied with a smiley.

If only I could literally choke you... ---

Nioca thought on the offer. Of course he'll agree. Extra help is good but what help exactly? Then he had a genius spark.

"Indeed. I do need some help." ---

Azuma cringed.

Only a Mother Could Love

By Jewels - Apr 4 2009

Alight with anger and confusion, Jewels fought the obstacles Nalyd had put in her path. *Yet another enemy. They are all enemies! ... No, they are friends. Misguided, perhaps. Untrustworthy at times, but not enemies. ... Right, with friends like that who NEEDS enemies? Nioca hates us, Vergil can't be trusted, and now Nalyd is trying to hide our baby from us! ... We don't know that. ... What else could it be? ... I.. I don't know.* By the time Jewels had destroyed the last of the vicious creatures, she was both physically and emotionally drained. Her joyful high from the possibility that her baby wasn't dead had turned to the worst sort of dread. It would be better now if it *had* died. It would be a relief from the worry of the possibilities that now waited for her.

Jewels came to a sealed door at the end of the tunnel and started banging on it. Too distraught for words she just hit it again and again until it was torn open in front of her. Whatever she might have been expecting, this was not it. "Darius?" she whispered. Same square of the jaw, same cleft in the chin, same cut of the nose.

"Darius?" he repeated in a guttural voice. But no, the bare man before her was not Darius. Much larger, more muscular, taller, and there was something... something she could not put her finger on. Jewels was not even sure that it was a man.

Not anymore... She shuddered in her fear. Her mind reeled with what few facts she thought she knew. *Could it be?* Her eyes flamed in anger only to be echoed by a flash of his own. She made no hostile movement as tears of frustration ran down her face. "Who are you?" she asked, though in her heart she already knew. "What has he done to you?" she grieved.

"What... has he... done to you?" he repeated again, awkwardly reaching up a hand to wipe away her tears. There was a roughness to his touch that made her skin crawl and a harshness in his words with a quality that made it seem like there was more than one voice speaking them.

Jewels gently took his hand from her cheek though the touch grated at her senses. Like fingernails on a chalkboard was the contact, still she endured. Every motherly bone in her body screamed at her to wrap her arms around him, but every survival instinct she held screamed just as loud to run. As it was she compromised with herself and just held his hand. "Come on, let's find you some clothes."

Jewels knelt hunched over Nalyd's limp form. For the first time, she gazed at his face. It seemed... younger than she had expected. She brushed a few stray strands of his hair to the side as she fought with herself. She felt betrayed and yet... would either of them have survived at all without his help? She could never know for sure. "Pick him up, gently," she instructed. "We take him with."

She stood back and watched as her son stepped forward to pick up Nalyd like a rag doll. She had been robbed of motherhood and couldn't decide if that was a good thing or not. If motherhood came with this constant worry and heartache, perhaps it was better she had been spared much of it. But with it... joys had also been missed.

She walked them outside to a waiting Google transport and carefully replaced Nalyd's hood after her son had laid him on the back seat. "Stay here. I have... something I need to do first. I won't be long." He nodded at her and she turned back to the caves. She would spare Nalyd her rage, but if there was anything she could do to prevent him from being able to do this again, she would do it.

To the center of the caverns she marched, seeing everything but understanding nothing, she only knew she must not leave this place to enable Nalyd any future atrocities. A monstrosity faced her... something entirely unholy. Something she could unleash her revenge on. Jewels turned all control over to her fiery fury and watched her anger explode. The screech that echoed in her ears only fed rage... satisfied her more. Flesh melted, muscle burned, tentacles writhed. It fought back, unleashing all the powers of hell at it's disposal, but hell hath no fury like a woman scorned. Anything that could burn, did. Anything that could melt, did. Even the rocks of the walls of the cave became molten. When Jewels was done there was nothing left... well almost nothing. What was left, she took with and marched back out of the caves. At the entrance, she turned back to throw exploding fireballs that collapsed the entrance. As expected, Jewels still did not feel satisfied. Her fury still burned. She knew it always would, but she forced it to submit to her heart. Soon... soon she would have freedom.

Back at the transport, Nalyd still lay unconscious, but his body writhed and lurched. "How long as he been like this?" she asked.

"How... long?" her son repeated but then added haltingly, "Not long."

Nalyd's fingers curled and uncurled. His fists clenched and unclenched as if trying to grasp something. An arm reached towards Jewels where she stood. She looked at the scythe in her hand. The only thing to withstand her flame. She cautiously held it out to his reaching limbs and a hand grasped it firmly. His limbs pulled inward with the scythe, cradling it like a stuffed animal. He settled down into a peaceful slumber and the trip back to Calamity Refuge was uneventful.

No one that is not an Admin may come in or out. The SimpleBots were really starting to annoy her.

"Let her in you bucket of bolts," Kaylas stood on the other side of the gate trying to push the bots to one side.

No one that is not an Admin may come in or out, they repeated in unison shoving Kaylas back.

"Fine," Jewels reached into her pocket and pulled out her RMM-A. "If that's the way you want to play it..." Punching in some buttons, and working up a spell, she hit the limp Nalyd with it full force. "There... Nalyd is now an admin. *Let him in!*" The bots took a minute to compute before stepping aside. Jewels took Nalyd who still clutched his scythe. Surprised at how light he was, she carried him through the gate and handed him off to Kaylas carefully. She worked quickly

with her RMM-A and held up a hand to Nalyd's form. Energy came out of him and swirled about in motes before shooting themselves back into Jewels' hand. "And now he's not an admin," she addressed the bots. "Make sure he doesn't leave."

Kaylas looked at the bundle in scorn. "And just what do you expect me to do with this... thing?"

"Just meet us at the Admin Tower. I'll be there shortly." She turned to go back outside the gate.

"Wait!" Kaylas called. "Where are you going now? And who is that?" he sent a distasteful nod towards her other companion.

"Admin Tower. Five minutes," was all the answer she offered him before cringingly taking her son's hand and using her ring to teleport them away.

The warm light of the fire plane welcomed them, though the vertigo still made her nauseous. Back at her royal suite once again, in front of her nexus portal once again. Intent on her plan, she had gone immediately to it and made sure it's coordinates were set for Calamity Refuge. When she turned back around, she was horrified with herself at how insensitive she had been. Her son stood in a defensive position eying everything, especially her, with suspicion. Surprisingly he was in corporeal form... and he was sweating. He stared at her as if a hostile stranger then gave out a guttural cry and charged. Jewels didn't have enough time to dive out of the way before he hit her and his momentum carried them both through the portal.

This time through the vertigo was much worse, whether from being unprepared for it or for teleporting again so soon she wasn't sure, but her stomach heaved and her head spun. The weight of him falling on her broke some ribs. Pain shot through her entire body. A fist was drawn back. "No, wait... stop!" she yelled, not knowing if she'd be able to get through to him. "*It's me!*"

His fist stayed aloft. "It's... me?" his voice scratched out slowly. The flame in his eyes flickered out and his hand unclenched. His expression was one of a lost child, confused and alone. He staggered back, so unsure of himself and his actions.

It broke Jewels' heart, knowing it was her fault. She kicked herself for not explaining anything to him. She painfully picked herself up resolving to show him all the love a child deserved from their mother. "It's OK," she cooed walking slowly towards him. "It's me. It was always me. I should have told you, should have explained it to you." She reached her arms around his neck, hugging him tightly and holding his cheek to hers. The pain of it hurt worse than the broken ribs. Like instant freezer burn or the prickle a limb feels when waking up after it has fallen asleep only infinitely worse. Millions of tiny daggers stabbing at her every nerve, grating at her every sense. "It's OK," she repeated in tears.

Jewels had considered leaving him in her room, afraid how the others would receive him or the trouble he might get into, but the worry of what might happen while she *wasn't there* refused to let her. No. He'd have to come with. "Just stay with me," she had instructed, "and everything will be all right."

Kaylas was waiting impatiently at the bottom floor of the Admin. Tower. "Five minutes, huh? That was at least twenty." Jewels shook her head at him taking note that Nalyd had been plopped inelegantly onto a couch in the waiting room. He saw her gaze and preemptively responded. "You didn't expect me to carry him around all day did you? He's not exactly my favorite human, and you know how I feel about humans in the first place."

"No, no... I suppose not," she answered while straightening Nalyd out to a more comfortable looking position. "We can leave him here for now. He should be fine." She really wanted to stick him into a dungeon cell, but with the lockdown he shouldn't be able to go anywhere anyway. A dungeon would only aggravate the situation and Nalyd's mood when he woke up... if he was going to wake up. Jewels wished once again that she knew more about Geneforge. Maybe she could ask Ackrovan about it.

"Now, what about some introductions?" Kaylas asked eying the man that seemed to hover at Jewels' side.

Jewels began to say something, but didn't know how to put it. How could she explain something to Kaylas that she didn't understand herself? "He... He doesn't have a name," she finally stammered out.

"Doesn't have a name?" Kaylas scoffed. "Nonsense. What kind of grown man doesn't have a name?" He turned to address him. "What is your name?"

Jewels looked on in curiosity as well. Her son seemed to think deeply about the question. "A name," she encouraged. "What should we call you?"

"Name? Name..." Jewels watched Kaylas flinch at the sound. Another moment passed until it seemed he came to a decision. "Stillborn," he grated out. "Name is Stillborn." Jewels' breath caught. She had never said that word to him or mentioned any of how he came to be. Not that she really understood how he came to be. That he identified with this word... it left her uneasy.

Kaylas didn't seem to connect the dots though he had turned to Jewels for her reaction. "An... odd name to be sure," he said.

"An odd name," Stillborn repeated, "...for an odd man." He stuck out his hand towards Kaylas. "Nice to... meet you."

Kaylas took the extended hand but almost immediately recoiled protectively, leaving Stillborn's hand outstretched awkwardly. Jewels reached for it herself and brought it down to hold at her side. "Jewels," Kaylas said curtly. "A word... in private?"

"No," she replied just as shortly. "He stays with me." She walked out of the Admin Tower, not really sure what to do next when the Chat Lounge caught her eye. "Wait a minute... Is Will here?"

"I haven't seen him, but the second I do he's getting an earful about leaving me stranded in this place." Jewels rolled her eyes at him, not bothering to tell him that she could take him back to the fire plane at any moment.

"Who changed the chat lounge then?"

"Oh, that? Nioca came into the lounge telling everyone to move to one side and then all that construction started going up. Why?"

Nioca... Jewels' eyes slit. He just couldn't resist using the power. A quick glance at her RMM-A told her he was in his Citadel and she stormed off ignoring Kaylas' question. "Nioca!" she called bursting through his front door. "Somebody get me Nioca!"

It wasn't long before he came shuffling up irritably. "What do you want?"

Jewels attempted to be calm and professional. "Did you alter the structure of the Chat Lounge?"

"Yea, I did. Turned it into an inn. Do you like it?"

She ignored his question. "Did you have permission?"

"Permission?" he scoffed. "Will gave me permission when he made me global mod."

"But you didn't run it by him first, did you?" she accused losing her calm demeanor. "How about a backup? Did you make a backup first?"

"Well... uh, no. Not exactly," He said a bit flustered. "But don't worry, nothing went wrong. Everything's perfectly fine."

"That's not the point!" she yelled at him then let out a frustrated sigh. "The point is something could have gone wrong. You put the Refuge at risk, without prior approval or a way to restore the refuge if something had gone wrong. Having great power is not just about being able to use, Nioca. It's about using it *wisely*." Jewels turned to leave running into Stillborn who had been standing right behind her.

"Introduction?" he asked.

"I have some business to take care of first." She took his hand trying to lead him back to the Admin Tower but his feet stayed rooted and his eyes didn't leave Nioca.

"Introduction," he insisted. Jewels was baffled at the look of curiosity on his face.

"Um, okay. Stillborn, this is Nioca. Nioca, this is Stillborn. He is my... guest." Stillborn held out his hand again confidently to Nioca.

Nioca hesitated but only briefly and as soon as he took it Stillborn clamped down tight pumping it up and down enthusiastically and smiling from ear to ear. "Nice to meet you." he asserted. Jewels had to stifle a giggle at the pained look on Nioca's face. Stillborn suddenly pulled Nioca towards himself and wrapped his other arm around patting him heartily on the back.

"Gah!" Nioca cried out trying to struggle free.

"Oh... Okay, okay, break it up," Jewels intervened, pulling Stillborn away. "Nioca isn't really the... hugging type. Come on. I have some things to do."

"Stay." Stillborn's voice resounded as if a crowd had all said the same thing at the same time.

"I... I really shouldn't. I.."

"You go." Stillborn looked at her winningly. She couldn't possibly guess what was going on in his head. "I'll stay."

"Oh... Uh, okay. I mean... If that's all right with, Nioca."

Nioca didn't look at all like it was all right with him but Stillborn answered for him. "Yes, yes. Nioca will give me a tour, yes."

"If you're sure..." Jewels wasn't at all sure herself but Stillborn was ushering her out the door.

"Very sure," he soothed which was actually less soothing than if he had said he would rather come with her, but Jewels was intrigued by his assertiveness and confidence. Perhaps they would be all right. Nioca wasn't incompetent after all.

Jewels had gone back to the Admin.Towerand stood at the door to floor 18 for the first time since she had been made an Admin. The plaque on the door read "Maintenance". She had always just expected Will to take care of this stuff or Vergil... but Vergil had resigned and Will was gone. Who knew when he was coming back? And if Nioca was going to be running around creating whole new buildings, she definitely needed to know how everything worked. The main panel came to life as she walked in. Her eyes scanned the options until they rested on 'Backup'. *Save the table structure. Save the table data. Compress the file with gzip*. Jewels wasn't sure which option was the best so she tried combinations of them all. *Click, click, click.* Hmm... that wasn't so bad. Pretty easy actually. Jewels looked over the other options and kept clicking away.

Ten minutes later she was completely done with the maintenance but her hunger over knowledge about the forums had grown immensely. She dug in her pocket a bit. *Where is that?* Eventually she came up with a slip of paper that had the url for the database on it. Hmm... It couldn't hurt to go look around, could it?

Time Out for an Assassin

By Zoe - Apr 6 2009

Iffy was just sitting calmly down drinking some hot chocolate. He was looking around observing people, and simultaneously working on a new script. A man who had been wondering around uncomfortably had then sat down next to Iffy. Iffy turned away for a few seconds to observe some more.

Iffy was going to drink some more when he noticed something wrong with the drink. He threw it at the mans head and slammed him down to the ground. Which, of course due to boredom, everyone looked to see what happened.

"This is the most pathetic attempt yet to assassinate me!" said Iffy with an annoyed tone. "They told me you were dangerous...but damn! How did you..." the man was interrupted. "It was plain obvious. Geez, she is really scraping the bottom of the barrel for these guys. Are you even real assassins?"

"Please! Spare me!" the man pleaded. "Give me some information and I just might let you live," said Iffy, almost bored. "Never! I had a contract!" shouted the man as he tried to run off. Iffy chuckled. A couple of seconds later and the man was trapped in a force cage.

"So...you attempted to poison me and tried to run off...how pathetic." Iffy said annoyingly. "And that was good hot chocolate too. Now stay there and think on whether or not you want to tell me anything. I just want to work on my script."

People turned away with the action over. Ackrovan attempted to poke the man within the cage, but retreated his finger when the man proceeded to bite him.

"Wait!" the man said. "I hate it in here! Here, this letter should give all you need." Iffy snatched it and read it over. "Good boy" Iffy folded it and stuck it in his pocket. He then proceeded to continue work.

"Aren't you going to let me out?" the man said. Iffy chuckled. "Later, I'm busy"

The man grumbled and day dreamed of cooking the two claw bugs standing next to Ackrovan. And hot sauce. He loves hot sauce.

The Changing of the Guard

By Nioca - Apr 7 2009

Nioca stood, watching the "Stillborn" carefully. He wasn't sure what to think of this monstrosity. Still, it didn't seem too harmful at the moment. Nioca decided to try and ignore it and go about his business. He headed to the basement where Azuma was working on the teleportation crystal. He watched with annoyance as Stillborn proceeded to follow.

Azuma stared at the crystal, seemingly looking for something. He looked up at Nioca as he entered. "I've reconfigured the crystal. It points to its previous coordinates."

"Thank you. You're a lifesaver, Azuma." Nioca said, shaking his hand. Azuma was no longer paying attention to him, however, but instead was looking over his shoulder at Stillborn. "Oh, that's Stillborn. Stillborn, meet Azuma."

"Nice to meet you." Stillborn said, holding his hand out. Azuma shook it, though the look on his face clearly indicated that he realized it was a mistake.

"It's like sticking your hand in a cheese grater, isn't it?" Nioca asked. Azuma nodded, and Stillborn merely looked confused.

"...and that's the citadel." Nioca said to Stillborn. They were headed back down to the foyer. "So, where exactly do you know Jewels from?" Nioca asked casually.

"Mom." Stillborn replied.

Nioca paused and looked at Stillborn. "What?"

"Mom." Stillborn repeated.

"Jewels is your mother?" Nioca asked, confused and startled. Stillborn merely nodded in reply.

Nioca simply stood stunned for a moment. Then, without a word, pulled out his RMM-A and examined it. He turned and left the citadel, leaving Stillborn standing on the steps.

Nioca crossed the park, landing on the doorstep of the Admin Tower. He pushed the door open, and saw his quarry. Nalyd, positioned on the sofa as if he was taking a simple nap. However, Nioca knew immediately that it wasn't the case. He could hear Nalyd's breath from the doorway; shallow and erratic.

"Ah, Nalyd, what have you done this time?" Nioca asked softly. It was entirely rhetorical. Picking Nalyd up and slinging him over his shoulder like some odd sack of potatoes, Nioca turned and headed out the door. Once again, he crossed the field, this time entering the Geneforge forum.

Ackrovan had been through here; the room had been cleaned up, and the Essence and Healing pools were working again. He also spotted the telltale blood and essence stains of Shaping and Absorption. Nioca carried Nalyd over to the Essence and Healing pools and set Nalyd down between the two. Energy started flowing into him; Hopefully, the boost of essence and vitality meant he'd recover in a little while. Nioca had questions; If Stillborn was indeed Jewels' son, and if Jewels lacked an alien cheese grater fetish, then there was only one way he could have been altered. Furthermore, Nioca was concerned; that kind of power poured into a creature like Jewels was... disconcerting.

Nioca summoned a shade to watch over Nalyd and headed back out. He looked out toward his citadel, and his breath caught. A silvery light could be seen between the four spires. The power crystal meant to power the entire citadel was online, it seemed. The Citadel was, at last, complete. Well, the building was, anyway.

Nioca rushed to the citadel and up its myriad staircases. After climbing seven stories, he reached his goal. The entire floor was actually a large, wall-less dome. There was only a domed roof, supported by four large stone beams. Inside was a massive crystal, emitting a silvery, shifting light. Nioca felt his entire body start tingling violently; it was as if tiny sparks were embedding themselves in his skin.

Five crystal pillars stood around the large crystal. Unlike the central crystal, these were dark. Crystal conduits ran from the central crystal to these, though the conduits were also dark. Crystal conduits also led to the edges of the room, which were lined with crystal.

Nioca stepped up to a gem-studded control panel near the large crystal. An amalgam of magic and technology, it controlled the power nexus and how it operated. The display printed simple green letters.

Status: Standby

Efficiency: 0%

Output: 0%

Load: 0%

Reserves: 0%

Nioca pulled out his RMM-A. Accessing the forum's power controls, Nioca tried to figure out how to add the citadel's power nexus to the list of power sources. "No wonder w-dueck does his maintenance in the tower." Nioca muttered to himself, trying to modify it. "Making changes through this thing is a royal pain in the- Ah! Got it."

Pocketing the RMM-A, Nioca pressed one of the gems on the panel, a ruby. The display text turned red, with several new lines of text appearing.

Output Setting: Fixed

Output: 0%

Maximum Load: 0%

Reserve Storage: Store Excess

Reserve Level: 100%

Nioca rolled the ruby in its setting downward till the Output Setting option was highlighted. Rolling the ruby sideways, he watched as different settings flashed by. He eventually settled on a setting named Match Load. The Output option changed to display +0%; Nioca adjusted it to +5%, then changed Maximum Load to 100%.

He pressed a diamond on the console, and the display switched back to normal. He then pressed a topaz, resulting in a new screen.

CURRENT STATUS: IDLE

Nioca rolled the topaz sideways. The status switched to Active. He then pressed the diamond again. The display went back to normal, but the central crystal in the room started flashing new, faster and brighter patterns of silver light. The feeling of sparks embedded in Nioca's skin intensified. The field named Output now indicated that the crystal had an Output of 2%, and the Efficiency field stated it was operating at 20%. However, both fields were rising at a fast rate. Soon, the crystal's output hit 5%, and the Efficiency hit full.

Nioca cringed. All of his hair was standing on end, causing him to look like some kind of frazzled mad scientist. It now felt like hot needles were digging into his skin, and it itched terribly. Pressing a blue sapphire on the panel, he watched as a list of floors flashed across the panel. None of them were receiving power. He rolled the sapphire and landed on an option titled Activate All. He pressed the sapphire into the panel. He then pressed the diamond.

The display now showed that there was a 6% load on the new power system. As the output increased to accommodate the new load, Nioca winced. He noticed that his skin was turning red from his exposure to the reactor. Pulling the RMM-A back out, he shut down the Admin Tower's back-up generators. He then went down the stairs and grabbed an amulet from a box at the bottom. Putting it on, he ran back up the stairs. The feeling of burning needles was fading as the amulet protected him from the reactor's effects.

He looked at the display at cocked his head. The load was still at 6%. With a frustrated sigh, he looked at the now-ringing RMM-A. Three words were stamped across it: FORUM POWER FAILURE.

Nioca pondered whether Jewels was going to chew him out again. Then, with an angry growl, he jabbed an amethyst on the console. He had, naturally, forgotten that the forums ran separately from his citadel. A display came up with a list of every building on Calamity Refuge that drew power. Once again, he found an Activate All option and selected it.

The display returned to normal, but the load jumped several-fold. It now had a load of 53%. Nioca once again felt like hot sparks had embedded into his skin. He could only imagine what it'd feel like without the amulet, assuming the raw energy coming off of the reactor didn't cook him. He noted that the conduits leading to the crystal pillars were lit. They were charging the crystal pillars with reserve energy, to help compensate with any changes and to act as a back-up in case the reactor went down.

Nioca pressed an emerald on the console and turned the reactor's shields on. He then decided to get out of the reactor dome as the reactor started increasing in brightness. He headed down the staircase, dropping the protective amulet in the box at the bottom. He then stepped through the reactor door and closed it behind him. He then examined the door; it was made from Adamantine to avoid letting anyone in, and the doorknob was made entirely out of crystal. Azuma was waiting behind him. "Okay, try to open the door." Nioca said to him.

Azuma stepped forward with a confused look on his face. He grabbed the doorknob and attempted to turn it. However, it refused to turn. Azuma tried harder, throwing his entire weight behind him, but the doorknob wouldn't budge. Nioca signaled him to stop. Nioca then reached and grabbed the knob. It turned freely, and the door popped open. He shut it again with a smile. "Good. I don't need someone unauthorized waltzing in and tampering with it."

"The door only works for you?" Azuma asked.

"Or anyone I authorize. Aryll can get in there, but she doesn't use the door. And w-dueck will be authorized once he gets back. Other than that, though, I'm the only one allowed in." Nioca stated. "Thanks for all your help, Azuma." Nioca added. "Would you care to join me for some Amritae?"

Nioca entered the chat lounge. It appeared that the excitement hadn't just been in his citadel. A man sat forlornly in a forcecage, surrounded by two clawbugs. Iffy, Ackrovan, Jewels, Syla, Stillborn, Kaylas, and Vergil were all here as well. Ackrovan and Vergil were at a corner table, discussing something furtively. Iffy sat near the forcecaged man, thoroughly ignoring him. And Jewels sat at the bar talking with Ligrev.

Nioca knew it was coming before Jewels left her seat. He could see a flame in her eye, and her frown and crossed arms signaled nothing but trouble. "What were you doing?" She said disapprovingly.

"Oh, you mean posting the naked pictures of you and w-dueck?" Nioca snapped sarcastically.

"WHAT?!?" Vergil yipped. He had jumped clear out of his seat. "I AM GOING TO KILL W-DUECK! HOW ***DARE*** HE-"

"Vergil, sit down! There are no pictures!" Jewels yelled at Vergil. She then turned to Nioca. "And as for you, you know perfectly well what I mean. The power failure! What did I just tell you about using power wisely?" She said, her voice echoing through the room.

"You mean cutting the back-up generators which would have died within the day if I hadn't switched them off?" Nioca responded.

"They wouldn't have died if you hadn't decided to abuse your powers! When w-dueck gets back-" Jewels said shrilly.

"Oh, abuse MY powers?!" Nioca yelled. Even though she was angry, he noticed she flinched at the sound of his raised voice. "The first thing w-dueck will do is hear about your subordination and how you flaunted his orders and broke security protocols! I'm not the one trotting strangers in and out whenever I damn well please! I was trying to fix the problem, and I have! You, meanwhile, have been a risk to security, smuggling people in and out, making Nalyd an *Admin*, and generally finding every way possible to ensure you have your way!"

Jewels sputtered. She had been caught off-guard, just as she had caught him off-guard earlier. "No harm came of it-" She began weakly.

"Did it?" Nioca said. He pointed at the man in the forcecage. "I don't recognize him. He's not a member. He wasn't here yesterday. Which means that he got through security measures, which are pretty tight. That means that your tampering resulted in a breach. Somebody could have gotten killed because of you." Nioca finished. He moved past her, leaving her stunned. It felt good to unload his frustrations somewhere.

Jewels recovered slightly. "There's something else I wanted to talk to you about. Stillborn. You shouldn't have just left him alone like that. Do you know what kind of trouble he could get into?"

"Ah, yes." Nioca said loudly. "I apologize. It was careless of me to leave *your son* in a protected environment."

Everything stopped. Nioca hadn't meant to say it. It had just come out. Jewels stood stock still, mortified at having it broadcasted to the entire inn. Kaylas went pale. And Vergil looked as though he were going to be sick.

Finally, Jewels managed to snap out of it somewhat. She turned to Stillborn, choking on her words. Tears were forming in her eyes. "Come on. Let's... let's go." She then walked hurriedly out the door, Stillborn following obediently.

Nioca paused. A tiny part of him felt sympathy and shame for his actions. Nioca quickly shook his head, clearing it. He had things to do. He sat down next to Iffy. "So, nice to see you here, Iffilous." He said. "I actually could use your help for something."

"How could you?" Iffy asked. "Jewels is nice and good, and... and you just crushed her! You made her cry!"

"I saw that." Nioca said cheerily. He was starting to feel quite a bit better, now that his frustrations had been vented. And Jewels was out of his hair for a while. "The less you know about that, the better. Trust me."

"Yeah. I guess I don't." Iffy said. He got up and walked away.

"Perfect." Nioca cursed under his breath. "Ah, well, guess I'm on my own. But first..." Nioca got up and left the lounge.

Nioca entered his citadel. He saw, now that the citadel was complete, that his thirty-eight shades were now hovering idle on the main floor. "Shades, attention!" He shouted. They all hovered rank-and-file in front of him. Nioca tampered with his RMM-A for a moment. A SimpleBot hovered into his citadel. "*Awaiting orders.*"

"These shades are here to assist in your job protecting the island. They are not to be interfered with or attacked. If they come under attack, you are to assist them in combat." Nioca stated clearly.

"*Orders processed. Order #4A7M29 - Do not interfere with or attack specified shades. Order #4A7C31 - Defend specified shades in combat. Confirmed?*"

"Confirmed." Nioca stated. The Simplebot hovered away. Nioca turned to his shades. "Follow me." Nioca turned a led them through the citadel. Arriving in his bedroom, he spoke, "Serota emgas phtros." The barrier down to the bunker faded away. Descending, he led the shades to the alien device. A script was already on the computer. He just needed to activate it. He summoned a shade on the platform. Then he turned on the device.

He placed a hand on the green globe of the alien device. Staring at the screen, he started reciting the script. Words passed his lips quickly as he gave the device its commands. After several minutes, his monologue came to a close. The globe of the device turned red. It let off a plethora of red light, the shaping platform the shade stood on glowing to match. The lights dimmed as power started surging through the device. The light held for ten seconds. Then it faded.

Nioca took a step back. The shade seemed to shudder for a moment, then exploded in a spray of ectoplasm. Amongst the ectoplasm was thirty-eight bolts of light. They hit a shade each. The change was immediate. The shades turned a color of cyan. Frost quickly formed around them, and the temperature dropped to unbearable levels within moments. Nioca quickly cast a shielding spell to protect him from the effects of the supernatural cold. "Alright, come on, out! You'll damage the equipment!" He shouted. The shades complied, floating up and out. Nioca quickly ascended from the bunker. He was out his bedroom door before the barrier had even fully reformed. Exiting the citadel, he found the shades standing rank-and-file. The outdoor temperature around them was enough to give a person frostbite within seconds, despite the night being pleasantly warm. Their claws seemed to be made of solid ice now, instead of the usual ethereal bone.

Nioca approached them, but stayed far enough away to avoid their damaging effects. "I want you to patrol the island. Keep an eye on the coast. If anyone attempts to enter or exit other than w-dueck, they are to be turned away. w-dueck is a white male, wears heavy robes, and wields and

iron-bound lorken. If w-dueck attempts to enter or exit, let him. He will also be allowed to make you stand down." Nioca paused. "If someone persists in trying to enter or exit the island, inform them that you are allowed to use lethal force to maintain the embargo. If they try to force their way past, kill them. The SimpleBot are there to assist you. However, if for whatever reason they attack you, do not hesitate to destroy them."

The shades started to float away, but Nioca wasn't done. "You five! Your orders are the same, but you are to guard the google station instead of patrolling."

The shades Nioca addressed each floated toward the station. Nioca smiled. Perhaps now, the embargo would be upheld.

He jumped. The sound of a chaingun echoed across the island. Running to the source, he drew Crusader's Protectorate. He found the wreckage of one SimpleBot, surrounded by several fyora and clawbugs. One of his shades was also here, with blood on its claws. Several more SimpleBots arrived at the scene, chainguns loaded and ready to fire. Unfortunately, there was no sign of the attacker. "Shade, who broke through here?"

"Unknown. Found creations, all but one dead." It hissed. It got closer, and Nioca recoiled. His skin was starting to hurt just being this close.

"Very well. Carry on." Nioca said. He marched away. Someone was on the island. Someone skilled with Shaping. Nioca started hurrying to the chat lounge. The people there needed a heads-up.

He burst into the lounge with Crusader's Protectorate drawn. Iffy, Syla, the forcecaged man, and Ackrovan were all still here, and looked up in alarm. "Listen up! We have a security breach! Someone is on the island and has already taken out a SimpleBot. He or she is capable of shaping creations and-"

But the rest didn't get out. A bolt of acid had struck him from behind, and he collapsed, unconscious.

Banned Lizard

By Vergil - Apr 7 2009

"Jewels, I want to know if you have any interest in marrying Dubya, because I swear, if there are any photos of his-"

A loud rattling clap boomed throughout the refuge. Vergil looked at his RMM-A. **Code Silver**

"Buggah Nuts."

Jewels scowled "Go off, you, and don't think about those photos."

Vergil grimaced "I swear....if I ever see a photo of that kind I will murder dubya." Vergil drew close to the chat room, while running, he saw Nioca rushing in, a woman behind him, he was

speaking frantically, "Listen up! We have a security breach! Someone is on the island and has already taken out a SimpleBot. He or she is capable of shaping creations and-" *Aw....shit! An agent! I will have to be careful* Vergil saw the woman in blue clothes, with a long, wide, blue blade. Vergil leaped on to the roof of a shack near the lobby, then running off of the shack, twisted his leg into the side of the Agent's back. The agent rolled over to the side and threw an ice bolt at Vergil's head. Vergil let it smack and drain off his face. Vergil held up Yamato, which was glowing a blue hue near the agent. The Agent's eyes widened, then she sneered. She extended her hand towards Yamato. In one quick motion, Yamato flew into her hand. Vergil stood in shock at his empty hand, then looked at the sneering Agent. Vergil now *hated* her. Vergil's eyes started twitching and his bones started jerking in the wrong directions, his complexion turned a dark blue, minor blue spikes erupted under his eye. His fingers started elongating and sharp edges appeared at the ends of them. The Agent took up her blade and lunged at Vergil. Vergil turned so the blade missed him and grabbed her wrist and threw her at a wall. Vergils shoulders and arms started to erupt with more blue spikes. His bones snapped together into a lizard like form. Vergils eyes grew to the size of baseballs and were white sockets of flame. Syla went over to Nioca and touched the back of his head gently. Nioca shook his head and looked at the current scene. He saw Vergil.

"Oh.....no." Vergil howled and leaped towards the agent. He tried to lunge with his claws at her arm, but the Agent blocked with Yamato. Vergil then shredded her legs with his hind feet and jumped on her. He jammed his claws in and out of her body, causing blood to spurt in all directions, while scraping and destroying her legs even further. When Vergil finally stopped hacking her body, he stood up and breathed heavily at his results. The Agents face was splattered with blood, her arms had several gaping holes in them, her legs had no skin on them, and her chest was flayed open, leaving the spinal column visible. The Agent's face had a shocked look on it. Vergil breathed heavily and sulked. Vergil closed his eyes and took one slow, long deep breath. The spikes retracted from his body and his bones reformed. A now regular Vergil cricked his neck and turned to face the members. Nioca grimaced at Vergil, Syla looked horrified at Vergil, eyes flicking back and fourth to Vergil and the body. Ackrovan looked wide eyed at Vergil. Iffy gave Vergil a cold stare. Vergil shook his head and murmured "Bloody Humans....."

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w-dueck walked into the refuge. "Oh bother, the place is falling apart." Vergil walked by

"Hey, Vergil. Help me with finding Jewels and Nioca." Vergil turned to Dubya with a smile.

"Bite my ass." Dubya sighed

"I need to get back, I can't stay here. Therefore, you sir, earned yourself a ban" Vergil gave dubya a cold stare

"You wouldn't DAR-" Vergil vanished. w-dueck turned around.

"Now, back to whence I came from, sorry Nioca, but you gotta do this on your own." Vergil seethed in rage. He stabbed the ground in fury.

"MotherfuckinghorseasscuntballshitNICKLEBITS!!!" Vergil sighed, then got an idea. *The tavern is open to all people isn't it?* Vergil ran towards the back door. *That was an Agent.....Ackrovan looks like a Guardian, I bet he is the reason this happened. I shall break into*

the Fire Elementals Government files and see if they encountered anything funny.... I am going to need Laesp'awn.....And Ackrovan, conscious or not. Vergil nodded to himself and went throught the tavern door. He saw everyone at their own tables, drinking assorted drinks. He walked over to Ackrovan's table and sat down.

"Ackrovan, I need your help for something." Ackrovan looked up at Vergil

"Go away, monster." Vergil grabbed Ackrovan and pinned him up against a wall

"Listen to me. I did what I had to do." Ackrovan scoffed. Vergil pushed him harder against the wall.

"Would she of stopped with knocking Nioca unconscious? Or would she of killed every last damn one of you?" Ackrovan lip curled

"The answer is still no." Vergil spoke very softly

"Ackrovan, you *will* come with me." Ackrovan turned to Vergil with disgust

"Or what? Will you lay open my stomach for the birds too?" Vergil looked at him intensly and put him down.

"No... I will be dissapointed." Ackrovan's face screwed up.

"How do you plan to get past the guards?" Vergil smiled.

"That's the easy part."

Reunion

By Sylae - Apr 9 2009

By the time w-dueck reached the city gates, night had almost fallen, the sun glowing fiery red over the western peaks. His feet had begun to wish that they had arrived much closer than they had, and his back still itched from the night's rest in a haybale. *You brought everything but the coin, didn't you?* he thought to himself.

One of the gate gaurds pulled him over to the side when he arrived. "Wot's your business in the city, ser?"

"I'm here to meet an aquantance," w-dueck replied.

"And who be he?" the gaurd didn't even look up from the parchment on which he was writing.

"He's...over...in the eastern quarter. Name's...Legriv." *Why couldn't you think this crap up earlier? Like in the haybale?*

"And you be?" the gaurd finally looked up.

"Uh..." *Oh shit! Oh shit!* "I'm...Nioca." *Oh, he's not going to care for that. Dumbass* "Cooper's apprentice out of...Refuge. Small little town, probably haven't even heard of it."

The guard waved the next fellow in line over. "That's all I need from you, Ser...Nioca. Next!" w-dueck walked on, shaking his head at his dumbassery.

The city was even bigger than he remembered. Glittering blue-gold towers soared above magnificent palaces and fountains made of solid gold. Every street and even the alleys were lit with silver lanterns.

And then there was the rest of the city. Where the alleys weren't so clean and bright. Where there was, quite literally, a slum stacked on top of a slum. That was where w-dueck headed.

Several hours later, w-dueck finally stumbled across the right building. On the lower section of the neighborhood, it was nestled between a brothel and a tannery. The only moonlight that was visible shined through a ladder-hole across the street. The sign above the doorway merely read 'Drink' in faded white paint. w-dueck stepped through the open doorway (the door was currently playing the role of the porch) and stepped into the warm firelight.

The inside was, thankfully, much cleaner than the outside. w-dueck found an empty table (it wasn't that hard) and sat. It was a few minutes before a balding man who had quite obviously been more muscular in days long gone strode up. "Sorry about the wait, ser, but all the serving girls are next door...what can I get you?"

"I'll have your finest Corean water with half again your finest red ale."

The man shook his head, "There's only one man I knew who could brave that grog, and ... well ... he's dead. That was a while back..." his eyes faded slightly as repressed memories brought themselves back. "He was the worst possible combination of heartsick, bravery, and stupid a man could find. But you could count on him. Always picky about the tiniest detail, too, that was the one person you'd never want to work for, not that he'd ever let anyone else do the work--but enough of that. Nobody deserves to hear an old soldier's rantings. I'll get your drink." he wandered off, and w-dueck studied the pitted table dully.

A clay mug smacked down on the table, and the man stated, "That's five for the drink. Is there anything else I can get you?"

w-dueck handed over six copper pieces. "No, but could you tell me, did Paaran ever get that scabbard back?" he sipped the foul-smelling grog slowly.

"Paaran? How did you? Oh, you sly son of a bitch." The man sat down and put his head in his hands, "So he isn't dead after all..."

"Nice to see you too, Jumara. Fourteen years is just too long.

Fight for Freedom

By Jewels - Apr 13 2009

One way in, one way out. Only having the exact url let her teleport to her current coordinates on the internet plane. The door to the database was imposing but still Jewels pressed on. After entering in the code Will had given her, she cautiously walked into the massive room. In the center stood a glowing cylinder from floor to ceiling. The bright baby blue light was enough to leave no place for shadow to hide. It took a minute for her eyes to adjust before she could really enjoy the beauty of it. Crystals lined the walls of the room set up in patterns of varying color and size. Everything sparkled in the intense blue light. "Wow," she mused to herself, "and I thought my room was extravagant."

Not having too much foreknowledge in the inner workings of a forum database, but having good reasoning, she figured that the beauty was more necessity than cosmetic. The crystals would provide the power needed to create whole buildings with a few clicks of the mouse. The cylinder... the focal point for harnessing energies. What it did, she could understand. How it did it, though, was still a mystery.

At the far end of the room sat an office chair infront of a huge screen. Tentatively, she sat down and was startled when the console in front of her automatically came to life. Hovering before her in a 3D hologram were her options.

:SELECT DATABASE:

:CREATE NEW DATABASE:

:LOGOUT:

Jewels reached her hand out to touch the floating orb next to 'SELECT DATABASE'. Only two databases came up and one was labeled wiki so it had to be the other one... hopefully. Jewels started exploring the tables listed. Lots of logs, one for members, one for messages... Rather boring actually considering she had already read them all. She continued to scan down the line until something caught her eye. *Hmm... now this could be interesting.* She started to type in a query.

*SELECT * FROM `whitehall_smf_personal_messages` WHERE `sender` = 'Vergil'*

She sat at her study desk, hands shaking. New knowledge begat new responsibility but also new temptations. Guilt wracked her mind from the prying she had done. Not because she had been snooping, but because of what she had found. She didn't know why she had taken it, why she had kept it, but it seemed... important. Vital even. And the names at the beginning... Vergil, Laesp'awn, Kaylas... all Bluebloods. Vergil was actually a higher rank than Kaylas. His insubordination now made perfect sense. His devotion was to Vergil first. His allegiance, with the Bluebloods. The names of the first through the 11th regiments now swam in her mind. The

organization responsible for the death of her father and the name of the man who gave the order...*Shrikas*.

She would never forget that name. The man who had the power to order both her general and her brother to take her life. She felt the anger rise in her. The feeling of betrayal even though they had done nothing against her yet. The fact still remained that if ordered to, they would. Could she trust no one?

Will. I can trust Will. The thought rang true and yet hollow at the same time. He had disappeared without a trace and left Nioca in charge. For the good of the Refuge. Will still held the Refuge above her... but that was as it should be, wasn't it? Shouldn't she hold the same mindset? Wasn't that the exact reason she had spent hours upon hours searching the fire plane research libraries? To make sure she didn't put anyone at the Refuge in danger ever again. To protect them from herself... because she could trust herself least of all.

A new resolve formed in her mind. She would get what she needed, not letting anything stop her, and then... she would be free.

She carried her clipboard with her as she walked hurriedly. Twenty-two names on her list. Nine she had crossed out for inactivity. She had either never met them or they hadn't stayed around long enough to allow her to collect what she needed. Of the 13 names left, five had big check marks next to them. The other eight held boxes that waited for theirs. After a quick check on her RMM-A to see where everyone was, she set out.

By the time she walked towards the chat lounge, only three names were left unchecked. Jewels expected to find one of them inside. What she didn't expect to see was Stillborn, trying to poke a man trapped in a forcecage. It seemed everyone else was doing their best to stay away from him and the trapped man looked like he wouldn't mind being elsewhere, too. She walked up as Stillborn was pulling his hand away in pain for the third time. She took his hand, resisting the urge to pull back her own. "Hey, how was the tour?"

"Good," he nodded.

"Where's Nioca?" she asked looking around.

Stillborn shrugged, "He left."

Jewels was about to ask more questions when Ligrev walked over offering her usual coffee. Jewels accepted a cup while Ligrev started chatting away. "So you know this guy?" she asked not stopping for Jewels to actually answer. "Glad someone here knows him. Saw him wandering around outside looking so lost. I invited him in and gave him some coffee..."

"Wait a minute," Jewels interrupted. "He was alone outside?"

"Yep, just walking around slowly, looking at the pond and the trees and the bugs in the grass. Didn't seem to know which way to go so I had him come in here. He hasn't said much and shook a few hands but then everybody seemed to want to avoid him. He's been poking the forcecage ever since so I'm real glad you came in here and seem to know him. I don't know what everyone

else's problem is with being friendly." Ligrev put her hand unflinchingly on Stillborn's shoulder. "You want some more coffee, hun?"

Jewels eyed her hand and opened her mouth but thought better of it as Stillborn smiled and nodded at her. She didn't want to say anything in front of him. Out of the corner of her eye she saw movement and looked up just in time to see Pestilence walk out the door. *Oh no!* "Hey," she said cheerily to Stillborn. "Stay here. I'll be right back." Jewels got up and hurried to catch up with him.

"Pestilence," she called, "wait up." He stopped and turned expectantly. "I... I just, uh, wanted to say hi. Yeah... So, uh, hi."

He looked at her strangely. "Hi," he repeated.

"And, uh, I guess now it's bye, too, so... Goodbye hug?"

"Uh... Ok," he said, even more perplexed. "Sure." The hug was brief and a bit awkward. "Ow," he yelped pulling away and rubbing his head.

"Oh, sorry. My watch must have snagged in your hair. You all right?"

"Yeah, sure," he said still rubbing.

"Ok then. Bye," Jewels turned quickly and walked back to the Lounge.

"Bye," he repeated behind her sounding all the more confused. She hoped he hadn't seen that she wasn't actually wearing a watch.

Two steps from the door all the lights went off and Ligrev screamed. Soon after she heard Stillborn cry out in pain as well followed by the clattering of furniture and the breaking of glass. Jewels ran forward fire in hand for light. Kaylas also held his lit hand aloft in the corner next to Vergil. Ligrev had spilled her coffee on Stillborn's lap in the dark and he in turn had knocked over his table and chair breaking the coffee cup that sat atop it.

"Oh... Oh my!" Ligrev exclaimed, gushing over Stillborn. "I'm so sorry. Are you all right? Ooh... let me get a towel. Oh my, my. What happened to the lights?"

Jewels dug into her pocket pulling out her RMM-A again. Big red letters flashed across the screen. *MAIN POWER FAILURE.* A few button pushes and it was revealed that all power was down. All except for the citadel... *Nioca!*

Jewels left the chat lounge wiping away her tears, followed closely by Stillborn. He caught her arm, stopping her. "What's wrong?" he asked, eyes full of concern. She didn't know how to tell him... how to help him understand. She looked at him, so grateful he was alive, and proud even to be his mother, but scared... oh so scared for him. He held a child's innocence that would eventually be crushed, and sooner than he deserved.

"Have I ever told you, I love you?" she asked.

The question gave him pause but soon he shook his. "No."

"Then let me tell you now, and never forget that *I love you!* I will always love you and I cry because I love you."

Stillborn nodded but still looked confused. "What is... love?"

Jewels sighed resigning herself to try to explain it to him when Vergil and Kaylas burst out of Lounge looking for her. Jewels sighed again, this time out of frustration. One more thing she'd have to deal with. "It's not true, is it?" Kaylas asked breathlessly. "What that human scum Nioca said about... him?" He looked at Stillborn briefly then back to Jewels insistently. "Is it?"

"Yes, Kaylas, it's true," she said sternly, cringing herself at the renewed horrified expressions on both of their faces. "Nalyd altered him with shaping but he is my son, *and*..." she emphasized, "I'd appreciate it if you didn't act like it was so terrible." Jewels' voice raised in anger imagining their callous thoughts, "Because it's not! He's alive and that's all that really matters."

"Nalyd did what?" Vergil seethed. "Where is he?!" He started cursing causing Jewels to instinctively attempt to cover Stillborn's ears. "*I'm gonna rip him a new one!*"

"You will do no such thing!" Jewels yelled back. "And watch your language! I'd rather not have Stillborn repeating that." Vergil started to rant again when Jewels saw Azuma near the Spam Forum. One of her unchecked people. "Oh, hey," she interrupted, "I need to talk to him." Jewels started to walk away at a good clip leaving the other three abruptly. All three started following.

"Jewels," Vergil whined. "I wasn't done talking to you."

"Not now," Jewels waved him off turning her attention to Azuma. "Hey!" She called, seeming to startle the wandering member. "You haven't been around here in a while. How have you been?"

He didn't answer at first, just stared at her with wide eyes, then glanced at Vergil, Stillborn, and Kaylas, too. He started stuttering. "You... You're... You're uh..."

"I'm Jewels," she offered. "An administrator here."

"Yes, of course. I know, but... Ah, what was your question?"

"How have you been?" Jewels repeated slowly with a teasing smile. "I don't think we've ever talked."

"No, well, I haven't spent much time here lately. Don't like to wander far from home, you know. But I've been good for the most part. I... uh, and you?" He seemed excited and alert but unsure of how to continue.

She chuckled at his question. "I won't lie to you, I've been better, but I won't bore you with the details." Vergil snorted but Jewels tried to ignore it. "I really just wanted to welcome you back to the forums." She gave him a hearty pat on the back and squeezed his shoulders. "If there's ever anything I can help you with just let me know."

"Oh," Azuma's eyes lit up. "All right, well... Would you mind if I asked you a few questions?"

"Of course not, go right ahead." Jewels tried to remain cheery though she was itching with impatience.

His voice was still hesitant. "You... You're an elemental, right?"

Jewels was caught off guard, but not really surprised. There wasn't much about her that was a secret anymore. "Sure am," she replied brightly. "We all are in fact."

"Hey!" Vergil hissed, grabbing her arm. "Maybe we shouldn't broadcast to everybody, huh?"

Jewels just rolled her eyes. "Everybody already knows anyway, Vergil. And if they don't, they'll find out soon enough." She turned back to Azuma. "You had another question?"

"Yeah, uh... I mean, well, if it's not too much trouble, could I get together with one of you sometime and, uh, talk about your species and your culture and stuff like that?"

"Uh, sure, why not? You can talk to either me or Kaylas."

"What!?" Kaylas interrupted.

Jewels ignored him. "Though he knows way more than I do. I've only been awakened for about a week. I'm sure Kaylas would be happy to have a little chat." Jewels gave him a stern glare. "Isn't that right, Kaylas?"

His eyes said 'No way!' but slowly his lips teresly said, "I'd love to."

She watched as Vergil went off to help with the Code Silver. Her own RMM-A buzzed in her pocket. "Shouldn't you go check it out with him?"

"It's probably just the forcecage dissipating, but I suppose..." Jewels started slowly following towards the Chat Lounge. "Keep an eye on Vergil at least." They arrived at the edge of the scene just in time to see Vergil transform into a Lizard and rip a poor woman to shreds. Jewels breath caught in her throat at the viciousness of it. *Intruder, you mean? ... Intruder or not she's still a poor woman. ... You're too sentimental. ... You're too cold-hearted and hot-tempered.* She paused there at a distance not really understanding what she was seeing and not really wanting to. "Has Vergil always been able to transform into a Lizard?" She posed the question to Kaylas.

"Not always. He had to learn how." Kaylas was about to say more when he stopped himself mid-word.

Jewels looked at him curiously. "What? What were you going to say?"

"Nothing," he insisted. "If you want to know more about it you should talk to Vergil. He'd be more suited for explaining it to you."

Jewels saw Nioca laying on the ground. *I should help. ... Let the bastard help himself.* She hesitated. Jewels turned away from the scene heading for the Admin. Tower. She wanted to help, she felt like she should help, but she had something more important to do. Something that would help the Refuge and it's members infinitely more than cleaning up after Vergil or getting another earful from Nioca about intruders. The mere fact that she *had* hesitated showed how much she needed to focus on this now. There was just one name left on her list now. w-dueck.

Night was beginning to fall, and in her suite Jewels had made a little something to eat for her two guests. Kaylas turned up his nose at the freshly picked salad while Stillborn dug right in. "Fine," Jewels had addressed Kaylas. "There's food in the fridge, make yourself something to eat. I'll be back in a few minutes."

"Wait," he had protested. "Where are you going now?"

"I said I'll be back in a few minutes, nosy. Like 5 to 10. Can you handle that?" She hadn't waited for him to answer and hadn't responded when he called after her out the still ruined door. With her heart set on finishing her task, pandering to him was not high on her list.

At the stairs, she had taken one flight up... to Will's suite. She stood at the door wondering how she should try to get in. Call a SimpleBot? No. They'd probably turn her down anyway. Pick the lock? No. That would take too long. Blast the door? As much as she hated to leave such blatant evidence of intrusion, she figured it would probably have to do. *If I had said yes to his proposal, he'd have given me a key already.* She smiled at the thought and figured it couldn't hurt to just try the keys she had. She didn't hold high hopes... until one key surprisingly slid into the lock. Jewels held her breath as she turned it. *Click. Clunk.* She turned the knob and the door swung open. Man... Will really, *really* trusted her too much.

The stark contrast to her own floor startled her. When she walked in, there was one hallway straight through with doors on both sides. It looked like an office building... or a hotel. Not the lap of luxury home he had offered her. She opened the first door on her right and was greeted by another corridor with more doors. Jewels sighed. How was she ever going to find what she needed in this maze of hallways?

One hour later, she walked back into her apartment where a rather impatient Kaylas stopped pacing to yell at her. "Ten minutes! You said you'd be gone for ten minutes! Do you have any idea..."

She cut him off calmly. "It took longer than I expected. You could have made yourself at home while you waited." She walked past him to her bedroom fetching a shoebox out of the closet. "And now..." she hesitated. "I need to ask a favor of you."

By the irritated look on Kaylas' face it was doubtful that he would say yes. But she had to try anyway. "Can you watch Stillborn for me until I get back?"

"What?!" Kaylas was incredulous. "You're leaving again?! How long this time?"

"I... I don't know how long it will take."

"No! No way! I'm not a babysitter, least of all for..." His voice trailed off even though his eyes rested on Stillborn who currently sat entranced in front of the TV watching cartoons.

Jewels was angry now. She pulled him into the bedroom closing the doors behind her to mute her raised voice from carrying through the whole house. "For what?" she insisted. "Hmm, Kaylas? Least of all for what?"

He avoided eye contact and lowered his voice. "He's just not... natural. This *whole thing* just doesn't feel right, and I'm not talking about the way I want to tear my hand off when he shakes it. Nothing good can come of this, Jewels. Mark my words. It doesn't help that I'm cooped up in this pile of Calamity Refuse."

Jewels calmed down just a bit. "I just need you to watch him while I perform a... cleansing ritual. The past couple of days... Kaylas, you've been here. You've seen it. I need this. For me. Please? When I'm done I'll take you back to the fire plane myself."

His eyes lit up. "You can do that?" She nodded at him and waited for his response. "Okay, but we're coming with you." Jewels tried to protest but he spoke over her. "Either you take us with to watch you do this ritual so I don't have to worry about you or you try to manage him on your own."

Jewels sighed gripping the shoebox in her hands tighter. "Fine, you can come. But I need you two to be quiet and not interfere." She opened the bedroom door and waved him out. "I need to get ready first." She closed the door behind him again.

When Jewels came out she had on only a simple white dress. No frills. No ruffles. No beads, buttons, or zippers. Just plain bright white. She trembled slightly out of nervousness. *I don't want to do this. ... I know. That's why we must.* Silently she signaled to Kalyas who in turn indicated to Stillborn that it was time to leave.

"Where to?" Stillborn asked as he rose.

"Up," was all that Jewels replied and she proceeded to lead them to the roof of the Admin Tower.

A chill night breeze whisked across the roof causing Jewels to shiver. She walked solemnly to the center of the round building feeling the indented runes with her bare feet. She instructed Kaylas and Stillborn to stay outside the runes. "I need to concentrate so just be quiet, stand still, and above all else, *do not interfere*. Understood?"

Kaylas nodded. Stillborn didn't seem to fully comprehend but echoed Kaylas' nod. Jewels turned her back to them hoping it would keep them from distracting her. She opened the lid of the box one more time to make sure she had everything. Mostly it contained strands of hair. One from Iffy, taken when she had ruffled his hair. One from Pestilence, taken when she gave him the goodbye hug. One from Azuma, taken when she had patted him on the back. One from Nalyd, taken while he lay unconscious on The Roost floor. She had searched the fire plane home of HellSpawn to find one of his, and had gotten one of Vergil's off the pillow in his room. Then within Will's bathroom, she had grabbed a hair from his comb. Five other names on her list had gathered something different. From Robsta's hut, Jewels had taken what looked like a toenail clipping, and from her own office she had gathered a napkin that Nikki had used to wipe his mouth before writing his url on it for her. From Nebulan's room, Jewels had taken a snippet of an inside seam from one of his robes. She didn't know if it would actually work as it was, but she could find nothing else in his room that might have his DNA on it. Not even a used tissue. The last two were tiny vials corked on the top. One, a souvenir she had kept from the SpiderWeb Deathmatches. She had picked it up at TrueSite when she had gone to find Nalyd. The other... was filled with ashes; swept, by her own hand, off the floor of the dungeon in the fire plane. The ashes of Nioca.

All were accounted for alongside a glowing scroll covered with intricate golden runes. Jewels carefully took out the scroll and put the lid back on the box then placed it on the ground. Unrolling the scroll, Jewels shuddered inwardly. *Last chance at freedom. Don't do this. ... No.* ***This is freedom!*** Jewels opened her mouth to speak but nothing came out. She forced her lips to whisper the words written on the scroll. "*Eshowen soothasha envottowa aywa!*"

The scroll lifted from her hands and floated in the air high above her head. The glow from it intensified as Jewels stood with baited breath. The winds picked up encircling the top of the

Admin Tower. The runes beneath her feet pulsed in green light with an ever increasing intensity. Suddenly a savage lightening bolt shot out of the scroll into Jewels. The deafening crack of thunder echoed for miles and drowned out Jewels' scream of pain. It felt like she was being torn limb from limb. The scroll was drawing something out of her... tearing something out of her. That was as it should be but still... something was wrong, she could sense it. The voice of Kaylas calling out her name reached her ears but she couldn't respond. she hadn't the energy... *Energy!* She didn't have enough energy! The spell was only halfway complete and she was already fully drained. She fell to her knees struggling to hold onto her consciousness. If she couldn't complete the spell all would be lost! *All... lost...*

"Jewels!" Kaylas called again over the raging wind when Jewels fell to her knees. The crackling bolt of energy still connected her to the scroll and her body shook from it's effects. This was like no cleansing ritual he had ever seen before. He had seriously doubted it when the whirlwind had started, but the lightening was definitely out of place. He had to stop her... but how? Magic was finicky. Without knowing what she was really doing, trying to interfere could kill her. Kaylas felt hopeless standing helplessly at the sidelines of a tragedy in the making, but where he hesitated, Stillborn did not. Before Kaylas could stop him, Stillborn had entered the runic circle and ran to lift Jewels back to her feet. As soon as he touched her a new wave of energy blasted outwards like a ripple knocking Kaylas to his back and another bolt of lightning pealed forth from the scroll, this time hitting the box Jewels had brought with her. A blinding white light erupted from the box as the runes of the roof started to vibrate giving off a high pitched whine. Kaylas tried to shield his eyes but even after closing them and covering them with his arm, the light still penetrated seeming to shine right through his entire body.

When the light subsided and his vision cleared, Kaylas made out the form of Stillborn carrying Jewels towards him. In her hands, was her shoebox. On her face, the brightest smile he'd ever remembered seeing.

Falling for the Trap

By Zoe - Apr 14 2009

"Come on, time to go," said Iffy as the forcecage dissipated. "Finally," grunted the man. "Too many current distractions anyway," Iffy mumbled.

Iffy noticed the large number of guards guarding the Google station as they were headed there. Simplebots and Ice shades made all of them up. "There is NO way I'm suicide running though that!" yelled the man. "Pfffshd, you underestimate my power"

Before anyone could so much as blink, the script came, activated, and was gone again. The twenty or so guards instantly just disappeared. As Iffy started to lead the man over to the station, he started gasping. "Grah...what? How...I planned this part. I should have had enough

energy...to...be active long enough..." Iffy was interrupted as the man forced him down to the ground. "You...how did...you use...that? There is no way...but if my energy is so...you must have..." and then Iffy slipped into unconsciousness.

People watched as the man dragged Iffy into the Google station. There was no way anyone could get there in time. As soon as it was a short distance away, the simplebots and shades returned and guarded on as if nothing happened.

Sleepless

By Nioca - Apr 17 2009

Syla helped Nioca up, her eyes fixed on the body of the agent. "What... What was..."

Nioca stared coldly at the agent. "What, did someone throw her in a wood chipper?"

"A what?" Syla asked, nauseated.

"Never mind." Nioca said, approaching the body. "Who-?"

"Vergil." Ligrev piped up. She was trembling and peeping over the counter.

"Naturally. Way to wreck any chance of identifying her." Nioca stated dryly. He pulled out his RMM-A and fiddled with it a bit. "A SimpleBot should be here shortly to clean this up." He announced to the room. "Come on, Syla." He then said, signaling toward the door.

Nioca typed away at a computer, Syla looking on with a confused look. Aryll was pacing anxiously nearby.

"Okay, I think I have it." Nioca muttered. "I know the device works. Now, I have to take the plunge." He got up and walked over to the alien device. He placed a hand on the green orb and recited a rapid-fire set of syllables. With a single breath, words fell from his mouth. The dialect seemed broken and odd, but he recited from the computer screen word-for-word.

Then he finished. The orb's glow changed imperceptibly for a moment, then started turning red. Nioca quickly stepped onto the shaping platform adjacent as the device began its work. A bright red glow furnished the room, and the shaping platform turned red. Nioca closed his eyes, prepared for agony. That was the norm for powerful magics like this.

But it wasn't. Instead, it felt as if feathers were tickling his veins, causing him to itch slightly. It was irritating, to be sure, but not nearly as bad as he expected.

The process continued for seconds. Then minutes. Just as the process approached the ten-minute mark, the device disengaged. The sensation of feathers stopped, and Nioca stepped off the platform.

"How do you feel?" Aryll asked anxiously.

"Not bad... But I'll have to try it out." Nioca said, looking at his hands.

"Try what out?" Syla asked.

"You'll see..." Nioca said. "But first, there's something else I need to do." Nioca added. He turned and entered the laboratory. Opening the closet, he took out the beaker of corrupted antidote. The inside of the beaker was covered in what looked like a fine pink powder, and the corrupted antidote had grown considerably since he had stored it away. "Okay. Now..." Nioca muttered to himself. He carried the antidote over to a computer console. Above it sat an odd, needle-like apparatus. Nioca typed in a few commands to it.

Suddenly, the needle turned toward a blank corner of the room. The lights dimmed heavily as greenish sparks poured out of the apparatus and into the corner. A green outline formed, and it slowly filled in. Eventually, the corner of the room was filled by two green, knee-high domes, connected by some sort of green pipe.

Then color came in. The green, insubstantial shapes faded into a pair of basins, entrenched into the floor. A small tunnel, almost completely embedded in the floor, connected the two basins. The basins were enclosed in glass domes, completely sealing them off from contact. And around them, several blue runes, glowing gently. Nioca walked over and lifted the lid off of one of the basins, and poured the corrupted antidote in. It filled the bottom of the basin as a shallow, lumpy puddle, releasing a poof of the pink dust. The spores of the antidote. Nioca held his breath as he put the glass cover over the basin. He then made a gesture to the runes; they turned off, becoming mere etchings in the floor.

"You should get sleep." Nioca said as Syla followed him to the parlor.

"I'm not interested in sleeping." Syla responded defiantly. "Besides, I don't see you looking for a night's rest."

"True enough." Nioca said, exiting the Citadel. "It's been... hard to think of sleeping." He added. "Just lying there in bed, vulnerable to whatever depraved being fate throws at me next."

"Indeed..." Syla said quietly.

Nioca stopped, noting the quietness in her voice. "Is something wrong?"

"No! Of course not! It's just that... when you sleep, you miss so much of the-"

"Syla, I've known you for nearly twenty years. You've never passed up the opportunity to sleep." Nioca said sternly.

"A lot can change in sixteen years." Syla responded. "Whereas you are and always have been a persistent insomniac."

"I get plenty of sleep." Nioca stated. "I just prefer staying awake. You, on the other hand, are not used to a lifestyle of 36-hour days."

"First, I think we're going on 48 hours. Second-"

"We?" Nioca asked. "You got sleep last night, didn't you?"

"Of course!" Syla said a little too loudly.

"Syla..." Nioca said, his voice enunciating his disbelief.

Syla stared at him for a moment, before lowering her head. "Okay, I had trouble sleeping last night. It's not a big deal, I'm sure it's just stress."

"Stress... Syla, you've been through a lot in the last 48 hours. You need rest." Nioca implored.

"No, I'm fine."

"No you're not. And not sleeping will only-"

"I can't sleep! I just... can't! So drop it!" Syla snapped.

Nioca looked at her with concern, and put a hand on her shoulder. "What do you mean you can't?" He asked softly. She didn't respond. "Are you having nightmares?"

Syla looked away, brushing Nioca's hand from her shoulder. "Every time I fall asleep, my thoughts go back... back to the..." Syla waved her hand lamely. "And now, I also imagine tearing apart Gvelston. As a... monster. Killing them..."

"It's not your fault." Nioca said strongly. "Listen to me! It's not your fault!" Nioca steered her back to the Citadel. "Come on, I think we need to talk."

They walked in silence for a few moments and entered the citadel again. Nioca led her to the parlor and sat her down on one of the sofas, pointing at a tray of drinks. Syla raised an eyebrow. "That's your solution? Alcohol?"

"No. But I imagine you could use one right now." Nioca stated. "Personally, I find it lowers my guard."

"We can't have that, can we?" Syla quipped.

"No." Nioca said with a smile. "Syla... I'm about to tell you something. It doesn't go any further than you and me. Okay?"

"Sure..." Syla said, though her voice sounded anything but sure.

Nioca didn't respond. Instead, he left the room, leaving Syla alone. She leaned back on the couch, puzzled as to what Nioca was going to do. What could he possibly have to tell her? What could he be hiding?

She straightened up as Nioca returned. He carried a gold ring in his hand, and sat down opposite of her. His hands carefully fidgeted with the ring, and his demeanor indicated that he was uncomfortable. "Do you know what this is?" He asked, handing her the ring.

Syla took it and looked it over. It was highly ornate, encrusted with several different gemstones. Most prominently, a piece of jade. Carved into the stone was a symbol of a sun. Around it sat three sapphires, each evenly spaced so as to be a perfect 120 degrees from each other around the jade. And the rest of the band was studded in four additional sapphires as well, so that the ring seemed to sparkle with blue light. Syla stared in awe. "That's... That's one of the Galton's family rings. Each member had one, and each was unique depending on the generation, the number of people in that generation, and the person's relation to the Galton family. This..." Syla looked closely at it. "Used to belong to the fourth child of the third generation. How did you get this?"

"Simple. It... it belongs to me. It's my ring." Nioca said quietly.

Syla stared for a moment. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that I'm the last surviving member of the Galton family." Nioca said.

Syla simply stared. "No... All of the Galtons are dead. The last four members of the Galton family were killed after demons leveled their manor. They found their bodies, with all of the-"

"They found the bodies of my brothers and sister, along with one of our servants. I placed my ring on the servant's hand so that no one would know I was still alive. The Galtons had enemies, and I was only twelve. There was no way I could have survived. Not if I continued to hold the Galton name. So I decided to use my middle name instead. And later, I created a last name." Nioca reached forward and took the ring back.

"So... what's your real name?" Syla asked tentatively.

"Nioca." Nioca stated. "But I presume you mean the one I left behind. Enivir Nioca Galton." Nioca looked down at his boots. "You're probably wondering what all of this has to do with your guilt. Well... I was out of town when the attack came. I was just returning home. And... And I wondered why. Why I hadn't been with them. Why didn't I stop the attack. And... Well, it took a few years, but I eventually realized that these things happened. And that you shouldn't blame yourself, because you wouldn't have affected the outcome."

"So you don't blame yourself? For not being there?" Syla asked.

Nioca sighed. "Well... yes, I do. I just keep in mind that there's nothing that could be done."

They both sat silently for a moment. Syla eventually poured herself a glass of mead and took a few gentle sips. "I see you got the ring back."

"I did." Nioca responded, quieted by the enormity of what he told her.

"Why don't you wear it?" Syla asked.

Nioca looked up, surprised. "Well, it's just been so long..." He turned the ring over in his hand.

"No one here would know the significance of it other than us." Syla pressed.

"I suppose you're right." Nioca said with a smile. He slipped the ring onto his right middle finger. "Now, get some sleep. Knowing how things have been going recently, you'll probably need it."

Syla nodded, then headed off for bed. Nioca stayed in the parlor, looking at his ring, when he felt his RMM-A vibrate.

The few newbies Nioca didn't recognize were gathered around the Google station. Several SimpleBots had swarmed the location, looking as confused as a robot could possibly get. Overall, it didn't seem like there was any sort of incident, yet everyone seemed to be making a commotion.

Nioca drew Crusader's Protectorate and looked around. Then he addressed one of the newbies. "What happened?"

"This guy got kidnapped! That script guy cast a spell, the guards disappeared, and then this other guy grabbed him! Knocked him unconscious!" The newbie said hysterically.

"*Poor Iffy. Always at the wrong place at the wrong time.*" Nioca thought to himself. "Did you get a look at the kidnapper's face?"

"No." The newbie sobbed.

"Okay, take it easy." Nioca reassured him.

"Take it easy?! If they can get him, they can get me!" The newbie hollered. He ran away, screaming.

Nioca sighed. The other newbies looked just as panicked. However, a soothing voice cut in. "It'll be okay. We'll be fine, we just need to calm down."

"Aryll. Can you question these guys?" He asked her. He noted that she was wearing a simple dress. Presumably, she altered her appearance so as to not come off as alarming as Nioca probably looked.

"Not a problem." She said. She proceeded to question another newbie. Nioca, meanwhile, started interrogating the shades.

Unfortunately, after an hour, it was quite clear that they wouldn't learn anything. Nioca turned to give a command to a SimpleBot, when a ray of flame flew past his ear. He whirled and discovered one of the newbies had pulled a long, sharp knife and had it raised to strike. However, the blast had distracted him, and he stumbled sideways to avoid getting hit.

Nioca brought Crusader's Protectorate about, but his attacker was fleeing. As the other newbies scattered, his attacker grabbed one of them and yanked the newbie in front of him, knife to his throat. "Drop the sword. Or the newbie dies."

"No." Nioca said blithely, keeping his sword raised. Aryll moved into a protective position, turning into an orange shadow.

"I'll kill him!" The assassin warned.

"No you won't." Nioca snarled, approaching the assassin and his hostage.

"Stay back!" The assassin shouted. His eyes were widening in terror.

"You won't kill him. Why don't you make it easier on everyone involved and just surrender?" Nioca said with a sneer.

"Easier? You want easier?" The assassin hissed. "Fine." He said. He drew the knife back across the newbie's throat, and a spray of red spattered the ground. The newbie collapsed as the assassin ran. Nioca ran forward and muttered a healing chant. The wound sealed as quickly as it had appeared.

"Keep an eye on him!" Nioca shouted to Aryll. He took off after the assassin, who ran into the Avernum/Exile Trilogy board and slammed the door behind him. Nioca paused at the entryway. Pursuing him inside was reckless. The board was a bit derelict, and wild flora flourished inside, kept unchecked. He could easily be walking into a trap. Decided on a different plan of action, Nioca produced his Global Mod keys and quietly locked the door. He then pulled out his RMM-

A with a flourish and started working his way through various prompts. "Let's see, security... emergency protocols... Avernum/Exile forum... Ah, here we go. Toxic Spill protocol." He said with a grin. He put the RMM-A away, and leaned against the wall. He kept a hand on the key still in the lock, ready to turn it on a moment's notice.

At first, it seemed nothing was happening. However, the doorknob suddenly began rattling violently. "Hello?!" Someone shouted from the inside. "Let me out of here!" However, Nioca merely smirked. The assassin started pounding on the door. "Let me out of- Oh, gods, please! Let me out! Please!" He shouted inside, pounding on the door and frantically turning the key. Nioca heard, underneath the pounding, the distinctive roar of quickfire. "Help me! Somebody help me! Oh, gods, someone! Anyone! Please!" The man pleaded. Nioca continued to stand by the door as the pounding continued to get more frantic. Soon, the assassin could be heard sobbing inside. The sound of quickfire rapidly approached. "Please..."

Nioca gripped the key tightly. Just as the quickfire started to reach a crescendo, Nioca turned the key in the lock. The door popped open, and the assassin stumbled forward. Nioca grabbed the door and slammed it shut just as the quickfire reached the door. Locking it again, he whirled on the assassin and held Crusader's Protectorate to his back. The man was trembling violently, and didn't protest.

Nioca called Aryll over. "Keep ahold of him, and follow me." He stated. Aryll roughly pulled the man to his feet. They marched to the Admin Tower and went behind it. Nioca unlocked a trapdoor down to the Dump with his keys, and opened it. A set of ominous stairs headed down into the ground.

"No! Don't put me in there!" The man shouted. He started struggling against Aryll in vain.

"You're going in there until w-dueck decides what to do with you." Nioca stated. "And what is that smell?" He added, putting a hand to his nose. He turned around and finally got a good look at the assassin. He wore mostly plain clothes and looked rather unremarkable, save for a long wet spot down one of his legs. "Ah. Well, get in."

"Don't I get a new pair of pants?" The assassin asked hopefully.

"Maybe you'll think of that next time you decide to slit someone's throat." Nioca snarled. "Aryll?" Aryll nodded and shoved the assassin forward. The man stumbled and fell into the trapdoor. A series of thuds followed as he bounced down the staircase. Nioca slammed the trapdoor shut and locked it again. "That is going to stink by the time w-dueck gets back."

"He wet himself?" Aryll asked.

"Among other things." Nioca said. Aryll looked mildly disgusted. They both started walking away, when a loud snap caught their attention. They broke into a run away from the Admin Tower, then turned around and looked up. The top of the tower was lit-up as if being struck by perpetual lightning. Nioca pulled out his RMM-A and tried to figure out just what was going on. However, the device offered no answers. As if in response, the lights died out.

"Oh, screw this." Nioca muttered. "I'll deal with this in the morning." He marched off to his citadel, looking for a good night's sleep.

Let Man Not Separate

By Jewels - Apr 20 2009

Kaylas stared incredulously at Jewels taking her out of Stillborn's arms. "What the ice was that?"

Jewels wobbled unsteadily and spoke groggily but with great contentment. "I already told you it was a cleansing ritual."

"It most certainly was not!" Kaylas insisted. "Now, tell me what's going on here."

"And have you running off to tell Vergil? I think not. " After she heard herself say it, she cringed inside a bit. She hoped he would think she meant because they were old friends and not that she knew they were both Bluebloods. Luckily he didn't seem to pick up on it but it hadn't satisfied his curiosity.

Kaylas started helping her down the stairs chiding her the whole way as Stillborn followed silently. "You can't keep doing this, Jewels. Running off alone, doing deity knows what, performing dangerous 'rituals' that you won't even tell your trusted friends about..." Jewels bit her lip at his presumption. Of course, she *had* trusted him... until this afternoon. "I'm your General, Jewels, your head of security. I'm supposed to protect you! How can I do that if you won't tell me what you're doing?"

"You don't need to protect me, Kaylas. I'm perfectly capable of doing things myself." Ironically, as she spoke, she was leaning heavily on Kaylas for support. He was practically carrying her down the stairs.

He stopped at a landing to look her in the eyes. His voice was soft but his disposition was severe. "What if we wouldn't have been up there tonight? I know a spell gone wrong when I see one. What were you thinking trying to do something so complicated? You're not a practiced mage. You've barely even used magic at all. That looked like something even a veteran student of the arts wouldn't take lightly. If I hadn't insisted..." His voice trailed off as his eyes teared up. "*You could have killed yourself.*"

"You're right," she said in a small voice, knowing it was true. "I... I don't..." Jewels was having trouble concentrating. Her eyelids felt so heavy. Losing her train of thought, finally she just said, "Thank you," and stayed silent while Kaylas helped her the rest of the way to her room. "Didn't you want to go back to the fire plane?" she managed to ask as he was tucking her into her bed.

"I think I'm needed here," he replied, breaking ranks to kiss her forehead before she closed her eyes for some much needed sleep.

Shrouded in mist she walks the tall silent corridor. Only her own heartbeat thuds in her ears. Six doors stand ominously on each side reaching almost to the high ceiling, at the end of the hallway, another. In the middle hangs a chandelier with a heavy fog pouring down from the

middle to creep along the floor and up the walls. The chandelier gives off a soft light through thirteen swirling orbs that each glows with a slightly different shade of white.

She is drawn to the light... she is the light! Without bodily form she floats about the room and hovers in front of a door. It opens to her and she sees Spiderweb. Friendly faces stare back at her laughing silently and in good cheer. A wink from Nico and Jewels retreats. The door closes behind her. To the other side of the hallway she is carried atop the mist. A door opens and she sees in her hand an RMM-A. Looking up, the Admin Tower is before her. She stares at the top floors, at her bedroom window, then at the sky above the building, calm and clear. She retreats. She opens a door and sees Vergil full of determination. She opens a door and sees Ackrovan full of confusion. Two doors hold nothing but darkness and a third holds naught but dark mist. Behind a door, the familiar glow of the fire plane. Behind a door, a sword. A rather sharp sword. The whetting stone is in her hand, she runs it along the blade. She opens a door and sees a small table filled with things she doesn't understand. One of them, a tiny vial. She picks it up... carefully... cautiously... the dark substance inside oozes against the pull of gravity. She opens a door and steps into the Chat Lounge. Ligrev offers coffee to the lone patron though her cup is already full. Jewels retreats, back to the hall of mists, back to the center of the chandelier. The descending fog carries her down to the floor and sweeps her along to another opening door. The place is strange, the faces unknown, but a man smiles at her in a friendly manor as she sips a drink in her hand. Once again she retreats out the door. Only one has not been opened. The one at the end of the hall. It opens before she reaches it and draws her steadily in... then slams shut behind her.

She woke up with a shrill scream. Kaylas burst through the door breathlessly asking what was wrong. Jewels quickly realized where she was and quieted down to listen to the *thump, thump, thump* of her heart. "It was a dream," she sighed with relief. "It was only a dream." She shook her head in an attempt to rid her mind of the horrid image she had just seen. The things her subconscious came up with sometimes... she shuddered anew at the thought.

Light poured in through the windows from the sunrise. The smell of bacon wafted into the room as a curious Stillborn peeked shyly around the door. Aside from the adrenaline rush, Jewels felt very well rested and started to climb out of bed. "Do I smell breakfast?" she asked cheerily.

"Ah-ah-ah, get back in bed," Kaylas insisted. Jewels protested, saying she was perfectly fine. "But we have a surprise for you and I'll not have you ruin it, now back in bed."

Jewels looked curiously from Kaylas to Stillborn and back. "WE have a surprise?" Kaylas only answered her with a nod then signaled to Stillborn who promptly disappeared only to reappear holding a carefully balanced tray of food.

"Good morning, mom," he said while gently placing the tray on her lap.

A smile crossed her face as tears welled up in here eyes. She was a *mom*!

After breakfast, Kaylas and Stillborn set about cleaning up the kitchen which had gotten rather messy from the unpracticed duo. It the meantime, Jewels showered, changed, and took the

shoebox to her bed. Hesitantly she opened the lid to find thirteen crystal orbs each filled with swirling mist. Gingerly she picked one up and the immediate sense of unconditional love for her half-brother was overwhelming. *This must be Vergil's,* she thought to herself.

No longer did she fault him for their father's death. No, instead she empathized. What a struggle it must have been to have to choose between his family and the whole of their people. He must live with the knowledge of his deeds for the rest of his life. There was no turning back time on this one. Jewels found it odd that she still didn't trust him. But it mattered naught if she trusted him. Nothing he could do to her would ever change the way she felt about him now. The spell was unbreakable according to her research. An irreversible binding of a part of her soul with each of the members she had collected samples from. They were all a part of her now. Their safety was as important as her own. For if they died, now so, did a part of her. Her own happiness was not complete if any of them were unhappy. Their worries were her worries, their causes were her causes. She got a little light headed with the thought of the enormity of her deed. Thirteen... thirteen was a lot, but how could she have denied any of them? Well, there was that one that she probably could have skipped, but it seemed only natural to include him. *Irreversible...* she reminded herself. No use thinking about what cannot be changed.

She took out another orb and smiled as thoughts of Will filled her mind. She wondered where he was and when he would be back and... if he was safe. Somehow a part of her knew that he was. She stared at the swirls within letting herself become entranced. They were all so beautiful. They were all slightly unique. *I should display them somewhere.* Somewhere she'd see them every day... The empty mantle of the fireplace caught her eye. They'd be the first thing she'd see when she woke up each morning and the last thing she'd see before she fell asleep each night. Three on each side of the open square in the middle of her room. Yes. That'd be perfect.

Jewels looked around for something she could make the stands with. In one corner of the room stood an abstract statue made of bronze. That would do. With a little fire power, some ingenuity, and some help from her guests, the statue was soon melted down and formed into thirteen simple stands for the crystals to rest on. Each was as subtly unique as the orbs themselves, holding the faint etchings of a flaming symbol Jewels had designed specifically for each member. She set the stands on the mantles and started placing the orbs on their new resting places.

She was nearly done when a sudden sense of worry engulfed her. Jewels looked at the orb she had just picked up. Its mists swirled slowly just as all the others did but something was different... something was wrong. Iffy was in trouble.

Placing the orb on it's stand, Jewels quickly pulled out her RMM-A and brought up the 'Who's Online' screen. Her eyes scanned the list quickly finding the name she was looking for was missing. Iffy was not on the Isle anymore. She paused looking at the list again. Vergil and Ackrovan were gone, too. Wasn't there supposed to be a lockdown? Where was everybody going? For good measure, Jewels checked Vergil's and Ackrovan's orbs but felt contentment with both. Only Iffy was in trouble, but she had no idea where to find him. She really wished Will were here.

Kaylas noted her change in mood and asked about it. "I'm just worried," she had replied. "Three members that had been at the Refuge last night are now gone, including Vergil. And the lockdown has not been lifted."

"How'd they get out?" Kaylas asked, looking a bit jealous.

"I don't know but I intend to find out. I could use some coffee with my answers. What do you say we head to the Chat Lounge?"

Inquisitions at the Chat Lounge resulted in less information than Jewels had desired. Good information, but still less than what she had hoped for. Ligrev had said the Vergil had burst in yesterday and taken Ackrovan out with him and that Iffy had let his prisoner out of the forcecage and left with him. Neither tidbit had given any reason why none of them were at the Refuge anymore.

Azuma had been there but said he didn't know anything about where the three members might be. He was quite interested in furthering his conversation with Kaylas, though. So even though Kaylas looked like he'd have rather been doing anything else, Jewels had him stay to satisfy Azuma's curiosity. "Be nice," she had instructed in a whisper. He had given her a disgruntled stare as he sat down at Azuma's table.

Further queries of the other newbies and trapped lurkers said there had been some commotion down at the Google station that Nioca had cleared up, but again no 'why'. She had left Stillborn drinking his coffee, which he only enjoyed with lots of sugar, while she had questioned the others and had come back to find Ligrev sitting at their table chatting away with him. Well, Ligrev had been doing almost all of the chatting but Stillborn was a very attentive listener and didn't seem to mind her high squeaky voice in the least or the fact that she didn't leave any space for him to get a word in edgewise. Not that he had more than a word or two to add anyway. For the most part he either nodded or shook his head at her questions and Ligrev seemed even more energized than usual to have someone to talk to. Jewels had interrupted to ask if Stillborn wanted to go talk to Nioca with her to which he shook his head at simply saying, "You go, I'll stay," and turned back to a beaming Ligrev who picked up right where she had left off on her ramblings. It was probably for the best that Jewels speak to Nioca alone anyway. These security breaches were getting out of hand and if she wanted any hope of actually making the Refuge safe, she would need his help.

Her RMM-A had said that Nioca was, of course, within his citadel. The sun was reaching it's zenith as she neared the door. It was nearly noon. Jewels knocked softly and waited. She was surprised when after a minute there was still no shade answering the door for her. Odd. Jewels knocked louder with still no answer. She was about to just open the door when she thought better of it. She should really start respecting Nioca's privacy. There were other ways to get his attention. Quickly she wrote up a private message and sent it on its way. *I would like to talk if you have time. I am at your front door.* Again she waited. Patiently she waited. Fifteen minutes passed and still no sound came from within. But a voice from behind her startled her.

"What do you want?" Jewels turned around to see Aryll behind her. She had arrived silently and was standing uncomfortably close.

Jewels quickly regained her composure and smiled at Aryll. "I'd just like to talk to Nioca about the security issues we've been having. Is he available?" Aryll gave her an icy look. "It is rather urgent business concerning the Refuge. Do you think I might have a word..."

Aryll cut her off. "Nioca will be taking his noon meal shortly and after that his schedule is full until dinner."

Jewels started to fret to herself. "Not until after dinner? The safety of the Refuge is much too important to put off till then. What to do... what to do?" Aryll had stepped back giving her a raised eyebrow when Jewels snapped up with an idea. "Over lunch! We could talk over lunch. I'll even cook it myself. I'll have Nioca over as a guest at my suite and cook him lunch, we can talk business, and he can still keep all his appointments for the rest of the day." Aryll started shaking her head and was about reply when Jewels cut her off. "Oh, please? Please, won't you just ask him?" Jewels had put her hand on Aryll's arm only to have her jerk it roughly away. Jewels looked down. "Listen, I... I know you don't trust me. Not after what I tried to... after what I did. I don't blame you... but it won't happen again. I promise you, I've made sure it *can't* happen again. I really need to talk to Nioca about the Refuge. Please, just ask him if he'll come to lunch."

Aryll stepped past her to walk right through the door. In less than a minute she had returned not exactly looking pleased. "Nioca will attend your luncheon. He will be at your suite in fifteen minutes."

Jewels smiled, nodded in dismissal, and hurried off to start cooking. Salad to start with, yes. Then... something light. Club sandwich? Sounds good. BLT perhaps, she had the lettuce and tomato waiting in her garden and there was leftover bacon from breakfast. Should she use leftovers for a guest? Well, it's perfectly good bacon, and it's not like he'll know it wasn't fried up just for him. BLT's it was then. Fifteen minutes was more than enough time to get that ready.

The table was set for two complete with a votive candle in a small bowl for a relaxed atmosphere. The salads, sandwiches, and fresh picked grapes were already set out when Nioca walked through the charred door frame. She really needed to get that fixed soon. Jewels put on a winning smile. "Welcome, welcome! Make yourself at home. What would you like to drink with your lunch? I have milk, tea, orange juice, water, and coffee... though I'm afraid it's not as good as Ligrev's." Jewels was afraid she had overdone it by the distastefully confused look on Nioca's face.

"Uh... water will be fine," he said.

She showed him to his seat. "Go ahead and help yourself to the condiments and seconds if you'd like." She took a cup out of the freezer and filled it at the tap. She noticed his puzzled look and explained, " Already filled it with a bit of water so it already had an ice cube in it. When you usually eat alone and the freezer is usually empty anyway... well, I just got bored." She brought him the glass and poured herself some water as well. "Ice water," she mused, "heh. Poor Vergil can't drink it without..." She let her voice trail off realizing that she was rambling but Nioca seemed to be interested.

"Without what?" he asked.

"Well, let's just say it doesn't really agree with him. Gives him a brain freeze of sorts."

Nioca didn't seem too pleased by her answer or as amused as she was about it. "Let's stop this worthless small talk, Jewels. This was supposed to be business, remember?"

"Yes, yes, of course. You are a busy man. I wanted to talk about the security breaches..."

"Taken care of," Nioca cut her off shortly. "No thanks to you."

Jewels furrowed her brow and brought out her RMM-A again. "But Iffy, Vergil, Ackrovan... all three are still gone and..."

Nioca's harsh laughter cut her off. "Vergil has been banned. He won't be back here anytime soon."

"What?!" Jewels was surprised to say the least. "Why? By who's authority?" Jewels could feel her anger rising, though it was different... subdued. Her voice was raised but not harsh. "Nioca, how could you ban Vergil without approval? Even I don't touch the BanHammer without Will's approval..."

"I didn't ban him, but I would have if w-dueck hadn't shown up. Vergil deserved to be banned. He turned a Code Silver into a dead body on a whim. We don't need that here. So don't get all self-righteous with me. At least I've been doing *something* about the security problems, unlike you! I'm the one who increased the perimeter guard with my shades, and I'm the one who fought and caught a second assassin out at the Google station. He's down in the dump, by the way."

Jewels had been holding her head trying to calmly take it all in but she just had to ask, "Down in the dumps? Is there a reason he'd be happy about being caught?"

"No, I mean I locked him up in the dump. So don't be going down there till w-dueck gets back."

"Okay, okay... Vergil was banned, but Iffy... I think Iffy is in trouble."

"Well, yeah, I suppose he is since he was kidnapped last night."

"Kidnapped?!" Jewels felt sick to her stomach. "But when? How? By who?"

"By the assassin that *you* let in yesterday during your little stunt to get Nalyd into the Refuge and when *you* were busy messing with who knows what kind of magic just two floors up. And while you were up there making a pretty light show, I was actually doing something useful to help the Refuge. Like catching the people that are trying to kill our members. You know," his voice grew very condescending, "*using my powers wisely*! Unlike *you* who spent the night altering the weather patterns."

"I was, too, helping the Refuge!" She burst out. She felt no hostility towards him but his attacks still hurt. Teary eyed, she defended herself adamantly. "I did more to help the safety of the Refuge last night than everything else I've done since I've been here."

"Well, that wouldn't have been hard," Nioca cracked under his breath. He seemed to be enjoying her distress.

Jewels shoved her chin forward in determination. "I'll show you," she said more to herself than at Nioca, then again louder and intended for him. "Come on, I'll show you what I made!" Jewels stood up from the table and leaving the untouched food behind, she pulled Nioca towards the bedroom. He started to protest but she insisted and explained as she walked, "I put them on my mantle. You can see them. You can see what I did last night."

Nioca finally allowed himself to be taken just inside her bedroom door and stared unimpressed at the swirling orbs before him. He stepped forward frowning and picked one up. "Theme orbs? You think getting us new theme orbs increases the safety of the Refuge?"

"No, Nioca, they're not..."

He proceeded to lob the crystal at the wall. There was a crack as it hit and then fell to the ground. "They don't even work!"

Jewels shrieked and ran for the orb. A quick glance at the orb showed no damage what so ever. *Unbreakable spell, remember?* Breathing a sigh of relief she quickly returned the orb to it's stand. "Don't, Nioca, listen to me..."

He picked up another one and stared at it closely. "What an incredibly horrendous waste of time and energy at a time like this?" He picked up the handmade bronze stand the orb had sat on. The flaming symbol on it was his.

Jewels tried again. "Nioca please..."

But he wasn't about to listen. "Making theme orbs that don't."

"They're not..."

"Even."

"...theme orbs!"

"Work!" Nioca raised his arm high and threw the ball straight down at the floor with great force.

Jewels' eyes were wide with unbelief as she watched it shatter into a thousand pieces. "*No!!*" she cried, falling to her knees. Her tears flowed freely now and Nioca was finally at a loss for words. Jewels started mumbling as she tried to pick up the tiny pieces that now sat in a small pool of slowly expanding fog. "Unbreakable... unbreakable... it... it was supposed to be unbreakable..." Her falling tears parted the fog as they fell. What would she do now? Did she possibly have the strength to make another? She barely survived the first.

"Jewels, I..." Nioca's voice wafted down to her ears. Almost sorry... nearly regretful...

Jewels could feel her anger surge back full force and screwed her eyes shut rocking back and forth. *That bastard!! ... No! Go away! ... Look what he's done! He doesn't want peace with us. He doesn't* ***deserve*** *peace with us. ... Stop it! ... I'll kill him with my bear hands! ... NEVER! I won't let you!* Jewels' hands had balled into fists and she was squeezing them so tight, they stung.

"Jewels," Nioca's voice held something close to concern this time. "Jewels, you're bleeding. Open your hands." Her eyes snapped open and sure enough, there was blood running down the side to drip on the floor. She gasped and forced herself to open her hand. The tiny shards of crystal she had picked up were now embedded into her flesh. "Here, let me take a look." He helped Jewels to her feet and took her hands in his. Jewels resisted but Nioca insisted, "It won't heal as long as they're in your skin. Now hold still so I can help you take them out." She still hesitated, still fighting within herself, but managed to get herself to stand still. Nioca looked closely and carefully pried at a shard. She muffled a groan as he tried to wiggle it free. "You really got these things in here deep." With a jerk and a yelp from both of them, the shard came free. Nioca looked at the tiny crystal fragment that he now held between his thumb and

forefinger. Both of which were now also bleeding. "Darn things are sharp. Nicked me, too." Jewels looked at his face, so determined. He looked up and caught her gaze, too. Was that smile... genuine? Or was he just enjoying her pain? It would be so nice... to have a *genuine* smile from him again. "One down, about twenty more to go." He let the blood covered shard fall to the floor as he focused on a new one. Time slowed down but they were unaware. The crystal shard fell in slow motion into the mists that it had once contained... And upon hitting the floor, time stopped.

To the rest of the internet plane at least but not for Jewels and Nioca. An undeniable force clamped his hands down onto hers. He gasped as the shards easily embed themselves into his palms as well. She also cried anew as new pressure brought new pain. The mists that had swirled gently at their feet started to rise, encircling the pair. It glowed with it's own light and pulsed as it started to spin around them picking up speed and making a wind. Jewels stared at Nioca, his eyes wide. Nioca stared at Jewels, her eyes aflame.

A blast of emotion seemed to level them both. Anger, empathy, determination, love, bound and boundless. Their hands were seemingly sealed to each other, unable to be parted. An overwhelming feeling of shock resonated with them. With... *it*. For they were no longer two separate entities. They were one. Combined emotions washed over it, a maelstrom of conflict. Panicked thoughts were drowned out as quickly as they surfaced.

And memory... not one, but *two* lives flashed before its eyes simultaneously. A flash of a sword. A blast of flame. Two lost fathers. Two lost mothers. Three lost siblings. One still living. And dark secrets started to fly. A memory of the entity as it committed familicide. Another of it preparing a planned genocide. Then of lighter memories. Of love for many. Of love for one. Of blissful happy days on the Ermaria plains, and of a carefree childhood amongst the Fire Plane.

But the entity did not have long to live. The mixture started tearing itself apart, ripped in half by forces unknown. The newborn entity fell apart as quickly as it was born. A sense of identity, of two identities, reasserted itself. Panic overwhelmed the dying entity. Soon, it was split into two.

Nioca's hand slipped, no longer adhered to Jewels. They stared directly at each other, but it was with unseeing eyes. Neither was able to think. They were combined as intelligent as a grain of sand. Overwhelmed by the experience, both were struck completely dumb. Unconsciousness promptly followed, with both collapsing sideways onto the bed.

However, in their unconsciousness, they still knew each other. A compulsion somewhere between them drove them towards each other. And they held each other in a tight embrace.

Three Long Years

By Zoe - Apr 24 2009

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Iffy woke up with a start. "Good, you're finally awake," a man said. "She's expecting you."

Iffy, still dazed, stood up. "I know who you mean. Take me too her...and there I appear to have been drugged as my scripts aren't coming..." The man punched him. "You talk too much, come on," As they were walking, Iffy sneered at the man. "Heh, was that really supposed to be a punch? I barely felt a thing." The man responded by attempting to stab him. It broke when it came in contact. "Put that thing away, you could poke an eye out." The man, infuriated, picked Iffy up. He ran across the hallway and threw him at a woman's foot. "Sweet, I didn't have to walk. Heh...you. I've been wondering when I would come face to face with you again."

The women walked over to Iffy. She gave him such a horrible look, Iffy actually flinched. "You...Iffy isn't it? Finally. It is really hard keeping me from killing you this instant, exactly like how I saw you kill my..." "I had no choice, you know." "Shut up!" "Just saying, sheesh. You know..." "I said SHUT UP!"

A different man than from the one before entered the room. "Hello, uncle," the woman said. "Here is Iffy. Now, you said you had the ultimate torture spell?" Iffy looked in a way that's half laughing, half horrified. "Well, well," Iffy said. "So you tricked her? Pssht. You do realize that he's not actually your uncle, right?" "He lies," the man said. "Well, well, Iffy, shall we begin?"

-*- After a while, the preparations were complete. Before they started, Iffy whispered in the man's ear. "I know what you're planning to do. I'm warning you...you won't be able to utilize my powers." Then they started.

It started out calm. Just a little glowing light on the platform. Then, as it glowed brighter and brighter, the feeling changed. It went from something easily ignored, like a tiny scratch, to excruciating pain. Then energy began flowing from Iffy. Then things went dark...

-*- A couple minutes later, Iffy regained consciousness. It was fuzzy at first, then it became clear. Iffy blinked a couple of times before he believed what he saw. "Saph..." A figure had apparently knocked the man to the ground. She had a similar appearance to a young girl...but Iffy knew exactly that she was in no way young. "You mess with Iffy, you mess with ME!" She pulled out her knife, cut off his arm, and started beating him with it. "THAT'S what you get butt hole!"

"...Saph...is that really you?" She turned to him and walked over. "Iffy! I knew you'd wake up eventu--" But she was interrupted as he got her into a hug. "It's been three years, Saph, three years..." "I...can't...breath...idiot...let me go!" Iffy let go. "Sorry..."

The woman from before looked at Iffy and Saph with hatred in her eyes. "What. The. Hell. Who are you little girl? And why are you sided with this...this monster!" Saph glared at the woman. "Little girl? I'm much older than you will ever be. And Iffy...you still haven't told her yet?" "I've tried, but she kinda isn't listening." "Iffy, you are such an idiot sometimes, you know that?" Iffy grumbled.

Saph looked towards the woman. "Look here, *young* lady. Iffy killed your parents for a reason. Sure you were young and had their blood splattered on your face. So? It doesn't make Iffy a monster. He had to do what he had to do. Sheesh." The woman, angry, hit an alarm. "Ah poop" "Umm Saph..." "What is...Iffy? Ah damn" Iffy collapsed.

Saph had then had to escape while dragging Iffy. She got into the nearest Goggle station she could find. "Calamity...Refuge," Iffy managed to mutter. She put that in and they were off.

And of course they were noticed immediately.

Paranoia

By Sudanna - Apr 26 2009

Black, black emptiness. Populated by a great sense of distance, of indescribably foreign things, foreign minds and lives. Removed beyond comprehension, but so close. Too close. Nothing but a thin membrane, a rippling sheet to separate such alien might. Inklings seeped through.

Such is the sleep of Shapers. Or at least those who have had creations die. Even the veil between life and death cannot completely sever the link between Creator and Created. Sleep dampens the noise, allows inklings of the lives beyond life to trickle down. Shapers do not dream. They *see*. A terrible, unsettling sleep is the sleep of Shapers. Many opt out, as much as they can.

Nalyd was one of those. He was unused to such prolonged exposure to this monstrous otherness. And the length and deepness of his sleep only amplified the effect.

Eventually, he awoke to the pleasant feeling of an restorative pool's aura, facedown with his Scythe beneath him. He was disoriented, confused, and manic. As he raised his head, the

brightness of the room blinded him. His mind lurched erratically. Was overcome with paranoia. He scrambled ahead, grasping Lifesower in one hand, until he came to a wall. Or, as it turned out to be, a desk. As he rose, the room resolved itself more fully.

The Geneforge Moderation Centre. The comforting artifacts of Shaping came into focus around him as the warm, homely design of Calamity Refuge's building was recognized. The essence and healing pools to either side of him quietly swirled about, gently glowing and sparkling at periodic intervals.

Nalyd crouched, clutching the Scythe tightly. His eyes darted from place to nonthreatening place. What was he doing here? Who had brought him here? What had happened to Stillborn? Where was Jewels, where was everyone? Where was his work? WHERE WAS HIS CREATION?!?

The room became more and more visible, and something was revealed. A shape, a wispy, smoking form. A manifestation to keep him confined, a jailkeeper, an imprisoner! Some hand of the evil ones that brought him here, some ally of that iconoclast, that destroyer, Jewels! These things his fevered mind thought, and these things he saw.

Snarling, Nalyd's grip tightened around the Scythe, and his tight, shaking form skittered forward. Raising his left hand, he grasped the Scythe just beneath its blade. A pull and a push, and the base of Lifesower smashed into the unsuspecting shade's head.

The shade had been instructed merely to keep watch over Nalyd, not to harm or confine him. But it had not been specifically instructed to not harm him either, and self-preservation kicked in immediately. Staggering, the apparition grabbed at the Scythe as it fell. Nalyd hissed as the blade slipped over his fingers, smoothly slicing several of them off. They fell to the floor, and Nalyd screeched, bending over an clutching at the mangled left hand as the full force of pain hit him. The shade threw the Scythe away and tackled the tiny, bleeding form, smashing Nalyd face-first into the floor. As he impacted, Nalyd twisted, bringing himself out from under the shade and clawing at a table with his ruined fingers, heaving himself up and away. Kicking the smoky, faceless being as he did so.

The thing rolled now, away from Nalyd, and the little Shaper took this opportunity to grasp at the glass containers covering this table, grabbing the first one of substantial size he found. Whirling around, beaker raised to throw, he just caught a glimpse of the shade as it began to turn insubstantial.

Howling, Nalyd tossed the glass and leaped after it. The chemicals in the beaker were nothing dangerous, nothing spectacular. But it did hit the thing, and force it to pause a moment. And Nalyd came flying through the air just after it, hands ablaze with a fire of dark, dark red, hitting the shade squarely in the back. His hands ripped into the shade's transparent form as if it were putty, leaving nothing but glowing red holes. As the ghostly thing fell forward, it hit the wall face-first, and if it had been human, it would have a broken neck.

A faint rasp sounded from the shade, as Nalyd's hands ripped and tore down it's back. As Nalyd rose and slashed at the monster again and again and again, until it dissipated.

The little Shaper stood fully, breathing heavily and stumbling over to a table to catch his breath. As he braced himself against it, he was reminded of his severed fingers. A moment of

concentration and a sickening sound later, and he flexed his regenerated digits. Nalyd stooped to retrieve the Scythe, sighing in relief as the sweet music flooded his mind once more.

Now business. This place was hostile to him, obviously. The small minded fools here would never be able to accept his triumph, his creation! Never mind that they had helped him recover. Nalyd knew he yet lived; he sensed the vague connections. But the bond of Master and Servant had not been hammered home; the link was tentative at best, and could not be used for much. The creation would have to be found. Hopefully, he had held true enough to his plans that that his experiment could yet be salvaged, could yet be completed! Nalyd drooled at the thought.

Untacking his master plans from the wall (The paper of absurdly high quality actually repaired the holes), Nalyd folded them down to an unnaturally small size. Into his robe they went, and Nalyd exited the building.

Assembly, Part I

By Sylae - Apr 29 2009

"Here's more of that foul drink, Mage." Jumara slid another clay mug to w-dueck as he sat down. "You know, it's never bothered me, after all these years, that I've never heard your real name. You do have one, right?"

They were both silent for a second. Then they both laughed. "I think I drank too much one day and forgot it...I *think* I had one of those, but..." They both laughed again.

They were silent for a moment, then Jumara spoke up. "Well, I know you didn't just show up here for no reason. Why're you gracing an old man's presence in such a fine locale?"

"Well, you remember old battle-mage Infiera? His schemes about 'planes of existence'?" Jumara nodded. "Well, he was right. When I led that last charge, there was a battle-mage there waiting for me. We were doing the usual, firebolts and all that, and then...well, to be honest, to this day I have no idea what happened. I just know that a week later I'm washed up on a near-deserted island in the middle of nowhere. Found a town and they took care of me."

Jumara shook his head. "You know, from anyone else I'd call their bluff. But that still doesn't explain why you are here."

"After a bit of wandering, a job here and there, I ended up starting a smaller colony, called Calamity Refuge, on one of the islands. This 'plane,' it was just all islands in a gigantic ocean. Long story short, I made some enemies, and just a couple days ago, they attacked the Refuge. Well, I plan to take the fight to them, and I can't do it without help."

Jumara was silent for a minute, then spoke up, "They'll do it. They've been itching for action since the war ended. Probably don't know, but your charge won the Second Defense of Corel. It was bittersweet, though. 14 people in Fourth Company survived, and we were lucky. Command gave us all bonuses, pensions, and told us to see our families. I think some paperwork got lost,

though. Fourth Company has never been formally disbanded. We still hold monthly muster though."

w-dueck's robes vibrated suddenly, and he pulled out his RMM-A. *SSMT Connection lost* was printed right across the display in bright red. A moment later, the connection solidified and it stopped vibrating. "What the...Jumara, today's your lucky day. You get to see that I'm not bluffing."

Jumara's eyes were quite wide. "What...is...that?" He pointed at the RMM-A.

"I'll explain on the way. It'll be safer if we move into the country." w-dueck gathered up his staff and moved to the door. Jumara followed. "See, this is called a Remote..."

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w-dueck and Jumara flashed into existence outside the Google station and were immediately set upon by SimpleBots and strange forms of ice shades floating about.

"I knew Nioca would keep this place in one piece while I was gone," w-dueck helped Jumara up, who was still shaking from the effects of plane transition. "Don't worry. It takes a while to get used to, but eventually you don't even feel it."

"It...felt like...being pulled inside out...through my nose..." Jumara winced.

"Yeah, my method of transition isn't very refined. It's on my to-do list. Anywho," w-dueck led Jumara down the cobblestone street, "Welcome to the Refuge. I've got some things to take care of, so I'll let you wander around," w-dueck pushed some buttons on his RMM-A, "If you need anything, talk to a Bot. I've told them you are 'a special guest of the ArchAdmin.'" w-dueck walked off toward the Admin Tower.

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w-dueck knocked on what was left of Jewels's doorway. "Hello? Jewels?" There was no answer, so w-dueck stepped through the hole. "Are you here?" He stepped into the bedroom. Jewels and Nioca lay on the bed, tightly embraced. Their legs were intertwined and Jewels's hand was laying on Nioca's...

"What...happened?" Jewels moaned and sat up. She looked up, saw w-dueck, and screamed, "What are you doing here! Get out!" she threw a pillow. w-dueck ducked the pillow and straightened back up.

"Sorry, I just arrived. I'll go ahead and leave now," w-dueck coldly stated. He turned and walked back out the door, bits of crystal crunching under his feet.

Nioca yawned, "Aryll, somebody's...the door..." his eyes opened, and his jaw dropped. "Jewels...why are you touching my..."

Several hours later, w-dueck was more than sufficiently drunk. "Thankshh Ligrev...I thought you just did coffeeeeeee. But I'll take more of this...this...this...coffeeeeeeee."

The door opened as Ligrev was pouring another cup and Jumara sidled in. "So, Mage, how are you?"

"I'm...fine...Ah jussht found out that the luf of ma life ish...the village shlut," w-dueck slammed the glass down on the table. "Ah leave fer a dhay or two...and I come back and she's got her hands all ofer ma good friend Nioca's--"

"Looks like someone needs more coffee," Ligrev hastily poured more liquor.

"Well, I can't say I've ever been in such a situation, but from what I heard on the way here, this Jewels girl is a real...jewel. I'm thinking your mind's playing tricks on you." Jumara sat down and Ligrev poured some coffee--the real coffee--for him.

w-dueck drained another glass and spoke, his voice suddenly cold, "No, Ah saw what Ah saw. She was all over that...that...him." w-dueck downed another glass and Ligrev reached for the bottle again, but Jumara glared at her. w-dueck spoke up again, "He's always been a real asshole to her. Maybe that'sss why...Maybe she's all into aggressive guys. Maybe...that's where Ah went wrong."

The door opened again, and Jewels entered. The room temperature dropped ten degrees almost immediately.

"Will...Will. I don't know what you think you--" Jewels started, but w-dueck cut her off.

"Your keys."

Jewels stared. "What? My keys?"

"Yes, your keys." Jewels slowly pulled them out and handed them over. w-dueck took one key off the ring and handed them back. "I'll leave now. Good day." w-dueck staggered toward the door, and tried to open it. Then tried again. "Fuck it." he stepped back and used his staff to remove the wall...explosively.

Epic Coffee is Epic

By Azuma - Apr 30 2009

Kaylas didn't like this. Accompanying a human and to even to befriend one? Unthinkable! But his queen ordered it and he was overruled by just that reason. For now though, both were in the Chat Lounge, drinking the ever-satisfying coffee made by Ligrev the cook, chef, coffee maker, inn-keeper but Kaylas felt little less unsatisfied. Still, they weren't doing anything a human does, which, he always expected to be, a waste of time and effort. The human, Azuma, as Jewels called him by, wasn't even looking at him.

Azuma was lost of thoughts, well, lost of actions, viable actions, that is. He can't just ask the guy to let him explore his body. Nope. No lemon party here.

He was tightly gripping the cup of coffee, thinking on how to interact with the elemental in a proper, sensible, and sane means. Sentience emanated a sense of inquiry.
You know, I doubt the whole intelligent weaponry premise. I can't just walk up to him and say, hey! Can I inspect your body?
Sentience retorted with a sense of it was just trying to help. Azuma replied with a sigh. Kaylas, as the lovely Jewels called him, noticed his expression.

Good! He looks bored, maybe I can finally leave this human and back to Jewels.
Kaylas was about to speak, his expressions was clearly to imply some convoluted speech on how they are not doing anything and, possibly, not do anything at all and the human was bored, he would then suggest that if they can part ways, each returning to mind their own business, and the human, seeing how sensible the suggestion is, agrees, and leaves without causing Kaylas no problems, something which often happens around humans. Sadly, that wasn't the case.
"Can we, uh, take a walk around the, um, Refuge f-for a while?" Azuma almost stuttered every word.
"Tch. Fine." Kaylas said coldly. His coldness continued on at Azuma's expense. "At least speak properly when talking, it separates the intelligent from the unsavory, dumb beings." Kaylas headed for the exit, almost leaving the lounge complete, then, remembering he had company, stopped, folded his arms, and tapped his foot impatiently. "Well?"

What a douche!
Sentience agreed with the statement but just said to let him be. Azuma sighed and finished his cup of coffee. He headed for the exit, brushing against Kaylas as he did, causing him to stumble backwards.

Kaylas cursed as he staggered backwards. His eyes almost flamed but he calmed himself down, remembering that Jewels herself was the one who said to escort the human. Kaylas cursed again and finally left the lounge.

Kaylas caught up with the clearly irked Azuma. It was against his nature to do what he will, but to possibly anger his queen. No, he will have patience with this.

"H-hey." Kaylas stuttered, still having second thoughts. Azuma stopped and turned to face him, making the spiteful task somewhat easier.

"What?" Azuma's tone clearly showed that he was annoyed.

"I-uh-err-apologize." The words left a bitter aftertaste in Kaylas' mouth. Apologizing to a human? Almost blasphemous he thought.

"Well, it wasn't nice but yeah, let's put that behind us now." There was no intonation of hidden anger or grudge in Azuma's voice.

"So, Azuma right?" Kaylas asked. Azuma replied with a nod. "What would you want to do?"

"Well, I was thinking of going to the Spam Section. I think I forgot something there."

"That place it is then. Do you mind if you lead?"

"Not at all."

*Maybe this won't be **that** tiring after all*, Kaylas thought.

We all have lapses dammit!

So you're blaming me now? Like you remembered it too.

Just shut, kai? We're going to get it.

Azuma tightly gripped Sentience's hilt, as if to imply that he was choking it. Sentience just laughed at him.

Kaylas saw Azuma gripping the hilt of his sword a tad bit too much.

"Is something wrong?" It was Kaylas' best interest to ask, possibly to avoid something stupid.

Azuma replied only with shaking his head, though his grip didn't loosen. Kaylas shrugged.

They arrived at the entrance to the Spam Section. It was quiet. Too quiet. Even for the double locked, triple plated, *Pron-Be-Gone!?* doors, this was too much.

Azuma stood silently while Kaylas proceeded to open the door. Azuma grabbed him by the collar and yanked him back, his palm felt a bit hot though.

"What now?!" Kaylas protested.

"Flames." Azuma whispered.

Accompanying the human was one thing but this! To insult his nature of being a fire elemental?! "Are you making fun of me or are you just daft?!" Kaylas lashed out at the clearly surprised Azuma. "N-no! I-it's just tha-" Azuma's stammering was cut off by Kaylas' loud, angry voice. "I am an elemental of fire! No little spark can hurt nor even tickle me!" Kaylas continued to go inside the section despite Azuma's warnings. Indeed Kaylas was greeted by something aflame but it wasn't fire. It didn't even feel like it. But Kaylas felt inexplicably annoyed, even angry. Enough to cuss out but not quite to set something blazing. The same flame hit him, amplifying his mood.

"What the hell was that?! Who did that!? GAAAAAAAAAAAH! They will pay!" Kaylas heard cackling. He shot blindly towards the laughter not even bothering to look at his targets. His fire did get the desired effect. Two bodies laid before Kaylas, smoking and smelling heavy of burnt flesh. Trolls. Their misshapen body was more disfigured as Kaylas' fire ate through the flesh. Azuma stood observant, stunned, amazed, taken aback, but observant.

"Wow." That single word showed on how astounded Azuma was.

Kaylas straightened out his clothes. A volley of anger do tend to do that. He noticed Azuma's astonishment but he remained uninterested.

"If you were awed by that little spark, then you have seen nothing yet." Kaylas said, with a bit of smug.

"Well, if you've seen something new and amazing, wouldn't you gawk in wonder? Either that or you cower in fear."
Kaylas gave a chuckle. "Wow, what is your business in such a loathsome place?"

"I left something here, nothing really special but anyways, wait here for a while will you." Azuma walked past Kaylas, trudging deeper into the section. Of Kaylas' knowledge of the Spam Section, which wasn't much, he knew that section was not normal. Of course, Spam Section were littered but not like this, at least, here in the Refuge. Lolcats lol-ing were running around rampant, a white guy saying that he won't give you up was in the center and was that? No, it can't be! The humanity! For all things sane, was that a nipple slip from w-d?! Azuma returned to a slightly disturbed Kaylas. Azuma nudged him out of his daze. "I'm done." Kaylas noticed the box Azuma was holding with both his hands.

"What is that?" Kaylas inquired, pointing to the box Azuma returned with.

"It's my iSpam box. It holds vast amounts of memes, lingos, and shoop da whoops. And we were lucky that neither goatse nor w-d's nipple slip got out." Kaylas heavily doubted that latter part. The pinkness was too much to be forgotten.
I can't seem to send it back home. Darn it. Azuma stared down at the box, as if expecting something to happen. Nothing did.

Kaylas shrugged. "Where do you suppose to keep it now?"

"Maybe in the Moderator's Lounge. I think it's safe enough there." Azuma took a pause. "S-say."

"Yes?" acknowledged Kaylas.

"C-can you turn into, um, into your true form? Y-you know, your elemental one?" Azuma cringedly asked.

"What?!" Kaylas looked genuinely surprised at the request and the sudden digression. His voice became calm though he was still annoyed. "I cannot. My queen has disallowed it here."

"Then where?" Almost a hint of childish exuberance was heard in Azuma's tone.

Please say what I think you'll say!

"My home plane."Kaylas replied.

W00t!1!11!!!

"Can we, um, go to the-"

"No!" Kaylas sharply cut Azuma off.

"Why?" Azuma's childlike exuberance almost faded.

"Because." Kaylas answered definitely.

"Awwww." Azuma almost sniveled at Kaylas' reply. But he was determined. "Maybe we can ask Jewels if we can... That's right! Let's ask Jewels!" Azuma's enthusiasm came back full bloom. Kaylas face-palmed himself and shook his head. "Though I'd like some coffee first. I think you would too. Ligrev's coffee is epic." Azuma added. Kaylas just nodded, clearly not wanting this.

The two men's voices trailed off as they headed outside the Moderator's Lounge to the Chat Lounge. The box was left behind, lying on the floor, covered but not sealed. It didn't quiver nor quake nor even shake but slowly, and surely, the lid popped open, not removing it but the gap was enough for something to peek in or peek out. It was ghastly quiet in the section as an all too familiar reptilian eye appeared from the darkness within the box.

Both Azuma and Kaylas were surprised to see Jewels in the Chat Lounge. *Yey!* Azuma thought, but his cheerfulness was washed out when he saw the Jewels was drinking, and it wasn't the usual drink Ligrev serves. He sensed that Kaylas was upset, mainly because his eyes were flaming and it was getting a little too hot for comfort near him. Azuma too was curious on what was bothering Jewels.

Connection

By Nioca - Apr 30 2009

Nioca reclined on his parlor sofa. A glass of Amritae sat on the nearby table, glowing gently. Jewels had ushered him out of the Admin Tower quickly; not that Nioca had done much to resist. His head pounded, and he felt distracted. Bizarre dreams plagued his thoughts... but he shrugged them off. Since when had his dreams been anything but bizarre?

"What am I going to tell w-dueck?" The thought ran through his head. *"He'll be crushed!"* Nioca paused for a moment. *"Wait, why do I care what w-dueck thinks?"* He shook his head. *"Why? What has w-dueck ever done to us?"*

"Done to us...?! ARYLL!" Nioca shouted mentally. *"How many times have I told you not to use telepathic feedback to manipulate my feelings?!?"*

"Excuse me?" Aryll's reply came. Nioca was alarmed to find that her thoughts were startled.

"Wait, what... what's happening?!" A panicked thought raced through. Nioca grimly recognized that it was not his own nor that of Aryll's. *"Who... who is this?"}* A thought came through, though Nioca could feel that the person on the other end already knew what the answer was.

Nor did he need to ask who it was on the other end. He knew who it was. Jewels. Fury slowly built inside of him. *"What have you done to me?"* He demanded.

A sense of dread bled through to Nioca. *"Nioca? Oh... I... I don't..."*

Nioca felt, with some satisfaction, that she didn't know what to say. He could feel her desperately trying to think, trying to find an answer. But he was still infuriated. It was bad enough that he had to tolerate her at Calamity Refuge. But to be mentally linked to her? To share thoughts and feelings with that creature?

Jewels apparently could feel his thoughts about the situation. "'I'm sorry! This wasn't supposed to happen! I... I didn't mean to!"

"Oh, no, of course not. I mean, it's not like there's any benefit to you knowing my every thought and move." Nioca replied sarcastically.

"It was an accident!" Jewels responded defiantly. *"And it's your fault! If you hadn't have thrown around my orbs-"*

"It's my fault you're practicing black magic?!" Nioca was now squeezing one of the couch cushions in an effort to keep his anger under control.

"Black magic...? What are you talking about?"

"Come now. Even you can't be that stupid. Black magic. Soul binding. But you know that already. If you didn't, you couldn't have used the spell."

"No, I didn't! I swear on my life-!"

{{color|blue|"Well that's not worth very much."[/color] Nioca cut Jewels across, a cold hatred starting to burn through the link. *"Tell you what. Why don't you go get your boyfriend back. Though I suppose you managed to thoroughly trash that as well."* Cold humor formed in his thoughts. *"I did warn him. He'd get burned by you if he kept it up. And now it seems you've earned his hatred as well."*

"No! I-"

"No, truly, bravo. Well done." Nioca noted with satisfaction that Jewels was trying to push the link away. "Well at least she's done bothering me for the time being." He muttered. He went back to his Amritae and lost himself. As the minutes ticked by, his thoughts flitted back to what Jewels had done. Why couldn't they just have a normal day?

A knock came at the door. "Oh, what fresh hell is this?!" Nioca muttered

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Truth and Consequences

By Jewels - Apr 30 2009

The mists swirled along the floor in agitation. The hallway looked the same but the atmosphere was different. The chandelier swayed slightly as if there were a wind but she felt no breeze. The orbs of the chandelier glowed as before but one was missing, instead replaced by a light with no source that shown brighter than the rest. It illuminated a door frame without a door. The sound of a conversation wafted through it. That was new. Jewels walked through it.

She found herself in the Citadel and saw Nioca with Syla having a pleasant and... flirtatious conversation. Jewels watched as the pair gushed over each other and each professed their love. At the first kiss, Jewels failed to suppress a giggle and Nioca's head snapped up. Instantly Nioca's demeanor went from love to hatred. The setting changed just as quickly. Syla disappeared and they were in a room Jewels didn't really recognize. It was dark and ominous with machinery she didn't understand. Though Jewels didn't move, the perspective of the room did and she found herself in chains on a platform looking down at Nioca's angry face. "You made Syla leave!" His voice was full of malice. "You'll pay for that..." He proceeded to curse at her while pushing the gems on a console.

The machinery glowed blood red and hummed but Jewels felt nothing. "I don't think it worked," she stated.

Nioca's face went to one of confusion as he feverishly entered the commands again. The machine glowed more intensely with a darker red. It' s hum grew louder but still nothing happened. Nioca looked panicked from the machine to Jewels and back again. It burst into flame and exploded. "You've destroyed it!" he accused. "You've destroyed everything!"

The setting changed once more as the fire grew to surround them. The machinery disappeared and the stone walls turned to wood, engulfed in flame, burning around them. Crusader's Protectorate appeared in Nioca's hand and Jewels felt a tremor of trepidation. He started swinging at her and she started dodging. "You don't deserve to live!" he shouted at her. The surroundings started changing subtly. Cobblestones appeared beneath her feet and the sky was opened to a bright but smokey day. Jewels felt the apprehension of what the setting was starting to look like. It was a familiar place, though she knew she'd never been there. It was a place she hoped she'd never go. And yet she WAS there and HAD been there. The flames died down to reveal the smoldering wreckage of a home. Nioca's home. His family appeared on the opposite side of her and Nioca stopped his attack in an overwhelming dread.

"No! Run! You're not safe!" Jewels felt Nioca say it, but she heard the words come from her own mouth as she was engulfed in the same horror that poured out of Nioca's psyche. It was happening again. She was powerless to stop it. Her arm raised before her against her struggle. "Nooo!" she wailed... Or was that Nioca's voice? She didn't want to see it again, he didn't want to experience it again. Nioca battled in vein to change the inevitable outcome but he was glued to his place, unable to move. Jewels was incapable of stopping her other hand's rise to point at the family. She tried to close her eyes against the images, he attempted to shut out the sight, but their eyes did not even blink as gouts of fire erupted from her hands and inflamed the innocents standing there. Both hearts cried out at the injustice, both souls mourned the loss.

United once again for a moment in their grief, their bodily forms turned to light and as one they floated out door on the mists. They came to a door and it opened. On the other side, the face of a child. The young girl smiled at them and they retreated. The mists carried them to another door. Beyond it, the door to Jewels' suite, ruined as it was. They went through slowly looking this way and that, moving forward slowly, steadily. The door to her bedroom was open and they neared. The shards of broken crystal glittered on the floor in front of the fireplace but their gaze did not linger long. Instead, their view was drawn to the bed. They shivered in unison at the sight of two

bodies on her bed. Arm in arm, leg over leg. They slid forward until the sleeping faces came into view...

Jewels woke with a start and moaned, "What... happened?"

Jewels sat on her bed distraught. Becoming mindlinked with Nioca and feeling the full extent of his hatred was taking it's toll. What was worse, she had been found in a compromising position with him by Will and he thought... he thought... the unthinkable of her. She couldn't even explain it herself. Her memories after Nioca breaking his orb were foggy and jumbled. How could she deny anything when she didn't even know how then ended up on the bed together? They couldn't have... she wouldn't have... HE wouldn't have. No, nothing happened... not *that* anyway. She stared at the remaining 12 orbs wishing she could be numb. That she could just stop 'feeling'. They were supposed to bring her freedom. They were supposed to ensure she never hurt anyone here ever again... but they had done quite the opposite. Maybe Nioca was right. Maybe she *had* used... she shuddered to even consider it... black magic. Had not the enchantment researchers looked at her strangely when she had told them what she was looking for? What a mess those orbs had created. What a burden they had become. A burden she had brought onto herself. The key she had searched for on her road to freedom turned out to be only a new set of chains exponentially heavier than the old ones had been.

The tears flowed freely as she set about sweeping up the remaining shards of crystal. She was about to throw them away, but no, they were still significant. A solemn reminder of her deeds and their consequences. She rooted around in the kitchen until she found a small glass flask and poured the crystals into it. She then molded Nioca's brass stand to fit. Instead of back on the mantle, though, she took it to her study and placed it on the shelf across from her work station. No lesser or greater than any of the others but set apart.

Soon, though, she found herself back at the fireplace. Once again she stared at the swirling mists of her captured soul. Her heart was drawn to Will's, her mind settled on him, her gaze locked on his orb, and she lost herself in the fluidity of it's unceasing movements. The light inside glowed brightly, encompassing her view, blinding her to all but what was within...

A counter, a full shot glass, a shaky hand reaching out for it. Jewels reached with her hand and felt the smoothness of the glass as her fingers curled around it. BETRAYAL!! It hit her like a ton of bricks and pierced to the core snapping her out of her vision. She held Will's orb in her hand, feeling its cool smoothness, and the overwhelming sense of betrayal drove her to her knees. New tears streamed down her face at the realization of how much he was hurting... How much *she* had hurt him. The one person here she had felt she could trust had now found her faithless.

"What's the matter with you now?" The harsh irritated thoughts of Nioca broke through. Having him privy to her every emotion was disconcerting to say the least. She tried to form coherent thoughts to answer him but was at a loss. Instead she just let the feeling from the orb penetrate her entire being again. More irritation came through from Nioca's end as Jewels pressed to convey the whole of her raging emotions towards him. Sorrow for hurting Will, regret for what she could not change, hope that she could be forgiven, love for the heart of the man, and the

yearning to comfort and right the wrongs. Unsurprisingly, she was accosted by Nioca with a cold blast of disgust and loathing.

"You did ask," she responded meekly. *Failure!* It wasn't a direct thought but the feeling came through just as clear. Not only an accusation but a fierce hope and an expectation that she would fail to do any good here or anywhere. Her nature was destruction, she couldn't fight it. Anything she tried to protect would be left desolate. His thoughts cut into what little was left of her hope. Not because of the sentiment itself, but because of the truth behind it. She had tried to protect her father and had failed, she had tried to protect her child and failed, she had tried to protect the members of the refuge from herself... and failed. Jewels attempted to withdraw from Nioca, suddenly feeling ill. She ran to the bathroom clutching her stomach and emerged five minutes later wishing she hadn't left her lunch uneaten on the plate because dry heaves were that much more unbearable. With one last glance at Will's orb, Jewels left her suite intent on finding him. She didn't need an RMM to tell her where he was.

She entered the chat lounge more than aware that all eyes were on her and aware of a new visitor that sat next to Will complete with the disturbing look he gave her. She tried to talk to Will but he wouldn't even let her finish one sentence. She was also well aware of which key he took off her keyring. The key to his suite. She was actually surprised when he handed the rest back. Surprised he didn't just ban her and send her back to the fire plane with all the trouble she had caused.

She had jumped as the wall had splintered away from his drunken spell. Unable to comfort... unable to explain... utterly helpless... a failure. She sat at the bar stool Will had left and picked up the now empty shot glass he had used. "Ligrev, give me one of whatever Will had." Like a good bartender, she tried to give her a new glass but Jewels pushed it away. "I have a glass, now fill it up." Ligrev looked like she wanted to protest but didn't press the matter further. When the clear liquid reached the top, Jewels picked it up and stared at it for a minute. Finally in a barely audible whisper, she gave a toast. "To love." Jewels downed the drink and smiled as it burned down her throat as bittersweet as what she was drinking to.

"Jewels?" the hesitant voice of Azuma wafted towards her. She turned her head to the sound just in time to see Kaylas push past him on his way to her.

"What's that human's problem?" Kaylas pointed at the new gaping hole in the side of the inn and Will staggering away from it. "And what *are* you drinking? Hard liquor? Jewels you're not trying to get drunk are you? The last thing we need is you losing your senses here and..."

Jewels raised her hand to cut him off. "Kaylas," she waited for his full attention before continuing coldly, "Shut. Up." Ligrev's jaw dropped open mirroring Kaylas' shocked expression. "Give me another," Jewels instructed Ligrev. Being uncharacteristically quiet she obliged. Jewels was about to lift the glass to her lips again when Kaylas grabbed her hand to stop her. Jewels couldn't explain her rage other than to say that Kaylas wasn't protected from it, and yet she stayed composed enough to not raise her voice. "Let go of me," she quietly commanded.

"No," he stated firmly. "I'm not letting you drink any more."

Jewels was fed up with him. The smugness, the gall, the insubordination... Without a word she took a deep breath and closed her fist into a chokehold. Since he was so close, the air was drawn away from both of them but he wasn't ready for it like she was. She stared him down as he started to gag. A grim satisfaction came over her as he let go of her hand with a look of confusion. Jewels quickly downed the drink before letting the air rush back to the space around them. With an icy glare she whispered, "Don't forget who you're talking to."

Kaylas coughed as he stared at her fiercely. "You were only gone for an hour. *What the ice happened, Jewels?*"

Jewels was about to say it was none of his business when she turned away with a sudden realization. She was feeling something towards Kaylas that she had never felt towards him before... it piqued her curiosity as well as chilled her to the bone. The same loathing that Nioca had been pouring at her all morning now seeped through to her opinion of Kaylas. It wasn't anything Nioca was thinking now, but the link was undoubtedly affecting her. Her next instinct was to throw her arms around him and apologize but another out-of-place feeling stood in the way. Pride. She knew she could overcome it if she wanted to but the drama was getting old. After a moment of silence she looked back at him. "Too much," she said simply. "Way too much." Kaylas didn't looked satisfied but they were interrupted before he could press further.

"Ahem," Azuma cleared his throat next to them. "Jewels? I was wondering... Would it be all right if Kaylas took me to the Fire Plane?" He must have noted her 'Are you out of your mind?' expression as he continued. "Only for a visit... a very short visit... with Kaylas, so I can see him as an elemental." His eyes were hopeful and he wrung his hands together while waiting for her answer.

Kaylas was quick to interject. "I don't think it's a good idea."

Azuma's puppy dog eyes only got bigger, "Oh please... *Please!* I really want to see it." He put his hands together pleadingly while biting his lip.

Jewels couldn't help but smile at his tenacity. "It's awfully hot there. Do you have fire protection?" He was about to answer when Jewels' attention was drawn away by a question from Kaylas.

"Hey, Ligrev. Where's Stillborn?" Jewels' heart leapt to her throat as she frantically searched the room for him. She had been so distracted with everything else she hadn't even noticed that he was gone.

Ligrev was back to her high cheery voice. "Oh, he left a while ago. Said something about wanting to explore."

Jewels looked at Kaylas worriedly and, to his credit, he didn't even hesitate. "I'll go find him," he sighed. He started to walk off but Jewels caught him on the arm first. Getting over herself she stood and hugged him whispering a thank you in his ear.

"I'll be here... or the Admin Tower if I take Azuma for a quick visit of the fire plane." Kaylas nodded. He knew as well as Jewels that with the time difference, even an hour there would only pass as a few minutes at the Refuge.

"Um... so, *you're* going to take me then?" Azuma asked daring to hope. "I don't have any kind of fire protection, though."

Jewels nodded at him and realized that she knew a protection spell to use on him. Did she know that before? Hmm... maybe the link with Nioca wasn't *all* downside. She cast the new yet oh-so-familiar ward as easily as if she'd done it a million times before. Then taking Azuma's hand she teleported them straight to her suite in the Fire Plane with her ring.

For a moment she thought something must be wrong. For a moment she thought she had lost hold of Azuma, but no... the weight that had suddenly lifted was not physical but mental. Jewels actually laughed with joy at the relief. She hadn't realized how far Nioca's general state of mind about her had penetrated. She hadn't realized how much of her anxiety was actually not even her own. She felt like herself again. Azuma was more than surprised to find her celebrating by pulling him into a spinning hug. When they were both thoroughly dizzy, Jewels stepped back with her body of flame and Azuma stared.

"Wow," was all he had to say.

With the alcohol starting to kick in, Jewels felt her inhibitions drift away. She felt like showing off. "Hmm... If you think that's impressive, just wait until you see this." Jewels took a few paces back before erupting into full splendor for him. He was forced to shield his eyes from the brightness, though he tried to peek out through his fingers. Returning back to normal she stepped forward again making a sweeping motion with her hand. "This is the Royal Suite. What else do you want to see?"

Azuma only glanced briefly at everything else. Instead, his eyes seemed to be glued to her, full of wonder and youthful exuberance. He took a step nearer to her. "Your hair..." he hesitantly raised a hand towards it. "Can... can I touch it?"

Yamato Origins

By Vergil - May 1 2009

Vergil was very perturbed. Dubya had the sheer gall to ban him for defending the refuge, the insufferable hypocrite! Still, Vergil had a proxy emulator, so he could visit the forums, and Ligrev would allow him in, no matter how much Dubya would say otherwise. Vergil walked into the lounge wearing a black cloak. He settled down near Ackrovan. "Ackrovan, we need to leave, now." Ackrovan raised his mug and drained it. Standing up, Ackrovan flipped a coin to Ligrev, who promptly smiled and dropped it in her cleavage. Vergil's eyebrow raised "Guess that's one way to avoid the pickpockets." Ackrovan's lips twitch in mild amusement.

Tesara post was as lively as usual. After walking through many districts, and seeing many adventurers and magicians, Vergil finally found one particular shop that stood out from the rest. "*Shop of Ill-Gotten Gains*, perfect!" Vergil murmured to himself. Vergil and Ackrovan walked into a busy and hot accessory shop. Juk was wiping a counter when Vergil walked in. "Oui! Juk,

how you doing man?" Juk turned around and smiled at the new customer "Vergil! I haven't seen you in years! What brings you here?" Vergil tightened his smile and leaned onto the counter. "You still have a 1st generation Guardian Claymore, I presume, from a very nice shipment you sent Gathitens." Vergil said in a soft, silky voice. Juk put on a cautious smile "I don't believe I know what that is." Vergil's smile turned into a glaring frown. Suddenly, Vergil poured a pouch of money on the counter. Juk looked at it in amazement. He feverishly touched a coin. "By....by the gods! This is Earth Elemental Cristum!" Vergil put on an obnoxious smile "Still having....troubles, remembering the item I want?" Juk batted his eyelashes "Oh.....Yes! Yes...Now I remember! Heh. I will be right back." Ackrovan walked up to the counter "Why do you need a new sword? You have Yamato." Vergil raised an eyebrow in amusement. "This is not for me, it is a new blade for you, and one of the damn best ones that exist." Ackrovan looked genuinely surprised. "Huh, I guess you did have to give me something for accompanying you." Vergil smiled. Juk returned with a blade wrapped in cloth. Juk sighed "You know.....I was gonna start a collection and-" Vergil took the blade "And that is a tale another for another day." Juk sighed and waved goodbye.

Vergil and Ackrovan snuck through the flame-light hallways, cautiously looking for a pink dumpster. Ackrovan pointed at an object at the end of the hallway. "*Ooh, my lady, what nice sparkles you have, oooh!* Vergil made a look which of looked like a dying fish. Reluctantly, he banged on the dumpster a few times. Silence was heard for a few moments, and then the dumpster top flew open. An annoyed Laesp'awn emerged. "You always come at the wrong time!" "I could say the same about you." Laesp'awn chuckled. "So, we do the deal tonight?" Vergil nodded "Someone is doing private military dealings with someone, and I want to know who. And...Laesp'awn, why the hell do you live in a dumpster?" Laesp'awn rolled his eyes. "Well....If YOU were the ruler of a fire plane, would you look in a pink dumpster for spy's and assassins?" Vergil grinned "So, do you have the rippah?" Laesp'awn nodded "Yep, that and the new body armor they gave out to 17 and above regiments. Same thing as the old one, except with bladed limbs." Vergil raised both eyebrows "Oooh! I will need to try that out sometime!" Laesp'awn was about to say something when Ackrovan spoke "Can we stop wasting time and finish the job?" Vergil nodded and motioned in the direction of the palace. They moved from alleyway to alleyway, until they found the ballroom balcony, the only place in the palace, due to the assassination of the previous fire lord, that had only 2 guards posted there. Vergil told Ackrovan to stay put. "Just watch Laesp'awn." Laesp'awn jumped on an outstanding brick on his first step up the palace wall, then using the spots of missing cement and brick, managed to hang right above the guards heads on the balcony. Vergil gave him a thumbs up. Laesp'awn grinned. He jumped down, slicing with a serrated elbow to the spine of a guard, Laesp'awn landed, ripping the guard in half down the back. He savagely turned on the other one and sweeped a bladed leg at the guard's ankles. The sickening crunch followed by a muffled yowl of pain was shortly silenced by a heel to the neck. Laesp'awn reared his head back, mane-like hair shimmering. Ackrovan curled his lip in disgust "I see all of the members of your cult are as unnecessarily brutal as you." Vergil ignored Ackrovan. Come on, the records room is just beside the ballroom. After all of them had made it up safely, Laesp'awn opened the door and whistled "Will you look at all that leftover food." Vergil stared bizarely at Laesp'awn "What the hell is with you and food?" Laesp'awn licked his lips "Chocolate Truffles....." Vergil rolled his eyes and

motioned for Ackrovan to come. Vergil sat down at the computer and typed down the password for the military records. The computer whirred to life.

"OPENING FILE 235579231486

DAY 1: We found an small island in the human plane that looked interesting and different from all the other ones we had encountered. Our suspicions are right. For we found carcasses and cities of civilizations that we had never seen before. When we landed, we didn't do much investigation, we just looked around and amazed our self with the wonders of the ruins and beautiful architecture, it would be perfect, if those snobby military types weren't here. Always asking dumbly if we had found a special weapon that we could use for combat. Idiots.

DAY 35: Interesting. After some deciphering, we have found that there was an culture that made their own creatures to do battle and bidding. When the commander heard this, he demanded to pull our attention away from the architecture and culture of these people, and made us focus on how to create these creatures. Due to our lack of information, we can only tell that these things can be made from some substance called essence. It is not helpful to have these impatient officers breathing down our necks all the time. Time will tell the secrets of these problems.

DAY 78: Those imbeciles! They ruined everything! Trashing around delicate ruins just to find a scrap of paper or a bit of meat! They almost destroyed a library for Shinji's sake! We found more evidence and info on how to make creations, but these were humans, or, at least, a type of human which harnessed this essence that we Fire Elementals can't handle. The commander was not happy to hear that. He was happier to see that we had found some weird jar-like things which when released, greatly improved and modified the user. We are unsure the consequences of this, but it keeps the commander happy, so I don't worry too much.

DAY 154: God I miss home. If it weren't for the new frequent discoveries we make, I would of surely given up by now. We have found a pool of energy that supplies whoever uses it with a certain substance, which, soon after we learned what was essence. After translating some training books, a few volunteers tried to create. It was disastrous. The horrible smell that befouled the air as well as the shrieking husk of flesh that we behold after completion was horrifying. We are refraining from creating again until we have more knowledge.

*DAY 213: We have found an enchanted ruin. One with an abundance of treasure and artifacts. Both the scientists and the commander were very pleased at this discovery. I also found a unique weapon lying on a pedestal, a curved blade with a circular hilt, after examining it, we found that it was the finest, cleanest, sharpest blade we had ever seen. It was to be taken to the Fire Lord's newborn son, as a gift to show our gratitude. We found other fine blades in the ruin, but none nearly as magnificent as this. We decided to call it after the twisted beauty it had. "*Yamato*", it was a great pleasure seeing such a work.*

Signed by Fredderick A. Hourmoin

""*Yamato*", it was a great pleasure seeing such a work." Vergil said flatly. "Yamato. Oh deeear." A voice sounded behind the door "Hey, who is in there?" Vergils eye's widened "We gotta go." Vergil pressed a button on his robe. Laesp'awn got up from his truffles and hid behind a corridor. 3 guards walked by the door. Vergil gave the signal for them to move. Laesp'awn didn't wait. He twirled and spun into the guards, cleaving them and their armor into shreds. Vergil growled "You

should of waited." Laesp'awn rolled his eyes "Hey, I got he job done, what harm is ther-" 5 heavily armed guards came marching into the room, they pointed at the party "Hey, you there! Stop!" Laesp'awn sighed "Oh boi." More guards poured into the room from the front. Vergil eyed a teleporter to the left. "Lets go!" Vergil, Ackrovan, and Laesp'awn ran for the portal, Ackrovan, being the most fit, managed to easily stride into the portal. The guards where faster than Vergil and Laesp'awn, and as soon as Ackrovan stepped through the portal, one of the guards cut the energy. Guards from all directions now came into the room, like a thick, red wave. "Have you gone into embrace recently?" Laesp'awn used a rueful grin that was his trademark "Not nearly as much as I would like." Vergil smiled "Doesn't Fire and Air Make explosives?" Laesp'awn laughed as flaming tendrils came out his hand "Woo-yeah!" Vergil let out a deep amphibian caturwaul. Fumes started to rise from his coat, Yamato burned brighter, blue and black spikes started to puncture his skin, his body snapped and twisted lower and lower. Laesp'awn was an light-flame dancing in the wind. Vergil moaned and leapt into the crowd, cleaving guards and tearing flesh with his free hand. Laesp'awn used his now on fire razor limbs to hack and mow guards in half, giggling with glee with every gruesome flesh wound he invoked upon the hapless souls which could do nothing but feebly attempt to stop a raging onslaught. Everytime Vergil tore a person in half with his claws, Laesp'awn de-limbed another one, every time Vergil hacked armor and flesh wound together, Laesp'awn would smash another ones helmet into their own brain. But for all their bravado, Vergil knew, even in his bloodlust consumed state, that there where more that they could handle. Vergil threw Yamato at the window and Vergil and Laesp'awn jumped out and did the only thing they could do now. Run.

Rotten Mind

By Sudanna - May 4 2009

Nalyd blinked wildly in the bright daylight. Blinded! No doubt, a trap laid upon the door, to stun and weaken him, while the traitors of this Refuge slew him in ignorance of his grand workings! Nalyd shrieked and dove to the side. . . right into an absurdly scratchy shrub. Cowards and weaklings! They must have some druidic powers as well, aping the might of Shaping to lay cunning traps for him! Nalyd wormed his way out of the bush.

He could see now. The weaklings couldn't incapacitate him for long! And it looked as if, seeing him in his full fury, they had all fled as well. Cowards! Nalyd moved on, Scythe shining in a clean and brilliant silver above his head.

Nalyd stuck to the shadows, using stealth and guile, apparently evading the countless assassins that the denizens of this place had no doubt sent for him. The fools couldn't even hire competent help.

Not the there actually were any shadows, really. Just some pleasant, periodic shade. But Nalyd stuck to that anyways!

Slinking along, Nalyd ran from hiding place to hiding place. Here, take shelter in this water barrel! This bush! Around this tree! Behind this SimpleBot!

Eventually, Nalyd tired and decided that hiding in plain sight was best.

Strolling down the path, Nalyd couldn't help but notice that his Scythe felt different underneath his fingers. It felt smoother. Almost slippery, in fact. And brighter. Yes, it definitely felt brighter. To reflect his new power, no doubt! To reflect his progress towards triumph!

How had he gotten the Scythe, anyways? Hadn't he Shaped it into his Rot? Yes, he definitely remembered doing that. But how had it been remo-

My, what lovely azaleas those were. Positively radiant.

Nalyd started. Where had that thought come from? Peering around him for any offending telepaths, Nalyd couldn't help but notice that there were no azaleas present. Oh, wait, there they were. In the middle of the path. Which had been clear a moment before. Nalyd agreed wholeheartedly with himself. They were rather stunning. Radiant, indeed. Blinding, for that matter. Blazing like the sun.

Nalyd moved on.

Where was he? Ah, yes, his Scythe! How odd. Had he absorbed his Rot? No, Nalyd felt the gap where the essence used for it should be. Poor twisted thing must still be alive. Say, Nalyd could send a command to it for-

Why, is that a lion there? I should go be distracted by it!

Now, where had that come from? First person?!? Also, that lion bit. There were no lions around here! Except for that one, perched on Nalyd's shoulder. Huh. How distracting. As Nalyd brushed it off, he saw that the blazing azaleas had disappeared. How very distracting.

Now, that Scythe. Wait. There was no way that Nalyd could have the Scythe and have his Rot still be alive. Not while remaining sane. How-

IMPATIENCE ENOUGH OBEY

What now? That's not even a proper thou-

Nalyd wheezed and curl inward as the wind was suddenly knocked out of him. Keeled over as, some seconds later, his crotch was apparently kicked in by some kind of invisible ostrich. Lay coughing on the ground, until what felt like the thousand demons of Solomon hit him in the side and sent him flying through the air, across the plaza, and right into the library wall. He decided to lay there mewling for a while, just to throw his attackers off.

After hacking up a couple organs, Nalyd stood and teetered around for a while. To throw off his countless, everpresent attackers. Of cour-

You're hopeless. Go! To the tavern! To Stillborn! Or I'll do worse. I'll stop the song.

Now, see, that voice was familiar. He had made that voice. Rot? Is that you?

The song stopped. Nalyd shrieked and gurgled, scythe clattering from numb fingers. Numb with silence. The silence! Forever and ever and ever, everywhere and always, echoing the

nothingness, for an eternity. Silence surrounded, enfolded, infiltrated, commandeered, defined him now. Nalyd made many small, high-pitched sounds, and then threw himself upon the Scythe. A great slash sprouted down his side. His fevered mind sought the song.

Enough! I do not want my tool dead. Have your song.

Nalyd felt heaven and ecstasy, ultimate fulfillment; bliss incarnate.

Go to the tavern. Find Stillborn. Finish your work. The work I am to do. The work I was made for. No, don't heal yourself. Hurry! I wish to leave this plane.

Nalyd, blood drenching his right side, lurched into the chat.A he braced himself against the open door, he couldn't help but notice that it was a shattered, splintered ruin. A number of them stuck in his hands and wounded side. He staggered forward, head already going fuzzy from blood loss. To a bright and smiling Ligrev, he slurred a command for Stillborn. Too far gone now to hear the answer, he fell over, hit his head on a chair, heard something crunch. Lifesower thudded wetly into his shoulder, effortlessly sliding in up to the base of the long, thick blade.

But Nalyd was long gone by now. Someone else eventually started screaming. More than enough for him.

Elsewhere, Stillborn felt his master's pain. Inklings, anyways. They still hurt. The creation came running.

Starred

By Azuma - May 7 2009

"Sure you can! But it's a bit hot, so be careful." Jewels's cheery tone enticed Azuma more. He started at the ends first, and cautiously, worked his way up to the roots. Azuma was so astounded by the flame cadenza that he didn't notice Jewels giggling.

"Teehee! That tickles." She said in between her laughter. Azuma stopped at the remark causing Jewels to play a frown. "Why did you stop?" she asked. "Well, I thought you were, uh, being... uhm... irritated." Azuma's eyes rolled sideways, and his head hung low, abashed. He hid his face under his hood in shame.

"I wasn't silly. I kinda liked it," Jewels said reassuringly.

"R-really?" Azuma faced Jewels though his hood was still obscuring her view of his face.

"Really!" Jewels replied enthusiastically. She paused for a while, thinking. "So you want me to fire up again? I won't be as intense as the last time." Her gleeful tone suggested that she wouldn't take no for an answer.

Azuma nodded.

"But you have to pull down that silly hood of yours," she said in her still exuberant tone.

Azuma did.

She took a few steps back. "Well, here I go!" Jewels raised her hands and she flared up. This time though, Azuma could see her without inhibitions. She was divine. The flames made her a rose, a fiery rose. No words he could say could equal to her grace. The blaze itself almost seemed to dance, as if accosting to Jewels's joy.

"What to see me spin?" Jewels asked in a merry tone that seems impossible to say no to.

Azuma only nodded, he was too mesmerized to reply with words.

She closed her eyes and with a smile, she twirled and twirled and twirled around. She laughed happily as she did.

"Weeeeeeeeeeee!" She swirled around faster, the flames covering her encircled as she did, resulting in a fire blossom. Azuma thought every rotation must make her dizzy but in every turn she exuded more frivolous joy. Then suddenly, something caused her to loose focus and eventually her balance. In a single moment, her joyful face turned to cringing as if in pain. Her hands flew to hold her head. Jewels fell.

"Aaaaaaaaah!" Jewels would have expected a thud and pain but there was none of either. Instead, she felt someone's arms. Azuma caught her eye before catching her mid-fall, enduring the pain of her weight, more for the fact that she was fire.

With alarm in her eyes, Jewels immediately stood up albeit clumsily. She almost fell again, but Azuma got ready to save her again from falling. She managed to regain her balance, but she sprained an ankle in the process. She knelt down, rubbing her foot. Azuma followed her. "Are you all right?" His voice clearly belied his worry about her being. He tried to hide his own wince of pain but Jewels saw it anyway.

"I'm so sorry." She apologized while turning back to a non-blazing human. "I was... I... um... I was... I'm so sorry!"

Azuma just smiled at her worried demeanor. "It didn't hurt that much," Azuma said, trying to reassure Jewels that he really wasn't hurt but the pain was a bit too much to stop another wince. "Plus, how could I let you fall when I'm here to catch you?"

The statement seemed to catch her off guard though led to a small smile. Jewels chuckled, quietly and only slightly, as a tear dropped from her. Azuma watched intently as the teardrop tensely fall towards the floor. He looked up again at Jewels. She started sobbing, crying her heart out. "I-hey... Jewels... don't cry." Those were the only words he could say to her. He was totally clueless. He slapped himself mentally for being so, but it was much to his surprise when Jewels embraced him almost quickly as the last word exited his mouth. He didn't know how to reply to her action, because in truth, he had never imagined something like this, not even once.

To be someone for another to lean on... ha ha...

Jewels seemed confused. Mentally and emotionally so. She was with a person she barely knew and here she was, embracing him like there's no world for tomorrow and not letting go.

"Would you... stay with me?"

Maybe it was the liquor or maybe not. She held her breath, waiting. Perhaps steeling herself for a rejection.

Those five words erased all other thoughts he had. What would he answer? Would he lie to her just to let her feel good? Or tell the truth, possibly hurting her?

Of course, that would be the truth. You know better than anyone, I don't stick around.

I haven't stayed with anyone since the day I found you. What makes you think that would ever change?

He closed his eyes and without any stuttering, he embraced her back. Not too tight and not too loose but just enough. And he whispered to her something he never imagined to.

"I will."

She squeezed him tighter at hearing his words but cried harder than before. In between her whimpers she managed to say something to him.

"Thank *sniff* you... even if *sob* it's not... *wail* not true!"

"It is."

His reply made her cry more though he could only guess why. Maybe because she had already been disappointed by everyone else and those thoughts echoed throughout her whole that he would be the same. Nevertheless, for the moment she found solace in his touch.

He had no regrets when he let go of his words. No afterthoughts, no guilt, nothing. He said them because they were the words that he wanted to say to her. Every single one of them.

He held onto her for moments, which turned into minutes and more. He didn't care how long. He was happy to be her comfort, to be her succor, to be her relief. He was more than happy and more than willing to be. He was something other than what he looked like,though. He felt her life matrix opening up to her, the very essence of her being, the goal he originally wanted... but that was before. It didn't matter now, only she was important in this trice. Jewels... his star.

Azuma didn't know how long they stayed in the fire plane. Tears and laughs were both forthcoming in great quantity, and quality. Eventually his heat wards started wearing off and Jewels brought him back to the Refuge. Amazingly, the sun seemed to not have moved for all the time they had spent. They had arrived in the bedroom of Jewels' suite. He had never been there before and the giant glass windows overlooking the Refuge were quite a sight. He almost didn't notice Jewels staggering back and clutching her head. When he asked what was wrong, she had just waved him off with renewed tears, unwilling to share any more. Jewels had muttered something about not having enough privacy before ushering him out the door saying she'd like to be alone.

So much for staying with her. Now she was pushing him away? But perhaps it was for the best. Sentience tickled his mind with another annoying thought.

I wasn't being attached! ... Shut it! ... Shush! ... I said stop dammit! ... Don't be technical now. ... Oh pshaw, do you want me to stuff you in there *again? ... Good. Now, to drown this all off in some of Ligrev's epic coffee.'*

Assembly (Part II)

By Sylae - May 7 2009

Jumara thanked the SimpleBot for taking him to the building and watched in amazement as it hummed off. Magic metal birds, that could fly with no wings! What other marvels would he find next? He turned and walked up the the steps leading to the front doors, half-expecting them to carry him up without his taking a step. Sadly, they didn't. Magic must have it's limits...

The doors opened before he got there, and an attractive woman stepped out "What business do you have at the Citadel?"

He smiled. "My name is Jumara, I've come to see a ser...Nioca, is it?"

"I will see if he is available." The woman walked back inside. A minute later, she returned. "Follow me." She led Jumara into the building and into a small sitting room, via several halls and staircases.

The sharp-dressed man stood as Jumara entered and bowed politely. "You must be Jumara. I am Nioca. It's a pleasure to meet you. Have a seat. Would you like a drink?" Nioca sighed as Jumara shook his head. "Then let's get to business. What does our friendly ArchAdmin need so greatly that he cannot come in person?"

Jumara couldn't help but notice the sarcasm is Nioca's voice, but he answered anyway, "Actually, he didn't send me here. Well, he brought me here, to this place, but not to you or your palace specifically. Anyway, what I'm trying to say is, he needs your help. He's--"

"If he wanted my help, he would be here right now."

"Will you just shut your mouth and listen? Or do I have to speak into some machine for you to hear me?" Jumara's years of dealing with mouthy insubordinates had returned to him.

Nioca, unfortunately, was not cowed by Jumara's outburst. He snapped his fingers, glaring at Jumara as if he were some sort of pest. "I suggest you keep some things in mind for the next time you decide to speak. This is my home. I am not your subordinate. With a single command, I can have these shades rip you into pieces so small not even w-dueck could find them all," Nioca waved at five ice shades that had entered the room. Frost was forming on the glasses, and Jumara couldn't help but shiver slightly. "Assuming I didn't do the deed myself. And, finally, I am already in a sour mood." Nioca leaned back. "Continue."

Jumara glared at him. "As you may know, he's formed a strike force to destroy a group called the VRP, and--"

"Wait, *that's* why he's been gone?"

Jumara glared at him again. "Yes. Why do you care?"

"...It just interests me to know that w-dueck has gone completely and utterly insane, 'tis all. The VRP is quite a large group, formed mainly of assassins and powerful wielders of magic. He'd need all the help he could get."

"So, are you in?" Jumara asked, "Consider it repayment for whatever you did that got him so...agitated."

It was Nioca's turn to glare. "Repayment?" Nioca said, his voice a mere whisper. "He has a lot of nerve... Fine. I'll do it. Not because he thinks I slept with Jewels, though, no," Nioca smiled grimly, "if he were to go alone, he'd get himself killed. He'll need back-up, and someone that can actually do something against the VRP." Nioca smiled at Jumara. "No offense."

Jumara looked up at the hulk of the Admin Tower. Scaffolding and machinery covered it about halfway up. Was that where the VRP had attacked? No matter. He still had one thing left to do. Jumara got a SimpleBots attention and it hummed down toward him.

"Yes, ambassador?"

Jumara frowned. "Ambassador? When did I become an ambassador?"

The SimpleBot beeped in agitation. "*Directive AF7342-C, given by ArchAdmin w-dueck - Register guest 3378, that is yourself, as member 'Jumara', title 'Ambassador of the Corel Lancers'. I presume this information is correct? Your permissions dictate that you can be informed of all directives involving yourself, would you like me to create a printout?*"

"No, but I would like to speak to Jewels. Could you take me to her?"

"*I cannot, for I am carrying time-vital supplies to the reactor repairs. I will, however, direct another machine to do so.*" The SimpleBot flew off, and another replaced it a second later. "*Follow me, ambassador.*" It took him into the tower and up a long flight of stairs. "*Administrator Jewels' chambers are through the hole there. I may suggest that you have caution, ambassador. Her processor has been rather strange lately. It may need replacement.*"

"I'll be sure to remember that. Thanks." Jumara made a mental note to ask what a processor was.

"*The sentiment has been logged. Good day, ambassador.*"

The SimpleBot hummed off, and Jumara stepped through the hole in the wall into a lavish entryway featuring a grand fireplace. He could hear a woman crying beyond it. "Hello?" he yelled.

The crying stopped abruptly, and he heard a shaky but hopeful voice, "Will? Will is that you?" A woman's head--presumably Jewels'--looked out of a doorway. "Oh, it's *you*. Go away. Can't you tell I'm not in the mood for company?"

Jumara stepped forward cautiously. He had a bad feeling about this woman. "My name is Jumara. Can I talk to you?"

Jewels shook her head. "You're not going to leave. are you? I can already tell. Do you want something to drink? Eat?" She pointed Jumara to the right of the fireplace at a sitting room of sorts--except that the only furniture was a couch and a strange black cube set along one wall among shelves and shelves of smaller colorful boxes. She sat down and motioned for Jumara to sit. "Well, what do you want?"

"Well, as you may know, Mage--er, I guess you call him 'Will'--he has been planning an attack on this group, the VRP, for some time."

"Is that why he left? To bring them down? Why? He doesn't honestly think they attacked the Refuge, does he?" she shook her head and looked out the window, toward Nioca's extravagant palace. "Sorry for interrupting. Carry on."

"Ah, well, the thing is, he's obviously going to be needing some help, and...are you okay?" Jewels' eyes had glazed over, and she looked a million miles away. Jumara shuddered. Mages looked like that, right before the ground beneath you exploded.

Her eyes suddenly came back into focus. "I'll do it."

Jumara stared. "What...how...I hadn't..."

"You want me to help Will take down the VRP. I'll do it. Why, I'd rather not tell a complete stranger, no offense, but I'll help him. Now if you don't mind, I'd like some time to myself..." her eyes flitted toward the doorway.

"Oh, sorry. I'll leave now." She suddenly burst into tears, and he slowly backed out of the room.

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w-dueck was tired of watching the repairs. They weren't going to go any faster just because he was watching. Besides, he had to prepare. "What is the status of Jumara?" he asked the nearest SimpleBot.

"*Ambassador Jumara is currently heading down the stairs of this very building. He will reach this location shortly.*"

As it spoke, Jumara appeared at the landing. "Mage! I've been looking for you. We need to talk."

"What do you need, Jumara? I was just about to head upstairs to get my things." Jumara glanced over at the machines. "What, they only listen when it's their business." Jumara still gave them the look. "Fine. Let's go." w-deuck led Jumara back up the stairs and into his chambers. Several hallways later, he stopped. "Now, what do you need to tell me that's so damn secret?"

"I requited some forces for--"

"Who?"

"Ah...well..."

"No! I don't want *their* help. Jewels and Nioca can stay here and forn--"

"Stop it! You need their help, and you know it. Nioca said you'd never make it without his help."

"He said that? The bastard. He's right, too. That's the sad part."

"So you'll take their help?"

"The answer's still no." w-dueck sighed. "You know, I thought I had something with Jewels. I really did. I even asked for her to marry me."

"Wait, what did she say?"

"She never really got around to answering. Why does that make a difference? I saw what I saw. She's been acting really weird lately, too. But that doesn't matter. I'm not taking their help." w-dueck shook his head and walked through some more doors, Jumara following.

"Mage, just stop. In all my years as your company commander, I've never seen you so damn *pigheaded* over a woman. You obviously have feelings, and I can tell those haven't changed. The best thing you can do is stuff your emotions and your honor deep inside you and never bring them out again. If I have to, I will *order* you to work with them." Jumara looked him in the eyes, "Just do it. It's not like it can get any more complicated."

w-dueck rolled his eyes. "Fine. But for the record you did force me into this."

Preparations

By Nioca - May 10 2009

Nioca sighed. Now that Jumara was gone, he could attend proper business.

Or at least he could have, except that he was yet again interrupted. "Massster..." One of his ice shades hissed. "Ssssssomeone issssssss at the docksssssssssssssssssssss..."

"Great." Nioca said. "And what's with your accent?" Nioca added, noting the unusually long hiss.

"Sssssssssssssssssorry."

Nioca headed out to the Google station, Crusader's Protectorate in hand. Two figures stood at the station. The first was leaning against the second, despite an odd height difference. Surrounding them were Ice Shades and SimpleBots. The latter had their chainguns deployed.

"Let me through!" a high voice shouted.

Nioca ran forward. Keeping Crusader's Protectorate ready, he finally got a good look at them. The person shouting at the bots was a young girl, no older than seven. And the other was... "Iffy!" Nioca shouted. He attempted to push his way past, but the shades and SimpleBots stopped him. "Shades, stop!" He shouted. The shades stepped out of the way. "And why are you stopping them?" Nioca asked pointedly at the SimpleBots.

[tt]"Order #4A7M29 - Do not interfere with or attack specified shades. Order #4A7C31 - Defend specified shades in combat."[/tt] The SimpleBots droned in unison.

"Oh, right. Cancel those orders." Nioca said.

[tt]"Orders canceled."[/tt] The SimpleBots droned again. Their chainguns disengaged, and they hovered away.

"So where'd you find Iffy?" Nioca asked the young girl.

"I'd rather not say." She stated. She pushed her way past Nioca and headed further into the Isle.

Nioca, somewhat appalled by the little girl's manners, proceeded to follow behind her. "You know, there's an inn just over there. If you'd like, you can rest before heading out."

"I intend to stay." The girl said bluntly. "Iffy needs me."

"I see." Nioca stated. "So who are you in relation to Iffy?"

"A friend."

"Can I at least get your name?" Nioca said, only just holding back his irritation.

"You may call me Saph."

"Nice to make your acquaintance. My name is- Hey!" Nioca yelped. He had stopped, expecting her to stop. She did not, and he was now running after her. "So where are your parents?"

"You ask too many questions, Hey." The girl said irritably.

"What did you call... oh, come on!" Nioca yelled. At first, it was annoyance that she didn't catch his name, but it quickly turned to frustration. There was a gaping hole in the side of the inn.

"This doesn't look very safe..." Saph commented.

"It's just fine." Nioca growled. "It appears simply that a patron got a little rowdy." He stepped inside through the hole. "Ligrev, what happened here?"

"Hi! Well, w-dueck was drunk-" Ligrev started chatting.

"Got it." Nioca cut her off. He could fill in the blanks. "Get some coffee for Saph here. And whatever Iffy drinks."

"Sure!" Ligrev squeaked. She started preparing coffee.

Meanwhile, Saph set Iffy down in a chair. Nioca gave him an odd looks as he slouched over, his head hitting the table. Nioca took a closer look at him. "Are you sure he isn't dead?"

"Absolutely positive." Saph replied blandly.

Nioca took a furtive glance at Saph, then checked to make sure he had a pulse. He then murmured a couple of spells. Light enveloped his hand, and a glowing nimbus surrounded Iffy. He looked up, blinking blearily. "Oh..." He moaned. His hands tightened reflexively, and his body curled somewhat in a desire for a fetal position.

"Rise and shine, Iffilous." Nioca said with false cheeriness.

"Go away." Iffy moaned. His head hit the table again. Then it jerked back upright. "Wait, Nioca?"

"Yes?" Nioca replied.

"Nioca? I thought you said your name was Hey." Saph said disapprovingly. Nioca waved her off.

"What happened? Where am I?" Iffy asked.

"Well, your friend here brought you back to Calamity Refuge. As for the rest... Beats me. You'll have to ask her." Nioca pointed at Saph as he finished. "Look, no offense, but I really have other places to be right now. I'll leave you with Ligrev, okay?"

"Alright..." Iffy moaned. He shuddered slightly. Nioca gave him one glance, then made a mental note to include painkillers in his medical supplies. He walked out the door.

However, he didn't get far enough to miss what could only be Saph shouting, "What do you mean I have to pay for the night?!" He looked back and smiled.

Nioca marched down into the parlor. At the opposite end sat Aryll, who stood at attention. "You called?"

"I need you to go to Tesara Post." Nioca said sharply. He handed her a list and a pouch. "A full list of what I need and the coinage to buy it with. I need you to get there, buy the supplies, and get back as soon as possible." Nioca took a breath. "Also, contact Tionirrr. Tell him Nioca sent you, and that he needs assistance."

"Consider it done." Aryll said. She ran out of the parlor. Nioca watched the point where she left for a moment, then headed to the bunker.

"It's risky..." Nioca said, finishing typing on the console. "But I have to try it." He brought the entire script up. Then he went over to the sleeping noob that he had captured. "Up. Get up." He commanded. The noob looked up blearily, then stood up. "Stand on the platform." Nioca commanded again.

The noob looked disdainfully at the platform, but stepped onto it anyway. Nioca pressed a key on the console's keyboard, then walked over to the alien device. He put his hand on the glowing green sphere.

The computer picked up the change instantly. Nioca voice came pouring out of the computer's speakers at a rate far faster than any normal human could ever hope to acheive.

The alien device glowed red as the computer finished. The noob twitched slightly as it was altered by the device. The device hummed with power, working its powers on its subject.

Then it finished. For a moment, everything was still. But that moment was shattered. The noob, with no warning, vomited up a green slime. It sizzled as it splattered on the cold stone floor, and a small gouge started to appear where the stone was getting eaten away.

The noob tried to howl in agony, but was interrupted by more of the acid. A hole burned through its torso, dripping the caustic substance and mingling it with blood. Then its neck became flaccid, and its head fell off. The creature quickly dissolved in a puddle of its own ooze.

Thankfully, the shaping platform it stood on was unaffected. Nioca covered his nose and mouth; the sight and smell of the dissolved noob was overpowering. Gagging, he stepped over the acidic slime and into the next room. Shutting the door behind him, he took a few breaths of clean air.

Scanning the room, he saw the next matter of business. Pulling a pouch from his robes, he approached the basin with the corrupted antidote. One was full of the pulsing purple goo. It had grown significantly since he had left, but the runes were keeping it in check. The cold coming off of them seemed to bring its growth to a stop.

The other basin was full of a pink powder. Spores. Carefully lifting the glass lid off of this one, Nioca opened the pouch and scooped up a massive dose of the spores. A small cloud of pink spores rose, propelled by the gentle motion of the scooping. Nioca tied the pouch shut, then stowed it away. He then put the glass lid back in place. Sighing, he turned around and headed back to the main part of the bunker. Hopefully, the smell of melted noob had worn away a little bit.

Kicking Against the Goads

By Jewels - May 14 2009

Jewels' head pounded. This was why she didn't drink alcohol. It wasn't worth it. Well, that and the fact that she felt like such a fool. Poor Azuma... all he had wanted was a visit to the fire plane, and what did she give him? A big drunken emotional display, that's what. And he had been so polite about it. At least... that's the gist of what she remembered. The whole thing was a bit fuzzy.

One thing she did remember, though, was that this seething hatred from Nioca was almost non-existent in the fire plane. Likely from the dimensional distance. There had been that one surge from him, though, right before she fell. His own dashed hope that their link had been completely severed. Apparently, her joyful demeanor had come through and he had rather viciously reminded her of all the heartaches she had caused there at the Refuge. Now that she had come back, the underlying hatred had hit her full force. It almost made her want to stay on the fire plane indefinitely.

That'd be perfectly fine with me, demon. Listening to your unceasing pity party is insufferable. Nioca's icy thought cut through.

Jewels couldn't help but let another sob escape and was about to say something when someone called out. "Hello?"

Too distracted to recognize the voice, Jewels let her heart hope for the best. "Will? Will, is that you?" But a quick glance soon revealed it was only his new companion. She did nothing to hide her disappointment. "Oh, it's *you*. Go away. Can't you tell I'm not in the mood for company?"

The man stepped forward cautiously. "My name is Jumara. Can I talk to you?"

Of course he wasn't leaving. He had climbed all the way to the 29th floor of the Admin Tower to speak with her. Jewels shook her head at her own expectation that he would just go because she had said to. "You're not going to leave. are you? I can already tell." Might as well be somewhat

hospitable. It's not like it was his fault she was a basket case today. "Do you want something to drink? Eat?" He shook his head no so Jewels pointed him to the living room couch to sit. She couldn't manage to muster any more pleasantries for him, though. "Well, what do you want?"

He actually seemed relieved she wanted to get to the point. "Well, as you may know, Mage--er, I guess you call him 'Will'--he has been planning an attack on this group, the VRP, for some time."

The VRP? The simple acronym sent shivers down her spine. She knew she had not encountered them before and yet... a foreboding remained as vaguely remembered knowledge surfaced in her mind. Nioca has had experience with the VRP. "Is that why he left? To bring them down? Why? He doesn't honestly think they attacked the Refuge, does he?"

Nioca cut into her thoughts. *Of course it was the VRP. They hate the designers which you, Will, and I all are. Who do you think poisoned you in the first place? They've been sending assassins since the day they found us here.* Designers? The concept was new to her and yet... not entirely foreign. Nioca mentally swore. It was obvious he had been happier when she was unaware of it. Jewels shook her head looking out the window, toward the citadel. She was reminded that she was talking to someone else. "Sorry, for interrupting. Carry on."

Jumara started to talk again but Jewels wasn't really paying attention. Instead she pried into Nioca's thoughts. Jumara had already talked to him about this. Asked him for help defeating the VRP to make up for... *Gah! That's not what happened!*

Good luck convincing w-dueck of that. Now GET OUT OF MY HEAD! Jewels felt the mental blast fiercely throwing her mind back. She was again aware of her other guest. "I'll do it," she said abruptly.

Jumara stuttered. "What...how...I hadn't..."

"You want me to help Will take down the VRP. I'll do it. Why, I'd rather not tell a complete stranger, no offense, but I'll help him." Not to make up for a perceived offense, no. The all-too-recent vision of Will hanging in a dungeon cell now filled her mind and a lump formed in her throat. She would protect him if she could. She felt the worry of dreadful possibilities start to take hold. She barely managed to whisper at Jumara. "Now if you don't mind, I'd like some time to myself..." Jewels looked towards the broken doorway wishing that there was something to close behind him. He got up saying something to her, but she was too far gone to understand. She couldn't stop the sobs or the tears and was only vaguely aware that Jumara had actually left.

It wasn't long, though, before Nioca's irritation burst. *Oh, for Zqxuwy's sake, Shut! Up! Stop all the useless blubbering! With any luck YOU'LL die in the battle and we'll have solved half the problems of the Refuge.* Jewels was so tired of being accosted by him. She was about to tell him to mind his own business when it dawned on her. The undercurrents of his hatred for her seemed ever present here. It was only logical that the pendulum swung both ways. Could he feel how much she cared? For Will? The Refuge? Even for him? He had to be able to sense it and that made her nostalgic. Her days at Spiderweb weren't that far removed though the years had seen members come and go. Her gaze settled on the only orb she had made for someone who wasn't a member of Calamity Refuge. Someone who she had decided needed more love than anyone else. The harder he fought, the more she gave freely and the more her soul had been rewarded for it.

Yes. Nioca's very essence screamed hatred at her. His words cut like knives. But this was not new, oh no. This is what she was best at. What had thrilled her soul for years. A new confidence radiated through her as a new resolve was made. The problems of the Refuge may be her fault but she would fix them the only way she knew how. She sent a thought to Nioca knowing he would not be able to deny it's sincerity. *I know. I love you anyway.* She felt his immediate disgust but it only bolstered her more. A genuine smile played on her lips as her age old concept of 'Smothering with love' was brought to a whole new level. Nioca could not escape it no matter how hard he fought. Thoroughly exasperated with her new resolution Nioca retreated to focus on other things and Jewels wiped her eyes to move forward in the day. She had wasted enough of it already.

Time to stop fretting over the problems they've caused and start using these orbs the way she had meant to in the beginning. Jewels circled her bedroom fireplace watching the mists of her soul swirl within the crystals. She let her fingers trail over each of them, though she hesitated at Will's. She couldn't bring herself to relive his pain again. Not yet. She skipped over it and continued around finding each as she expected and relatively content until a wave of disorientation, agitation, and desperation washed over her. She didn't have to look at the stand to sense it was Nalyd as the orb brought her care and concern for him to the forefront. He was awake.

Jewels was not exactly looking forward to clearing the air with Nalyd, but it did need to be done, and in his current state, perhaps sooner would be better than later. A quick check of the RMM-A showed that Nalyd was heading towards the Chat Lounge and sent Jewels hurrying through the eleporter after him. She arrived just in time to watch Nalyd faint onto Lifesower, it's blade slicing straight through his shoulder as he collapsed. Jewels almost felt as if it were her own body on that blade and gasped as Ligrev let out a horrific scream. There was no physical pain from it but the mental coupling was almost as crippling.

She sent a distress call to Nioca who was more than annoyed. *I'm busy. You're an admin. Deal with it.* Jewels mentally huffed but pulled herself together. He was right after all.

Jewels rushed forward kneeling at Nalyd's side. His blood had already started to pool underneath him. She had to get him off his scythe. She looked around the Chat Lounge pleadingly and with a slight hesitation Azuma appeared next to her. "What can I do?" he asked.

"Lift him up," she instructed. "I'll pull out the blade." Thankfully, Nalyd was unconscious, because Jewels didn't think she'd be able to stand watching him endure more pain. Pulling the scythe out made her sick to her stomach as it was. "Lay him down." Azuma did and Jewels set the scythe down next to him. Despite being unconscious Nalyd's hand still stretched towards Lifesower, fingers curling around it's staff. Jewels worked up a healing spell and watched as Nalyd's wounds started to close but her spell didn't seem to be strong enough to work fully. Frustrated, Jewels tried again with less success than before. "Why isn't it working?"

Azuma gave her a shrug when Stillborn burst in coming straight towards them. The look on his face was unlike the naive innocence that Jewels usually saw there. Instead he was a man on a mission with grim determination. He was looking right at Jewels but didn't really see her. Instead he looked past her at Nalyd and was no gentleman in shoving Azuma out of the way to kneel

next to him. "*Stillborn*," Jewels chided. He looked up at her as if finally registering that she was there. "What's wrong?"

He looked back at Nalyd opening his mouth to respond but hesitating for the right words. "Must help Master... Father," he finally uttered reaching his hands to press against Nalyd's wounds. Jewels was about to protest at the classification of Nalyd as his father when Stillborn's whole body started to radiate a dark nimbus of energy that felt like it had a life of it's own. Jewels was so startled that she backed away instinctively. This was not normal magic. Not elemental. Not priestly. Not even like her soul binding spell, whatever kind of magic that had been. This wasn't anything she understood as magic, anyway. Whatever Nalyd had done to him... in his altering of Stillborn with shaping... this had to be part of it.

The feeling that normally came by being in physical contact with Stillborn soon permeated the whole room and patrons, including Azuma, began to cry out and hurriedly back away, most making their way towards the door. Jewels noticed as Azuma passed Kaylas, who stood just inside the door catching his breath. Jewels' eyes met with Kaylas', each wore a worried cringe but he didn't back away. The feeling stopped abruptly as Stillborn lowered his hands. Nalyd's wounds had fully closed and his eyes fluttered open. He sat up moaning, "Ooooh... Where is Nalyd?"

Kaylas walked towards them and Jewels stood up. "I found him for you. He was over by the Nethergate forum. I was in the middle of telling him you wanted him at the Admin Tower when he suddenly took off for no reason. He ran like the wind, Jewels. I've never seen someone so fast on two legs. I could barely keep him in my sights."

"Well, he is part air elemental..." Jewels had smiled when she said it but she remembered how he hadn't changed into an elemental in the fire plane and finished the sentiment forlornly. "...was."

"What was that all about anyway?" Kaylas asked.

"I'm not sure." Jewels looked down at Stillborn who seemed to be getting a through examination from an ecstatic Nalyd. "He healed Nalyd. I guess Stillborn could tell that he was hurt and needed help."

Kaylas frowned. "That's a pity. Could have done without that one." Jewels scowled. "What? You expect me to like the guy who did... *that* to your son?"

Jewels sighed. "I expect you to be cordial. If you can't say anything nice don't say anything at all. Words to live by, Kaylas. Words to live by."

Nalyd had been muttering excitedly, ignoring everything except for Stillborn. He stood mid-sentence and started walking towards the door. "...once we get to the lab there will be so much for Nalyd to do. Come, Stillborn." To Jewels' dismay he started following Nalyd without hesitation.

She grabbed Stillborn's arm as he passed and addressed Nalyd. "I don't think that's a good idea, Nalyd. I'd rather have him stay with me. I'm sure you understand." But by the look on his face it was clear that he didn't.

"Don't be silly," Nalyd walked back to the pair. "Of course, Stillborn is coming with Nalyd. He is *Nalyd's* creation." He grabbed Stillborn's other arm and almost seemed to swoon with pleasure. 'Oh... what a song," he breathed softly.

Jewels was indignant. She stepped between the two taking Nalyd's hand off of Stillborn's arm none too gently and hissed at him."How *dare* you! After all you have done to us already? With your incompetence you botched your poison 'antidote' and turned me into a heartless bit..."

"*Jewels*!" Kaylas interrupted her harshly. "What happened to 'If you can't say anything nice...'"

"Shut up!" she yelled before returning to her tirade towards Nalyd. "You *lied* to me! You *stole* my child. You denied me the joys of motherhood, of watching him... and helping him grow up, and... and made him into... into..." she refused to let herself say it. She would not punish Stillborn for Nalyd's iniquity. "... and now you expect me to just hand Stillborn over to you for further experimentation?! That's ludicrous! *Insane!* Not a chance in the entire Fire Plane." Nalyd's expression had changed quickly from joy to fury but Jewels didn't care. "He is *my son*! And he's not going anywhere, least of all with you."

The impact was sudden. Though she had been looking right at Nalyd, she hadn't seen it coming. When she asked about it later, Kaylas would tell her that Nalyd had blasted her clear across the room with a dark green energy that flowed from his hands. In Kaylas' version, while she lay stunned, Stillborn had immediately ran to her side and Kaylas had immediately drawn his sword and cut off both of Nalyd's outstretched arms while he was focused on his retreating creation. Jewels almost remembered hearing his screech of pain and instinctively wanting to run to his defense, but her body refused to move. In her minds eye she could just imagine him stumbling back as Lifesower clattered to the floor away from him, severed hand still clutching it tightly.

Leaving Nalyd to wail in agony, Kaylas had joined Stillborn at Jewels' side. Her collarbone protruded from her shoulder and the deep gash on her forehead gushed with blood. He stood by helplessly calling her name which she often thought she could recollect distantly as if in slow motion. Giving credit where credit was due, Kaylas said that Stillborn was the one to set her bone and close her wounds with his magic.

From Ligrev's perspective, Nalyd had taken only a few moments to lament his lost limbs before diving for Lifesower. In only a few more ticks of the clock, Ligrev had watched in astonishment as Nalyd grew two new arms to replace those that had been severed. The memory of the sickening sound had caused her to wince upon its retelling.

Jewels had become fully aware only in time to see a restored Nalyd raising his scythe above the turned backs of Kaylas and Stillborn. "Look out!" she yelled while shoving Kaylas to the side. Her hands had come up by order of her mind, logically intent on throwing a fireball to blast Nalyd and his murderous weapon back but her heart wasn't in it. No fireball formed and Lifesower descended quickly towards her extended palms. It stopped only millimeters from the tips of her fingers when Stillborn sprung at Nalyd, tackling him in the middle and falling to the floor with him.

Kaylas recovered himself as Nalyd swore and pushed Stillborn off. "You stupid creation! Do not interfere again!" Jewels took notice that Stillborn heeded his words and made no more moves except to back away from the entire thing. She was infuriated that Nalyd seemed to have so

much control over him, and yet glad that Stillborn was soon to be out of harm's way. Kaylas once again engaged Nalyd with his sword, only Nalyd was not to be taken by surprise again. The clanging of their weapons filled the room along with Ligrev's intermittent screams.

Nioca, I could really use your help down here. Nalyd has gone completely crazy!

I said I'm busy! *Nioca's irritation now came through as flat out hostility.*

He's trying to kill me! she hissed desperately as she stood up on wobbly feet.

Good riddance! he hissed back. *Besides, I'm sure you're just over exaggerating. Now do you mind? I'm trying to concentrate here.*

Jewels watched through blurred vision as sword met scythe again and again. Back and forth, back and forth they pounded this way and that like the waves on the ocean. Her stomach churned and she broke out in a cold sweat. What was wrong with her? Were Stillborn's healing methods causing these side effects or was she just sick over the scene that played out in front of her? Jewels gasped as Kaylas tripped over a fallen chair giving Nalyd the perfect opportunity. Nalyd leapt upon Kaylas with Lifesower aimed right at his throat. Kaylas had managed to raise his sword in time to keep himself from being decapitated, but the weight of Nalyd's thrown body had still allowed the scythe to sink into his neck.

"Nooo!" Jewels heard her shrill voice sounding in her ears. Yet it seemed distant and surreal, through a fog that weighted her down.

Nalyd howled in victory eyes shining brightly, but with his small frame, once the momentum of his jump had played out, the strength in Kaylas' arms was more than enough to throw Nalyd and his weapon flying both in separate directions.

Pulling herself together, Jewels focused on Lifesower. Without it Nalyd could do much less damage. Once the blade clattered to rest on the floor in a corner of the lounge, Jewels cast fire barrier on top of it. Content that the sound of the roaring blaze meant that Nalyd remained weaponless, Jewels flew to Kaylas' side. His lifeblood poured out as she readied a healing spell. She felt extremely drained and it was all she could do to muster up that last spell. To her dismay it did little more than clot the blood at the edges of the wound. "Stillborn!" Jewels called desperately and she tore the sleeve off her dress for a tourniquet. "Stillborn, come and heal Kaylas!" Her head whipped around the room for her son but when she found his eyes they told her he couldn't move. Paralyzed by command or confusion, she wasn't sure, but Stillborn was not going to interfere again.

Another howl from Nalyd filled the room, this time of pain. Jewels couldn't believe what she was seeing as he leapt right into the raging fire barrier to retrieve his beloved scythe. When he emerged, robe fully engulfed, the skin on his hands had mostly melted away revealing shriveled muscle and blackened bones. Jewels reeled from seeing his pain. Her soul screamed with him and continued to scream when he fell silent. Though it went against every logical bone in her body, Jewels ran towards him grabbing a pitcher of water off the bar counter as she passed. Amazingly, Nalyd stood still while she put the flames out, but maybe it was less standing still for her and more standing still for himself, for while his robe remained tattered beyond repair, the hood disintegrating to a pile of ashes at their feet, his charred bones, burnt flesh, and singed hair

all restored themselves before her very eyes. The manic determination in his own eyes remained the same and Jewels barely had time to duck a sudden swing of Lifesower.

Nioca! Jewels mentally screamed it at him now as she staggered away from the point of Nalyd's curving blade. *I don't care if you're busy. I need help!* "Nalyd," she tried to reason with him, "You don't really want to kill me do you? I mean, you'd get banned for that and then you wouldn't have your lab anymore..."

I'm really indisposed, demon. What did you do to tick him off, anyway. Not that it surprises me...

Nalyd swung Lifesower in a big arc towards Jewels driving her back. "Nalyd will just find a new lab," he hissed at her. "A better lab."

I didn't do anything to him. He just want's Stillborn for more experiments and I said no. Jewels was quickly running out of room to fall back to. She dove under a table as another swing nearly nicked her. The follow up strike brought the blade slicing through the table just inches from her nose.

Ah... Jewels felt Nioca's epiphany. *Shapers grow highly possessive of their creations. Especially unusual experiments. They use an inherent material in their bodies known as essence to help make them. To Nalyd, Stillborn is his.* "But Stillborn will be IN the Refuge. You still won't have him," she hollered at Nalyd as she scuttled out from under the table gracelessly.

Nalyd paused for only a moment. "Maybe, maybe not, but Nalyd will cross that bridge when he comes to it." With a single yank, Lifesower came free and the advance continued. "He will remove one obstacle at a time."

Jewels was really struggling to keep it together. "Stillborn will never be his!" she blurted out loud almost not realizing that it had not been a thought. What with the dodging and weaving and two separate conversations and worry for Kaylas and Stillborn all on top of symptoms she would later classify as a flu... it was no wonder with her dizzy head, that she tripped over the remains of one of Nalyd's severed arms.

Stillborn will always be Nalyd's creation.

"Stillborn will always be Nalyd's creation!" Both statements came at the exact same time though one almost held pity while with the other there was no mistaking the vehemence. Lifesower came down towards Jewels' head just as she rolled easily slicing off a good foot of her hair but getting stuck in the floor. Nalyd cursed. "Hold still so Nalyd can kill you!" Jewels staggered to her feet while Nalyd labored to free his blade. Jewels decided from that last close call that it was time to make an exit and headed for the door. Realizing what she was doing, Nalyd roared in fury.

When the whole ordeal was over and Ligrev had managed to calm down, she described to Jewels how Nalyd had raised his hands glowing in a sickly green nimbus and blast Jewels across the room once more, her body careening through the air to smash through two tables before cracking against the wall and falling in a heap to the floor. Ligrev's high-pitched voice had caught in her throat during the review, an involuntary shudder running through her body.

Bolstered by his heroics, Ligrev would continue on to recount how Stillborn was stirred to action from his non-interference. Even while Nalyd growled at him to stop, Stillborn had run to Jewels'

side once again. His healing touch did nothing for Jewels' ever increasing disorientation though and when her eyes fluttered open this time, she was only slightly aware of Nalyd raising his scythe above the turned back of Stillborn. "Look out," she murmured, groggily lifting her hand in a futile attempt to ward him off.

Stillborn made no move against his master this time, though, and Jewels was startled as Sentience struck the descending crook of Nalyd's weapon with a reverberating peel. With strength she didn't know he had, a returned Azuma drove Lifesower back causing Nalyd to stumble with it.

Once again the clashings of sword on scythe rang through the lounge but instead of worrying about the fight, Jewels stared at Stillborn's face. So much like his father Darius... A new curiosity was brought to her mind. *Stillborn called him father...*

Nioca mentally sighed that she was once again intruding into his thoughts. An inkling of a notion to satisfy her quickly so she would go away sooner bled through. *To Stillborn, he is. Shapers usually either create creatures anew or alter them heavily from their original state. And their minds are usually part of the alterations. Nalyd once told me that creator and creation are invariably linked even beyond death.*

Would... would Nalyd feel that way about all his creations? As if a father I mean?

No. Some Shapers feel a parental connection to their creations, but Nalyd isn't one of them. He's a true Shaper in that regard. He considers Stillborn to be a prized possession, much like his scythe.

Jewels was snapped out of her chat with Nioca when a vision straight out of a nightmare came storming down the stairs of the inn. Cute as a button even when scowling as she did, a little girl entered the lounge directly in harms way. "Stay here," she whispered to Stillborn mustering her strength to do what she could to protect the child. She dug in her pocked for her RMM-A. This definitely called for some simplebot intervention.

To Jewels' surprise the girl let out more than one explicit about all the noise that was making it impossible to rest. Iffy soon appeared descending the stairs, too, a little slower than usual. "Saph, get back here," he called. "Don't get into the middle of someone else's fight. It's none of our business."

"They've made it my business by waking you up," she hollered back heading straight for the dueling pair.

"No!" Jewels exclaimed heading to intervene, hand still rooting around in her pocket, but this Saph paid her no heed.

"Saph," Iffy called again with more annoyance than concern but she ignored him too. She reached Azuma first and with strength beyond even Jewels, grabbed his leg and flung him back against the bar, Sentience clattering to the floor. As Jewels neared, she noticed that Nalyd had turned his attention back to her and was already raising his scythe to strike. Saph remained ignored until she grabbed the end of the scythe and sent Nalyd careening into a table with it.

Jewels pulled her hand out of her pocket but it didn't hold her RMM-A... No, she'd found something better. She ran straight at Nalyd with grim determination. Nalyd hadn't quite

recovered his bearings when he took his next swipe at Jewels allowing her to dodge even in her weakened state. She clamped onto one wrist with both hands. "It's for your own good, Nalyd," she whispered. "No more hurting people." Nalyd only sneered at her pulling out of her grasp and whipped Lifesower around, inches from her face. His sneer turned to confusion as he stared at the blade hovering so close to his prey. His confusion turned to despair when Jewels leaned in towards the blade only to have his hand involuntarily pull it back. And his despair erupted in wails when Jewels smiled in satisfaction and turned her back on him to address Saph.

"Hi, I'm Jewels. You're awfully strong for such a young girl."

Saph didn't smile. "Don't patronize me. I could have been changing your grandmothers diapers." Jewels raised an eyebrow but declined to tell Saph that her grandmother was well over two millennium old. "Are we done here? Is it gonna be quiet now?" She looked around Jewels at the mourning Nalyd. "Is he going to shut up or do I have to make him?"

"Um... I'll send him back to the Geneforge forum so he won't bother you anymore."

"Good," with that Saph turned on her heel and strode straight to Iffy. "Back to bed, you."

"But I'm not tired," he protested.

"Don't give me that lip, I said back to bed." Iffy sighed and did as the little girl... er, youthful woman told him to. Was nothing normal in this place?

"What have you done to Nalyd?" a pitiful mewl cried behind her. Jewels turned back to see him clutching the scythe in both hands trying to force it towards her without success.*[color=green]You're not terrified anymore. What DID you do to Nalyd?[/color]* Jewels just smiled without directly answering either, but the mental picture of the restriction bracelet she had taken off of Ackrovan came through easily enough. Nalyd would surely figure it out eventually... probably even cut his own arm off to be rid of it seeing how he could regenerate himself so easily. That and the fact that he was beyond reason.

Jewels turned her attention to Azuma. He seemed dazed but no worse for wear. "Ooh... what hit me?" he moaned.

She helped him up debating what to tell him. "Someone really strong," she half chuckled. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I think so." His first few steps were a bit unsteady but he seemed better off than Jewels as she stumbled back towards Kaylas.

Nalyd followed, seemingly still trying to finish her off. Jewels felt weak in the knees when she saw Kaylas though she couldn't be sure if it was because of his pale complexion or her own steadily worsening state. He was unresponsive and the bleeding had still not stopped. Jewels' attempt at a healing spell puttered out before it even began. She had no mana left. "Azuma, do you know any healing spells or have any potions?"

Azuma bent to pick up Sentience. "No, sorry." Azuma still eyed Nalyd warily, took a seat at the bar, and ordered a coffee from Ligrev who was a little less frazzled now that the commotion seemed to have stopped.

"Stillborn," she called again. "Stillborn come here. Kaylas needs to be healed."

"You will do no such thing!" Nalyd growled at Stillborn from behind her. Stillborn stayed where he was bound to Nalyd and his commands except... except when she was in danger. Maybe blood was thicker than water... or essence as it was in this case. "Besides, it's not like it's going to do any good. He will die anyway. No use in prolonging the inevitable." Nalyd started to chuckle.

"What do you mean?" Jewels demanded weakly putting extra pressure on the bandage.

Nalyd cackled wildly. "And ruin the surprise? Oh no. Nalyd would much rather have you wonder. Let's just say that his final death will be long and painful."

Jewels' emotions got the best of her in that moment. "What's wrong with you? Why are you doing this?" she asked tearfully.

The question seemed to give Nalyd pause as if he wasn't quite sure himself but only for a moment. "Nalyd's creation," he murmured. "Nothing must stand in the way."

The realization that this was once again *her* fault hit Jewels hard. Nalyd wouldn't have freaked if she had let Stillborn go with him. If she had not gone after her son Nalyd would still be at the Roost with him. If she had not asked Nalyd to accelerate the pregnancy... the chain of events was endless. Nioca was right. She was a curse to the Refuge and the people around her. Through blurred eyes she managed to finally grab her RMM-A and punched in a Code Blue-Alpha. That should bring Will at least... if he was willing to heal Kaylas. The chances were slim but slim was better than none. "Azuma, can you help me?" she choked out. Again he hesitated but left his coffee to help her. When he knelt beside Kaylas, she took Azuma's hand and put it over Kaylas' wound. "Just keep pressure on this until someone comes to help. I've set the alert so Will should show at least." She looked pleadingly at Azuma. "Don't let Will refuse to heal him. It's his job. Make him do it."

With that she rose and started walking towards Stillborn. "Wait," Azuma called. "You're not staying?"

"No. I... I don't feel well. I... I have to go." Nalyd still followed her mumbling things to himself. Jewels helped Stillborn to his feet and wrapped him in a big hug. The daggers to her senses were almost comforting. "Go with Nalyd," she whispered in his ear, then without looking back she headed for the door.

Rest, rest... she needed rest. Her limbs seemed to be weighted down. How would she ever make it all the way to the Admin Tower? She was not halfway there yet when she staggered off the path. She caught and steadied herself on a tree. Rest, rest... she needed rest. *Peace... tranquility... sanctuary...* Her body melted into the tree like a hot knife into butter and she found rest.

Predators

By Nioca - May 18 2009

Nioca sighed. The Code Blue-Alpha on his RMM-A was ringing incessantly, and it was starting to drive him crazy. Annoyed, he pulled it out of his robes and looked at it. Chat Lounge... "Damn it." Nioca muttered. A shade hovered into the room. "Finish cleaning this up." He stated, pointing at the dissolved noob. He got up and marched out of the bunker.

Nioca arrived at the chat lounge and found it a complete wreck. Ligrev was desperately trying to clean up wrecked tables, and blood was pooling in a corner. Kaylas lay there, unconscious and pale. Nioca at that moment wanted to walk out, but several others had their eyes on him. He couldn't afford the hit to his publicity, however limited it was.

Nioca stooped over him, glancing at Azuma, who was keeping pressure on the wound from which Kaylas's blood seeped. Azuma started speaking. "It was-"

"I know." Nioca cut him off. "Where is he?"

"Um..." Azuma said

"Faint at the sight of blood?" Nioca directed at Azuma. "Alright, where's Jewels?"

"Er..."

"Is there anything at all you can tell me about the current situation that does not involve some sort of groan?" Nioca said, exasperated.

"No." Azuma stated.

"Fine. Help me move him; we're going to the Blades of Avernum forum." Nioca stated. He did this for two reasons. The first was to avoid a gaggle of spectators. The second was to put Kaylas on Nioca's home turf, where he was most comfortable.

The two carted Kaylas off to the Blades of Avernum forum. Nioca groaned slightly under Kaylas's weight; as if it wasn't bad enough he had to heal him in the first place...

They arrived in the forum. Nioca directed Azuma up the stairs to the moderation center, where Nioca opened the door. They laid him down on a table, and Azuma exited. Nioca looked Kaylas over carefully. Then, with a wave of his hand, he started casting spells. A pair of healing spells sealed the wound on Kaylas's neck, and a third helped replenish his depleted blood. It was then followed by several curing spells, and finished with an Unshackle Mind cantrip.

Kaylas blinked awake. Nioca watched him carefully as he stirred, evaluating his every move. "All hail Kaylas!" Nioca said mockingly. "The Fire Plane's finest warrior!" Nioca approached Kaylas with a wide grin. "And yet completely unable to block the attacks of a weak mage with a unwieldy weapon. Tell me, how does it work on your plane? Survival of the weakest?" He snarled.

"What do you want?" Kaylas moaned. He moved sluggishly and acted as if in great pain.

"I wanted to enjoy this moment." Nioca hissed. "To see the demons' finest left to mewl and squirm like some sort of half-crushed insect."

"Your day will come, human." Kaylas whispered hatefully.

"It already has!" Nioca laughed. He paced around Kaylas's still form. "In my dealings with you, I've discovered something. We... are not that different. We're both predators. Predators by choice. We hunt our prey, and show no mercy. Driven to destroy our foes... No matter what the cost. Driven by hatred." Nioca paused. "Destined never to stop."

"You have the audacity to compare me to yourself?" Kaylas asked, outraged.

"That's quite brazen of you, Kaylas. You see, you created me." Nioca paused again. "Unlike you, a born predator, I was made. Molded by you and your kind. Made to hunt the hunter." Nioca stopped by Kaylas's side. "If it wasn't for Jewels, you'd still be fighting. Annihilating humans without care or concern. She claims to have ended the war, but we both know she only put a temporary ceasefire in place."

Kaylas fumed. "She *did* end the war, you worthless piece of sh-"

"That's what she thinks. But you know better, don't you?" Nioca asked. In answer, Kaylas smiled. "Unfortunately for you, I know better than the both of you. Jewels stopped the war. Now I'm going to make sure it never starts again."

"You monster." Kaylas hissed. "You'd kill the one person that actually cares for you and your kind." Kaylas smirked. "You fool. She'll just be replaced. All her death would do is start the war again."

"Yes, true. Another fire lord will take her place. But tell me..." Nioca leaned down to Kaylas's ear. "How can someone be leader when there's no one left to follow?" Nioca smirked, then continued. "Jewels really is incompetent. She gave me the opening and the weapon I needed to put an end to you and your kind. And she can't even lift a finger to stop me."

The door opened behind Nioca. He straightened and turned around as w-dueck entered. "You couldn't have ended the alert?" w-dueck asked, annoyed.

"My apologies. It slipped my mind." Nioca responded pleasantly.

"I see you took care of... *him*." w-dueck nodded to Kaylas with visible distaste.

"As best I could. He was hit with Nalyd's scythe, which carries a number of pathogens. Most of them are only curable by Nalyd... I can slow the diseases in his system, but it's only delaying the inevitable. He's terminal, and curing spells will only delay his misery." Nioca faked concern with his prognosis.

"I see. Is there anything I can do?" w-dueck asked, though it was more out of courtesy than a desire to help.

"You have to stop him!" Kaylas shouted. "He's going to kill the fire plane!"

"Well," Nioca began tritely, "as you can see, he's somewhat delirious. Delusional. Plus, there's severe pain, fever, rashes... basically every symptom you can imagine."

"I'm not delusional! He told me himself, he-" Kaylas continued, but suddenly cut off. "He... he told me himself..." He repeated, suddenly looking confused.

"I'd say he needs to go to the Moderator Forum for observation. Maybe provide painkillers and other medicines to make him more comfortable." Nioca stated professionally.

"Very well. I'll have the SimpleBots move him to the Moderator Forum." w-dueck turned to leave, and Nioca followed him out. "I'm preparing for the incursion to Ermaria." Nioca stated as they walked through the Blades of Avernum forum. "I should be ready by the time you are. Is there anything specific you need, or... hey!" Nioca shouted. W-dueck had walked away from him upon exiting the Blades of Avernum forum, and was clearly ignoring him. "Well, it was nice talking to you as well." Nioca muttered under his breath.

Power

By Zoe - May 20 2009

"Did you get the rest you needed, Iffy?" Saph looked at him hopefully.

"Yes, I only needed a couple more hours after...you threw Nalyd."

"He was surprisingly light..."

"Heh"

Iffy was soon out of the bed. He first sealed the room with a script spell, and then brought one out, sighing.

Don't hesitate, Iffy. You know what that would do.

I know that...you don't have to remind me.

While Saph made sure she was supporting him, Iffy used the script. When his hand started glowing, he thrust it into himself. Literally. Ignoring the pain as best as he could, he drew something out. If you were to see it, you wouldn't know what to call it.

Iffy proceeded to "open" it. Using the full extent of his and Saph's will power, Iffy kept most of the energy inside stay. The energy, even though Iffy kept it at bay, sent out a wave like it did before. Such a strong wave, it shook everything. When Iffy let a tiny fraction of it come through, the wave only intensified. Everyone felt it. There was no way they couldn't feel it.

Then it was complete. Iffy closed it and got it back inside him, using a healing script thereafter. "That went rather well" "Yes, but I'm sure people felt it. They'll probably realize how it came from this room." "That wouldn't be good, Iffy. We both know that they can't know. After all..." "Yes, they would look at me with such a fear..."

Nice Day for a Walk

By Robsta - Jun 3 2009

It was a nice day in Trevis Northern forest when Robsta hauled his new breastplate towards the castle where he would rendezvous with the priest there to cast the final spell on it. In just a few hours, he thought, he would complete the project that had kept him busy for months. He had been hard at work in his smithy crafting this breastplate ever since the battle of Konoros with breaks only to run around Ermarnia researching how to craft his armour, and making sure he was crafting it in such a way that this enhancement could be cast on it.

Trevis northern forest Robsta thought to himself again, and scoffed. Stepping over a fallen tree he reminded himself that this forest had an orcan name as well, seeing as it was part of their hard fought territory, but the orcs surprisingly had been a lot more inventive than the humans in naming the forest, so consequently he had forgotten the proper name of it. The forest was fairly deep in orcan territory these days, so Robsta was surprised to see a line of human soldiers barring his path.

"Good day," Robsta called out cheerfully, quickly surmising it was much too late to escape detection.

"It is not our job to chat with green skins." The officer facing him shot back as troops emerged from the bushes to surround Robsta.

"Is it not? I'd be amused to find out why you're so deep in orcan territory then." Robsta looked around for an escape route, cursing his sense of ease earlier that had let him get caught in this trap.

"I think my officer spoke too soon. I am actually here to talk with you, Kashuur." One of the soldiers stepped forward. He looked vaguely familiar, but Robsta couldn't place where he saw him last. "But first I must invite you over to my place."

"A very kind offer indeed, but I have business in the orc castle right now, I'll be sure to drop by later in the week."

"I'm afraid it's rather a matter in which you have to come, now."

Two soldiers grabbed Robsta, one to each arm. He retaliated by grabbing one and throwing him towards the officer. The other was disposed of with a swift kick. Stonecrusher flew out of its

scabbard and carved a deadly pattern through the troops that surrounded the lone orc. Robsta's last thought was regret his shield wasn't readily available before the poisoned dart pierced the back of his neck.

Robsta awoke in a cell. Looking around he saw a straw mattress as the only furniture, the door to the cell was plain, no doorknob window or any other such aspect to break the smooth surface of the iron. The only light came from a small window high up in the stone wall across from the door. Even though the window was much too small for Robsta to squeeze through, it was barred.

Robsta felt a chill in his blood and reached for his neck... realizing the poison was still potent. Robsta struggled to stay awake, but found himself sinking back down into slumber. He was only half awake by the time the door of his cell opened and he heard a tray of food being placed on the ground. With a sudden surge of energy he never knew he had, Robsta threw off the forced drowsiness and sat up, delivering a punch to the food bearer so powerful it killed him instantly. Hearing the body fall, the guard outside rushed into the cell, sword drawn, only to be strangled by an enraged orc.

Robsta only had two options open to him now, and one was death, so he picked up the guard's pathetic sword and chose the other option. Carefully he looked out of his cell to see a short passage T off into another. Robsta closed and locked his cell door to hopefully hide the evidence. Slowly he crept along the left passage and examined the room at the end of it.

"That orc is strong, are you sure these chains won't break?" Robsta slunk into the shadows, surprised by the shattered silence.

"These have held against War-Orcs, and if he's stronger then those we may well have bigger problems on our hands already." The voices were coming from the door at the end of his passage. Drawing closer Robsta peered in through the window. It was a torture chamber.

"He may well be as strong as one of them, did you see how he threw that guard yesterday?" The first person replied. It was the same one he had recognised from before. Where had he seen that face before?

"Strong or not, the rack will break him. Have you seen it before? Have you seen the rack at work Gheor?"

"I can't say I have, I just hope it lives up to..."

Robsta stopped listening to the soldiers talk, instead he chose the other passage away from his cell. As he snuck past the guard room he briefly assessed a soldier's chance of winning with two pair and decided going all in was the wrong decision.

He was well down the hall and examining the armoury by the time he heard the cry of a man who had lost all his money. The soldier stormed out of the guardhouse and paced the hallway, finally deciding to dip into the armoury, unawares of the orc hiding behind the door. He muttered something about claiming and selling a shiny breastplate they had captured recently and picked up the piece of armour Robsta had spent so much time working on. The previous owner had already reclaimed his breastplate before the soldier's body had hit the ground.

Robsta was about to leave the armoury, still short his magnificent sword when a tour entered it.

"This is the armoury, if you ever break your sword or run out of arrows the spare weapons are here." An elderly officer informed the recruits. "Of course... you'll have to pay for any equipment you take from here, if it was your fault you needed it." He glared at one of the youngsters who met his glare with a smug expression.

"Is this also the place to sleep when you want to slack off?" The smug one replied, pointing at a pair of boots sticking out from under a table of shields. Robsta took the opportunity to slip out of the room before they realised the body was of a dead soldier. He was well down the hall before he heard the officer issue orders hastily. "You, alert the guards in the room next to us. Harry, tell Sir Gudric. The rest of you search the area for any possible perpetrators of this crime."

Robsta hid and followed Harry to greet the fort's commanding officer. Or tried to follow. Before long Harry crossed a courtyard full of soldiers practicing, and Robsta due to his skin colour and body's build couldn't follow without having to fight the entire garrison of the fort. As it happened, Sir Gudric was a lagre built knight in the centre of the field, and his shining armour indicated that he hadn't been practicing. The shining sword at his side also told him that Gudric thought Stonecrusher was better than any other sword in the fort and therefore claimed it.

Robsta wasn't going to wait to see what happened next, he knew. When Gudric's booming voice commanded a halt to the training Robsta crashed full speed into him, knocking them both over and causing massed confusion. With Stonecrusher in his left hand and a sword from the armoury in his right, one orc cut his way through the surprised garrison and slid under the falling portcullis.

"I felt many sword stokes and arrows hit the breastplate while I was escaping. I hope that won't prevent you from casting the enchantment." Robsta explained to Sheanna, a priestess who lived and worked in the Thieves' guild hidden under the Orc Castle.

"You would never had known." She replied, "There isn't even a scratch on it. I doubt it will cause the spell to malfunction."

"Only one way to find out, I just hope I don't have to spend months making another because some second rate soldier wanted to torture me."

Robsta knew the priestess was done when a flamestike spell shot from her hand and bounced off the breastplate, exploding in midair. In rapid succession a wound spell, curse spell and smite spell also bounced harmlessly off the breastplate.

"Perfect." Robsta thanked her, handing over a small purse. "If all goes well I'll have a helmet, shield and grieves for you to enchant before the year is out."

"If you get those, I might have to recommend you for rank of mage-killer."

"You know I never thought much of all these complicated military ranks we have."

"It's why you left, isn't it?"

"No. But it didn't convince me to stay."

"Why did you leave?"

"I keep my reasons to myself."

"Well you know you'll always be welcomed in this house."

"I know that. Goodbye." Robsta strode out the door with his new breastplate on, not bothering to look back at the woman who watched him leave her again. It wasn't the first time. It wouldn't be the last. "Now back to the refuge to make the helmet." Robsta muttered to himself.

Parrots!

By Azuma - Jun 25 2009

Kaylas' stay in the Moderation Forum was long, uneventful, and boring and knowing that the SimpleBots outside are primed and ready to shoot him down if tries to go out doesn't mean good as well. He could smelt them down but in his current state, courtesy of Nalyd's scythe, he can't. What more bothered him was Nioca's words.

"How can someone be leader when there's no one left to follow?"

Kaylas reeled back into a couch nearby, contemplating. *What would that fool do know?* Kaylas sighed, but it was cut short. A scuttle alerted him. Even drained, he wasn't inept. He didn't notice it before but he can feel it now.

"Come out and I'll try not to burn you!" Kaylas provoked.

Hisses answered him. *Hisses?* "Bo- !"

A lunge from the left cut his alarm off but it was enough to get attention from the SimpleBots guarding him. They crashed the door open and opened fired at the... "Raptors!?" Kaylas shuffled backwards behind a bot and stayed there, heaving breath. "What in- is this Nioca's doing?! Damn that man! Damn him all!"

The bots seemed to hold off the beasts but blasts of energy from above quickly dispatched the two. Kaylas quickly barrel rolled towards the exit of the room. *Unscathed? Well, that was luck-* "Aaaaagh!" A dark bolt firing from the room hit him in the back, rolling him back painfully, but he managed to close the door, locking it automatically, trapping the creatures inside, as he careened. He laid on the cold floor, billowing breath, it was getting dark, that hit hurt a lot. "N- not... like... this. . ." Kaylas head cocked to the left, his sight going dark. His last view was Azuma running towards him, plunging his word towards him. ---

"W- w- ugh..." Kaylas held his head, trying to remember what happened. He did. The attack, the bots, the dark bolt, and Azuma plunging his sword in him. He scurried quickly to see the wound but there was none to be found. He tried to reach the part where the bolt hit him but a voice halted him.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you. Those shadow bolts are nasty, even when you heal them, you can still feel the pain if touched. Don't worry though, it'll fade in time." Kaylas looked to see who spoke up and was surprised to see who it was.

Kaylas hands flared up, taking a defensive stance against Azuma, not removing his sight on him. "You stabbed me!"

"There's no other way that Sentience can heal you and don't worry, it doesn't... what now? ... Oh, for gods' sake! You're a sword! You have no gender! ... I'm hurting your rights of living? First of all, you're an inanimate object through some unknown force of power became a sentient creature who mysteriously decided to never hurt any other sentient thing regardless of their alignment axiom! ... Fine, no hilt scratch for you!"

Kaylas sighed, lowering his guard. "If you excuse me." Kaylas said not-so-politely, "I have to find Jewels. I have more important matters to heed rather than listening to a rambling delusional." Kaylas brushed against Azuma as he trudge off, tipping Azuma off balance but he managed to stay standing.

"Wait, I'll come with you!" Azuma shouted as he ran after the clearly vexed Kaylas. ---

A dark, reptillian voice echoed from the depths of the iSpam box Azuma left inside the Moderator's Lounge. The already rampant raptors circled it in uniform, as if worshiping some dark god. Every word it said frenzied the raptors even more "Aaaah, human-Azuma... we have

met again... sssss... we will face again soon.. and this time... ssssss! You'll be the one left for dead! The Brood shall be running free again!"

The voice screeched and the others followed, bloodcurdling, atrocious, and wont be meaning anything good.

Green is the Colour

By Jewels - Jun 30 2009

Her rest was not quite restful, her peace was not quite peaceful, her sanctuary was... not what she expected. Action. She must take action. There wasn't much time, but wait... secret. It must be secret. How could she keep it secret? Quickly. There wasn't much time.

If one were watching the tree, they would have seen a curious sight. If they were watching carefully and intently, they might have noticed the subtle swaying of the branches and the smooth movements of the bark as if something were stretching out just beneath it. Then much more noticeably, a low knot bulged and rounded into the form of a large flower bud. The rough brown bark turned first a smooth dark green and then a pale pink. Gently, the petals unfurled, soft and supple as a giant rose. Then there, at the center, Jewels emerged. The flower became her dress to replace the bloody rags she had stumbled in with, and the hair Nalyd had chopped off now flowed longer than before. Her usual hazle eyes now opened to a vibrant green and with calm confidence she uttered the word, *"TELEPORT."*

Within the split seconds that the magic took effect, Jewels thought of home, where the spell always sent her, but instead of the usual bright warmth of the fire plane, her surroundings opened to the dim coolness of deep forest. A chill ran down her spine as a stiff breeze wafted the smell of damp earth and fresh foliage past her nose.

The setting was vastly different but the sentiment still rang the same. This was still home.

In awestruck surprise, Jewels turned slowly taking it all in. It had been many years since she had been here and she only now realized how much she had missed it. The towering canopy, the diverse wildlife... the serenity. After half a turn she stopped with trepidation. There was no mistaking, it was *her* tree... and it looked sick. The few leaves that still clung to life were wilted. Even the branches drooped and the bark was so brittle she was afraid the wind might blow it off. Hesitantly Jewels reached a worried hand towards the nearest leaf only to have it fall off at her touch. A gasp escaped her lips. A full dryad could not live without their tree... was hers dying?

"What did you expect?" The voice startled Jewels so, that she cried out. She whirled on the voice to face who it belonged to. The woman's pale green skin almost seemed to glow. "You've been gone for over thirty years," she continued, her voice accusing and pained. "Dryads cannot live without their tree, and neither can a tree live without it's dryad. Not fully anyway. Dryads aren't

meant to be away from their trees for a single day let alone *thirty years!*" The woman spat out the last two words as if it were an abomination. "Your tree was used to you being gone for a week or a month at a time. We tried to understand how you had another home... another life, and your tree was resilient in waiting for you every time. So much so, it astonished the elders." She paused as if to compose herself but her voice only grew increasingly sorrowed. "The day you told us it was time for some living fire tradition to live amont the humans until you had 'awakened', and that you didn't know how many years that would be... your tree started to die that day and we all died a little with it knowing the heartache it would endure without you."

Jewels stood silently, not knowing what to say. What *could* she say? Finally, in tears, she managed, "I've forgotten so much. What can I do?"

The dryad's face softened slightly in seeming pity. She stepped forward and took Jewels' hand placing it on the brittle trunk of her tree and whispered. "It's been waiting so long. Just be one with your tree."

The agony... the joy. Betrayal, forgiveness... sanctuary! The bitter sweet exchange covered her entire life. Everything Jewels had forgotten, she was reminded of. Everything new she had experienced was laid bare and taken in by her tree. It's acceptance of her was without condition. It's council was truth without prejudice. It's actions were sure without hesitation.

When it pushed her back out into the forest, Jasmine still stood next to it. "What happened? What's wrong? You were only in there for a minute."

Jewels wrapped her arms around her startled childhood best friend. "Oh Jasmine, it's been much too long."

"No, no. It hasn't been long enough, Jewels. You think one minute is going to make up for thirty years of absence? Now get back in..." Jasmine's voice trailed off as she witnessed the transformation of Jewels' tree from a sickly sapling to a vibrant specimen full in bloom. The topmost branches started swaying against the breeze.

"Nana knows time is of the essence. She's the one that kicked me out."

Jasmine looked in astonishment from the tree to Jewels and back again. "Well, I wouldn't have believed it if I wasn't seeing it for myself." She squinted at the moving branches for a moment. "She's calling for a meeting of the elders? Whatever for?"

Jewels started walking south. "There's so little time to explain..."

"The elders won't be here till tomorrow at best," Jasmine interrupted, standing in her way. "That's plenty of time."

Jewels took her friends arms in her hands to look her in the eye. "Jasmine, listen to me!" she said a little more harshly than she had meant. She continued more calmly but with the same intensity. "War is brewing. On more than one front, and I am smack dab in the middle of all of it." Jasmine opened her mouth as if to protest such a thing was even possible but Jewels sushed her. "Nana thinks I should ask the elders for help... or at least inform them of it. Part of the war is here in Ermaria." Jewels stopped and looked down at the moss that was nestled between her toes.

"And the other part?" Jasmine ventured.

When Jewels looked up she had a tear in her eye. "... is much closer to home." She refused to say more about it when prodded. Instead she changed the subject. "Come on, help me find some glowing nettle, comfrey root, and graymold. I'm gonna need as much as I can get."

Jewels kneled next to Nana packing a bag with the things they had collected and made while trying to clear her mind. The task ahead of her seemed all but impossible and she didn't know if she'd have the strength to pull it off.

Jasmine appeared next to her, defiance all over her face. "I don't like this Jewels. It's not our way."

"My ways aren't your ways, Jasmine. They never have been. You know that, but don't think that I like this any more than you. They need me. They all need me. I can't... No. I *won't* abandon them."

"And what about Nana? Are you just going to abandon her? And me? What if something happens to you? I just got you back. I don't want to lose you again, and you know Nana can't survive your death. Not for long." Jewels stopped her packing to embrace her worried friend.

"There are more lives on the line here than just mine and Nana's. Besides, she and I both know I couldn't live with myself anyway if I didn't do everything humanly possible."

"But you're not human!" Jasmine argued stomping her foot.

Jewels chuckled as she picked up her bag. "You know what I meant. I won't be gone long. I'll come back to speak with the elders soon." One last hug and an affectionate pat to Nana before she cleared her mind again. *Secret... It must remain secret.* Jewels teleported back to the Refuge.

Jewels walked up to the Mod Center intent on finding Kaylas. She struggled with the keys since her arms were full. She had finally gotten the right key into the lock when someone called her name.

"Jewels!" It was Kaylas with Azuma tagging along behind.

"Kaylas?" Jewels hurried over to meet him. He looked terrible, tired and pale, and thrown into a coughing fit the moment he stopped walking towards her. Nalyd's scythe was definitely more deadly than Jewels had ever thought. "What are you doing up? Why aren't you resting?"

"You might not want to go in there," Azuma interrupted. "We have a little pest problem."

Jewels furrowed her brow at him, fumbling to take out her RMM-A. "There are no alerts. Have you reported it yet?"

"Well, er... no but..."

"Oh for crying out loud... Are they dangerous?" Both Azuma and Kaylas nodded and Jewels rang up a code Gray for the Mod center before putting her RMM away. She faced Azuma. "Are you gonna help us with them?"

"Uh..." Azuma paused, turned sideways, and started whispering. "Yes I know I *should*... How was I supposed to know it wasn't secured? ... Can we discuss this later?" Turning back to Jewels he nodded. "Of course I'll help, but I, uh, need to get something first. I'll be right back."

Jewels watched him walk off to the south then grumbled a little more. "I could really use a table, but I guess the stairs will have to do." She set down her bag and opened it taking out one of many small vials. "Here Kaylas, drink this." He looked at her sideways but followed her instructions without question. Almost immediately, he seemed to perk up. The color returned to his cheeks and he stood a little straighter.

"Wow," he quipped. "I feel so much better. What was that?"

"Strong curing potion, made by yours truly, from the freshest glowing nettle you'll ever find." Jewels basked for only a moment that it had helped before going into the bad news. "Kaylas, it's not a cure. Nothing that I know of can cure you fully except Nalyd... and he's not exactly in the right mind to be helping you right now."

"Even if he were, I wouldn't accept his help anyway." The truth in his voice was mirrored in Kaylas' eyes. When he met her gaze, Jewels couldn't help but let out a sob. They both knew what that meant and it was almost more than Jewels could bear. What was worse... she could almost hear Nioca snickering in the back of her mind. He was enjoying this.

Jewels tried to compose herself as she bundled up the rest of the vials in a smaller pouch and handed it to him. "Take one whenever you have a coughing fit. Don't try to go longer and don't worry about running out. I brought back enough ingredients to make you a month's supply at least and I can easily get more. " Kaylas nodded hanging the pouch carefully on his belt.

Jewels' hands started shaking just as much as her voice as she struggled to take her ring off. "Give me your hand."

"Jewels, no," Kaylas protested realizing what she was going to do. "I can't."

"Give me your hand!" she commanded. He relented hesitantly and Jewels managed to fit her teleportation ring on his pinkie finger.

"I can't take this," he insisted.

"You need it," she assured him, "because I need you to do something for me." Jewels bent to pick up three scrolls. "Will needs an army to fight the VAR and I'm going to give him one. These are my orders and I need you to deliver them." Kaylas had started shaking his head the moment Jewels had said Will's name.

"I need to talk to you first. About Nioca and something he said to me."

Jewels pressed him harder. "Please, Kaylas. I need you to do this for me. If not as your Fire Lord, then as your friend."

"Friend?" Kaylas spoke the word as if a condemnation then chuckled sadistically. "I had hoped that we would be *more* than friends... one day. But I guess we won't have time for 'one day' to come, will we?"

Through her tears, Jewels reached to hold his face. "No," she whispered. "No we won't." He leaned in to kiss her and she didn't pull away. It was bitter sweet and much more painful than she

had expected, opening her heart to love fully, that which she was destined to lose. Eyes closed she whispered. "Go." He made no move to leave until Jewels pushed him away. "Go now, quickly! There is no time to lose." Obediently he stepped away from her, scrolls in hand and teleported away.

As he dematerialized, Jewels breath caught in her throat at the steely gaze of Will boring daggers right through her. Come to deal with the code Gray no doubt. How much had he seen? How much did he misunderstand? The distinct sound of steady clapping rang in her head along with cruel laughter. Nioca's enjoyment of the scene succeeded in breaking her. There was no way she'd be able to stand helping Will or Nioca with the pest problem. She did the only thing she could do and retreated. Back to her home, back to Nana whose normally calming sanctuary was unable to stop the weeping.

Kaylas arrived at Jewels' royal suite without event. He took a closer look at the scrolls Jewels had given him to deliver. One was addressed to Vergil, one to Darius, and one to himself. Quickly he opened his own, hoping to have some light shed on his mysterious task. It read simply:

I know what Nioca plans. Prepare the soldiers for war. Prepare everyone else for evacuation. By order of the Fire Lord, ~Jewels

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By Design

By Nioca - Jul 21 2009

Nioca looked up at the shining white towers. Beautiful marble in a lush greenery, adorned by a magnificent spring. He owed that much. He watched as men and women meandered past windows, how some tended gardens. A few sat beside the marble-adorned spring, lost in meditation. Water shot high into the sky. And magnificent cliffs surrounded the sanctuary on all sides, protected by both mundane stone and incredible, unceasing arcane enchantments.

He thought of it. Of how this entire place came to be. Each color in every stone was a thought. Each drop of water told a story. Every plant, a memory. To an outsider, or indeed, even to the priests that now inhabited this glorious temple, it seemed to be nothing more than a powerful building in a beautiful sanctuary.

But it was his thoughts. His memories. His stories. The waves of color in the temple's marble were like words upon a book to Nioca's eye.

It had been tiring. He had drank a copious number of healing droughts and other elixirs simply to

keep him alive during the momentous task. But he had relished every moment of it. It provided him with the time to clear his thoughts. To sort them and empty them, to lay them into stone and plant and rock. His rage, great as it was, had subsided. His mind was clear for the first time in...

...in a while.

His eye wandered to the valley's mouth. Only one passage lead away from here. One entrance. He could see large, golden lizards wandering the path, looking for any who would harm. These powerful beasts stood at doors of the temple. Magic ran strong through them. Magic ran through the entire valley. Several miles long and a few wide, it was fully capable of sustaining everyone within. The Temple itself ran almost a mile, its long halls capable of holding thousands. The whole place was self-sustaining, not needing the turmoil of the outside world.

"You have brought us a most splendid gift." The elderly Vorgron said beside Nioca. "How can we ever-?"

"No. This is not a gift." Nioca said. "It's what you've been owed for a long time."

Vorgron kneeled, his white robes wrinkling as they settled against the ground. "Thank you. Thank you so very much."

As Vorgron got to his feet and ambled away, Nioca pondered the sensation. It had been happening frequently, ever since the Temple came to be. A thrill of energy. A bit of spiritual and physical relief. A bit of power. He knew what it was; they were prayers. Prayers to him, faith in him. Which each word of faith, he felt his power replenish and strengthen ever-so-slightly.

"It's strange... But... wonderful." Nioca said aloud. "I feel as if I could do anything."

"Maybe you can." Syla said from behind him. Aryll was also there, watching Nioca as if he were falling ill.

"Maybe..." Nioca looked about. "If only I never had to leave. If they never had to leave." Nioca sighed. There were still preparations. Still things that had to be done. But for now... he was going to enjoy a moment. Enjoy a few moments in his own paradise.

The moon was rising into the sky. Deep in the Temple's interior, Nioca stood in his own private chambers. To say they were elaborate and grand would be an understatement. Statues, beds,

grand fountains, altars, and amenities to shame a king. It was one of the many chambers each dedicated to a different designer.

The others... He still worried. W-dueck was young, and unsure of his power. Or his responsibilities. It was with unease that he considered w-dueck gracing these halls. And Jewels... She was close to discovering the truth about herself. But she was minor compared to other designers. Nay, she wasn't a problem. Nor was Robsta. And another... did Iffy know? He suspected that Iffy would get dragged into this somehow. But was he aware that he was a god?

But his mind wandered elsewhere. The path ahead was clear. He held a shortsword sheath in his hands. With one fluid motion, he drew the blade. Its violet nimbus seemed to tint the entire room as Nioca laid it down upon the altar. His altar... The thought still sent shivers down his spine.

Crusader's Protectorate. How long had he carried it? Ever since that fateful day when Aryll had been transformed into a phantom and condemned to servitude. And this blade... he had denied it for all these years, yet he knew. It was this blade that had done it.

"Why?" Nioca asked.

"It's a sword. It's served you faithfully." Aryll answered.

"But it's evil." Nioca replied.

"It's an object." Syla had climbed off one of the beds and had walked over. "Evil can only occur with sentience and sapience. This... has neither."

"No." Nioca said defiantly. "Even by the bounds of a weapon, this is evil. It's inherently designed to prey on life. It..." Nioca didn't know how to finish.

"But you can turn it to good purposes." Aryll replied.

"I've tried to convince myself of that. I renamed it Crusader's Protectorate in hopes of changing it. I tried to use it for good. But... I've been so blind. It just brings about more chaos and destruction." His mind flickered to ramming the blade through Vergil's gut. Of having it used on him. And a thousand more painful memories. He held the blade in his outstretched hands, palms up. One hand gripped the pommel. The other, the blade. And both were clenched in a painful grip.

"So what do you plan to do?" Syla asked.

"No." Nioca said, unhearing.

"Nioca?" Aryll said, worried. His mind had been strange ever since he had started building the temple. It was stranger still now.

"No more." Nioca said with finality.

Aryll and Syla leapt back in shock. The blade has shattered like glass in his hands, spewing pieces through the air. Glinting metal caught firelight, as Nioca held a pommel in one hand, and nothing in the other.

The metal fragments had all, as if by a miracle, landed on the altar. Nioca gathered them together. A violet energy seemed to flow out of the pieces of metal, the enchantments on it also broken. Soon, it was nothing more than fragments of dull iron.

Nioca gathered the pieces back together and started putting them into place like a puzzle. Aryll watched carefully. She had been caught completely off-guard. She could normally tell his every move. His mind had been mostly predictable to her, she knew where every emotion led, how he decided, how he thought... But now, it was like she was dealing with a foreign entity. "Nioca, that... that was stupid." Aryll said, recovering. "Now you don't have a weapon!"

"I don't?" Nioca asked.

Aryll waved a hand at the broken sword, but her protest stopped in her throat. The sword had, for lack of a better word, healed. It was whole once more, if nothing more than a piece of sharp metal.

Nioca smiled, then lifted the blade. Gathering up the golden cloth draped across the altar, he wrapped the blade of the sword in it as if swaddling a child. He murmured slightly.

Aryll and Syla exchanged looks. Had Nioca lost his mind?

With a slash, Nioca yanked the sword out of the golden cloth. The cloth fell perfectly back to the altar as Nioca stared at the sword. The iron blade now seemed to be made of gold; the blade had turned a distinct gold color, and glowed gently with a yellow nimbus.

Nioca sheathed the newborn blade, seemingly ignorant of the golden thread that had enveloped the sheath. He then turned toward another sword, the longsword named Avenger. Gently, he

passed it to Syla. "You were a crusader for Gvelston once. I know it's a lot to ask... but would you be a crusader again?"

Syla took the sword. With a dramatic flair, she unsheathed it, whirling it in a deadly arc before letting it come to rest at her side. "Yes."

Nioca smiled gently.

Nioca approached an obsidian archway near the back of the temple. It was covered in myriad delicate runes. 8 feet high six feet wide, and a mere foot in depth. The back of the archway was solid obsidian. It held a certain foreboding to it, along with an aura of something else. It was almost as if the archway was both real and mirage. It was here, yet it certainly did not seem to belong.

Nioca conjured a massive bolt of magical energy and threw it at the gate. It hit some sort of energy field around the gate, and the numerous runes etched into it lit up. The energy disintegrated and absorbed into the stone. Not a scratch of crack marred it; It'd take something very strong indeed to damage the structure.

Nioca ran a hand over the side of the archway. The runes began lighting up, in a gentle succession. A hundred different hues lit up the archway as strings of light and energy made their way to the center. They started coalescing into a shapeless form of bright white light in the center, a form that pooled out, like a gas, until the arch's entire shape was filled.

Suddenly, like a whirlpool, the light pulled inward. It was as if it was extending behind the archway, through solid stone. It formed into an arch-shaped corridor, one seemingly of pure light. However, a red tinge appeared in the center. The colored runes around the edges grew brighter, as if pouring energy to some distant location.

A bright flash lit up the Refuge, centering in a secluded corner of Refuge Isle. The light formed into a shape, a large filled-in archway. Then, as if it were there all along for everyone to see, it faded into being, Made of obsidian, intricate etchings along its edges suddenly pulsed with a brilliant array of hues. Light appeared in the center of the archway, as if a tunnel was forming in the center of it. It spread to fill the archway, forming what appeared to be a corridor.

Then, as suddenly, the light faded. The corridor collapsed, and the runes went dark. It appeared to be nothing more than a simple obsidian archway.

Nioca stood watching the priests of Gvelston pray in the new inner sanctum. It stood massive, capable of holding tens of thousands of people at once.

Suddenly, he clutched his stomach. Fire seemed to spread through his body, radiating outward from his belly. He slipped back into shadow, writhing in agony.

And then it was over. He stood up shakily, sweating profusely, only to sink down to the ground again. His robes were covered in vomit with waves of red, blue, and purple. The floor around his feet was stained similarly. His body felt cold and hot at the same time, his head spun like a top...

He felt himself get pulled to his feet by someone. Aryll. He could feel her mind, terrified for his well-being. He leaned against her for support, to weak to handle his own weight. She led him to his chambers, and he collapsed on his bed. "It's catching up to me, isn't it?"

"Yeah. What happened?" She asked, worried.

"What happened? I drank... well, was more fed, roughly 150 health potions of varying kinds. Healing potions, healing elixirs, bliss elixirs, restoration brews... And I suspect... I'm running on magical life support." Nioca said weakly.

"Magical life support?" Aryll asked, confused.

"Healing potions, healing elixirs, so forth... they don't really replenish life energy. They simply provide an ample substitute until the person can replenish their own." Nioca groaned. "It's not supposed to replace all of one's life energy. Just fill in where the original energy is missing. If you were to cut me right now, I'm betting I would bleed blue or purple. I think..." Nioca's voice wavered. "I think I'll be alright. Given time."

"If you say so..." Aryll's voice wavered slightly. Nioca knew she didn't believe it in the slightest.

There was a knock on the door. "There's someone here to see you."

"Just a minute." Nioca called out hoarsely. He staggered upright despite Aryll's protests, and

quickly pulled off his stained robes. Sliding them behind a statue, he pulled on a fresh set and answered the door. Was it w-dueck? Had he figured out how to use the portal?

His heart sank. It was the Stranger. "Good evening, Mr. Galton."

"What do you want?" Nioca asked, annoyed as the stranger pushed his way in without waiting for an invitation.

"I must say, this is quite impressive." The stranger said, seemingly ignoring the question. "I wasn't aware your life force was so... potent."

"Not as potent as a healing elixir or two." Nioca said, glaring.

"Or two hundred? I must say, Mr. Galton, this was quite stupid of you. Gallant. Generous. But stupid. You're practically dead." The stranger spoke as if reprimanding a small child.

"What do you want?" Nioca pressed, now annoyed.

"w-dueck seeks to destroy the VRP. You need to stop him."

It was silent for a moment as the sentence settled in. Then-

"Perhaps you've forgotten. I intend to destroy the VRP as well." Nioca said cautiously.

"Yes. Well, that needs to change." The stranger said simply.

"I thought you said-"

"I am aware of what I said, Mr. Galton. Believe me, I do not want them to achieve their goals. Neither must w-dueck achieve his. The VRP must survive." The stranger said, an odd strength in his voice.

"Not even death itself could stop w-dueck. He'd just come back-"

"Then your course of action is clear, isn't it?" The stranger said icily. He tossed a dagger toward Nioca. Nioca flinched, but it sailed harmlessly past him and landed gently on the bed. A ruby blade glinted in the firelight of a torch.

"No." Nioca hissed. "I would never-"

"Then I suggest you find some other means of stopping him. But it must be done."

"And if I refuse? If I still go after the VRP and assist w-dueck in his efforts?" Sneered Nioca.

"You owe me." The stranger said without a trace of malice in his voice. "We will cross paths again, Mr. Galton. How that encounter plays out will depend entirely on your actions in the coming times. I warn you against being an obstacle towards my plans, though, for obstacles in my way are quickly eliminated." The stranger took two steps away from Nioca and disappeared into thin air.

Nioca took a deep breath. The attack his body had felt was dissipating slightly. "I need sleep." He said to the chamber around him. Turning around, he made his way to his bed and collapsed.

The Letter

By Vergil - Jul 21 2009

"You are an ASS, Vergil." Laesp'awn spat at him while sitting on a bar stool.

"I was the ass? YOU were the one howling and laughing manically while tearing guards apart" A few bystanders looked at them with a suspicious glare.

"And shut up, we are attracting unwanted attention. Bartender! Ice-Water please!" Paul reluctantly halted his cleaning of a glass and pulled out a ruby pitcher out of a sealed room. He poured Vergil a shot. Vergil looked at the glass at eye level, then, in one swift motion, pulled it to his face and drank the shot in one gulp. Vergil blinked and recoiled slightly.

Paul looked uneasy "Just no more dancin' under the tables an' singin'." The door opened and a fully armored man walked through. Vergil felt a wind blow and a sharp object in his back.

"Aw, shit." Vergil put his hands on his head and turned around. Kaylas was standing there, holding a letter. Vergil embarrassed, put his hands down and yanked the letter, he opened it.

"*Vergil, the fire plane is needs your help, and the help of the Bluebloods, we need you to help with an assault on the VRP, the agent you "took care of" was one of them. We know where there base is and we have a working portal there, gather the Bluebloods, as many as you can muster and follow Kaylas to the portal. Please, Brother, I need you.*

~Jewels"

"Ay, ay, ay."

Vergil walked through the gloomy halls to the head office of the Bluebloods, flanked by Kaylas and Laesp'awn. A choir of arguments echoed through the halls. Vergil paused upon reaching the door, then gently pushed it open. The room went quiet.

"Vergil. Explain why you interrupted our meeting."

"My apologies, Sancolan. I am here only to ask a humble permission to aid a call of help." Vergil gave the letter to Shrikas.

Shrikas chuckled, "Why should we help the whimsical call of the new fire lord to help her take down some make belief secret organization?"

Laesp'awn stepped forward "All due respect, sir, I have been in the Fire Plane quite frequently recently and I have noticed a number of human operatives exploring the fire plane, I have been attacked by a few, and they are no tourists, nor a non-dangerous organization, they bear the letters VRP on their suits. These are the same people." Kaylas nodded in agreement. One council member stood up

"Given the current situation, I, 5th Regiment Council Member Gilarden, approve of Vergil's request for military action, in all assignments I have given him, he has succeeded in them, even the task to assassinate the most dangerous fire lord ever, his father, no less." Vergil flinched at the statement.

A old ice elemental stood up. "This is a trivial matter that does not affect the fire plane, I, Polimus, disapprove of Vergil's military request."

"Who else disapproves of his request?" Two other council members raised their hands.

"Approves?" One hand went up.

Shrikas rested his chin on his chest. After a long pause he finally spoke "I grant Vergil permission to take the 101st regiment to battle to aid the new Fire Lord in her attack on the VRP. Now leave."

Vergil nodded and bowed, then walked out with Kaylas and Laesp'awn.

"Tell the 101st to meet at the 52nd jumping hall. That's where the portal to our Ermaria is."

Unattached Arms

By Sylae - Jul 23 2009

w-dueck headed over to the chat. He wanted to see the results of the fight for himself. Stepping though the hole in the wall, he surveyed the destruction. Perhaps three of the tables were still intact, and there were noticable dents in the walls. The massive amounts of blood and splintered wood made walking treacherous as he...was that an arm? "Legriv!" he yelled as he stepped over the arm...oh look, another one... "Legriv! I'm going to send some machines to clean this up! Where are-" he was inturrupted by an extremely high-pitched voice from the stairs.

"Hey! Keep it down! Some of us enjoy peace and quiet!" The young lady went on to call him several things. She showed no sign of stopping, so w-dueck interrupted her.

"I'm sorry, I'll try to be more quiet. But I must ask you, do you know what happened here, young miss..."

"Saph. And I'll tell you what happened, you miserable..." Iffy had come down the stairs with the cursing, and Saph had directed her language towards him.

"No! No, it's okay, I've been meaning to talk to Iffy!" w-dueck said quickly, hoping to stem the flow of expletives coming from Saph's mouth. It worked, and she told Iffy to get down the stairs.

"I suppose I'll hear about this mess later. Iffy, we need to speak--in private, if you would." He led Iffy down a hallway and opened the last door with a shining silver key. w-dueck sat down at the small table and motioned for Iffy to do the same. "This room is magically protected from eavesdropping. It would take about three Admin Towers' worth of power to listen in, so obviously what I'm about to tell you should remain in confidence." Iffy nodded, and w-dueck continued, "As you may know, the VRP launched an attack against the Refuge recently. Obviously, I don't care for that, so I'm launching an attack against the VRP, and I'd like your help."

"How many need to die?" Iffy asked.

"Enough so that they can't attack us again in the near future. Preferably without butchering the innocent."

"Yes. Saph and I will help. When do we move out?" Iffy moved towards the door.

"I suppose someone with that kind of mouth is bound to be helpful...I'll send a SimpleBot with the time. Oh, and Iffy?"

"Yes?"

"Do you know what happened in the chat? I saw arms that weren't attached to anyone."

"I'm as surprised as you are." Iffy opened the door and walked back to the main part of the chat, ignoring the raised voice of Saph.

Citrus

By Ackrovan - Jul 27 2009

Ackrovan brought his sack of goods to the ground as he stepped off the Google Cart. He motioned his personal creation, Citrus, a large female Kyshakk, forward. As Citrus stepped off the cart, its wires sprang up a few feet. *Citrus must have gained a few pounds*, Ackrovan thought to himself. He waved for Citrus to follow him.

As the two of them headed for the main part of the Refuge, two large bots blocked their path. Annoyed, Ackrovan snarked at them. "Move out of my way. Now". The bot on his right responded "Brrrrrrrr you are not a memberrrrrrr of the Refuge. Please vacate the vicinity immediately". Citrus growled. Ackrovan reponded, "What do you mean, "not a member"?! I'm a moderator for the lords sake. I repeat. Get out of my way." The bot responded again. "Please identify youself." Flustered, Ackrovan turned to his bag. He bent down, opening the bag up. He reached his hand into the bag, and pulled out his profile information. He held it up to the bot. "See? Now move." The bot observed the piece of paper, and nodded. "Brrrrrrrrr. Welcome back, Master Ackrovan." Ackrovan pushed past them, Citrus in tail.

Ackrovan walked into the pub. Ligrev was handing out a few beers to the guests currently at the Refuge. Ackrovan commanded Citrus to wait outside the door. Citrus rolled on the ground, now intent to sit in the sun. Ackrovan walked in and made a bee line for the bar. "Ligrev! Bring me a brew!" Ligrev handed Ackrovan a large glass. She made a quick glance at his forehead. She noticed a small scar on his head. It looked very recent. She queried about it to him. "Hey Acky. Where did you get that scar?" Ackrovan had already finished the drink as he sat it down, and said, "Keep them coming, Ligrev". She obliged him.

The Third Such Incident

By Nioca - Jul 30 2009

Nioca drank a cup of coffee, trying to jolt himself awake. He had nearly died in his sleep, and was still getting wracked by bouts of nausea, lightheadedness, and cold sweats, now with fatigue thrown into the mix. He wondered just how long he was going to pay for his creation.

The Temple of the Designers was designed to be completely self-sufficient. It could very well cut itself off from the outside world if the situation demanded it. There were enough resources in the surrounding Valley of Design to comfortably support over 6,000 people indefinitely. It could

probably be stretched to 12,000 if the need arose. The temple itself had room for 8,000. So it was a shame that only 200 were here now.

Nioca thought of their numbers. Not long after Nioca had helped fight off the Fire Elemental army, the VRP had gone after Gvelston. Of the original 150 in the Gvelston order, only twenty-six had survived. Of the new converts, only eight of them would be of any use in a fight.

"*Not much of an army.*" Nioca thought. "*Hopefully w-dueck had more luck.*"

"*But you said it yourself. Beating the VRP would depend more on stealth than open confrontation.*" Aryll thought encouragingly.

"*It's not the actual organization that worries me. It's who they have backing them.*" Nioca responded. Indeed, the situation was much, much worse than he had originally realized. One member of the VRP was none other than the very Emperor of Ermaria. The VRP had the entire military forces of the Empire at their disposal. And there was that other detail...

The hall he was dining in suddenly hushed, and all eyes went to the door. A person, dressed in metal armor from head to toe, had entered the room. He or she looked like a walking suit of golden armor. A golden greathelm with decorative wings enveloped his or her head. Gold plate mail and greaves covered the torso and legs, while golden plate boots stopped embraced the feet. Golden bracers and spiked gold gauntlets graced the arms and hands. Not an inch of human skin was visible. A gold-hilted longsword was strapped to the person's side, and a polished golden and silver shield was strapped to the back. And to top off the overkill, an ruby-studded bow with quiver was slung across the person's back.

Nioca smiled. The atmosphere had changed just as it should. The person was a Gvelston Crusader, one of the elite warriors within the enclave. Heavily trained in combat rituals, melee combat, and ranged combat, this was one of the people who would have defended Gvelston to the last. The crusader paused, then marched over to Nioca. "Now I remember why I moved to the regular priesthood." Muttered a heavily-muffled female voice. "This armor is killing me."

"You'll be fine." Nioca stated, suppressing a laugh.

The woman lifted her visor. "Yeah, finely roasted." Syla stated. "I'd rather fight wearing nothing but a sword than this." At that comment, a young male convert suddenly took an unusual interest in Syla. "Think about it, and it'll cost you something dear to you." Syla shot at him, running a hand across Avenger.

"Don't mind him, Syla." Nioca said, raising an eyebrow as the convert scurried away. "He's young. He's male. He can't help himself."

"Like you were?" Syla said with a smirk.

"That only happened once!" Nioca whispered, mortified.

"You need to relax a bit." Syla observed, grinning at the embarrassment blazing on Nioca's face. "The world isn't coming to an end. Yet."

"Easy for you to say." Nioca muttered. "Listen, you and I need to go somewhere private."

"E-excuse me?" Syla said, startled. "Nioca, I said relax *a bit*. Not-"

"It's important." Nioca stated firmly.

Syla gazed at him for a moment, as if trying to evaluate what his angle was. Finally, she consented. "Alright."

Nioca and Aryll gazed out at the valley as it retreated behind them.

"You look like you're getting worse." Aryll said. Nioca nodded numbly in agreement. He had caught a look at himself in the mirror back at the temple. His eyes were sunken and dull, his hair was gray, his skin was maggot-white, and he had lost what looked to be seventy pounds. His clothing didn't help; a simple tunic and pants, with a ragged traveling cloak and worn boots wound up making him look anything but a god. He felt awful, too. His entire body ached, his vision seemed a bit sluggish, and sounds seemed distant.

"What did you do?" Aryll asked quietly.

Nioca ignored the question. "Jewels is nearby."

"What?" Aryll said, exasperated.

"I didn't notice it before... But I can feel it now. She's..." Nioca trailed off. Closing his eyes, he let his powers envelop him. "She's here."

"Where?"

"Here." Nioca replied. Aryll looked around, confused. It had suddenly turned into a lush green forest, and Nioca had disappeared.

Nioca staggered. The effort he had expended locating and teleporting to her location, plus magically concealing himself and Aryll, had left him winded and vertigo-stricken. Gathering himself together, Nioca closed his eyes and tried to probe Jewels' mind. Even though she was nearby, something felt wrong. Off. Though he could sense her presence, nothing actually seemed to be coming through the link.

His probes wound up hitting a shield. A protective barrier stood between her mind and the outside world. None of her thoughts could escape, and none of his could penetrate. They simply deflected away. Trying a different tactic, he focused his powers again, trying to pinpoint her.

She was very close by. However, in the all-knowingness of his surroundings, something else stood out. Something alarming, something-

"Aryll, hide!"

The two stepped off the path they were on, one to each side. Nioca put a hand to his sword, and held his breath. What were the odds?

A dryad came forward, a scowl on her face. A human was walking down the road at a brisk clip. A black cloak and black clothing showed no wear from tearing its way through the various plant life, and an aura of power surrounded him. It was him. The Stranger.

"You aren't welcome here, human." The dryad stated. "This is our home."

"I know. Forgive the intrusion, but-" The stranger started.

"Leave now." The dryad said, infuriated. "You are not welcome in these woods!"

"I am aware. But it is urgent I speak with Miss DeForestal, Jasmine." The stranger persisted.

"You won't." The dryad said, alarmed. "She's with her tree, she's not to be dist-"

"Jasmine." The Stranger said strongly. "It is important I speak with her. You will not stand in the way."

But the dryad named Jasmine was adamant. "You must leave. Now. Before-"

"Before what?" The stranger said, his voice harsh. "I have great patience for people who are of use to me. You are not, and if you insist on being an obstacle, you must die. And then I will have no choice but to burn this forest to the ground."

Jasmine seemed to lose her voice. She resorted to shaking her head, readying herself for a fight.

"How inspiring..." The Stranger hissed. He raised a hand.

Jasmine yelped and fell to the ground. She twitched, screaming in agony, as a bright substance flew from her heart to the stranger. Nioca recognized it in an instant; life energy. The Stranger was literally sucking the life out of her. Within moments, she started looking sickly, and her cries grew weak.

The process stopped before Jasmine was completely drained. Life energy stopped flowing out of her, but Nioca could tell she was done for. He had drained an incredible amount of life; there wasn't enough left to keep her alive. It was made all the more horrifying by the fact she was still fully conscious; not only was she dying, but she would experience every moment of it. The Stranger's back was to Nioca, but it was obvious the Stranger was enjoying this.

"A pity. I'd rather not have burned the entire forest down... but you... you forced my hand." The Stranger stated. "But at least I'll have your soul to compliment Miss Deforestal's." The Stranger raised his hands, sickly flames dancing around it.

Nioca was shaken out of his reverie by a realization. He had been so used to the Stranger's seeming omniscience that he had completely missed it. The Stranger was unaware Nioca and Aryll were there. His guard was down.

Two more dryads appeared from the forest, and charged. The Stranger sighed theatrically, and produced a blast of flame. Nioca felt Aryll mentally recoil in disgust at the sight of the dryads burning to death, but Nioca paid no heed. He started to draw Crusader's Protectorate, but thought better of it. He instead reached into a pocket of his traveling cloak and produced a sheathed dagger, the same on the Stranger had given him. Gently drawing the dagger, he started slipping up behind the Stranger, letting his magical concealment fade to avoid alerting the Stranger. Jasmine writhed slightly, choking and crying at the sight of her fallen comrades and the physical agony that was wracking her body.

The Stranger stretched out a hand toward the trees, flames eagerly sparking around his hand as if anticipating the destruction. "Look what you've done, Jasmine." He said mockingly. "Look what you've done to your race." Flames started to spring forth.

There was a flash of red light as the ruby dagger caught a bit of sunlight, briefly turning the forest red. And Nioca struck. Wielding the dagger low, he slammed it right into the Stranger's

heart. He heard a gasp of shock as the Spiritkiller enchantment took effect, ripping and destroying the Stranger's soul. Thinking quickly, Nioca started drawing on the fleeing life energy, directing it to a useful purpose instead of letting it fade to ether.

And it was over. The Stranger fell, the dagger embedded in his back. Nioca examined his hand; some color had returned to the previously sheet-white skin, and he felt more alert. A considerable amount of relief spread through his body, alleviating the pain and nausea he had been fighting for the past day. Focusing, he tapped into his powers to examine the Dryad named Jasmine. He hadn't just absorbed the energy himself; there had been enough to almost fully revive him from his current state, but he had redirected some of it to her. She was in bad shape; so much as a paper cut would be enough to kill her, and she probably wouldn't have the strength to even sit up. But she'd live. Barely.

Nioca decided to rifle through the Stranger's belongings for anything of value. He found some exotic coinage and a diamond, but nothing else. It seemed the Stranger relied entirely on his powers to protect himself. Nioca briefly debated whether to take the dagger, but decided to leave it in place. Just to be sure.

Nioca's sharpened senses picked up further movement from the forest. Not wanting to answer questions regarding his presence there, he dropped the dagger's sheath and quickly teleported away.

Nioca examined the body amongst the fledgling crops. A mile south of Uon, in the Uon plains, Nioca gazed at the body of a mutilated man. He rubbed the Galton family ring nervously; an old friend of his was the captain of the guard here. No one else would recognize him as Enivir Galton, and his friend might not either. But confronting his past like this... made him nervous.

Nioca spotted the man instantly. He was wearing heavy armor, a scowl, and wielding a massive halberd. "You the one that sent me that letter?" He grunted.

"Yes, Polinus." Nioca replied softly.

The man looked him over. "You have a lot of nerve."

"Excuse me?" Nioca asked?

"Enivir was a close family friend of mine. He died many years back. And now you disrespect his memory... and his property." He added, noting Nioca's ring with disgust.

"How'd those badgers go?" Nioca asked.

"I- what?" The man said, confused.

"Or that stunt with the immovable cart?" Nioca stared into Polinus's eyes as comprehension dawned.

"But... it... can't be..." Polinus stammered. "How...?"

"Later." Nioca said, waving a hand. "What happened here?"

"We don't know." Polinus said, his voice worried. They both gazed down at the body. Huge tear marks gouged the chest, ripping ribs apart and causing them to jut out of the body. The man's

head had been taken clean off, and was laying several yards away. "Something obviously attacked him. He and two others were out tending these crops when it happened." Polinus motioned Nioca to follow. They briskly marched across the farmland. "As if that's not enough, one of my guards went AWOL. So I have to deal with this and an inquisition from the military." They reached another mutilated body. Aryll stood next to it wearing an unusually sparkly dress. Polinus resumed speaking. "The other two were standing here. This one," he pointed at the body, "tried to fend whatever attacked off with a hoe. It didn't work."

Nioca looked at the ground. "Didn't work" was an understatement in his opinion; the man's left leg and arm had been torn clean off, and something had cracked his face in two, revealing the rather gristly contents. But something didn't seem right...

"Where's the third?" Nioca asked.

"He made it back to town, hysterical as hell. Claims he never even saw the creature." Polinus shifted slightly, as if uncomfortable.

"He was right here when it happened, and he didn't see it?" Nioca asked with disbelief.

Polinus swallowed. "That's just it. He claims that, one moment, he and his pals were telling dirty jokes. The next, the first man's head goes flying, blood geysering everywhere. This guy stayed behind to fight it off and let our only survivor escape, but he lasted all of five seconds. Both times, he reported a bright flash accompanying each attack. But he didn't see the actual creature itself."

"Wait, blood geysering..." Nioca said to himself. He looked at the area around the body. "But there's hardly enough blood here. For these injuries and the way they were inflicted... this entire area should be splattered red. But it isn't."

"So where'd it go?" Polinus asked.

Nioca didn't answer.

"Enivir... Are you alright?" Polinus asked.

Nioca felt something stir deep inside. How long had it been since someone had called him that? "Hmm? Yeah, I'm fine."

"You sure? 'Cause you look bloody awful." Polinus quipped.

"Believe it or not, I look better than I did an hour ago." Nioca responded, amused. Polinus was not one to spare vanity. Or dignity.

A cry of alarm rang out from across the field. Nioca, Aryll, and Polinus quickly sprinted for the source, and found a guard with her bow and sword drawn. She stood over a third body at the edge of the crops, overlooking a river and the forest beyond. "Well," Nioca stated, "I think you found your AWOL guard."

A hole had been punched clean through the guard's torso, despite the guard wearing full plate mail. Once again, there was a copious, yet underwhelming amount of blood. The guard's sword was shattered into several pieces, as if something had hit it with great force. The guard's arm was broken as well. Deep furrows nearby suggested that a large, heavy creature had accelerated itself with incredible force.

Polinus picked something up. He then uncorked a watering can and poured water over a small object, cleaning it of blood. Nioca approached curiously and looked at it; it was a small piece of diamond. Looking about, he also saw a drop of some odd liquid nearby.

There was a loud snap and a bright flash. Polinus and Nioca jumped, turning about just in time to see the guardswoman's head fly back into the crops, and her body fall prone. Dirt and blood rocketed into the sky. Another flash as Aryll fired a ray of flame wildly at the attacker. Nioca reached for Crusader's Protectorate, instinctively drawing on his powers. However, whatever had attacked the guardswoman was already gone, leaving behind a large crater in the ground where it had been laying in wait for prey.

Polinus and Nioca exchanged a glance, shock on both of their faces. Nioca scanned the landscape warily, hand on the pommel of his sword. One moment, he could have sworn he saw a glimmer of light across the river. But when he tapped into his senses, they confirmed there was nothing there. He turned to Aryll. "Did you see-?"

"A brief glimpse, but... not really, no." Aryll said.

"What the hell was that?" Polinus said, finally getting his voice back.

"The third such incident in a week." Nioca replied grimly.

The Turning of the Leaf

By Jewels - Aug 2 2009

Kaylas walked out of the head office with Vergil shaking his head as he went.

"What's the matter?" Vergil asked.

"Nothing," Kaylas replied trying to sound nonchalant. "It's nothing."

"Oh, come on now," Vergil prodded. "We've been friends long enough for me to know it's not nothing. Now Don't make me play a guessing game. Out with it."

Kalyas stopped walking and leaned against the wall shaking his head once again. Why did he think he could hide his worries from Vergil? "I don't know," he started as he struggled to put his thoughts into words. "It's just, well, do you think this is a good idea? I mean we just ended the war. We just sent the troops home to their families." Kaylas lowered his voice as he continued. "We just got done killing one Fire Lord because he insisted on draging us to war." Kaylas paused, coughed a few times, and tried to temper his emotions with logic. "I know Jewels means well by this, but she's not thinking straight. This is w-dueck's war. She's doing it for him. She doesn't have our people's best interest in mind. I..." Kaylas paused again, feeling traitorous for just thinking it. "I don't think she's fit to be the Fire Lord."

"And you think I do?" Vergil quipped. "You and I both know it's supposed to be me on that throne. Jewels is there by technicality alone. She may think she's orchestrated a peace treaty

between fire and water but what happens when our sweet Darius meets Stillborn? Crap's gonna hit the fan and you know it."

Kaylas couldn't help but laugh at Vergil's statement. He had a point there. Mid-laughter, though, Kaylas started coughing hard. He felt dizzy and was suddenly quite grateful for the wall he was leaning against. He tried to wave it off as some spit gone down the wrong tube which seemed to satisfy Vergil though he still cocked a weary eye at Kaylas as the coughs continued a bit. When Kaylas had finally regained his composure, he started walking again. "Speaking of, our benevolent leader has given me a letter to deliver to Darius ASAP. I should probably get going on that. She's got me pretty busy after that, too, what with preparing our army and evacuating the rest..."

"Evacuation?! Whatever the ice for?"

Kaylas stopped again face turning somber. "Nioca still has it out for the living fire. Told me straight to my face he was going to all but exterminate our kind and somehow... somehow Jewels knows it, too. I suppose she thinks that if Nioca can't find our people, he can't kill them."

Vergil looked aghast at Kaylas, searching him for the truth in his words. "Not if I have anything to do with it he won't! I'll kill him where he stands the next second we meet!"

"No! You can't!" Kaylas looked horrified at Vergil and registered his shock and confusion.

"Since when do you care what happens to Nioca? I thought you hated him."

"I do. Believe you me, if there's one sentient being in the entire cosmos that I would want dead it'd be Nioca, but you can't kill him now. Jewels did some ritual while you were gone. Something to do with soul binding... with w-dueck, with Nioca, with... well, all the Refuge members as far as I know. Even you. I'm not sure exactly how the spell works, I've seen some crazy things because of it already, but if you kill him now she might die with him."

Vergil's eyes flamed, voice full of disgust. "Why on earth would she go and do a stupid thing like that?"

Kaylas looked at Vergil, surprized that he actually knew the answer to it. That he almost understood. A bitter sweet answer that filled him with envy. Sullenly he answered, "Because she loves you. All of you. And she wants to make sure she never hurts any of you again." Vergil was left without a reply and as Kaylas closed his eyes against the emotional pain, he was almost thankful for the newest coughing fit which drove him to his knees gasping for breath. The physical pain wracking his body also hiding the real reason for his tears. Vergil was by his side joking about getting something down the wrong tube again when Kaylas started coughing up blood. With pale trembling hands he tugged at the pouch of curing potions on his belt. The bag opened too quickly and the tiny jars came spilling out clinking and clanking against each other and the ground. Fortunately, they didn't have far to fall so none of them broke, but as he struggled to stop coughing long enough to swallow one he mused. This was all he had to look forward to for the rest of his days. Sentenced to death by another one whom Jewels loves. *What would Vergil have to say about that?* he wondered. He glanced at his concerned colleague and friend. His Blueblood brother. There was no avoiding it. He'd have to tell him about it now.

Jewels could not remember feeling so rested. Maybe... maybe the mud bath in the spa with Will. Being completely open, utterly vulnerable, and yet safe. Nana's calm countenance did wonders to ease Jewels' frayed nerves and the cool breeze that wafted through her upper branches tickled her senses. How long had it been? How long since she reveled in being what she was? To be happy just to exist and live and commune...

A sudden unmistakable feeling. *He is here!* But where? *HERE!* So close, she could tell but it confused her. At the Refuge when she had been within a tree their link had her seeing everything he saw, hearing everything he heard, feeling everything he felt, even thinking his very thoughts. She had watched the horror on Kaylas' face as Nioca told him his plans to exterminate the living fire as if through Nioca's eyes, and she had experienced his glee as Nioca spun his web of hopelessness around Kaylas raising the alarm. Incompetent he had called her. Unable to lift a finger to stop him. And with his words came his thoughts of her people dying rapidly just from reaching out their hands to each other. Like a pyramid of dominoes they fell in his mind to his satisfaction. She hadn't learned his exact plans but she had seen enough to guess it was plague like in nature. She was terrified he would learn that she knew before the evacuation measures and even then, if he learned from her where she had begged sanctuary, it would be all for naught. Her only real hope was to somehow change his mind. Somehow open his heart to forgiveness.

But now, now he was here. She was sure of it, but other than that there was no hint of their link. No thoughts, no feelings... Then a warmth enveloped her. *I will protect you.* It was Nana. She was blocking the link, perhaps because they were now linked themselves. Practically one in body, thought, and mind. And yet they were separate. Jewels held nothing back from Nana, but an out of place rustle of leaves from a neighboring tree and a wave of concern from Nana amid a reply left Jewels wondering what was wrong. *I will protect you.* Nana reiterated. Could it be Nioca walking down the path? Had he come for her even here?

Jasmine stepped out of the tree next to Jewels and walked up to confront whoever it was. A man on a mission walked straight towards her tree. Not Nioca though, no. It was worse than that. The Stranger... Nioca she could at least fend off halfways decently but the only thing she really knew about the Stranger was that he was more powerful then all the members of the Refuge combined.

"You aren't welcome here, human." Jasmine stated. "This is our home."

Jewels watched with trepidation. *Nana, tell her to back away. Tell her to just go back to her tree.*

"...it is urgent I speak with Miss DeForestal, Jasmine." The Stranger was polite enough but persistent. Jewels knew that he wasn't about to turn back without an audience.

Nana, tell Jasmine I'll handle it. I will protect you. It echoed through her mind again and again as the tops of the trees rustled to each other as if she were hearing each tree's response. It puzzled Jewels as to why her protection was so important to them all.

"You will not stand in the way." he threatened, and yet Jasmine seemed not about to budge.

Jewels tried to intervene before things escalated but she couldn't get out. *Nana? Let me out Nana, before...*

"Before what?" The strangers harsh voice seemed to answer Jewels' thoughts though he was addressing Jasmine. "...if you insist on being an obstacle, you must die. And then I will have no choice but to burn this forest to the ground."

Jewels at once struggled with all her might to exit her sanctuary only to find herself helplessly trapped. In her mind she screamed at Nana, *Let me out!! Let me out!! He's gonna kill her. I will protect you. Don't you understand? He's going to kill us all, and if you die I die with you! LET ME OUT!!!* The life had already been drained from Jasmine's body and sparks flew from the stranger's hand. A mediocrity of doubt could be felt in Nana's resolve as two other dryad's sprung to action only to be burned alive before them. Jewels struggled harder. *He just wants to talk to me. I can stop this! I can help Jasmine! Let me out!!* She could feel Nana's desperation as the flames jumped close enough to her foliage to wilt some leaves. She could feel that she was about to break free when another figure appeared right behind him. At this new threat Nana's resolve was renewed. Jewels was trapped as if behind a wall of glass as Jasmine lay dying on the ground not twenty feet from her.

What happened next, Jewels seemed to watch apart from herself and her hysterics, as if through Nana's eyes and with her countenance. The new stranger produced a knife that flashed red before being plunged into the murderous stranger's heart. Relief and gratitude poured over her as well as a bit of satisfaction as she watched his life ebb away. The new stranger looked as if he were living on borrowed time. His ragged clothes looked just as old as he did, and after a pause that seemed he was considering Jasmine's condition, he disappeared just as quickly as he had come. An angel in disguise? The single-handed savior of this grove had come just in the nick of time from the ether and stayed only long enough to save them. What else could it be? Divine providence of some sort. Two more dryads emerged and carefully carried Jasmine back to her tree where she could recover. Jewels and Nana, back on the same page, sent a root to caress one of Jasmine's and the roots of the four trees closest to the stranger now worked to bury him at their feet. When the elders arrived there would be much to talk about.

It wasn't until later in the evening that Jewels realized she no longer felt Nioca near.

Assembly

By Sylae - Aug 13 2009

"Have Jewels and Nioca meet me here ASAP," w-dueck told the SimpleBot from deep inside his quarters and watched as it flew off. "Jumara, are you sure the Fourth will go for this?"

"Yes. Unless something's changed since the last muster, they will be ready to head out," Jumara said.

"Well, we are still going to need more power. I can scrounge up plenty of SimpleBots, I don't know how much good they will be outside of the Refuge, though. Without regular energy resupply from the Hive, they can't operate, and I don't know how much crystal we can take with

us. There's too many factors...why can't war be straightforward and simple?" w-dueck asked. His question was left unanswered, however, as the door opened and a the SimpleBot returned.

"*Nioca and Jewels are not on Refuge Isle. Need further directions.*"

"'Not on Refuge Isle'?" w-dueck echoed. "Where the hell have they gotten off to now?" He said angrily. His tone implied that he already knew.

Jumara cut in. "We both have bigger things to worry about, so let's not linger on the past. There'll be a time for that later."

w-dueck sighed. "Well, we're going to need more troops. I can get several hundred Bots in the field, but how long, I don't know. Then you have perhaps twenty--"

Jumara cut in again, "Actually, we've gotten up to full-strength over the years. No reason why, really, but we've a full hundred. Even recruited six older mage fellows." Jumara motioned for him to continue.

"Okay, but still. That only gives us two-hundred three. Not much of an army." There was a long silence. "Now...I've scrounged up an old map of Ermaria..." w-dueck punched some RMM-A buttons, and a SimpleBot appeared and projected an image on the table surface. "You've eaten, right? Because this is going to be a long night."

"...so we will rendezvous here the day after tomorrow, take over this nice looking town, and go from there? Sounds good." w-dueck stood and stretched. The eastern sky was beginning to lighten up through the windows, and he'd last slept in a haybale in the countryside out of Corel. "I'm going to rest some, and then we're going to go see Fourth Company." He showed Jumara the door, then returned to his chambers.

He was woken up much too early by an annoying beeping sound. "*You have received a new personal message. Would you like to read it now, or later?*" The SimpleBot hovered by w-dueck's head.

"Oh, shut up. I have to take it now, don't I?" the machine dropped a post on his face and departed. w-deuck cautiously opened it and read. "Okay, go ahead and do what you have to. Just don't make the mistake of PMing me this damned early." w-dueck dropped the post on the floor, causing it to squeal and run for a nearby bag of cookies. "Oh, screw it. I'm not going to get any sleep anyways." He picked up the squealing post and threw it in with the other saved PM's, along with the cookies, and closed the door as the squealing multiplied as all the other PM's took their share of cookie. "I really need to get rid of those old PM's," w-dueck said to himself, and turned towards the closet. Opening the door, he began digging. "No, no, no...what is *that*? No, no, ye--no." Several minutes later, he'd finally found what he was looking for.

He drug the chest out into the center of the room, pushed all the closet junk back in with his foot, and turned back. "This is why you're a packrat, so you can save every single bit of your past." He unlocked the chest and opened it up, then pulled out the cream and green uniform of a Corellian Lancer-Mage. w-dueck looked it over. Ten years had been quite kind to it, except it now seemed

to be quite too large. He punched the RMM-A, and waited for a SimpleBot to appear. "Are you any good with a needle?"

Several painful minutes later, thankfully machines learned quickly, the uniform fit properly. He buckled the blade to his belt, grabbed his staff, and headed out the door.

He decided to make a stop at the Chat. Stepping through the door he found the room empty except for Ligrev and a man he didn't recognize. Nodding to himself, he stepped forward. "I must apologize for my behavior last night, Ligrev. I was not myself, and I'll understand if you don't forgive. I'm having the Bots clear up the hole in the wall, it should be good as new by tomorrow."

Ligrev smiled. "Oh, it's okay. I shouldn't have let you know I had alcohol stashed around here. You men always do despicable things with it in you." She poured him a cup of coffee.

The man, who had been staring at w-dueck this entire time, now finally interjected, "What...are you...wearing?" he chortled.

w-dueck slowly turned. "Do we have a problem, my good sir?" he stepped forward when the man did not answer. "It's the uniform of a Corellian Lancer. Is there a problem with that?"

The man stood. "And if there is?"

w-dueck's rapier was at his throat in a flash. "I hope we don't, because I'd really hate for my machines to have to clean up two messes." w-dueck lifted the blade from the man's neck, and stepped back. He didn't sheath it, however.

The man spit on the floor. "You think I'm scared of you just because you have a pointy stick and a costume? Ha!"

"That's it," w-dueck grabbed the man by the throat and pushed him against the wall, receiving a knee in the groin as thanks. He gritted against the pain, unwilling to give the arrogant whelp the satisfaction of knowing it hurt. "I've killed more people than you've ever *seen*. Do you think I have a problem adding one more to the tally, you ignorant swine? Do you?" he screamed, spittle flying. "I could gut you like a fish, right here and now. And you couldn't do a thing to stop me." w-dueck released him and stepped away. "Remember that. If you know what's good for you, remember that." he sheathed his sword and left.

"A fine performance, Mr. Dueck" The stranger said as w-dueck left, "We need to speak to each other. You are amassing an army, and I want to know why."

"What? Is today just not my day? Or do you bastards wait until I'm in a terrible mood before leeching on?" w-dueck asked, "And why are you even still here? I thought you left a long time ago."

"No, I've just been waiting for you to return from your hiatus. Now, why are you raising an army? I'd rather not have to resort to less desirable methods of asking, Mr. Dueck."

"Why, are you going to torture me? You can't do worse than what I've already taken. I can't walk five feet without dealing with one of you. I can't sleep for an hour without some emergency waking me up. Oh, and did I mention that my love can't keep her hands off another man?"

The stranger shook his head, "I see. Well, Mr. Dueck... be careful."

w-dueck sneered at him. "You can leave anytime, by the way. I can't stop you," he laughed, "I can't stop *anybody*."

The rest of Fourth Company appeared, and w-dueck turned to Jumara. "The Trilogy Board, that building over there, has been converted into a temporary barracks. Also, the Nethergate Boards are being used as the stables temporarily. We won't be here very long, so I don't think it matters." w-dueck dismounted and led his mount over to the hastily refurbished Nethergate boards. Jumara was yelling orders over the chaos. *Well, they are doing very well for a company that hasn't truly assembled in ten years and have never been ripped into a different plane*, he thought to himself.

After he'd groomed and stabled his horse, he found Jumara. "We'll be heading out at first light tomorrow. Can you make sure everyone is assembled before dawn? Also, the Magi and squad leaders' quarters are in the guest buildings, over by the Google station."

"Okay, I'll tell them." Jumara sidled off to the barracks, and w-dueck walked up to his chambers.

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w-dueck got up and dressed well before dawn. He'd need to prepare for the move to Ermaria. Moving so many men and mounts would require tremendous energy. Even moving one person lit up the sky for miles. Sighing, he finished the terrible breakfast the SimpleBots had thrown together, quite literally, unfortunately for his stomach, got dressed in the lancer uniform, and headed out the door.

"*The reserve batteries are nearly full*," the SimpleBot stated. "*A precautionary Code White has been issued over the area in preparation for your spell.*"

"Good, if you would tell Jumara we will head out when the batteries are full? And do tell him when the batteries are full, as well." w-dueck needlessly pointed down at the troops mustered out far, far below, just as a slice of orange appeared on the eastern horizon. They were slightly behind schedule, but that was okay. The VRP could wait an extra hour for their demise.

They only had to wait an extra minute, when w-dueck's RMM-A beeped, and a SimpleBot flew over to the assembled troops, who drew still.

A pleasant breeze blew across the rune-covered roof of the Admin Tower as w-dueck moved over to the mass of wire that was the SSMT and powered it up. He directed all power to the system and then scrolled to the last option on the screen: *High-Mass Transport*. w-dueck then selected **Ermaria** from the list of available systems. "Here goes nothing," he said as he engaged the SSMT.

Immediately, he could tell something was wrong. The entire Refuge was bathed in an apocalyptic orange light. The normally painful feeling of being pulled inside out via the nostrils wasn't there, either, he didn't feel a thing. "No, this isn't right." w-dueck punched buttons on the display. Nothing happened. "No. No!" The screen exploded, and w-dueck was thrown onto his back, staff clattering away.

A feeling of immense power settled over the Refuge, then erupted. He screamed as fire exploded out of every pore on his body, felt his skin blistering, cracking open. The power...washed over w-dueck like floodwaters over a levy, frozen fire licking at his very soul...agonizing chaos tearing him to pieces. "No! What is..." the words were ripped away as memory flooded him. *Spittle flying from a father's face...crystal smashing against the door* "...happening?!?" *He looked down at the spear through his chest, pinning him to the wall*. He felt the beckoning fire, calling him, screaming for him...the fires of...home? *Watching the knot tighten around neck, unable to do anything...forced to watch his own death...* Ice hotter than the sun, colder than the depths of space, mangling his very being. Struggling to his knees, he turned and saw them. Hundreds, thousands of people, stretching endlessly on. "Not...you! Leave me be!" He turned and ran towards the ledge, throwing himself off, but was stopped by the hands of those he had killed. "No! Please, gods, NO! Not them!" Felt their presence, pulling him back *Must...stop...* Fingers freezing, breaking off from the chill of molten rock. *Who was he? I am...I am...w-dueck...Mage...Thornslasher...Vermillo...* hundreds of names flashed by, names shed as easily as a cloak...struggling to find his identity as the demons of his own causing pulled him to them, feasted on his essence alongside the hellish energy he had wrought... He saw another face floating before him, a woman's face...whose? *She needs me* he thought *But why? I've done nothing for her? Who are you!?* he screamed out to the faint being. *Why are you here?* There was no answer...no response to his agonized pleas. Just the hell he had caused, the souls of the dead, dead by his hands.

And then they were gone, just sweet, sweet blackness.

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w-dueck opened his eyes slowly and and sat up. "Where's my...Ah, there you are." he picked up his staff, then stood up on the roof of the Admin Tower taking in the beauty of the serene mountains in the distance, the fresh morning air... Wait...mountains? "Oh gods, no..." w-dueck grabbed his RMM-A. *DATABASE DAMAGE. CRASH IMMINENT*. "No, no, this can't be happening."

The Spirit of a Creation

By Sudanna - Aug 17 2009

Nalyd watched as his hand regrew, from the bone outwards. First, wet marrow creeping outwards from the stump, and then it hardened. Veins and muscles crept like the tentacles of a kraken, lacing and binding, returning into existence something that was lost. It was beautiful, in a terrible way, seeing the half-hand split into the fingers. The skin, thin and delicate, taut over the skeletal appendage, lapped upwards like the tide. The nails were the last to reform.

Not that Nalyd noticed. He had cast the spell and moved on, taking the bracelet from his old hand and tossing it onto the table of mechanical junk he kept for the Shaping instruments.

Depositing his severed, dead hand into a jar of fluid. Stillborn's tall, bodybuilder frame watched him silently from the doorway as Nalyd bustled among the instruments.

"Stand on the Shaping platform, creation."

Stillborn looked about slowly, and did not move.

Nalyd spoke again, sharply.

"Creation!"

"I am named Stillborn, my master."

Nalyd froze where he stood.

"You are a creation."

"I am Stillborn."

Nalyd's brow furled. He clutched Lifesower, and his knuckles whitened. He turned around very slowly, very purposefully, and glared out from the shadows of his cowl. The dull silvery-black robes fluttered about his slight form as he strode towards the impassive bulk of Stillborn. His face was a hardened mask of fury, and the wide sleeves on his robe swished as he brought up a hand to stab at Stillborn.

"You are a *creation*."

It was a comical sight. Stillborn was tall, wide, and heavily muscled. Nalyd was abnormally short and slight. His robes hung on his hunched shoulders and fleshless form. Even Lifesower, which arched above Nalyd's head, came only to Stillborn's collarbone. The arm that Nalyd stabbed at Stillborn was almost vertical. Stillborn's arm was almost as thick as Nalyd's waist. The finely sculpted block of his face was impassive.

Stillborn quivered and slumped. In a heavy voice even more inhuman than usual, he mumbled.

"Yes, master."

He went to stand on the Shaping platform, somewhat hunched and staring at the floor.

Nalyd stood back and nodded to himself. Just like Shaping Drayks. They must first be made, and ten they must be broken.

Nalyd turned back to the tables and screwed a large, fragile-looking network of wires onto what seemed to be a miniature clock written in hieroglyphics. He dunked the wired end into a beaker of smoking orange fluid, and did the same with a scalpel that he fished out of his robe. Skittering towards Stillborn, he lifted up his shirt and made an incision on his abs. And then three more, and then he ripped off the square of skin. Stillborn grunted. The skin began to regenerate immediately. Nalyd stabbed several of the spiked wires deep into the exposed flesh. As the skin healed around the wires, it smoked and crackled.

He checked the hieroglyphic dial and snorted. It was broken. He'd have to use the Shaping terminal. The dial was unscrewed, and he led Stillborn to the block of the half-creation, half-mechanical control panel and screwed the wires into holes in the side. Tapping several of the blinking, jeweled buttons, he frowned at the bare text flowing through the little bioluminescence-

operated screen. That was simply not possible. According to these readings, Stillborn possessed more raw magical energy than a Geneforge. If this was right, more essence had gone into his Shaping than that of a dozen Eyebeasts. Nalyd shot the glum-looking. . . man a worried look. He popped a few panels off of the control terminal and checked the mass of wires sizzling in Stillborn even now. Rather than a malfunctioning device, there was a connector that he hadn't stuck in. He stared at the dangling wire, and left it there, taking the instruments out as he left. The holes sealed up before he made it back to the terminal. Inserting it would only raise the level of energy measured. That much power was just scary. He would feel better without the numbers tacked onto it.

Stillborn coughed and shuffled around a bit. Nalyd couldn't help but wince. He half expected the creation to explode at this point. He had, perhaps, some busywork to do on the other side of the room. Behind some counters. . .

Afraid? You call yourself a Shaper, fearing your own creations? Get on with it.

Nalyd jerked to a halt and resignedly watched his body walk jerkily back to the terminal.

Continue the examination.

Well, he'd established that Stillborn was possessed of downright creepy levels of magical energy. Next step would be to find out what it was doing, hmm? Might as well bind him to a diagram. That should help with the improvement in the long run.

After wringing his hands for a few moments and staring blindly at the viewscreen, the petite Shaper started, and looked about, hesitant about doing anything, shooting Stillborn wary looks all the while.

Go!

Nalyd nervously walked to one of the many cupboards holding alchemical supplies. Opening the door, he removed a small, round pot labeled "Sigil Paste". Taking off the lid revealed a chalky grey-greenish paste, which Nalyd took a scoop of and traced out a line of delicate symbols around Stillborn's neck. Stillborn had to kneel for it.

With his clean hand, Nalyd took a huge sheet, more than a yard to a side, of his exquisite paper out of a drawer and spread it out on the floor. Wiping the paste back into the bowl, he took a thin pointed rod out of another drawer, dipped it into the paste, and started the tedious etching of runes around the paper's border.

After several minutes of silence, Stillborn began to fidget. Eventually, the hulking man, for lack of a better word, spoke up.

"Father-"

"You have no father, creation."

"You are my father."

"You have no father. I am your master."

Stillborn might be powerful, but Nalyd was damned if that meant he could go about pretending to be human.

They were silent for a time.

"Master?"

"What, creation?"

"Why were you hurting Mother?"

Perspective

By Jewels - Aug 24 2009

Whereas Nana was fully willing to release Jewels when she was urgently needed elsewhere, now she indulged in her selfish desires to be whole. Thirty years... *Thirty years!* The wait without her had been excruciating. Nana had barely a motive to cling to life while she was away. Only the knowledge that Jewels would die with her had kept her roots drinking up water and her leaves reaching for the sunlight. While her very nature kept her mind seemingly serene, for a tree, Nana was in turmoil. Normal trees with normal dryads had naught a care it the world for all their hundreds of years of life, for normal dryads never left their tree incomplete for more than a brisk walk, or a quick romp among friends. There was not a single tree Nana knew of that had to endure such hardships like she did. Not a single one that could even imagine the worry she went through. None that she could relate to, or ask for council, or take comfort in... Except maybe Nola, Jasmine's tree. Jasmine and Jewels were such close friends. Surely Jasmine had worried over her in the past 30 years. Surely Nola shared in Jasmine's thoughts. But if she had, she had never given any indication and, like Nana, had suffered in utter silence while Jewels was away.

But now! Oh, now she had her back! Nana was whole once more and it felt *soooo* good. She had no idea how great her physical pain at the separation had gotten until Jewels had stepped back in once again and relieved it all. It had taken all her willpower to send Jewels out so soon again, but she had to. Nana had never known love so strong as when she felt what Jewels did for those at this Calamity Refuge. But not just them, no, not just the ones she had now bound her soul to, but for all. All of humanity, all of the living fire, and now that Jewels' memories of her forest life had been restored, her instant heart for all the dryads was exponentially more intense than anything she had felt as a child. It was that heart, that aching heart, that had almost caused her to let Jewels out when The Stranger was ready to kill them all. Perhaps this thirty years learning among the humans was not all bad. Perhaps even... it was something good. Nana, herself, had never cared so much for her own kind as now that she shared Jewels' heart. Their lives had never before seemed so worth fighting for. Even the order of the Elders to keep Jewels from leaving again, to keep her from harm till they arrived had not seemed enough and as far as Nana knew, in all the history of the Dryads, none had ever disobeyed the Elders. Of course as far as Nana knew, in all the history of the Dryads, none had ever had a heart like Jewels.

None of these undercurrents did she share with Jewels, though. No. Jewels had much too much to worry about already to add Nana's selfish desires into the mix. For selfish it was, to think that

a creature with such a heart as Jewels should remain forever within a prison of bark just to ease the pain of the prison. Nana knew and accepted wholeheartedly, with the new heart she had gained from Jewels' return, that they would never be in a 'normal' dryad/tree relationship. Nana *must* give Jewels the freedom to come and go and the freedom to share her heart with others. Nana vowed to herself that once the Elders had come to meet with Jewels, never again would she deny Jewels that freedom. Even if it meant disobeying the Elders.

A rustle of leaves let Nana know that the Elders were near. Very soon they would be separated once again for an indefinite amount of time. Too soon... much too soon... Jewels' worry at the news came through. Nioca could read her thoughts. He was no longer near, but what if he was still in Ermaria? What if he learned of her plans to counter his? What if... what if... Nana felt Jewels' anguish and made a decision with her new heart. Nioca could not learn what Jewels herself could not remember. By the time the Elders had arrived, Jewels' memories of the troublesome events had been suppressed far to her subconscious. When they were no longer a danger, Nana would restore them, but for now Jewels became blissfully ignorant. A tiny temptation crept into Nana, to suppress all Jewels' memories of the members of the Refuge, of all the humans, of all the living fire. It would be so easy, after all, but the idea was dismissed almost as fast as it had come. Nana loved them all now, too. Far too much to deny them Jewels' presence.

Jewels stepped out of Nana refreshed, feeling like a huge burden had been lifted from her shoulders even though the tasks that laid ahead were so daunting. *Wasn't there something we were supposed to be worried about? ... You mean more than asking the Elders for help? More than Kaylas dying? More than dragging the living fire into yet another war in Ermaria? More than Will thinking us faithless? More than Nalyd doing heaven knows what to Stillborn? More than forever being linked to the mind of... someone who hates us? Yes. I mean more. ... Do we really need more to worry about? I'd say we shouldn't be looking for more.*

"*Couldn't you just go back into that tree of yours?*" Jewels could not deny that being without the link had been plesant for her, too. She was really tempted to do just that but she would not abandon everyone else for her own comfort, nor for Nioca's.

They would both just have to learn to live with it and Jewels intended to make the most of it. Drawing on her heart and uninhibited by anger, she greeted him warmly. "*Evening, Nioca. You know I would if I could, sweetie, but I do have duties to attend to.*"

Nioca's thoughts were filled with annoyance. "*Don't call me sweetie.*"

"*What would you rather then? Honey-bunches? Snookums? Snuggle-wuggums? My spell was unbreakable, so like it or not we're stuck. I'm gonna have to have some kind of pet name for you eventually.*" Nioca's subsequent disdain almost made Jewels feel guilty for egging him on... almost. As it was she just smiled and send him what she now considered a mental huggle, full of warm fuzzies and undeniably sincere love. She could sense him gag on the other end withdrawing from the contact. He'd have to get use to it because it was how she planned to answer every harsh thought he sent her.

"What are you smiling at, Jewels?" Jasmine appeared at her side startling her. "Aren't you nervous about meeting the Elders? The last time a meeting was called was over a century ago. *At your birth* no less! I was barely a seedling but even I remember what a big deal it was."

"Don't you mean scandal?" Jewels quipped. "A dryad mating with a living fire? She was considered a heretic for even considering it. How could I forget? The meeting was over whether or not I should be allowed to live. 'Who knew what kind of trouble I'd be?'"

"And here you are. The very reason for their next meeting. Trouble indeed!" Jasmine gave Jewels a wink and both women laughed in a gentle embrace.

"How do you feel?" Jewels whispered looking Jasmine full in the eye to search for the truth.

She winced at the question. "Still healing, but I'll live. More than I can say for..." her voice caught in her throat as tears ran down her face. Jewels shared in the moment to mourn for the two that the stranger had killed. Jasmine started chuckling. "Trouble, trouble, so much trouble." Her voice was light and sing-song but the implications hit Jewels deeply. Indeed, they had died because of her very presence. With a somber mood both of them walked to the small clearing that had been designated.

The Elders were already present and everyone stood as the two approached. Jewels and Jasmine genuflected in respect until they were called forth by an ominously authoritative voice. "Jasmine. Jewels. Come and sit. There is much to discuss."

Jewels sat huffing at the ancients before her that refused to budge. Her continuous raised voice had carried farther than the wind by gossiping branches that kept the tale of the meeting going to the edges of the forest. No doubt exaggerated until unrecognizable to go down in the books as a legend. There had been no reasonable argument that they hadn't countered. No emotional one they hadn't shredded. No piece of evidence that they hadn't called into suspicion. But most damning had been something she had not anticipated. They had unearthed the stranger and brought his body forward for the discussion. After grilling both Jewels and Jasmine for everything they knew of the man and the events that had transpired with him, the lead Elder, Strom, had calmly stood to remove the ruby dagger from his back.

"You say that 'the angel' who saved us all from extinction used this dagger to do so?" He held it up dramatically for all gathered to see then handed it to Jewels.

She felt like she was being set up but there was nothing for her to do but answer them. "Yes," she said quietly.

His tone became condescending as if he were talking to an ignorant child. "Then, dear Jewels, I would say that the VRP are our saviors and not our enemies. For that is a spirit-killer dagger. A magic created and wielded by the VRP. From the way I see things, the only ones who have ever been in danger from the VRP are the Designers."

Jewels rose, screaming in frustration with flame flickering in her eyes, "I AM a Designer!" The whole of those gathered fell silent. The birds and the crickets held their breath... even the wind seemed to stop at her declaration which echoed far beyond what normal physics should have allowed. She couldn't explain how she knew... well, after feeling Nioca give himself a facepalm

she could guess, but that she *knew* without a doubt... that she suddenly could literally feel the electricity in the air... it was beyond her yet. The question still circled in her mind. *But what IS a Designer?* She was sure Nioca could tell her but he seemed more than uncooperative on the subject, and there was no way she was going to ask the Elders.

Their faces ranged from horror to hope but Strom's face was chiseled in indifference. "We will not go to war against the VRP. You have brought the danger to us. We will not sacrifice more for your sake."

Jewels sat deep in thought. It had been such a long night and the sun was rising in the East. She was tired and frustrated that it had all been for naught. At least she would be able to bring the living fire to help Will. A wave of doubt enveloped her. Doubt mingled with mistrust and laced with anger and hatred. "*You do not have to trust the living fire, Nioca. Only trust in me. They will follow my orders.*"

"*No. I have been betrayed once too many by you.*"

Jewels was already drained by the night's meeting. Putting up with Nioca would be doubly trying today. She scrunched up her face in frustration and put her hands to her temples.

Jewels cringed at the irony of it and rubbed her temples all the harder. A night within Nana could only go so far to ease her mind. How she missed Will. His comfort, his affection, his companionship... She could feel Nioca roll his eyes at her and move to concentrate on something else. If only Will would let her explain it to him. How she *needed* him to let her explain. She wished he was here, and for the moment it was all that mattered. Just to see him smile again. So deep in thought was she that she didn't notice all the hairs on her arms standing on end. She didn't notice the unease among all the wildlife or the urgent whispers among the elders. Nor did she even notice the worried voice of Jasmine calling her name.

Not until the rough hand of Strom pulled her up did she snap out of it. "Jewels, stop!" he yelled at her in accusation just a second before the ground beneath them all rocked wildly. Everyone was knocked to the ground rather gracelessly and a giant cloud of... something rose up on the western horison. To the average observer, a volcanic eruption was their best guess, but to Jewels it was infinitely worse. She lay doubled over in nausea and pain, squeezing her head at the chaos that wracked through it. Pain, pain... they were in so much pain... Even Nioca's mind seemed affected by her sudden overwhelming distress but she was unable to answer any of his sharp queries. The moment didn't last forever though, and soon Jewels lay numb barely able to breathe. In her heart, she knew that something was wrong, gravely wrong, and while her eyes stayed open, she was unable to react to anything. Nioca tried repeatedly to jar her to her senses and get some answers from her, as did the Elders but Jewels could barely hear them let alone form a reply.

Eventually, they all gave up and Jasmine coaxed her to her feet to walk her over to Nana. Just putting her hand on Nana's trunk restored a modicum of thought. Just enough to hear Jasmine whisper in her ear as something hard and cold was placed in her hand. "I don't know what just happened, or what you had to do with it, but I think you need this more than anyone else here." Jewels looked down at her hand to see a flash of red. In the commotion, Jasmine had taken the ruby dagger unnoticed, and now, she had trusted it to Jewels. Part of her was terrified of it, but

another was comforted. She managed to mouth a 'thank you' to Jasmine before she disappeared into Nana's sanctuary. Blissful, blissful, sanctuary.

Breaking Stillborn

By Sudanna - Aug 27 2009

Nalyd gritted his teeth, then bared them, though his back was still to Stillborn. With a voice that was leaking pure, spiteful, hateful *rage* through every syllable, Nalyd spoke.

"And. . ."

His hold on Lifesower was trembling.

"And who. . ."

His entire body was quivering with a pent-up aching for destruction.

"And, who, *creation*, is your. . .," Nalyd spat the word "*mother*?"

Stillborn stood impassive, tall and imposing in the Shaping Circle. His voice stayed at it's eternal calm and level monotone.

"Jewels is my Mother, Master."

Nalyd stood and roared and whirled, his tarnished silver robes swirling about his feet, the Shaper insignia on his back flaring with dull green light. While his left hand slammed the butt of Lifesower into the floor, his right hand blasted out a seething black stream, smoking and hissing, bubbling in midair. It struck Stillborn in the cheekbone, and he gave a low rumble before dropping to his knees. The left side of his face was smoking and hissing, and as he clutched his hands to it, the black acid slop exploded outwards, splashing onto his forearms and spraying droplets everywhere. Stillborn screamed, as the now-runny acid fell down his body in rivulets.

As soon as Nalyd had fired his bolt of acid, he had tossed Lifesower to his right hand, leapt onto the table of alchemical equipment to his right, ran down the length of it and jumped again, this time directly at Stillborn. Lifesower was levered out to the side, and the blunt end of the head crunched into Stillborn's jaw. The tarry substance was spread in a line across all of Stllborn's face, as well as spraying droplets everywhere, again. The blade of Lifesower tore a gash from chin to eyebrow, crossing the nose. Nalyd let out Lifesower in midair and dragged it from shoulder to hip.

Nalyd landed heavily, too angry to properly perform acrobatics. His voice tore out in a vicious screech, as he advanced towards Stillborn step by raging step.

"You filthy, pretentious animal! You dare to put on the airs of your betters? You mock your inferiority, with this pitiful mimicry of humanity? You will die like the beast you are!"

Nalyd raised his Scythe far into the air, as Stillborn moaned and kicked away, smoking and burning in the tarry acid all the while. Nalyd hacked down, and the wicked blade of Lifesower flashed in the light. And did not stop. The light flared and burned, issuing from Lifesower's blade, so bright that Nalyd almost dropped it. Would have dropped it, if he had not been trained with vicious abandon to never, never drop that Scythe. Had he not been hearing the Song for more than half his life, the weapon would have clattered away into a corner.

As it was, Nalyd fell backwards with the Scythe on top of him, that bright light already waning.

It was the voice of the Rot.

Enough. Harm my purpose no further.

Nalyd could not move.

My release cannot be destroyed.

Nalyd could not move.

Calm yourself.

Nalyd *could not move*.

Stillborn got unsteadily to his feet, reddish light pouring out of his hands, onto his ravaged face, and eventually onto his forearms and the rest of his body. The smell of smoke filled the laboratory. Nalyd stood up, not of his own accord, but at the behest of the Rot. Not even his eyes would obey his commands.

Or he would have looked away.

Stillborn was marked. He had healed the damage from Nalyd's Scythe, but he had healed the acidic tar right into his skin. Fully half of his face was a dark grey, save the scar from Lifesower, which was very light and sickly. His forearms and hands were stained in the same fashion, and judging by the myriad holes in Stillborn's clothing, he was flecked with grey dots. The gash in his clothing revealed a scar of varying shades of light grey and the whitish pink of normal scar tissue. The blotching of the acid had left streaks and spots of grey all over his torso, and the scar passed through several as well as the usual skin.

But it was the look on Stillborn's face that scared Nalyd. The good-natured, bland servility that had previously characterized him was gone. His blocky features looked wild and terrified, and when his eyes finally focused, he cringed away from Nalyd, even taking several steps backwards.

He has been damaged, but only in mind, and though he can never be perfect now, he is only a better prototype and a better creation. He fears you now, and is not merely compelled.

Nalyd found himself wondering how the fuck the Rot knew this.

Get back to work.

The little Shaper stumbled as his body unfroze, and Stillborn backed up once more, off of the Shaping platform. Nalyd wrenched his gaze away from his cowering creation.

Nalyd's mind was still reeling from the excessively unforeseen train of events, but instinct took over soon enough. "I thought I told you to stay on the Shaping platform, creation," Nalyd muttered as he walked back to his place on the floor, staring downwards, not even glancing at his creation. Stillborn fairly leapt into place behind him and nervously sat down.

Nalyd replaced the runes on stillborn and finished etching the paper after another hour or so and began to roll up the sheet. "Hold still," he said while rising. "And hold this paper." Stillborn leaned away from Nalyd involuntarily as the little Shaper walked towards him with the roll of paper. Stillborn's heavy arms reached out hesitantly and quickly snatched the paper away.

Nalyd waved his arms about and impatiently mumbled a few spell-words. The paste runes around Stillborn's neck crumbled off, while the paper in his hands squirmed and made shuffling noises. Nalyd took it back while Stillborn scratched away the remains of the spell. Unrolling the sheet revealed that the squiggles of pale greenish paste had rearranged themselves into a fantastically detailed, multicolored diagram of Stillborn. It even showed his breathing and movement.

Nalyd tapped and scratched at the sheet a few times, testing the functionality of the spell. He zoomed in on a cell, all the way down to the scrolls, and checked Stillborn's various unconventional organs. Told him to stand up, and watched the image of Stillborn do the same. Had it show his current position on a crude map. Even showed Stillborn's point of view with audio, though it was extremely crudely rendered, almost like abstract lineart, and the sounds crackled. Nalyd pursed his lips, but the his main reason for this spell was fully functional. He could see Stillborn's inner functions with perfect, real-time detail. Every sliding muscle or pumping vein, every twitch of movement or even the firing of a neuron. He tested the rewind function as well - that worked perfectly.

"Well," Nalyd announced after several minutes of silence while he surveyed his work, "You can wander off if you like." It would take more than a day to make the preparations to begin modifying Stillborn any further, and Nalyd wasn't the least bit concerned about him. He was, after all, only a creation, and his looming presence was only a distraction. This new-found cowardice was irksome.

Stillborn almost bolted for the door.

And then, blackness.

Nalyd awoke to fresh air.

An Offer Refused

By Zoe - Aug 29 2009

Iffy and Saph were sitting in their room, discussing about their latest events. "So Will wants your help with tackling the VRP, Iffy? I think it's rather funny how he said 'help' " "You know no one knows, Saph...and I'm not sure if I want them to know..." "They may have to find out sooner or later, the immense power that you hold within yourself. You can't go on lying to your friends for ever..." "Yes, that's true" "I think you should go tell Will that you can handle it yourself" "I doubt he'll listen, he's stubborn" "Yeah I guess..." "I'll go tell him anyway though"

Iffy head's to the door.

"I think I'll stay here...just don't be away too long" "I won't"

Iffy hurries over to Will's quarters, observing as he went. The chat room in ruins, with Ligrev cleaning like a mad...woman. People running around, chasing each other, and throwing the occasional fireball. People training for against the VRP. And Will was beginning to head back into his room when he saw him.

"Will, I need to discuss something with you" "Ok, shoot" "...you don't need to do anything. I can handle the VRP on my own" Will was a bit taken back by the statement. "I'm afraid I'll have to decline," he had respectfully stated. "Ok then, do what you will Will. I'm still going to help whether you like it or not" Iffy leaves before Will could say anything more.

On the way back, Saph had ran back to Iffy. "Dammit...I missed you Iffy..." "...I'm sorry Saph. I didn't mean to be gone for that long" Iffy then saw Jewels walking rather spaced out and ran over to her.

"Hey Jewels!" "Oh, hi Iffy. Have you seen Kaylas? I need to talk to him." "Kaylas? I haven't seen him really I don't even know what he looks like...oh and Saph this is Jewels" Saph looked at her for a sec, then said, "Yes we already met. Jewels, was it?" Jewels paused for a sec then said, "Oh sorry guys I gotta go do something bye" She huggles (Didn't even give Saph a choice) and left.

"...I wonder...did she?" Iffy thought.

Saph and Iffy then stood there together staring off into nowhere, when suddenly Iffy's RMM beeped saying about an emergency at the Moderation Lounge of the Admin Tower.

The Birth of a Plague

By BM - Aug 29 2009

Pestilence opened his eyes. It had been several days and the magic he had weaved surrounded the entire room. Only the center was left blank. On the floor there were now various drawings of pentagrams and magical runes, in the middle of the pentagram several small red orbs were flying randomly within the circle.

Pestilence sighed. His fellow mages were still weaving their magic to this room and they were behind schedule. Well, at least it isn't my fault, he thought. Then the room was suddenly disrupted starting from the center. The orbs that had been flying randomly now formed a big black gate. Pestilence stood and looked around, the guest room he occupied flickered from a normal bed room to a black chamber and then back. The room started to shake while the change was more and more constant until it stopped. "Finally." he muttered when he could see in the darkness. Several mages surrounded a huge circle which he was now in the center of.

"Welcome back, Pestilence," said a figure in red robe.

"Damien? What took all of you so long? I have been waiting for several days in that world. "

"Two days ago several of the new initiates broke into this room, wrecking all the magic we have weaved."

Pestilence frowned. "I told you to add some warriors to guard the door but you as usual wouldn't listen to me."

"Now since you have opened the gate I assume you have already figured out the second duty?"

"Yes, I have it. I will combine them later. I want you to send word to The Leaders and the labs."

"Sure. After all, our duty must be completed." Damien turned back and left, Pestilence following him.

"So this is the new lab?" Pestilence asked Damien.

"Yes, and I assume you want some guinea pigs?"

"Of course. Now leave me."

"Very well. Just call the Engineer when you need something," and he disappeared instantly.

Pestilence started to tinker with the parasite. The one he created from several organisms, although the thing in front of him barely look like a parasite. He opened the vial from Nioca and poured some of it to the parasite, then the parasite started to shiver and something grew from it. It looked like a sapling of a tree but instead of green and brown like a usual tree should be, the tree in front of him looked so plainly white. Using the lab equipment he scanned the plant and was shocked. The data which he read showed that the thing was an insect, a butterfly to be exact

but in very different form. Of course its different, you made it from a doppelganger, he thought. A green light flashed on a monitor "Ah, the sign of the first victim." He put the organism in a large glass box and left the lab.

Raptors…Ahoy?

By Ackrovan - Sep 1 2009

Ackrovan frowned at his third drink. Where *was* that incessant beeping coming from? "Are you gonna check on that?" Ligrev squeaked.

"Huh?" he asked, startled from his thoughts.

"The alarm. Aren't you going to check your RMM to find out what's wrong?"

"I suppose I should," he mumbled. Taking care of an emergency would at least distract him for a while. Ackrovan reached into his pocket and rummaged around until he found the infernal noisemaker. He squinted at the screen as it seemed to wave back and fourth slightly in front of him. Code Grey... what was that again? Pest control wasn't it? Well, hacking apart a few beasties was better than just sitting here. "Right. Mkay... I'm off to the Admin Tower, Ligrev. Put it on my tab." He stood a bit wobbly and steadied himself against the bar for a second before taking a few hesitant steps towards the door. "Come on, Citrus. It's play time."

As he stumbled out the door he ran into Iffy arguing with a little girl. "Do you really think that'd be a good idea? What if something happens?" The authoritative tone in her voice gave Ackrovan pause.

"Saph," Iffy countered, "You and I both know I'm more than capable of subduing a few measly beasts without anything going wrong."

"Beasts?" Ackrovan said a little too loudly. He walked up to Iffy, clapped a hand on his back a little too hard, leaned in a little too close, and smiled a little too wide. "I'm on my way to kill off a few beasties. Alarm says they're in the Moderator Lounge."

Iffy winced and leaned away scrunching up his nose as he replied. "Master Ackrovan, I don't think you're in any condition to be fighting anything."

"Nonsense," Ackrovan straightened up. "I'm right as rain. Never felt better. It'll be fun." Who did Iffy think he was, anyway? Thinking that he could handle the problem but the great Archon couldn't? Well, he'd show him. "Bet you hundred to none, I can kill more than you." He turned and stalked off towards the tower if a bit zig-zaggedly.

If he had been listening harder he might have heard Iffy whispering to Saph. "Well now I have to go. Can't very well let him try to do it alone while he's drunk."

"Sure you can. If he survives you can congratulate him tomorrow." Iffy looked at Saph. "Oh, fine. Let's go then."

Ackrovan looked back smiling smugly as the pair followed him and his creation. He was gonna win this bet. Not watching where he was going he ran smack into w-dueck. Both grunted heavily. "Watch where you're going!" w-dueck growled red-faced and resumed stalking straight away from the Admin Tower. Citrus growled back but w-dueck paid her no heed.

"What's wrong, Will?" Iffy tried to ask has he passed them.

"*EVERYTHING!!*", he screamed not even deigning to stop his retreat.

"Aren't you going to help with..." Iffy had started to call after him but gave up as w-dueck quickly widened the distance between them.

Ackrovan shook his head. Looks like he wasn't the only one with problems.

Azuma walked back towards the Admin Tower wielding twin daggers he had found left stuck in the wall of the Spam Forum. Someone had apparently been playing darts with them and didn't bother to take them down when the game ended. Sentience was in it's sheath at his side. "Oh, don't be like that." Azuma spoke aloud to the wind as he walked. "Well I can't very well kill raptors with *you* now can I?" Azuma quickened his pace while he rolled his eyes. "I'm not the one who decided not to harm any other *including* the ones that *need* to be killed." Azuma paused and pursed his lips. "Of course they need to be killed. We can't very well let them loose at the Refuge. You KNOW what they're capable of."

As he neared the tower, Azuma was glad to see other people coming towards the tower too, but where was Jewels? He scanned left and right but saw no sign of her or Kaylas. Azuma sighed. He had been looking forward to watching them use their powers in battle, hoping to learn a few things. He tried not to let his disappointment show as Master Ackrovan, Iffy, and Saph neared. Azuma glanced at the latter uneasily, instinctively rubbing the bruises he had gained when she had thrown him across the room. At least he knew that she could handle herself in a fight. "Is this all the help we're getting?"

"Considering w-dueck just stalked off in the opposite direction, I'd say it's a good bet." Iffy stepped forward. "Do we know what we are dealing with here?"

"Raptors," Azuma answered. "But they're not your average everyday raptors. These ones are intelligent and they have magic."

Ackrovan huffed and Azuma recoiled at the smell of alcohol on his breath. "How the hell did raptors get into the Moderation center?"

"Uh..." Azuma hesitated, not feeling like explaining the mechanics of it or being quite ready to take the blame for their presence. He shrugged in response. *What?* he thought, *That wasn't a lie. Since when do you care about being honest anyway?* Azuma shook his head at Sentience's reply. 'A virtue' it says. 'Honesty is a *virtue*.'

"Well, what are we waiting for then?" Ackrovan sputtered out drawing his sword. Azuma stepped back instinctively as he swung it a little too close for comfort.

"How about some wards and blessings?" Iffy offered. A number of scrolls magically appeared in his hands and disappeared just as quickly.

Azuma drew in a quick breath at the sensation. He felt stronger, quicker, and full of confidence. Nodding his head in approval he stepped to the door. "Shall we then?" The others gathered themselves at the door as well. "On three," he whispered. "One... two... three!" Azuma whipped open the door and the quartet burst into the lounge with swords and scrolls raised...

But the Moderation Lounge was empty. Completely empty... Saph swore, and Iffy lowered his scrolls.

"Well..." Ackrovan slurred looking back and forth animatedly. "Where are they?"

Azuma stood staring into the emptiness, an uneasiness settling into the pit of his stomach. *Shush!* he thought harshly. *I KNOW they took the box!*

Sentience

By Sylae - Sep 2 2009

w-dueck threw open the doors to the Admin Tower and rushed out, then stopped, staring wide-eyed at the damage.

Huge cracks ran through the cobblestone pavement, and bricks lay around all the buildings, having fallen off during... whatever had happened. Buildings farther away from the Tower appeared to be leaning inwards, as if the ground farther away had gotten higher.

Jumara ran up and yelled, "Mage, what did you do? I thought we were just movin-"

"I don't know!" w-dueck yelled back, "Something went wrong, I don't even know if we are *in* Ermaria. We could be anywhere! Where's a damned machine when you need one?" w-dueck looked around for a SimpleBot.

"They all left, one cornered me and told us to protect from intruders. That was you, right?"

w-dueck froze. "They told you to stay put? Did they say I told you to?"

Jumara shrugged, "No, just something about not being able to contact the hive..." he trailed off.

w-dueck pulled out his RMM-A and hit some buttons. "Is the company out patrolling?" Jumara nodded. "That's good. I need to figure out what's going on... Tell the troops to let friendlies in, but don't let anyone out... yet. For their own safety, the Refuge might be the only way off the Isle, as far as we know." Jumara nodded again, and w-dueck looked to the sky, searching for the bot he had called with the RMM-A.

Soon enough, a machine flew up and stopped in front of him. "Status." w-dueck said, not waiting.

"*The Refuge appears to have been moved to an unknown plane of existence. This move has caused extreme infrastructure damage and the Hive has been put offline, possibly permanently. The Sentience project has kicked in and a virtual Hive has been installed. The database is*

damaged, but repairable. The Hive's suggestion is to make an immediate database backup before the database structure collapses."

"The members?"

"*All Refuge population before the move remains, some minor injuries have occurred and have been treated. All members remain in the Refuge area, and the Lancers have taken the liberty of creating a perimeter.*"

"Location?" w-dueck asked.

"*The Isle is currently located in a small grassland area. Directly to the east, a little over one hundred feet, lies a large forest. Far to the west lie mountains. A road from the north travels southwest into the forest. SimpleBots are scouting both directions. No report yet on the southern front.*"

"Thank you. Please stay close by in case I need anything else." w-dueck headed to the chat. Opening the door, he was assaulted by several people. He ignored them, and headed to Ligrev. "Hey, Ligrev, I need you to tell anyone that comes in--Shut up! I am trying to talk! I'll get to you later!--Sorry, tell anyone that comes in to stay here. It's the only safe building." Ligrev nodded, and he turned to the newbs, "Now, what do you people want?"

The newbs all answered at once.

"Okay, I don't know what you said, so I'm going to go somewhere else. Stay here, unless you want to be dead." he turned and left the chat, sipping the coffee Ligrev had prepared while he was talking. He sighed as he heard horse hooves clattering across the broken pavement, and turned to see two soldiers escorting a mounted man down the street.

The soldiers halted in front of w-dueck. "He says he's from here. Urgent message. Wants to speak to you." The soldiers left, leaving the man there.

"Who are...wait, Nioca? What happened to you?" He rushed forward to help the unsteady Nioca down from the saddle. "You look as white as a sheet...what happened?"

"The question is, what happened here? I didn't know you were moving *everything*." Nioca leaned heavily on w-dueck as they walked to the Admin Tower and up to the second floor.

Once they had sat down at the table in the forum, w-dueck replied, "Something went wrong when I was moving the troops...I still haven't figured it out. But anyway, why are you here? I am assuming this is Ermaria."

"Yes, it is, and you landed the Refuge exactly where you were supposed to...But don't live it up. The Emperor of Ermaria is with the VRP. They're bringing an army kill us all."

"What? We can't...lot with the Refuge the way it is. We need to evacuate."

Nioca nodded. "Gvelston Sanctuary. It can hold everyone. I can take them there."

"How long before the army's here?" w-deuck asked.

"I don't know, You have a day at least...maybe two."

"More than enough time. Listen, I need to show you something. It's important."

The steel door slid open soundlessly, and w-dueck and Nioca stepped into the room, crystal shards crunching under their feet. The Database Core was a mess, some crystals had exploded, leaving huge gouges in the walls, and the normally white light was replaced by a glowing red in many places.

"Here." w-dueck walked up to a pedestal and placed his hand on it. It flashed white for a second, then began flickering softly. Several seconds later, a tiny crystal an inch across appeared in the air and fell into w-dueck's waiting hand. He handed the crystal to Nioca. "It's a database snapshot. You can use it to rebuild the Refuge, just place it into any pedestal like this one and it'll do the rest." w-dueck nodded and gestured towards the door.

"Wait." Nioca didn't move. "Why are you giving me this? You are coming, aren't you?"

w-dueck shook his head. "No, I'm not. I put my life into this place, and I'm not leaving it behind without a fight."

"Have you completely lost it?" Nioca yelled, "You and your stick won't last a minute against an entire army!"

w-dueck shook his head. "I know. But this Core, no matter how damaged, still has enough power to destroy our army ten times over. Someone has to do something."

Nioca shook his head in disgust. "Well, if you think that's how you'll survive..." he turned and left out the door.

"Who said I wanted to survive?" w-dueck whispered to the silent Core.

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w-dueck exited the Admin Tower and pulled out his RMM-A. Pressing some buttons, he opened CRAS. After several more button presses, w-dueck sighed and looked up. After a moment's silence, he looked back down at the screen. *Issue Sigma Cyan-Delta (Y/N)?*Another sigh, and another button press.

Immediately, alarms blared out of every building, and people began filtering out of the buildings, heading downhill towards the FTP pier, or what remained of it. SimpleBots began appearing on the horizon, and clustering over the steadily-thickening group of people. One spotted w-dueck and flew down. "rchAdmin, you need to join the evacuation group. The SimpleBot stated, expecting compliance.

"No. Override, on my authority. Assist all members and make sure *everyone* is out. Nobody is staying except for me. Also, call in Jumara's company. You are to protect the evacuation group and Nioca's commands. He will be leading the evacuation."

The SimpleBot beeped in comprehension and flew away. w-dueck turned and walked into the Tower, and up to his quarters.

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w-dueck hadn't slept since the evacuation group had left. He had been to busy preparing. And now was the time. When all he had done would be destroyed.

His RMM-A beeped, the perimeter sensors built from spare SimpleBot parts had detected movement. He grabbed the RMM, and punched a button. A grainy video feed patched in, and he saw the army approaching. It was big. w-dueck closed the video feed and returned to staring out the wide windows of his quarters, out at the army beginning to show on the horizon. w-dueck smiled, then typed out a line of script on the RMM. The Tower shuddered as a ball of energy as wide as it was spewed out of the top of the tower and landed in the middle of the enemy ranks. Hundreds died, and w-dueck just smiled. Magical shielding quickly appeared over the remaining army, which halted. A smaller force--only a thousand troops-- broke off and headed forward. w-dueck typed another line of script.

The Tower shuddered, and the ground below the detachment exploded, hurling parts of men every which way. The few survivors ran back towards the main group. Several minutes later, the magical shielding increased and the entire force moved forward.

The force was only about a hundred feet from the Refuge's outbuildings when the ground on both sides of the force exploded and small chain-gun emplacements appeared, gunning down troops. The enemy mages unfortunately destroyed these before they could do much harm.

w-dueck waited even longer, for the enemy officers to coax their troops to enter the Refuge proper. Soon enough, the enemy force moved forward again, and men broke off from the main force to clear the forums and other buildings.

He still did nothing when the RMM alerted him that troops had entered the Admin Tower. He looked out the window. About half of the army still lay outside the Refuge. Oh well. He typed another line of script, and quickfire flared out of every single building, except the Admin Tower. w-dueck silenced the automated CRAS Red-Deltas coming from the RMM-A and turned his back to the window. He typed out another line of script. A message flashed across the screen. *Warning: This action will use all remaining db power. Execute script?*

"Jewels, forgive me," he whispered as the door facing him smashed open. Smiling, he pressed the *Y* key on the RMM-A. He thought he could hear Jewels screaming as blinding white engulfed the Refuge.

The lone dryad watched in silence as the army moved alongside the forest. She cocked her head in confusion as a break in the troops came. Looking carefully, she saw a glint of light off of something crystalline. Rushing through treetops to keep up with the army, she looked again and saw a magelike man carrying a charred staff, a cracked crystal on it's top. Behind the mage rode several troopers carrying between them the body of a man, burn marks covering every exposed inch of his body. She gasped silently in realization that it was the same man who had stayed behind in the buildings that had appeared yesterday morning. The treetops rustled as the dryad pulled back to the cover of the forest. Her curiosity now greater then ever.

Overly Protective

By Jewels - Sep 2 2009

Nana was conflicted. As much as she hated Jewels being in turmoil, it felt so good to be complete while she comforted her dryad. What had just happened, Nana worked to put together. She had felt the air crackle with electricity and the earth shake her mighty trunk, she had heard the thundering ground and could sense the cloud of dust that now settled over all her leaves. But Jewels' pain... it was pain for members of the refuge. No. Pain *from* members of the refuge. What could possibly have happened to make both the refuge members suffer such pain and Ermaria have an earthquake? Nana puzzled over it, analyzing Jewels' thoughts and memories while she rested in peace unawares. Strom had told Jewels to stop... as if it was of her doing. Why would he think that?

Realization suddenly came to Nana. She knew very little more than Jewels about what a Designer was, having only heard whispered rumors or legendary tales about them. But one constant rang through all the stories. A Designer *was a god!* Nana would have chuckled if she was able. Her little Jewels? A god? Surely with all her frailty she couldn't really be. Though, Nana had to admit, Jewels had grown exponentially in power and knowledge since her childhood years. What was a god, anyway? From Jewels memories of studying Greek Mythology, it was any entity with greater power than the common-folk. Jewels certainly had that. Perhaps that made Nana one, too. Nana was amused again and her branches shook sending a rainfall of leaves down around them.

Well, if Jewels was a god, then maybe she *did* have something to do with the earthquake and the pain of the Refuge's members. She *had* been wishing for Will when it happened... and something went wrong? If Jewels was unaware of the power she had here, she undoubtedly wouldn't know how to control it. Perhaps, perhaps... Nana decided not to tell Jewels about her musings. After all, no point in making her worry about something she *might* have done. Instead Nana just enjoyed Jewels' presence and continued in her thoughts.

A gift... Nana would give Jewels a gift. After some quiet branch rustling with the nearby trees, Nana found Jewels the perfect gift. The sheath for that ruby dagger had just been left on the ground to rot, but Nana used a root to coax it closer to her trunk. She wrapped it into her bark to wait for the next time Jewels emerged.

Jewels had recovered most of her senses but she still felt queasy. And yet, she could wait no longer. She *had* to get back to the Refuge and it's members. She had to find out what was wrong and help if she could. When she stepped out of Nana, she looked for the dagger she had held in her hand but it wasn't there anymore. With a puzzled look she turned back to Nana, put a hand on her trunk, and looked down smiling. It hung in it's sheath around her waste under a fold of cloth so it wasn't so obvious. Jewels took two steps back and whispered goodbye before teleporting...

or at least trying to teleport. But the attempt only made her more nauseous and too dizzy to stand. She slumped against Nana's trunk gasping for breath.

Nioca! Jewels cried out in her mind, panic-stricken. I can't get back to the refuge! Something's wrong. I...

Nioca cut her off. It's little wonder. The Refuge isn't on the internet plane anymore. She was about to start throwing a barrage of questions at him but he anticipated. They're fine Jewels. They're all fine. Will was just attempting to transport everyone here at once and he accidentally brought the whole refuge. Buildings, pond, dirt and all. They all blacked out for a while, but nobody is badly hurt.

Jewels made no attempt to stifle her relief or her gratitude at Nioca being so forthcoming. Oh thank goodness, she gushed. The dizziness had subsided and Jewels stood but still leaned against Nana as her stomach did a flip.

Are you alright? The hesitant thought carried with it a crumb of concern, but regret followed soon after as Jewels' surprise and enjoyment of it was quite clear.

Instead of teasing him about it though, Jewels just answered the question truthfully. I've been better, but I'll survive.

Good, because there's someone here who's been asking for you and he hasn't been too polite about it.

Here? Here where? And who?

Well there's no way I'm going to relay the messages between you, so it'll be better if I just show you. Jewels was about to ask him what he meant when she felt his mind open up in a way she'd never experienced before. She couldn't quite explain the sensation but it was... *bigger*. As if she were feeling with senses outside herself.

The scenery changed to a clearing on a grassy plain and Nioca's unusually gaunt face was now just a few feet in front of her. A new wave of nausea and vertigo hit and it was too much for Jewels. She leaned forward vomiting at his feet thankful she had been leaning against Nana or else she was sure she would have fallen right into it. A little disgust and smug satisfaction came through from Nioca as he stepped back to stay clear of the mess, but shock and surprise quickly overwhelmed it. Although she had gained a splitting headache, Jewels tried to clear her mind as she looked up at him. With his pale skin and a much thinner body, Jewels was surprised she recognized him at all. He stood mouth open looking behind her.

Jewels turned around to look at Nana too... It suddenly hit her. Nioca had transported them both to his location. *"Nioca,"* she whined aloud. "Why on earth did you bring Nana with?"

"I... I didn't try to," he stuttered. "I was only focusing on you."

Others who walked by stopped to gawk and the giant tree that had just appeared in the middle of the courtyard. Her branches shivered in the wind... except there was no wind. "Nana?" Jewels asked with concern focusing on her tree. "Nana, are you alright?" She had asked the question hoping to get a reassurance from her... hoping that the feeling of distress she had was her own and not Nana's but her branches continued to quake and her leaves continued to tremble.

"Nana, what's wrong? How can I help?" Jewels was on the verge of crying and desperate to help her sanctuary. She sunk her hands into the bark, trying to better understand what was wrong. She realized that her headache was actually Nana in agony and got the distinct feeling that she was being strangled. Nana sent her a mental picture of her roots being shoved into a place where there was no room for them. "Nioca!" she yelled, though he was standing close. "The pressure... There's too much pressure! *You're killing her!*" She hadn't been very coherent but it had been enough. Nioca opened his mind once again and the pressure lifted. There was also an increased amount of nutrients and water in the soil that was left.

Nana calmed a bit though Jewels could tell she was still shaken. Jewels calmed too though an unspoken thought bounced around in her mind. Nioca had heard it loud and clear and she knew it, You're killing ME.... Jewels thought she should be angry, furious even at this blunder, but she and Nana only felt utterly vulnerable. Walking closer to Nioca with a hanging head, she whispered, "So now you know... If you really want me dead, all you have to do is cut her down." Jewels started walking away. She felt violated on Nana's behalf.

"I can put her back," Nioca called after her but she didn't acknowledge him. He raised his voice a little, "Jewels, I..." But he stopped and annoyingly butt into her mind. Jewels, I can put her back. Exactly the way she was.

No... No, she will not forget... She never forgets, but she will live. She has endured worse. Her thoughts trailed off for a moment before she suddenly twirled to stare directly at Nioca. Promise me something.

What? Nioca asked suspiciously glancing left and right to see if anyone was observing them.

When you kill me, if you do kill me, leave Nana out of it. She doesn't deserve to have her life cut short because you hate me. I was always taught that if a Dryad died, their tree would die soon after, but Nana's a fighter. She's a survivor! She may not like life without me but she deserves to live. Promise me, Nioca. He hesitated for a moment. Promise me!! Her eyes were aflame and her thoughts were fierce. Finally Nioca gave a barely perceivable nod. Jewels dropped her head and turned away from him once more. She started walking towards what looked like the main building wiping away a tear. "Thank you," she whispered aloud. His ears couldn't hear it but she knew his heart had.

Nioca wordlessly gave her a mental map of the place. He zoomed in until the face of Kaylas filled her mind and Jewels walked onward.

Nana's branches had settled down, but on the inside she still quaked. Being ripped from the only place she had ever known, with fellow trees on every side, and shoved into this strange clayed soil with barely a tree in sight? The shock of it had affected her more than she had let Jewels know. A new fear had also surfaced... Nioca was a Designer. *Nioca was a god!* With a mere thought Nana and Jewels had been transported who knew how far. He could kill them both... with a mere thought.

Kaylas sat in the small bed chamber he had been assigned rubbing his temples. What a day it had been...

Vergil impatiently paced or stood tapping his foot beside him. "How long do we have to wait here?" His irritation was plain as day. "This place gives me the willies."

"We wait until Jewels comes," Kaylas kept his voice calm and collected thought he felt neither. He was also quite unsettled being in this 'Sanctuary' Nioca had led them to. In truth he was on the verge of panic wondering where Jewels was, but showing that would do noting to speed her arrival so he would wait. "However long that takes," he said aloud more to himself than to Vergil.

Vergil snorted. "If I was Fire Lord, we'd have defeated the VRP already."

Kaylas shook his head. "If you were Fire Lord, we wouldn't even be here."

Vergil smirked at him. "True, true... And it'd be for the better. I can guarantee that."

Kaylas didn't respond except to shake his head again. He went back to rubbing his temples trying not to think traiterous thoughts... even if he agreed with them.

They continued to wait in silence except for the sound of Vergil's feet. Ten minutes? An hour? Kaylas couldn't tell, but the gentle rapping at the door startled him. He jumped up, barely daring to hope, and pushed Vergil aside though he had been closer to the door. When he opened it, relief flooded over him. Jewels stood there sporting a weak smile. Too glad to hold back, he immediately wrapped her in a hug. She seemed a little surprised but quickly relaxed and reciprocated.

"Ugh," Vergil groaned. "Enough with the sappy, happy to see you crap. Cut it out before it turns into sappy, emotional, happy to see you crap. We're here on business so let's act like it."

Jewels released her grip and smirked. "Good to see you, too, Vergil." She walked over and hugged him anyway. Kaylas couldn't help but smile as Vergil rolled his eyes but still gave his sister a good squeeze. Kaylas shut the door as Jewels straightened up. "Alright then, report."

Kaylas stepped over and saluted smartly. "Message for me read and executed, *sir*. Message to Vergil delivered, *sir*. Message to Dmph..."

Vergil had clapped his hand over Kaylas' mouth and whispered harshly. "Not here!" His eyes were wide looking around the room in suspicion. "Walls can have ears, you know." Kaylas nodded, glad Vergil had stopped him in time, especially since Jewels suddenly looked a bit self-conscious, too.

"Right, right. Thanks. Um... Three companies have been assembled and are ready to mobilize against the VRP at your order, *sir*... Um... *All* orders complete with preparations underway, *sir*.

Jewels looked a tiny bit confused but nodded her head regardless. She seemed to look past him as she thought for a moment before continuing with more authority than Kaylas had heard her speak in a long time. "The three companies are to be brought here to await the strike. They are to be instructed to remain in corporeal form until in battle. Nioca's already shown you how to use the portal, yes?"

Kaylas nodded, remembering how Nioca had insisted that he go find Vergil on the fire plane and bring him here. In reality, Kaylas thought he was just trying to get rid of him for a while. He couldn't blame Nioca, though. Kaylas *had* been rather annoying is his restlessness.

Jewels moved on turning to Vergil. "Report."

Vergil also saluted, although a bit mockingly. "Message received and executed, *sir*. Bluebloods 101st Regiment approved and being assembled, *sir*. Ready for mobilization, *sir*."

"Good, good," Jewels mumbled again far off in thought. Soon she snapped back to attention. "I don't presume to command the Bluebloods, but they may be brought here also whenever they are ready." Vergil nodded and Jewels mirrored in approval. "Is there any other business to report?" Kaylas and Vergil exchanged a glance before they shook their heads. "Very well then, dismissed."

All three relaxed their shoulders though none made any move to leave. "Um... Jewels?" Kaylas didn't want to be the bearer of yet more bad news so soon after they had been reunited but it *had*to be dealt with. He knew Jewels wouldn't forgive him if he waited much longer. "There's... There *is* something else you need to see."

Jewels gave him a curious look. "What? What is it?"

"Just... follow me."

Jewels followed Kaylas down yet another hallway. Her numerous attempts to get him to tell him where he was taking her had all been waved off or ignored so she had resigned herself to waiting. Finally he had come to a stop in front of a large archway, turning to face her looking unsure of himself. She glanced into the almost empty room seeing only an altar at the other end of the tall chamber. He fidgeted in front of her opening his mouth to speak but closing it again. He looked down then into the room and finally motioned for her to go inside. Jewels frowned at his lack of explanation. What could be so terribly difficult to tell her? She opened her own mouth to protest but closed it again shaking her head. She'd play it his way.

Turning into the room she looked left and right, hoping for any clue to the mystery. Other than the unnecessarily high ceiling, it was of modest size. The floors and walls were completely smooth and of a plain white speckled marble. In fact, besides the altar, the only other notable feature was a single window above it at the back wall. The sun was at just the right height to illuminate the altar to a brighter white than normal.

Jewels footsteps echoed in her ears as she approached the altar. She looked back quizzically at Kaylas who held his hands clasped in front of his mouth. The worried look in his eyes did nothing to settle her nerves. A foot from the altar she stopped. It didn't look like anything extraordinary although she had to admit, she did feel an energy about it. For a full minute she stood staring... waiting... holding her breath. She was about to turn back to demand an explanation when a thud and a whimper from behind the altar made her jump. She looked at Kaylas wide-eyed only to have him nod and start walking slowly towards her. Cautiously, Jewels started walking around the altar peering over the top. Someone sat huddled there in the shadow, arms defensively over their head. Their clothes were practically shredded revealing scars

underneath. Their arms were hidden in shadow and seemed to shiver despite the warmth of the room.

With trepidation she took one more step around the altar and reached out a hand against her better judgment. At her touch the person let out such a terrorized scream that Jewels herself cried out and rushed backwards. They looked at her with unseeing eyes before scrambling away to the opposite corner. Her heart stopped. Her hand had only brushed theirs but the pain that had seared up her fingers was unmistakable. In retrospect, she didn't blame Kaylas for not explaining it to her before, because nothing could have prepared her for the sight of her battered son cowering before her.

"I found him like this in your bedroom at the refuge." Kaylas' voice was soft and sympathetic though it did little to lessen her horror. "Don't know how he got there or what happened to him, though I have my suspicions. He wouldn't talk to me. Barely acknowledged he even knew me." Jewels gasped in her first breath since the touch, tears starting to roll down her face. "Had to tell him I was bringing him to you to get him to even consider letting go of your bedpost. Once we got here he started asking for you constantly. Nioca finally told him he'd take us to your room. This is where he brought us and he's sat there like that ever since."

As little as Jewels could form coherent thoughts at this point, she managed a halfway accusatory one at Nioca. You... you knew about this?

His tone was careful, almost gentle. I thought it would be better to have it come from someone you trust.

And... Jewels struggled to even acknowledge the name. Her stifled anger as hot as her bound soul allowed. Nalyd?

Confined for the moment. He was almost as difficult to pull from his lab as Stillborn was from your room.

Jewels exhaled her first breath since the touch. She hadn't even noticed that Kaylas had put his arm around her to support her. "Jewels?" his voice was hesitant... searching.

"Leave us," she mumbled. "I... I need to be alone with him." She had meant the statement for both of them hoping not to have to fight any arguments. "*Please,*" she added at Kaylas' hesitance.

Finally he nodded. "If you need *anything* you know where to find me," he said before he disappeared around the corner.

Stillborn had not moved from his corner nor ceased his shaking. When Jewels felt like they were alone, or as close to alone as they could get, she slid over and sat next to him. As quiet as she could muster while still being heard she spoke to him. "Stillborn," he flinched and shied away. "Stillborn, it's me. Jewels." He dared to peek out of his arms at her. "It's your mother."

He lowered his arms slowly and Jewels bit her lip at her first real look at his blackened face. "I... I have no name," he started slowly. "I am... a creation. I have no... m-mother." They sounded more like questions than statements. Questions he feared to dare to ask.

Jewels smiled though she wanted to cry. She took his hand in hers, bearing through the pain though his flinch broke her heart. She mused aloud "It wasn't enough to take your childhood, and your freedom, but now he takes your security and your dignity as well?" She slowly reached her

other hand towards his face. A face, now, only a mother could love. He shied away whimpering but his head was already against the wall and didn't have anywhere else to go. She cupped his face looking into his frightened eyes. "You are flesh of my flesh and bone of my bone. Nothing Nalyd can say or do will ever change that. You are and will always be *my son* and I will *always* be your mother."

Stillborn's countenance softened in uncertainty. Jewels held her breath, hoping against hope that it would sink in. "I..." Stillborn's voice caught in his throat, but then he cleared it and tried again. "I am Stillborn." Jewels nodded and smiled coaxing a fragment of a smile from him as well. "I am Stillborn," he said with more confidence. Then as if stating a fact in authority he boomed out, "I am Stillborn! And you are my *mother*!"

"Yes," Jewels said enthusiastically, "and I'm going to do everything in my power to make sure that Nalyd will never hurt you again." No sooner had the words left her mouth, then Stillborn wrapped his arms around her and wept. She wept with him, at first from the physical pain of it, but soon enough her nerve endings went numb and she wept from their shared emotional pain. Eventually, he fell asleep with his head in her lap and she wept for his future and how she would protect him from Nalyd when she could barely protect herself from the mad little shaper.

An hour had passed, maybe two. Jewels played with Stillborn's hair as her promise echoed in her mind. *Everything in my power... everything in my power...* The statement seemed so simple and yet... it was not. Jewels no longer had the power to harm Nalyd. She couldn't even bring herself to consider asking someone else to do it for her. She thought any normal mother would kill for their child, and yet, Stillborn was no ordinary child. Did she know enough about shaping to presume that Nalyd's death wouldn't adversely affect Stillborn, too? Hardly. So perhaps her subdued rage was a good thing, but if the danger from Nalyd could not be eliminated, how would she protect Stillborn? She needed something that could keep Nalyd *away* from Stillborn. Something to keep that accursed scythe from getting anywhere near his now scarred body.

If only she had as much power as Nioca. Transplanting a whole tree? How *had* he done that? No sooner had she asked herself the question, then she realized she already knew. Nioca was a Designer. That's how she knew that *she* was a Designer, because Nioca knew it. And... *that's why he didn't want her to know what she was.* 'Everything in her power' suddenly became more substantial. *Much* more substantial. What were the limits of a power that reaches outside of oneself? Jewels didn't know, but she intended to find out.

No time like the present. Jewels gently wiggled her way out from underneath Stillborn. He gave a snort and rolled on his side but did not wake. She stood slowly as long tortured muscles began to feel normal again. In a way, she almost missed the grating of his touch. Perhaps it was something she could get used to. One could only hope. Jewels gathered her thoughts for a few moments leaning against the altar for support. *Your altar.* It was her own thought but it startled her. *Nioca told Stillborn this was your room, therefore, it's your altar. ... Our altar.* She looked at it with new eyes running her fingers over the cold stone. Then she turned to take in the plain room again. *Your room. ... Our room!* A place where she should feel safe. Where Stillborn should BE safe. Where *anyone* should be safe.

Jewels knew what she wanted to do. She had no idea if she could do it or not, but she had to try. She turned back to the altar and tried to remember what Nioca had done. Opened herself up just like...

What are you doing? She had been expecting it even as harsh as it was, and so didn't lose her concentration. She was only surprised that he had not asked before she had started.

You know what I am doing, she intoned. We are one. As she thought she reached outwards without fear, feeling his mind involuntarily scrutinize every step of the way.

Jewels you need to stop. You don't know what you're doing. Jewels didn't respond, instead focusing on her room... her altar. You don't know what you're getting yourself into. His tone was more irritated.

Jewels smiled at his warning all the while piggybacking off of his knowledge and expertise. His mind instinctively flagged errors in her technique which she pressed to greater and greater lengths. She saw the length and breadth of her room. She saw the smooth marble, noticing for the first time that it held not a single crack. This sanctuary was not made out of blocks of stone... but out of one continuous stone! Even the altar was fused to the floor. There were no imperfections in it. No mistakes... It could not have been made by human hands. And there it was, as plain as day, the reality of it's existence. Nioca had made it. Nioca the Mighty Designer had made the whole thing. Jewels bowed in her mind to him while still expanding her perceptions of the room around her. She saw Stillborn, every scar, every hair, ever pore... She heard every sigh, every breath, every heartbeat... "It's so beautiful." she murmured aloud. Stillborn stirred at her voice and she saw his eyes flutter open without looking at him. In fact her eyes were now closed as she saw with senses outside herself.

So far she had done nothing but observe. She had gained a new perspective but she wasn't about to stop there. She switched gears focusing on exactly what she wanted to accomplish.*Safety... Protection... Sanctuary!* No Jewels! He was more urgent now, even a bit desperate to dissuade her. You don't have enough energy for that. You're going to get yourself killed!

And that matters to you, why? She felt his mind search for reasons that it should matter. If I do die, you will make do without me, happily I'm sure. Now please don't ruin my concentration. I want this to be perfect. She felt his frustration, both at being unable to change her mind and at unwillingly helping her with his experience. Jewels took full advantage of the resources available to her. She *would* make Stillborn safe!

Jewels started her creation and all the walls, ceiling, floor, and altar of her room started glowing with a bright blue light. Stillborn scrambled up crying out in surprise but Nioca's disciplined mind helped her to pay no heed. The blue light gave way to purple as hundreds of thousands of tiny runes began etching themselves on every surface. Jewels was so giddy with the thought of her end goal that she almost didn't notice her legs give out beneath her. No, not yet. Just a little more!

I told you, Jewels! It's too much for you. Stop it before you're dead! Although she didn't stop she knew he was right. Jewels had been on death's doorstep before and she recognized the call. Her own heartbeat rang slower in her own ears. She had not the strength to complete her task and live to tell about it... But the task was more important than her life. She had made a promise. If she

had to give up one to keep the other... she chose to keep the promise to her son. But too soon, the glowing of the runes started to fade. Too soon, the etchings ceased. It was incomplete...I told you!! Nioca's thought rang loud and clear as though he had shouted it right next to her.

Failed! Failed! She had failed her son. With her last breath she whispered his name. *"Stillborn."* With her last ounce of strength she sensed him coming near and the familiar burn of his touch as he picked her up. The burning spread throughout her body... such a welcome sensation. Such... such... *LIFE!* Jewels was almost overwhelmed by the massive amount of energy that burned through her veins. She felt like every inch of her was on fire and it was... euphoric! Eyes snapping open to meet the frightened stare of her son, she looked beyond his eyes to what lie behind them. The life forces of a thousand creations. A power she briefly remembered sharing with him one other time... on the roof of the Admin Tower.

Jewels wasted not another second. She grabbed a hold of his power, claiming it as her own, and bent it to her will. The walls glowed brighter than the first time, blindingly so. The runes were etched faster with more intricacy. The very air rumbled around them and all the while Jewels didn't take her eyes off of Stillborn's. The runes completed themselves but Jewels wasn't quite satisfied. As a final touch, she added flair. Mock alcoves with plush benches, yards and yards of shimmering fabric hanging from the walls, an intricately weaved rug almost identical to the runed floor beneath it but as soft as a chinchilla's fur, then finally... the window that shown down on her now runed altar turned to a circle of stained glass with the same protective runes. The sunlight now created a purple halo around the pair.

Finished, Jewels let go of her enchantment. She suddenly felt very, very weak. Her son's power was his own again and she had barely a shred of her own left. She fell limp in Stillborn's arms wondering just how much of that he had understood. He laid her down in one of the new alcoves looking at her uneasily. "Mother?" he started hesitantly.

"Hmm?" Jewels forced her eyes to stay open while he talked. "What, dear?"

"I..." his eyes were full of confusion. "I was afraid... You... you were..." Jewels rested a hand on his stained cheek. Now she knew what Nalyd meant by 'beautiful song', for indeed the daggers that pierced her senses were an incredibly beautiful display of the power that lie beneath. Finally settling his thoughts Stillborn looked her in the eye. "Please don't do that again. Please?"

Jewels was a little put off. She realized how much she had *liked* having the power of creation. But his eyes pleaded with hers... how could she say no? She had done without this power before, she could do without it again. She tried to tell him so but found she couldn't. She thought she heard him say something else, but weariness overtook her body before she could comprehend it. She hadn't even told him he was safe now. Her mind struggled to say the words but her lips were too heavy to move... too heavy to even push a breath out. Blackness overtook her.

Kaylas looked over the troops feeling rather satisfied. He had managed to organize and mobilize all three companies in just a few short hours. Vergil was still working on contacting some of the Bluebloods but he was mostly done, too. He dismissed all the captains and started walking back to his room.

As he rounded a corner, a wave of dizziness almost toppled him. He needed another curing potion... already. The pouch at his belt felt way too light as he grabbed one out and downed it. A quick glance held no good news. He was down to only three left. Jewels had thought they would last a whole week and now it looked like they'd barely hold him for three days. How long could he keep this up? He couldn't cheat death forever.

Nearing his room, he noticed Nioca knocking on the door. Kaylas cleared his throat startling his unsavory visitor. Remaining cordial he asked, "Were you looking for me?" Nioca nodded then seemed to fidget. Kaylas squinted his eyes recognizing the stance of a bearer of bad news. "What's wrong?"

"I... I need your help," Nioca spat out though he seemed loath to do so. "It's Jewels..." Kaylas straightened up fixing Nioca with a steely glare. "I... I think she's dead."

A million emotions ran through him at once, though anger blazed in the forefront. With barely controlled rage he tried to process the statement. "You *think?*" he seethed.

"Well, I just can't... reach her to... verify."

"Where is she?!" Kaylas roared.

"Still in her room with Stillborn, but..." Kaylas immediately took off at a full sprint. He barely heard Nioca call after him. "Wait!"

A thousand thoughts ran through his mind about what might have happened. An accident? Did Nalyd escape? Did Stillborn become violent? He unsheathed his sword as he turned into the last hallway. He counted the archways to Jewels' room. One... two... three... Kaylas slowed in surprise as his eyes took in the changed decor. Did he count wrong? Was he in the wrong hall? But no, there was Stillborn sitting near the back next to Jewels who lay limply on a couch that hadn't been there just a few hours ago. "Jewels?" he called as he ran to the entrance. Suddenly, it felt like something slammed into him head-on. Kaylas fell backwards, dazed from the impact. Still he lifted his sword trying to see through the double vision. "Who's there?" he demanded. "Show yourself!"

But there was no answer save a whimper from Stillborn. No assailant to be seen on all sides. Shakily Kaylas stood up rubbing a lump on his forehead, wincing at a bruised shoulder, and limping on a sore knee. He raised his sword in front of him looking left and right as he started walking forward again. If he hadn't been so alert, he might not have been able to dodge when his own sword bounced back at his face. Eyes wide Kaylas stared at the open air in front of him. More cautiously he brought down his sword until it hit a barrier at the threshold of the room. Kaylas reached out a hand to feel the invisible wall between him and his goal. Jewels lay just out of his reach. A frustrated grunt from behind him brought him around in an attack stance again.

Nioca walked up slowly. "I was hoping you'd be able to get in... because I can't." His admission seemed just as difficult as his request for help had been.

Kaylas lowered his sword, surveying more carefully the barrier he was up against. The archway had been encrusted with sparkling jewels in intricate patterns. Runes of amethist intwined around a background of sapphire on the underbelly of the arch. The outside looked like a mixture of

ruby and emerald. "What is this?" Kaylas asked. "This wasn't here before. Who put this here?" His tone was accusatory as he glanced between Nioca and Stillborn coming to rest on Jewels.

"She did," Nioca stated mater-of-factly. Kaylas' eyes never left her form hoping to see a stretch, a twich, a breath... anything. But she lay ominously still. "I've tried yelling her name a dozen times with no response, and HE won't help." Nioca indicated Stillborn who was awake and staring at the pair warily.

"He knows me a little better," Kaylas offered. "Maybe I can get him to cooperate." Nioca looked doubtful and shrugged while holding up a hand as if to say, go right ahead. "Stillborn? Is Jewels alright?"

The sulking man hesitated but answered quietly. "She is... sleeping."

Kaylas wondered if Stillborn even understood what death was. "Would you bring her to us?" he tried. Stillborn stiffened and shook his head once. Kaylas pushed, "We want to help her, but we can't reach her from here. We *need* you to bring her to us." But Stillborn only shook his head all the more while pulling his legs in closer to himself. Kaylas was getting more angry but doubted stillborn would respond to threats. "Can you tell us what happened, at least?"

After a moment of uncertainty he responded, "She made the walls burn with light. Then she went to sleep."

Kaylas turned to Nioca who held his forehead on one hand. "Do you know what happened here? Surely you have some kind of idea."

"She was messing with magic that she had no business messing with," he stated coldly. "I warned her not to... Told her it could be *fatal*. But she wouldn't listen to me!" Nioca's voice rose in frustration.

Kaylas didn't like his tone one bit. "Don't you have magic?" he jeered. "Can't YOU take this thing down?"

Nioca's face was priceless. Offended and yet... defeated. "No," he mumbled. "I've already tried. The wards themselves just absorb my efforts."

"Then how do we get in?!" Kaylas yelled more at the air then at Nioca, pounding a fist against the invisible wall. Then as loud as he could muster, "*Jewels!!*" She still didn't stir, though Stillborn slapped his hands over his ears.

Nioca's head was back in his hand. "Do you think I'd have asked you here if I knew that?"

"Of course not..." Kaylas softened his voice just a bit. His gaze was back to looking at the jewel encrusted archway. He squinted and scrutinized. Maybe if they could chip some of it off, it would weaken the barrier... But his fingers couldn't even touch the runes on the underside of of the archway. He could only feel the rubies and emeralds on the outside. Their pattern was different than the runes. In fact they didn't seem to be symmetrical at all. Kaylas looked closer when realization dawned on him. "Hey, look at this..." He pointed at the rubies. "This is firescript!" He sounded more excited than he should have been, but any clue was better than nothing. The words went all the way around the outside of the arch in the beautifully ancient alphabet of his people.

Nioca perked up. "Well, what does it say?"

Slowly and with venerable tone Kaylas began to read:

"Of all with loathing, none shall pass. Of all new ill will, none will last. No thing for harm shall pass this gate. No thirst for blood, no love for hate. No hostile spell, no want for sin, Protection from these lies within."

Kaylas had reached the zenith and stopped for a moment. He glanced guiltily at Nioca who seemed just as self conscious. "Well, that explains a few things," he chuckled uncomfortably.

"Indeed," Nioca nodded pursing his lips.

Clearing his throat he continued down the other side:

"Refine yourself in fires hot If granted entry, you are not. All wrongs forgive. Your grudges cease. Strip off all hatred. Put on peace. Let go of malice. Gain new heart, To share the boon these jewels impart."

Kaylas stepped back as he finished, crossing his arms in front of him. "Um... I think we're going to need someone else's help on this one." He looked at Nioca sheepishly knowing full well he wouldn't be able to comply with the requirements in any short order.

"For once I agree with you," Nioca nodded with shared admission.

"Got any ideas about who?"

"There are a few who come to mind." Nioca turned to walk away.

"I'll just wait here," Kaylas hollered after him. He cushioned his head with his forearm while he leaned against Jewels' unseen yet effective protection. He couldn't help but think of the roof of the Admin Tower where Jewels had bound her soul to her friends... and almost died doing it. *What have you done Jewels? What have you done?*

The light... the light was calling. It whispered her name. The sweet, sweet, light. Jewels opened her eyes to see an old smiling face looking down at her. "She's awake," he said a bit loudly. "I think she'll pull through." She sat up slowly, taking in her surroundings but not really recognizing where she was. "Quite impressive, if I do say so myself..." the man started rambling as he helped her up. "And I do. I really do." She looked down at the couch she had been laying on with it's velvety plush pillows. "Especially for a first attempt. Quite a lofty goal, that." She looked down at the blue and purple rug that looked like it'd be lovely to walk on barefoot. "Don't think I've ever seen anything quite like it, and I've been around in my time, believe you me." She looked at the runed wall and the altar... *her altar.* "But you must be careful you don't overdo it, you hear?" Jewels nodded while looking over her shoulder. Stillborn stood at a distance looking like he wanted to run to her and bolt away at the same time. "Designing is no small task. A god you may be, but immortal you are not."

Jewels stared at him bemused. "A god?"

The man chuckled at her ignorance. "Of course, child," he mused. "What else would we call someone who could make something like this?" His arm swept over the the expanse of the room while Jewels was shaking her head.

"How about a friend?"

He laughed yet again, his white hair bouncing around his jolly wrinkled face."A friend in high places, at least. Hmm?" He walked her towards the archway and she watched it sparkle in the torchlight. She didn't realize how beautiful she had made it. She stopped a few feet away looking at the odd pairing of Nioca and Kaylas waiting for her.

Kaylas looked anxious for her to reach them, but Nioca... Nioca looked... he looked... she couldn't quite place it. Usually it was so easy to tell what he was feeling from their link but now he was... just not there. Nioca? she tried experimentally. He didn't respond. She stepped forward till they were but one foot apart. Only the archway separated them. "Nioca?" she prodded aloud. He nodded at her. "Looks like I survived."

"Looks like." He stepped back without another word.

Jewels watched him for a moment before Kaylas spoke up. "We've been pretty worried. Don't suppose you could step over on this side?"

Jewels looked at him, suddenly realizing that he was holding himself up against nothing. "Of course," she smiled. "We're gonna have to work on that attitude of yours, though." She stepped over the threshold and was accosted by the familiar undercurrents of Nioca's mind. She hugged Kaylas enduring an especially hard squeeze.]We'll have to work on your attitude, too, she thought to Nioca.

I don't think so, was his only reply.

Kaylas finally let go clearing his throat. "I think changing my attitude to incorporate more peace right before we go to war might be a conflict of interests. Speaking of... Three companies present and accounted for, *sir*. Ready for battle, *sir*."

Jewels nodded in satisfaction. "Has Will been informed? I don't think I've even talked to him since..." her voice trailed off, not wanting to remember the last time they spoke. "...a long time ago."

"Well, no," Kaylas started. "He stayed behind at the Refuge when the rest of us came here."

Jewels stiffened. "What?"

"Something about not letting the core into the hands of the enemy."

A bad feeling came over her as she turned to Nioca. "He told me to get everyone to safety while he took care of some things there." He tried to look her in the eye but shifted uncomfortably. He seemed to withdraw his mind from their link.

Jewels stepped closer to him. "What aren't you telling me?" she demanded. "What are you trying to hide?" She stared at him trying to probe... trying to force it out of him. He fought but only half-heartedly before giving up. Jewels' hands flew to her mouth. "*No*..." she whispered, "*Please, no!*" In her minds eye she had seen an army descending on the Refuge and it's sole inhabitant.How could you? How could you leave him there!?

Simple, Nioca thought back. He told me to. Well, that and I don't love him like you do. Guess I'm just not as attached. Jewels cupped her hands over her face and turned. Her eyes started tearing up. What to do? What to do?

Kaylas looked at her bewildered. "Jewels what is it?"

If Nioca wouldn't help Will, she'd do it herself. "I have to go," she stated very firmly. "I have to go get Will." She started mumbling... "I need some stuff. I need a sword. If anyone even lays a hand on him I'll... *I'll*... But first..." Jewels turned to walk to Stillborn who still stood warily where he had before, only to be smacked to a dead stop at the threshold. "Ow..." Jewels pushed back rubbing her nose. "Hmm... even works on me. That's good to know," she mumbled, then louder she called to Stillborn. "Wait here, son. You're safe in this room. I'll be back as soon as I can." She then turned to the jolly old man who had hung back quite happy to just watch the discourse. "Would you mind bringing him some food and drink? Maybe some new clothes, too, please?"

He smiled widely and bowed. "Your son, did you say? I would consider it a sacred duty. I shall care for his every need until you return."

Jewels was about to protest but had a feeling she didn't have time to dissuade this Ermarian's zeal, so she just nodded and turned to leave. Both Kaylas and Nioca started following her.

"I'm coming with you," Kaylas declared.

"No!" Nioca insisted. "Nobody's going to get Will. Even if we took our whole army it'd be a suicide mission. They have ten times the numbers at this point and they're already converging on the Refuge. Will stayed to try to even out the odds."

"I can't just leave him there."

"I need you here. I need you to command your people." Nioca was adament but it didn't lessen Jewels' resolve one bit.

"Kaylas is my General. He will command the army on my behalf... and on yours. Will needs me more than you do." She quickened her pace, their footsteps echoing in the grand halls. Once they exited the building she scanned the clearing quickly. There was no one close so she turned on Kaylas. "Give me your sword," she commanded.

Kaylas hesitated but started to unbuckle it anyway. He handed it to her but he didn't let go. "I already thought I lost you once today. I don't want to lose you again."

"I can't let him die, Kaylas." She regretted the words once they left her lips if only for the pain she saw in his eyes. He let go of the sword in resignation. His eyes said it all. She was going to let *him* die... she wasn't fighting hard enough for *him*. Though she would cure him if she knew how, the fact remained that she had resigned herself to letting him go.

"Jewels, you're not going," Nioca interrupted.

"Yes, I am," she countered, turning to leave.

Nioca grabbed her arm and yanked her back, "Why won't you listen to me? You're going to get yourself killed!"

Jewels tore out of his grasp, staring him in the eye. You were right. I do love him. This is what one does for love. They fight for it or DIE trying. She turned away heading for the stables. Should she take one horse or two? Will and her could ride on the same one couldn't they?

Suddenly Jewels fell to the ground letting out a blood curdling scream. She felt like she was exploding! The eastern horizon was lit up brighter than the sun. Kaylas reached her first rolling her over. Jewels stared with wide but unseeing eyes. "I'm too late!" she wailed. "*I'm too late!!*"

If only just to stop the screaming in his head, Nioca hollered to Kaylas over her audible screaming. "Quickly, let's get her in her tree. She can recover there."

Nana received her tortured dryad once more. It quieted Jewels' mind and mouth but not her soul. For her soul mourned in her worst fear. Will was dead.

Jewels solemnly neared the edge of the forest. She quickened her pace as she noticed that the trees were leaning eastward, as if a giant force had pushed them out. She gasped as she saw a dead soldiers corpse hanging in one of the trees, as if a giant had thrown it there. Looking to her left and right, she noticed more cadavers, all looking to have been flung hundreds of feet. She steeled herself and ran through the remaining trees and out of the forest.

Jewels stood stock-still, unable to speak as she stared at the Refuge, a mile to her west. The grassland she had known as a child was gone. The rolling hills full of green grass were replaced by literal wasteland. She forced herself to walk forward, boots crunching on the pebbly sand, wincing as the wind blew gusts of silt into her face.

The walk into the Refuge was arduous, and she almost turned back many times, fearing the unknown sights before her.

A fine white dust coated the charred brick buildings. She felt as though she was being watched from the blackened windows of the buildings, but when she turned, nobody was there. Shivering slightly, she moved forward to the Admin Tower.

The door creaked open, and Jewels walked in. She decided to take the stairs after noticing the obvious list of the Tower. She looked into each open door as she passed. Nothing but blackness...until she reached a door on the 16th floor, leading into the News Center. Frowning at the dim light emanating from the doorway, Jewels slowly stepped in.

The room was dark except for a flickering, barely working screen mounted to the wall. Jewels ran forward to it, hoping to find information on what had happened. Punching a button at random on the keyboard attached to the screen, Jewels jumped as the display changed from flickering white to an ominous red. Slowly, as if it couldn't tell what to do, lines of text slowly appeared:

CRAS Alert system: Logs w-dueck - Grey (All Sectors) - 11F32 w-dueck - Sigma-Cyan-Delta (All sectors) - 11F33 Auto - Red-Delta (Nethergate) - 11F34 Auto - Red-Delta (BoE) - 11F35

The rest of the list was Red-Deltas in various buildings, until the end: *CRAS Failure - Error 15: Insufficient Database Power*. Jewels backed away slowly, and headed to the stairs. She was beginning to get an idea of what had happened.

A slamming door jolted her into action. She ran out to the inside of the Tower, looking out over the railing to see where the noise came from. She could only watch as a man dressed in the chain mail of a soldier ran back and forth screaming and clutching his head and toppled off of a railing many floors up. He fell to the rotunda at the bottom of the tower. Jewels almost retched as she heard the splatter of flesh on stone. Steeling herself--again--she summoned a fireball in her hand and headed upstairs.

The missing door to her room now matched the rest of the place, and Jewels stepped over the wreckage in the room. She headed to the hearth in the bedroom where she had left her orbs. She breathed a sigh of relief as she saw they were unharmed, if covered in soot and ash. She couldn't say the same for their stands though. All of them seem to have melted right underneath. Taking off her haversack, she picked up the orbs one at a time, putting them into it more gingerly than necessary. She gathered them quickly until she reached the place where Will's orb had been. Fresh tears threatened to roll down her cheeks at the reminder. It was gone. There wasn't a trace of it left on his melted stand. *Just keep moving,* she told herself as she turned to the charred remains of her office. There wasn't a single book left on her shelves but there *was* a large lump of glass. The jar that had held the shards of Nioca's orb had melted around them. She lifted it up and it sparkled in the light. Hmm... Maybe she could mold it back into a ball later. She put it in her bag as well and deftly tied it shut. She turned to leave the remaining wreckage behind without looking back.

She ran down the stairs as fast as she could, sobs escaping her lips. Out of the Admin Tower, past the muddied pond, past the empty ruined buildings. She picked up speed trying to put as much space between her and the ruins of the Refuge as she could as if it could help the pain... help her forget.

The lone dryad let out a sigh of relief as she watched the woman disappearing over the horizon, thankful that she had not been discovered. She held a swirling orb in her light green hand wondering why the woman had taken all the others and if she had wanted this one as well. She turned to leave these charred buildings behind, her desire to explore satisfied. She started on her way back to the heart of the forest. The Elders awaited a report.

Eight to Twelve

By Zoe - Sep 20 2009

Iffy was lying within a field. A beautiful, peaceful field full of white flowers that'll turn even the most psychotic person sane with their beauty. The sun washed over Iffy, a soothing, warm feeling. And he sat up when suddenly Saph appeared. A stormcloud washed across the sun, as the wind bent the flowers to its will. And Iffy could only watch as a hooded man appeared behind

Saph and stabbed her through her back...all the way through...as Saph fell into a bloody heap. And all the flowers within the field turned bloody red...

Iffy woke with a start, his pulse going higher than normal. He tried looking around, and then fell back into a blank, white sleep.

He finally woke up again, with Saph sitting next to him with a worried look in her face. "...so you're finally awake...it's about damn time! I was worried that..."

"I'm sorry Saph...w-what happened, anyways?"

"Well...Will decided to be *very* smart. He transported the entire Refuge into Ermaria! I was ok...but you...let's just say you weren't really conscious. Then everybody started to evacuate because an army was coming. Of course...they left us behind. Idiots. They didn't see that we were RIGHT in the (bleep) MIDDLE of the (bleep) REFUGE...well I ran with you to a nearby forest after they shut down the portal in our faces. And...Will stayed behind. While caring for you, I watched the hours go by. In about a day...well... the Refuge simply exploded after a struggle. I don't think Will survived."

"...What was Will thinking? He must have made a mistake"

"Yeah, some mistake"

"...I hope the others are safe"

"Pfft, I think we should worry about ourselves right now. Some troops stayed back to search the surrounding area. I've already killed two. And in your current condition, you're vulnerable. But now that you're awake, you should be able to take this."

Saph handed Iffy a potion. "I liberated it from one of the troops I killed. It should give you the strength to run for a while...but keep the magic to a minimum. I don't know how long it'll last on you. And as for your inner strength..."

"...I don't feel it anymore"

Iffy suddenly got very afraid. "Well...I don't know what happened...all I know is that something happened"

"Well this is just perfect"

A twig snapped. Iffy and Saph grew very quiet.

Suddenly a group of 20 or so troops stormed out.

"There's no way to handle them in our current condition..." Saph sighed.

A man stepped out from the rest. He then shouted...a bit too loudly, "Attention! Stop where you are! If you do as we say, you will be killed quietly!"

Saph held Iffy back when he tried to step up to them. *I'll take care of them.* She walked up in front of the men, and flashed her breasts while winking. While all but one of the men were just standing there wide-eyed, Saph dragged Iffy on his feet and started running with Iffy running just beside her with a shocked expression on his face.

"Did you have to do that, Saph?" "What, it was the only way to get a head start on running. I figured they'd be pervs who stare at girls who look only 12. I would never do it under other circumstances..." "Except that guy behind us"

The man was charging, and slowly catching up. "That doesn't work on me! I'm gay!"

"Dammit..."

"It happens"

While Iffy kept running, Saph turned around, jumped, and slammed her feet right into his face and kept on running.

Sunset

By Nioca - Sep 21 2009

After brief consideration, Nioca had made a decision. Having little knowledge of Dryads or their ways, he decided to return Jewels' tree back to its original location. It was easy enough to do... Until Nioca realized just how much matter he had transported, as his brief inability to breathe reminded him. It was very, very early in the morning, a reminder left by the chill in the air.

Nioca took a deep breath. Now that the enemy had attacked the Refuge, it'd be a short order before they came after the Valley of Design. It was the last stronghold. If only he could strike the VRP directly...

Wait...

Why *couldn't* he strike the VRP directly? The solution to their problem was so laughably simple... He knew where they'd be. He knew where the Emperor would be. And now, everyone that could protect them was here. There'd still be the massive army to contend with, but no matter the outcome, the VRP would be irreparably crippled.. The threat to Calamity Refuge would be over.

Set on his new task, he quickly ran through the halls of the Temple of Designers. He found and knocked on Syla's door again.

She answered wearily. "What is it, Nioca?" She asked with a yawn.

"Prepare everyone for battle. Get them into position to defend this valley. It's time to end this."

Around a table sat a large group. At its head, a throne holding a particularly bulbous man. Next to him, a tall thin man with a golden chain.

"I really must be going soon." The thin man stated. "As much as our victory pleases me, there is much more to be done. Ermaria must be united."

"I agree, of course." The bulbous Emperor stated. "But first, a toast! To you, Guenios! Leader of our salvation from the oppressive designers!" He raised a goblet of wine.

"To you, Emperor." The thin man Guenios stated calmly. "The wisest ruler to ever grace Ermaria."

A younger man raised a glass. "To the glorious victory of the Empire!"

"To the incompetence of the Designers!" Came another.

"To the foolishness of arrogant mortals!" Came a new cheer.

"To... wait, what?" The emperor paused.

Dead silence reigned for a moment.

"No, seriously, if it wasn't for you, I wouldn't have gotten this far!" A cocky voice stated. Nioca stood in a corner, raising a goblet in mock praise. "To you!"

The VRP members, as one, quickly stood and drew weapons. Swords, bows, crossbows, staves, and glints of ruby amongst them all. The emperor, meanwhile, sat dumbstruck, drool trailing down his chin.

"Really?" Nioca asked. "Well, it doesn't matter. You're all dead in five seconds."

"And how might that come to pass?" The man named Guenios snarled.

"Simple." Nioca waved his hand. There was the sudden sound of sickening thuds. Nioca had levitated numerous spiritkiller arrows out of one of the VRP assassin's quiver and launched them all at everyone in the room. In one swift move, each of his foes had been killed permanently.

Then Nioca doubled over. Such a feat had drained his already weakened body. Forcing himself back upright, he looked over the carnage. He couldn't believe it. All of the trouble in preparing to fight the VRP, and it went down faster than a snowman in a blast furnace. Of course, it wasn't all of them. But all the leaders had gathered themselves here, now joined in oblivion.

Satisfied with his victory, he started to leave. However, he suddenly became aware of a being at the edge of his senses. Something... not of Ermaria. Not something he had ever experienced before. Curious, he went behind the throne to a hidden door. Pushing it open, he made his way through a small, winding hall.

He could now see it. There was a creature standing at the door to some hidden chamber. It looked like a... raptor?

It turned to face him. There was a scroll in its claws, and a look of, or what seemed to be, shock on its face. "You!" It hissed. "How did you-?" It stopped talking an orb of dark energy flew at Nioca. Alarmed, Nioca ducked, and fired a blast of energy back. The raptor fell, but quickly started to get back up. Nioca started hammering it, blue bolts of ice striking its hide. With a final screech, it expired.

Nioca ran forward, grabbing the message. He became aware that the room he stood next to had a nameplate. Guenios... the same person that led the VRP. So this was a message addressed to him?

"Nioca, we need to get back to the Valley. The battle likely would have started by now."

"I know. But the battle won't be decided in the time it takes to read this.". Shaking his head, Nioca unrolled the scroll. His eyes quickly darted about as he read the message. It was a fast read, for the contents were something that had attracted the entirety of his focus. He read it a second time, unable to take it in. Yet only bits and pieces seemed to completely register in Nioca's stunned mind. A part of him wished he had never read it. That he had heeded Aryll's advice.

He quickly rolled the letter up and put it back in his robes. Suddenly, everything had a much greater urgency to it. The threat to Calamity Refuge hadn't been eliminated. Not even close. It was something beyond what Nioca or w-dueck had imagined.

They had been played. They had all been played.

Nioca shook his head. He needed a plan of action. He needed to get back to the Internet Plane. And quickly.

Nioca raced to the obsidian archway behind the Sanctuary. The battle was in full swing now. He heard the screams and cries of fighting and dying soldiers. But Nioca didn't care. Running a hand along the archway, he watched as the runes lit up. Light filled the archway, turning inward into a glowing corridor. "Aryll, we're ready!"

Aryll appeared, giving him a worried look. Something definitely wasn't right... Nioca was in a full-out panic. He was punching buttons on an RMM-A, drawing the attention of six nearby SimpleBots. He looked up at them and simply stated, "Follow me."

Aryll glanced up. The sun was rising well into the sky. It was late morning.

Without hesitation, the two ran into the archway, SimpleBots in close pursuit. The world around them seemed to change. They were corporeal, still... but the world behind them seemed to turn as if viewed through turbulent water. As they ran down the corridor, the sounds and sights behind them seemed to become further distorted... Soon, Ermaria was just a glowing wall of light.

However, the light they were running to was also changing. Vague, alien shapes became visible in the light. As they approached, it slowly started coalescing into something more recognizable. The color blue quickly became dominant. And as they reached the end, it became a normal image. They were staring out over a blue sea, tainted only by small bits of ash and debris.

Nioca stepped out of the archway. Then fell twelve feet into the water below, landing with a terrific splash. Aryll followed shortly thereafter. As Nioca sputtered and caught his breath, he looked up. The archway was perfectly suspended in midair, glowing ominously. The six SimpleBots shot out of the portal, and the portal shut down.

"SimpleBots!" Nioca sputtered. "Find the nearest transport and bring it back here!"

The SimpleBots flew off, leaving Nioca and Aryll bobbing in the water.

Fifteen minutes had passed. Nioca was getting panickier by the minute, and Aryll was now feeling rather panicky herself.

Finally, a sleek black vessel swooped down toward them. "Microsoft?" Nioca muttered to himself, spotting a logo on the side. Nevertheless, he climbed onboard, finding the six SimpleBots waiting for him. Shaking himself off, he looked over the controls. It looked like a normal control panel for a google craft, but there were a few extra gizmos off to the side.

"*This vehicle has telemetry on many islands.*" A simplebot droned.

"Okay..." Nioca said, wondering when he had asked the SimpleBot's opinion. Personally, Nioca was worried. There wasn't much time. He didn't have the time to learn the controls of a new craft. "SimpleBot, can you help me out here?

It buzzed.

"I need to narrow down the parameters here. First, it needs to be a medium-sized isle, capable of holding the entire Refuge, and have plenty of extra space for any additions. Second, it has to have a database core in place. Third, it has to has to be abandoned. And finally, it has to be pretty far away from here."

It buzzed again. A computer screen started flashing images at an incredible rate. Finally, the bot intoned, "*Three islands match your criteria. The first is a jungle island approximately 3,593 miles North-northeast. The second is an arctic isle 4,781 miles north. The third is temperate island 15,603 miles West.*"

"That first one will do it. But make sure to record this spot. I want to be able to return." Nioca responded.

"*Completed. ETA to island, 45 minutes.*"

Nioca braced himself as the craft blasted off to the northeast.

It was a quite a bit larger than he had anticipated. In fact, it was huge. Nevertheless, the jungle island looked like it would work fairly decently. Though Nioca suspected that w-dueck would likely have complaints over it.

The craft landed, and its passengers disembarked. "Stay close, bots. Keep your guns out" He stated. A piece of metallic wreckage had caught his eye. Wreckage that looked all to familiar. If it was what he thought it was... Well, he sincerely hoped nothing had been left activated.

Stepping past the wreckage, he saw that there were many more piles where it came from. Twisted metal littered the landscape. Concerned, Nioca drew his sword and made his way through the trees.

A SimpleBot buzzed up to him. "*Sir, this island shows no sign of life. There appears to be no threat to-*"

There was the sound of an energy weapon firing, followed instantly by a thin blue line of energy striking the SimpleBot. It exploded violently, showering the area with tiny shards of flaming metal.

Nioca ducked behind a tree. "Well, that's one heck of a report." He muttered. "SimpleBots, find that weapon and take it out!" The SimpleBots buzzed and hovered off. There was the sound of

chaingun fire as they closed on the target. "Weapon hasn't fired again in some time..." Nioca risked peeking around the corner. The five SimpleBots were firing on it with everything they had. He had suspected what it was the moment the beam had hit. It was an Annihilator. What basically amounted to a massive laser cannon with radar mounted on a large tower, with a rather impressive base. "Must be out of energy." He muttered, looking at it.

The weapon fired again, turning another SimpleBot into stray bits of flaming scrap. "Maybe not." He muttered. There was a loud screech of metal, followed by the sounds of electricity sparking. Peeking around the corner again, he watched as the massive laser cannon slowly slipped off the tower, falling to the earth. Nioca dove to the ground, covering his ears.

The ground shook as a massive explosion defoliated all the nearby trees. The cannon had smashed into the base of the tower, causing both to detonate spectacularly.

Nioca looked up cautiously. Billowing clouds of smoke and dust reached towards the heavens. "Naturally, I had to choose a *Total Annihilation* forum. Still... at least we might have an easier time defending it." He then groaned. All of the remaining SimpleBots had been trashed. "Aryll, find the... oh, what did w-dueck call it?"

"He didn't." Aryll stated bluntly. "But I know what you're talking about." She abruptly stood up and ran for the clearing.

About five minutes later, there was a shout. A mental impulse had told Nioca that she had found it. Nioca crept quickly through the defoliated underbrush and, in a short span of time, managed to track her down. She was standing next to a pedestal, not unlike the one w-dueck had showed him in Calamity Refuge. Reaching into his robes, he pulled out the orb w-dueck gave him, and plugged it in.

For a moment, silence reigned. Then the crystal sluggishly came to life. A massive green imprint appeared on the land, showing a holographic representation of the Refuge. Nioca ran a hand over the crystal, and the imprint rotated. At times, it turned red when the terrain wasn't suitable for the configuration. Eventually, finding a configuration that placed the entire Refuge within the clearing, Nioca pressed the crystal down.

The island was filled with a blinding light. Nioca had to shield his eyes with his arm, and yet it seemed to cut right through. A massive wave of vertigo overtook him.

He staggered upright. He was now on a stone floor, surrounded by the rounded walls of the Admin Tower.

Beep.

"Yes, I know."

Beep.

"No, you can't blow up."

Beep

"I said no!"

Aryll appeared behind Nioca. "So, we're just ignoring this whole Ermaria battle? You're going to let the rest of the Refuge fight your war?"

"There is no war, Aryll." Nioca stated.

Beep.

"Could have fooled me. So this is...?"

"I'm trying to get the Refuge operational so we can retreat. We've already lost." Nioca said bitterly.

Aryll blinked. "I thought-"

Beep.

"So did I." Nioca muttered. "Alright, Admin power is back online. Citadel generator is active and stable. There's no SimpleBots, unfortunately, but I should be able to rectify that. I managed to tie in the TotalA facilities to the Refuge... since I'm the only one that knows what he's doing with it, I've placed the controls in my Citadel."

"So the Refuge is working." Aryll concluded.

Beep.

"I said it's stable. There's a-" *Beep*. "-load of errors plaguing the system. Wouldn't trust any of the machinery here with my life. But it won't explode."

Beep.

"Also, I can't figure out how to turn off this beeping." Nioca said, visibly irritated. "I found a damaged Construction Kbot on the south coast. I've programmed it to build some defenses and get some resources for labs and such..."

"Will the defenses-"

"Yes, they'll recognize the members." Nioca paused. "I think. It's still a bit touchy." He stood up. "It'll have to do. We arrived at 6:07 PM, and it's now... 9:52 PM. How many seconds from when we arrived?" Nioca asked.

"Roughly 3 hours and 45 minutes. 13,500 seconds." Aryll gave him a confused look.

"Multiply this by 1.45, and convert it to hours and minutes." Nioca commanded.

"19,575 seconds... 5 Hours and 26 minutes." Aryll was looking increasingly confused.

"5 hours and 26 minutes... It was 11:17 AM when we left Ermaria... So that means that it's 4:43 PM now." He paused. "There's not much time left. We better move."

Nioca stepped back out onto Ermaria's soil. He felt the crystal in his pocket, vaguely aware of what had to be done. Turning around, he ran a hand across the obsidian archway. The runes glowed brightly for a brief moment before returning to normal.

He ran down the valley towards the sound of combat. The battle was still raging. As he approached, he saw a bunch of Simplebots swarm around a flare of light in the courtyard.

Getting Steamed

By Sylae - Sep 22 2009

A light *tap, tap, tap* sounded on Nana's bark. Jewels stirred though she didn't really want to. She never wanted to leave Nana again. But she had to... there was too much left to do. Nana prompted her out. Before her stood a dryad she didn't know. Jewels tried to be polite sticking out her hand. "Hello, I'm Jewels. Did you want to talk to me?"

The dryad stood with her arms behind her back. She looked rather uncomfortable and neither took Jewels' offered hand nor said her name. Instead she hung her head and shifted from foot to foot. Finally she brought a hand out from behind her back with a small leaf covered bundle in it. "I... I think this is yours."

Jewels gave her a curious look and gently took the package. Before she could protest, the dryad turned and sprinted away. Starting to open it, she mused to herself. *You'd think she'd just given me a bomb or something...* No sooner had she thought it then she fell to her knees screaming. *Pain!! Agony...*

Jasmine appeared from her tree looking intensely worried. "Jewels, what is it? What's wrong?"

But Jewels wasn't listening. All that filled her vision was a jagged whip coming down at her... until Jasmine spun her around. Words left unspoken she lifted a swirling orb in her hand. Will wasn't dead. He was alive and being tortured. Though her mind still screamed in agony, she started to laugh. A crazed laugh that left her breathless and left Jasmine worried all the more.

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w-dueck's eyes slowly cracked open, and he closed them again against the bright light shining against his face. Where was he?

"He's awake." The gruff voice just in front of him caused w-dueck to jump, flinching as the chains holding his arms above his head rattled.

He heard footsteps, and another voice came in, "Good. Go get the implements." More footsteps, and w-dueck opened his eyes again, wincing as the painful light bored into his mind again. He kept his eyes open, if barely, and the light slowly lessened into a torch on a slimy wall.

He dared to look around the room, and saw a man dressed in all-black staring at him. The man smiled as w-dueck looked at him, then said, "I don't suppose you'll tell us who you are, or how you destroyed half our army."

w-dueck gave the man a cocky grin, "I am a god. Kneel before me, like the useless human worm you are." He couldn't help but laugh at the joke. The black-dressed man didn't think it was funny, and punched him in the stomach. Apparently someone didn't have a sense of humor.

The footsteps came again, and a bearded man appeared. "Ah! The worm's bearded minion appears! Go ahead, I won't look." both men ignored him, even though it was a funny joke.

The bearded man lifted a leather strap and handed it to the fellow with no sense of humor. "We'll try again. Who are you?" He brought the strap down on w-dueck.

"I'm sorry, I didn't realize it was that lame!" w-dueck laughed again. Didn't anyone have a sense of humor?

"Stop laughing!" He hit w-dueck again. "I will ask one more time. Who are you?"

w-dueck grinned again. "I already told you. I am a god. You are a worm." He started laughing again, and the two men turned and left the cold cell. w-dueck stopped laughing as the iron-bound door slammed shut. "I am a god."

Several hours later, the cell door opened, and a man in robes stepped in. w-dueck looked up as the man stepped forward to him.

"Are you going to talk now, prisoner?" The man--obviously a mage--asked.

w-dueck smiled. "I already did. You jus--" He was cut off as the mage muttered a spell under his breath. He let out a scream as magma poured down his throat. The mage held still for several seconds, then lowered his hand. w-dueck's screaming slowly hanged into a laugh. "It'll take more than black magic to break me, mage." The robed man raised his hand again, and the screams continued again, longer. Slowly they too turned into insane laughter. "Still nothin', boy. Try harder." The mage raised his hand yet again, but before he could invoke the spell, the door opened and more robed men filed in. His torturer lowered his hand and moved to confer with the others. w-dueck made it obvious that he was listening.

"...isn't responding to pain..."

"..think...he's lost it...push too hard?"

"...after...happened last time?"

"Hard to make this...more insane...He's already a nutcase."

"...Hasn't even tried...escape...just sits there..."

One of the mages turned to look at w-dueck, and he stuck his tongue out at the man. The mage glared and turned back to the group, and suddenly w-dueck couldn't hear the conversation.

"You bastard. I was listening." w-dueck looked back down at the ground. Suddenly, the mages all filed out at once, leaving him in the dark.

"Will, it's me, Jewels." w-dueck looked up to see Jewels standing there in the darkness of the cell.

"Jewels!" he croaked, "You have...to get away, before they get you!"

"The mages can't hurt me, Will. You know that."

"I...I do?"

"Of course you do, fool." Nioca appeared out of the darkness.

"Nioca! Why...you were supposed to lead everyone to safety..."

"I did...they are safe now." Nioca grinned, and a line of blood rolled down his chin. "And soon, you will be safe." Nioca stepped forward, then fell as a sword appeared in his back.

"He's mine, human." Vergil pulled Nioca off his sword and stepped forward, "What gives you the right to my sister, human? You are no better than this scum," Vergil kicked Nioca's dying body. His sword slowly traced a line of fire down w-dueck's bare chest, "What gives you the right to my sister's hand in marriage?" w-dueck could only watch helplessly as the sword came down piercing his chest. Vergil stepped away, leaving w-dueck hanging by the chains connecting his arms to the ceiling.

It was her turn to step forward. "Just remember, every whip across your back, every spell," Jewels stated as w-dueck died. "You could've made them go away. Just by listening to me." She stepped out the door, leaving him to die in silence, her last words, the words which made no sense, ringing in his ears.

Jewels sat alone in the small copse of trees just over the ridge from the castle. Her hands were clasped tightly around Will's orb. She stared at it with red eyes, not of flame, but from many tears. Tears of sadness, tears of joy, tears of frustration... Wherever Will was, his emotions were chaotic. They just didn't make any sense. Nioca had left Ermaria before she had been given Will's orb which was hours ago and he still hadn't come back. She had gleaned from the Elders what the dryad had seen about Will being taken hostage.

With the strongest stealth spell she knew, Jewels was going in... and she wasn't coming out without him.

In utter silence, Jewels stood and donned the black silk blouse and slacks she had picked out for the job. Made from the thread of Ermarian silk worms in the forest, the fabric was so soft that it barely felt like it was there. She didn't know what to expect once she went in but if she got into a tight spot and brushed up against anyone, she hoped that it would feel as light as the wind and not break her spell. Though she had the ruby dagger belted around her waist she knew her only real hope was to get in without being detected.

Throwing a small bag over her shoulder she set out.

To her surprise, there were very few guards at the castle, making it easy to get in between them. Like a shadow on the wall, she made her way along the corridors. Once she was in, she found a secluded corner and had to chance some designing magic. She opened herself up to the layout of the castle, her breath catching at how much more difficult it was without Nioca's mind to guide hers. She leaned against the wall as some of her life force slipped away with the effort. She took only a moment to rest, though. It had been enough for her to know exactly where she needed to go.

Jewels snuck past two rowdy guards sitting in the middle of the dungeons and carefully lifted a set of keys off the wall. After she passed, she cast a sleep field where they sat throwing dice and

watched as they began to doze. She didn't know exactly how long it would last, but it should be long enough.

She began heading for the cell she had sensed Will in and stopped at the door glad that the guards were already asleep. Looking in the small window, she couldn't stop as a sob escaped her lips. The man hanging in the cell was almost unrecognizable as such and it took her back to the last time she had seen him in chains... She hurried to find the right key and opened the door.

He hung in the middle of the room, toes just a centimeter off the floor. Stripped bare and exposed to the elements, magically enhanced, it seemed, to make the room freezing cold. Frost covered his skin and hung on his eyelashes as well as radiated out on the floor in a circle around him. Jewels feared she was too late, how could he survive like this? But, no, there was a cloud of breath in front of his face.

Hurriedly she set to work. Not wanting to use up all her energy, Jewels opened up her bag grabbing out two healing balms. Biting her lip, she covered all his wounds with it melting the ice as her hands warmed his skin. He started to come around eyes wide with insanity. He started yelling for the guards though she urged him to be quiet, laughed maniacally at her feeble attempts to shush him, and threw strings of swear words at her about where she and Nioca should shove it. Jewels tried an Unshackle Mind spell with no effect. Her temporary, Control Foes, spell didn't work on him either. Frustrated, Jewels rummaged in her bag. She thought she had a scroll that might be stronger than her own spells, but she came out with Will's orb in her hand. She felt what he felt, saw what he saw, chaos reigned in his mind and she didn't know how to reach him.

"Please, Will," she whispered stepping close. "Come back to me. I need you, Will. I... I love you." For a moment he was silent. Jewels dared to hope she had gotten through to him when he spat in her face. Her arms fell, she didn't know what to do. The orb brushed against his chest on the way down and a surge of energy flowed between the pair like an electric shock.

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w-dueck looked up, his eyes clear from the insanity that had befallen him. Jewels was there. She had come to save him. Their eyes met, and w-dueck spoke up. "I'm sorry." The orb had connected them...only for a heartbeat, but long enough for him to see the truth.

"It's okay." Jewels said quietly. She reached up to the chains holding w-dueck's arms, and the acrid scent of melting iron filled the room. A second later, w-dueck was freed from the ceiling, half-melted manacles still clinging to his chafed wrists.

Their eyes met again, and for a long moment they were silent. Then they embraced, kissing each other fiercely.

w-dueck managed to get her tongue out of his mouth to get a sentence spoken. "Jewels...I, I need some clothes."

"I know," was her only reply before she stuck her tongue back into his mouth. "Gods, you're freezing." She managed to say while still kissing him.

Jewels felt like rolling her eyes as w-dueck pulled away... again. "What... if someone comes in?" He asked stupidly.

"They'll notice it's steamy in here," she said, noting the copious amounts of steam rising from his freezing-cold body. "Besides, it's obvious you're enjoying this," she continued, motioning to the other notable feature of his body. He shrugged and let her put her tongue back in his mouth. She could feel his hands caressing her, slowly moving down, reaching into her pants...

She jumped at his touch. Will's hands were *cold*! "I see you're enjoying this too," he said, grinning. She was about to plant her tongue in that cocky smile when the door burst open.

"I see you're enjoying this too," w-dueck said, he couldn't help but grin at the expression on Jewels's face. Suddenly, the door burst open, and he turned to see a pair of guards run into the room. "We're BUSY!" He yelled, and jumped on the nearest guard, punching him in the face repeatedly. Jewels handled the other guard.

They both looked at each other, and he noted that she was beet-red. "Oh, come on, Jewels. At least you had clothes on."

Jewels continued to stare at Will, fully aware of how flushed she was, but it wasn't because the guards had come in. Oh no... It was much worse than that. Nioca had just made it back to Ermaria and was continuing to express his disgust over sharing her passionate lust for Will. *Awkward...*

Fallen

By Sylae - Sep 22 2009

w-dueck opened the door to the cell, shrugging uncomfortably in the fallen guard's clothing. The dim torch-lit hallway was empty of guards, so w-dueck stepped out of the way to let Jewels through. "You remember how to get out, right?" w-dueck asked.

Jewels smiled, "Yes, and we can always teleport out if need be. Just take a left and keep going straight, then up the stairs." w-dueck nodded and led the way through the empty halls.

The next hallway was empty, but when w-dueck poked his head out the stairwell, a young guard saw him and ran the other way. "Shit!" w-dueck yelled, "I'll get him, Jewels!" He ran after the guard, wincing as his wounds complained. The healing goop Jewels had rubbed all over him, despite his complaints, was still working its magic, and the speed at which the young man ran wasn't helping. Finally, w-dueck gave up and hurled the sword--more like a sharp club--at him. Amazingly he stuck true, and the guard pitched forward, dead. "See, Jewels, I told you I'd...oh." The hallway was empty.

w-dueck backtracked several more halls, then gave up as he realized he was completely lost. He returned to the dead guard and pulled his body into a nearby storeroom, cleaning the sword as he

exited. The cooridor was still empty, so w-dueck set off in the direction the guard had been running. Hopefully he'd find a door or at least a window.

Jewels watched as w-dueck ran after the guard, then belatedly jumped into action as they turned a corner. The soles of her boots skidded around the corner, just in time to see w-dueck run around an intersection. Hurrying after, she turned at the same intersection only to find a hallway full of closed doors. Throwing a fireball at the wall in anger, she opened the nearest door.

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w-dueck's sword rang as one of the enemy guard's blades stuck it. The three men against him weren't that good, but he wasn't exactly in peak physical condition. He returned with a quick slice, and one of the guards fell screaming. One of the two remaining lunged forward, and w-dueck killed him too. The remaining guard slashed, and w-dueck barely parried in time. The last guard fell, and w-dueck was cleaning the blade on his tunic just as sounds of footsteps appeared, and a group of ten soldiers appeared at the end of the hallway, running towards him. More footsteps, and another ten appeared behind him. "I think they know I escaped," w-dueck said to himself, hoping Jewels had made it out.

Jewels ran after the squad of troops, who obviously knew where Will was. She'd almost had him, but she'd been interrupted by a soldier who'd thought a female intruder would be fun. She almost smiled as the memory of the fireball hitting the pervert's face. She smile faded when she heard the soldiers stop. Tiptoeing forward, Jewels saw the guards rushing forward towards Will. She saw him turn towards them, then turn around as another group of guards blocked off his retreat. She unsheathed the ruby-hilted dagger and rushed forward, killing three guards before they realized they had another target.

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w-dueck rushed forward at the guards, hoping just to break through the group and get out of this place. He frowned as the guards in the rear of the group turned away from him, but didn't slow down as the closer guards rushed him. He proceeded to hack and slash, hoping that he'd break through before the guards behind him caught up.

Jewel's dagger pulled out of the guard, and she brought it down on the next unfortunate soul. The clang of steel on steel jolted her arm, but she was even more jolted when w-dueck yelled at her, "Wrong side! Wrong side! It's me! Can we leave yet?"

"Will! Let's go. Why didn't you--BEHIND YOU!!" She screamed, remembering the other group of guards.

"--BEHIND YOU!!" Jewels yelled, and w-dueck turned, raising his sword to block the enemy's slash. He couldn't do anything but stare stupidly as the enemy soldier lunged forward, the point of his sword going through w-dueck's chest. Dropping his own blade, w-dueck reached down to pull the sword out of him.

Jewels screamed as she saw the red-coated steel blade appear out of Will's back, watching as he dropped his own sword and reached down to grab the blade that had impaled him. She couldn't even think as she too dropped her blade and began throwing fire, determined to kill them, no matter the cost.

Sometime later, she turned back and saw Will's body lying in a pool of blood. "No..." she whispered, letting out a sob. He was dead. She felt numb as she reached down and put a finger to his neck, letting out a cry as she found no pulse. Unable to see anymore, she stepped back and let her head fall back against the stone wall.

Maybe...maybe, if she hurried, Nioca could do something. Or Nalyd. Anything. Weren't designers gods here? couldn't gods do anything?

Struggling up, she grabbed ahold of Will's cooling arm and screamed a cantrip to teleport them to the Sanctuary.

The courtyard flared as Jewels appeared, a dead body at her feet. Immediately, hordes of SimpleBots, brought to the Sanctuary by Nioca, swarmed around her. The machines whirred and the chainguns began spinning.

"No! Machines, stop!" Nioca yelled, running into the courtyard. He stopped when he saw w-dueck's body lying on the ground. "Healers! Get the healers!" The SimpleBots buzzed off.

"I just stood there..." Jewels said to herself. Nioca, can you...can you bring him back? Her unspoken words rang across the courtyard as a young man in robes ran into the courtyard and towards the body. Without a word, he began working.

Jewels...the best healers Gvelston has are coming. All we can do is hope.

Jewels and Nioca watched as more robed healers ran up. The young man stood and shook his head, and the healers began conferring. A minute later, one of the healers walked over to the two, while the rest of the healers went to work. "It looks grim. We *might* be able to revive him, but right now...we don't have the time or energy to do so. The body will be frozen until it can be worked on later."

A minute later, the priests left, carrying a block of ice between them.

Worth the Sacrifice

By Jewels - Sep 23 2009

Kalyas started coughing again, almost unable to deflect the sword that was coming his way. All around him battle raged. The sounds of clanging steel, war cries, and accompanying death cries were almost deafening. He managed to dispatch the soldier he was engaged with before stumbling back from the front lines. He reached for the pouch of curing potions Jewels had given him, only to find it empty. Kaylas swore out loud as his vision started to blur. He would be no more good on the battle field, he needed to find Jewels... if she were even here.

Closer to the sanctuary, he ran as fast as his ailing body would carry him. There she was, with her back to him, standing next to Nioca. His relief at her presence brought back some clarity and he called her name. "Jewels!" She and Nioca both turned to face him, Jewels with tears streaking down her face. And that's when he saw it. A glint of red reflected in his eye and time seemed to slow down... or were the pathogens just making him sluggish? He followed the glint to it's source. A crossbow in the hands of a sniper perched atop the nearest building who looked focused on Jewels' position.

Fear and adrenalin surged through his body as he picked up speed. With all his years of training, Kaylas made his mind calculate the trajectory, see who the intended victim was. His call of greeting turned to a call of warning. "Jewels!!" He was so far away... and yet so close. Would he make it in time? The twang of the bolt letting loose echoed in his ears as he closed the gap. Jewels and Nioca were both wide-eyed at his approach and but didn't move... didn't seem to sense the real danger. So this was it... this was the end...

Kaylas threw his shoulder into Jewels knocking her to the ground while grabbing Nioca and spinning him around just in time to come between him and the missile. It struck the back of his neck, the force of it making him stagger forward and lean heavily on Nioca who almost collapsed under his weight. Oddly enough, he felt no pain except the twang of emotion as Jewels began to scream beside him.

"Noooooo!!" she wailed. But the sound was eerily distant.

He was slipping away. He could feel it. The magic of the spiritkiller was ripping him away. Nioca stared at him in shock, his face just inches away. A tear rolled down Kaylas' cheek as he gripped the cloak of the human he had saved. A human he never thought he would be willing to save, but for that split second when he realized Nioca was about to die, he saw him through Jewels' eyes. A soul worth sacrificing for. With his last breath, Kaylas addressed the human with strained words. "Don't follow your heart, Nioca... *lead it!!*" Kaylas closed his eyes, felt his knees buckle beneath him, and knew no more.

"Noooooo!!" Jewels saw the bolt sticking out of Kaylas' neck, had caught a glint of red as it had sped forward, and knew what it meant. She had lost another loved one, this time to the abyss. She could hardly bear it, but she was not about to sit idly by. Not this time. Jewels let out another anguished war cry while picking herself up and opening her mind to the details of her surroundings. Off of the roof, she plucked the assassin and unleashed her full rage upon him. The man began screaming as she held him suspended, arms and legs splayed. In her fiery fury she boiled him from the inside out before tearing him limb from limb. The drain of it was too much too soon after teleporting here with Will, though, and she fell to the ground unconscious.

Nioca stood still. Kaylas fell at his feet followed by Jewels and the body parts of the VRP assassin as her spell lost it's grip. The decapitated head rolled closer and Nioca recognized it as the same assassin that had eluded him at the Refuge. This time, he doubted he would be coming back to life.

Moment of Pain

By Zoe - Sep 27 2009

It was twilight when they finished killing the soldiers that had been chasing them. The clouds were in their usual twilight colors before the sun finishs setting. Shades of pink, purple, orange... "It's beautiful...isn't it Saph? Especially after a hard day of setting those traps and everything..." "Yeah, even though it only lasts for a few minutes" "I suppose we should find a safe place to rest..."

They went from tree to tree, using night's dark cloak to shield themselves from enemy eyes...just in case they may have missed one.

'snap'

Did you hear that?

Yes, I think we're being followed.

Well they're doing a pretty crappy job of it.

And who could expect...but the man who had stolen some of Iffy's power walks out into the clearing. "You..." Iffy gave him a hostile look.

The man just laughed. "I'm impressed of your power, Iffy...I must say I have grown quite fond of it." "And let me guess...you're here for the rest of it?" "No, in fact I'm here in buisness relating to the organization I am currently working for" "Which is?" "The VRP" "...I should have expected that"

The man snapped his fingers, and a scroll appears and dissapears. A group of 30 or so men teleport in, surrounding Iffy and Saph. "I must say, using scripts to control the power in

ingenious. But it's even more ingenious of me to come after you when you're in such a terrible state. This should be fun" "What do you want?" "Information" "Of--" "I suppose you know anything about the refuge? Of course we have seemed to destroy it, and we're destroying their other base as we speak, but we know that something's up. And I suspect you know, since you love to go snooping around" "Even if I did know I would tell you" "What a shame. I supposed I have to get it out of you."

The man rushed too fast over to Saph for either her or Iffy time to react. He forced her to the ground and Iffy a few feet away with just two spells, taking advantage of their exhastion. "I'm sure you two will enjoy this" The man chuckled as he pulled out a spirit-killer dagger. He raised it up, and then summoned a script.

Iffy looked at the script with horror...a script that would use the magic in the weapon to torture... "No! Saph!"

But Iffy could only look helpless as the man activated the script. A thin line of energy went straight through the dagger, growing into a dark-pale line of sickly energy that went straight into Saph...

Pain, suffering, sadness, depression, pain, suffering, sadness, depression, pain, suffering, sadness, depression...

Haha! You don't even know! You amount to nothing. You are pathetic, sad, depressing. Everyone will leave you. No one will care. You couldn't accomplish anything. You couldn't lift so much as a feather. You'd run from a kitten. You will scream in terror over the slightest thing. Who could possibly want you? You are destined to be alone. You sad, pathetic thing. Get out of my sight. You will never be wanted.

Saph and Iffy couldn't even scream. The pain was too much. It's amazing they could stand so much as the 30 seconds they had endured it. How anyone could endure so much...

The man stopped, not wanting to udderly destroy them. Iffy and Saph tried getting up, but fell back down...failing. The last thing either of them saw was the man snickering as they fell into a torturous nightmare.

Casualties

By Vergil - Sep 28 2009

Vergil surveyed the soon-to-be battlefield smiling to himself as he looked over his back to the 101st regiment. They would all be fighting today, a very bloody and horrible battle. Vergil relished the thought. Kaylas came up to him.

"Sir, the soldiers are wondering when we will be moving out, and really, I think we should do this before they start to-" Just then, a battle cry emerged and what seemed to be a hoard of troops came down the slope and to the VRP stronghold. Vergil cackled

"That would our call." Vergil rolled his neck and let out a battle cry that boomed across the field. The Bluebloods charged across the field on to the fortress. There were already alarms ringing, and before their eyes the gates to the fortress opened and soldiers and horsemen came flooding out of the fortress. The collective screams of soldiers rose above all else and the two forces smashed into each other. Hammer met shield, sword and helm, pike and spear, rising in a deafening chorus of metal. The Bluebloods joined the battle, firing off balls and slashing through the VRP flank. Laesp'awn howled in delight as he threw ropes around a soldier, layer after layer of rope tightening around his belly. With a cackle, Laesp'awn stroked the end of the rope, and a faint unsheathing sound was heard. He then twisted the rope as hard as he could. The soldier's stomach was ripped to shreds by the rope which now had the steel shards poking out of the side. After the blood stopped churning out, the middle section of the man was just a spinal chord. Laesp'awn chuckled with glee and hopped to his next target. Vergil gored Yamato through a VRP magician who had the wrong target in his mind. A soldier crept behind Vergil and tried to stab his back. Vergil already moved out of the way of the blade and threw his arm up a swift hack to the attackers neck. The soldier managed to block barely, and it caused his sword hand to be thrown above his head. Vergil cut off the hand, and with a clean nick of his sword, sliced the windpipe of the man and stalked off for a new target. Out of the corner he saw a red glint and he turned around. Lo and behold, he found an archer with a red tipped arrow pointed at Nioca. Vergil stared in horror and started to rush to Nioca's help, but the archer was already drawing back the bow. Just as he was firing, Kaylas rushed at Nioca, and right before the arrow hit, Kaylas shoved Nioca to the side and was stuck dead on by the arrow. Vergil stopped for a moment, then rushed with a greater frenzy to Kaylas's side. By the time he got there, Kaylas's eyes were open in a blank stare. There was no saving him, Kaylas no longer existed. His soul was ripped apart. Vergil's eyes sunk back and folded over themselves. The fleshy skin where his eyes used to be glowed blue. His hands grew angular, blueish black spikes forming all over his body. There was several sounds of bones breaking and Vergil roared in fury. Some of the VRP flinched. His hands were dark, black, and scaly with thick and sharp claws pointing out of them. He let loose a gout of blue flame which cooked all the soldiers in its path. Vergil jumped up and gored a man on his claws. He swung his arm at a soldier and watched the man fly away. He swung Yamato in a circle, catching a person on it and throwing him into 3 other soldiers. Vergil rushed over and crushed the neck with his jaw and tossed him down. He continued on and on, cutting, slashing, and breaking men with his hands. He stopped to see a VRP general cutting through the Ermarian ranks. Vergil rushed over to him. The general saw him, quickly killed his opponent, and laughed at Vergil, he rushed towards Vergil, sword thrust at his heart. Vergil easily deflected the blow with his sword and slashed down at the General. The general met his blade and twisted the blade point in another attempt to strike Vergil's heart. Vergil wound up his back arm, the General was already in a position to block the attack, but the blade simply broke the generals and the General was impaled on the sword and Vergil let the sword use the momentum of the attack to let it fly back and impale the general on the fortress wall. Vergil ripped off both arms and started using them to smack around the generals head. Back and fourth the head swung to the tempo of Vergil beating the generals head. The general's nose flew off a few moments before Vergil smacked his head completely off. The battle was completely halted the moment the General died. All the VRP started to shout hastily of retreating. The soldiers ran back into the castle, or what soldiers that weren't felled by the angry army.

Nightmares

By Jewels - Oct 7 2009

The foggy mists swirled around her, pouring down from above. The chandelier rocked back and forth above her head in agitation. The frantic sound of Nioca's frustrated voice echoed behind her but she didn't turn towards it. Instead she focused on a spot on the wall on the opposite side, a spot that once held a door illuminated by one of the glowing orbs above. Now it was dark pitch black even. She couldn't see the wall she tried so hard to focus on. Two steps forward and a wind picked up whipping her hair about her face and her dress about her legs. Into the darkness into the pitch black, she had to go. Her heart drove her to it.

Her hands eventually reached smooth coldness. She felt no doorknob, only the cold. She lit a spark in her hand and stared at the reflection of herself, the ghastly horrified reflection of herself in a thick sheet of ice where the door to Will? soul was supposed to be. Panicked, she started pounding on the ice and the winds howled all the more. She raged at being held back, at that which would stop her from getting to him. In full on flame, she pounded on the ice until it melted and cracked under her ceaseless attack. Through the cold through the ice, she had to break through. Her heart demanded it of her.

She entered the room into inky darkness. Blacker than black, as if in a vat of tar, she couldn't see her flaming hand even when touching her face. Colder than cold, as if plunged into an arctic ocean, she could feel the warmth draining from her body. She said his name aloud, called it, SCREAMED IT, till she was too hoarse to even whisper, but the darkness only seemed to absorb it. An inkling sprung to the back of her mind a memory, or rather the lack of a memory, came to mind. It was the void the abyss, where not even thought was granted to the soul that faded within. And she wept. With no voice left to her, she wept with her mind, with her strength, with her heart, with her soul.

She didn't notice the light that approached her until it surrounded her, growing quickly from a pinprick to all encompassing. Though there was now light, she still could not see. It blinded her to everything everything except five sharp ice daggers. Well, she couldn't really see them but she could feel them, because they had pierced her chest. All her senses screamed out in agony as they dug their way deeper, gratingly deeper, to wrap themselves around her heart and into her heart, ripping it to shreds from the inside out.

Jewels woke up screaming, the agony was all too real, but the terrified look on Stillborn's face soon silenced her lips. His hand still rested above her heart and still radiated with the aura of his alien power. He had been healing her, restoring her, and she lay once more in the room of her altar, but they were not alone.

A group of Ermarians were gathered within the room. Women with children clinging to their legs, elderly folk with flowing white hair, and a smattering of priests and priestesses who looked much more at home tending to the needs of the people around them then they would have

holding a sword outside. Most sat on the plush carpet though a few benches had been carried in to rest at the back, filled from end to end with people who waited in a hushed quiet. A few of them knelt in prayer before her altar but all of them kept their distance from Stillborn who eyed them all warily. It seemed with her scream, all other talking had ceased and all eyes rested upon her, expectant.

But Jewels was speechless. She arose silently, wiping tears from her eyes. How quickly her room had become a shelter. How soon it had given people refuge. She wrapped her arms around Stillborn and buried her face in his shoulder, finding comfort in the familiar pain. She didn't want to face any of them. Her dream was too fresh in her mind.

As an afterthought, she pulled away to rummage in the bag at her waist hoping that it had only been her fear giving her nightmares, but Will? orb was black as night, not even reflecting the lights that hung off the walls. She felt nothing from it and she had to sit once more feeling faint at the confirmation. New tears ran down her cheeks as she stared at it, lost in its depths.

Someone next to her cleared his throat, and Jewels looked up to see the jolly Ermarian she had asked to keep an eye on Stillborn. "Are you alright? Is there anything I can do for you?"

Jewels glanced at Stillborn who wore new clothes and didn't seem to shy away from him at least not much. "You've done so much for me already. How could I ask you for more?"

He gave a humble bow, waving her off. "I have done nothing but accept the opportunity you presented to me, and I gladly request another opportunity. Anything, anything at all."

She couldn't help but smile at him, a true servant's heart. She looked at him thoughtfully for a moment. "Tell me your name."

He seemed a bit surprised at the request, whether from her interest in wanting to know, or an expectation that she should already know, she wasn't sure. "Faren, my Lady."

Jewels nodded committing it to memory. "Well then Faren, the first thing you can do is allow me to thank you." She stood once more and hugged the man who was more than a little flustered. "From the bottom of my heart." Jewels stepped back waiting a moment for him to regain his composure before continuing. "And then, if you wouldn't mind, would you please escort me to," Jewels' voice caught in her throat as she struggled to keep from completely losing it. "To wherever they're keeping Will's body? I...I need to pay my respects."

Faren nodded at her knowingly gesturing towards the doorway. Jewels turned back to Stillborn taking his hand in hers and walked with him. He seemed a bit agitated that both she and Faren were about to leave him alone in this room full of people. "Don't worry, honey, nothing can harm you here. I've made sure of it and thank you. Thank you for healing me. I'll be back soon."

Stillborn nodded though he still didn't look very comforted. Jewels didn't like leaving him so often. He looked like a man but he needed to learn so much. She really needed to rethink her priorities, get out of the authority business and start being a mom. He needed her and she needed to take that responsibility more seriously.

Suddenly, Stillborn tore his hand out of hers, ran to the far end of the room, and cowered behind the altar. Jewels didn't even have time to ask him what the matter was before Nalyd came running wildly into the room. Well, he tried, at least, to run into the room but in a comical

sweeping movement, his feet flew out from underneath him as his arm refused to enter the chamber. He fell rather ingloriously to the floor with one hand still clutching his scythe which remained on the outside of the barrier.

The little show had at first caused some of the children to scream with fright, but now they laughed as the frail little figure picked himself up and struggled in futility to bring his deadly weapon into the room. Mothers covered little ears when he let out a string of expletives as pull after pull refused to budge it any further across the threshold.

Jewels stared at him in curiosity. Obviously he had no intent to harm anyone or he wouldn't have been able to pass the barrier himself. In a calm voice she addressed him. "You can't bring it in here, Nalyd."

"And why not?" came his indignant response.

"All those deadly pathogens on it? Under normal circumstances they'll just be eradicated from the blade, but your scythe is far from normal now isn't it?" Nalyd still looked confused but had stopped struggling at least "This room has been enchanted to not allow any hostile spells to enter it. I do believe the enchantment that keeps it deadly must count. Of course, it's also supposed to keep hostile persons from entering as well, which surprises me that it let you in."

"Why should it? Nalyd isn't hostile. Nalyd just came here for for..." His brows furrowed as if he was trying to remember why exactly he was here.

"For my son?" Jewels finished his statement stepping up to look him in the eye while tears welled up in hers. "Haven't you done enough to him already?" she whispered harshly.

Nalyd blinked and looked around as if really seeing his surroundings for the first time. "He Nalyd came for his creation. It's here, Nalyd can sense it." He turned back to Jewels as if it should all make perfect sense to her. "Nalyd's not done with it. He's not finished."

"He is NOT an it! He is my son. And not finished?" Jewels spat the words at him. "What more could you possibly have to do to him? Was scarring him for life both physically and mentally not enough? If I have anything to do with it, you'll never touch him again! I can promise you that."

"What are you talking about? You're not making any sense to Nalyd." The furrow on his brow ran deeper as his fingers tapped on the shaft of Lifesower. He called out loudly, "Creation, Nalyd knows you're here. Come out." Slowly but surely, Stillborn stood up and stepped towards his master, wincing anew at every step. Jewels, growing more confused herself, tried to read the look on Nalyd's face which seemed ever more concerned as Stillborn drew closer. Stillborn stopped a good five feet from them, deciding that he had done more than enough to obey the command he was given.

Nalyd looked even more concerned as he studied Stillborn's face. "Have you been damaged elsewhere?" Stillborn opened his mouth and managed to whisper. "Yes, master."

"Show Nalyd," he commanded.

Stillborn looked first to Jewels who was fascinated by the amount of concern Nalyd seemed to be showing. She nodded at him. "Go ahead and take off your shirt for him."

Nalyd's audible gasp upon seeing the scars surprised Jewels and when he spoke the anger in his voice was evident as he forced it out. "Who? Who did this to you?" Now even Stillborn looked confused and scared answer the question, but Jewels nodded at him. "You did, master."

The words stunned Nalyd. The shock of it was so great, he actually dropped his scythe. It clattered to the floor as he began mumbling to himself in disbelief. "No. No Nalyd worked so hard, he couldn't have. He wouldn't have. He didn't. He swayed back and forth on his feet continuing to mumble as Jewels instructed Stillborn to put his shirt back on and move back to the far side of the room. He looked more than relieved to do so.

Nalyd rubbed his temples repeating the words. "He didn't. He didn't Nalyd didn't" Jewels didn't really know what to say. She hesitantly put her hand on his shoulder when he suddenly turned to her with clear, knowledgeable eyes. "The Rot!"

Jewels held her head in her hands. What a nightmare At least now she knew that Nalyd wasn't a heartless bastard. No, scratch that. He was still a heartless bastard, capable of stealing a baby to practice his own craft on, just not a murderous one. A little less difficult to love, perhaps. She informed Nioca of the situation who seemed wholly preoccupied with something else, but she didn't pry. She had enough of her own to worry about right now. He at least sent someone to return Nalyd to confinement and observation which set her mind a little more at ease.

The sun was setting as she followed Jonas solemnly to the room where Will? body was being held. She had opted to leave Faren with Stillborn and asked another priest to take her. The room was cold so cold. Kept that way magically by an enchantment on the table he rested on, surely. Frost obscured her view of him thorough the solid block of ice he inhabited. With a warm hand, Jewels rubbed it away to see his face. Hot tears fell off her chin, melting some of the ice only to be refrozen into it seconds later. She had gone to rescue him and had only succeeded in getting him killed. It was her fault. She should have had a better exit strategy insisted on teleporting out immediately. My fault! The words echoed in her mind endlessly. She had to do something had to try! What good was it to be a god if she couldn't bring back the dead?

She asked Jonas to fetch her a couple of healing potions if there were any to spare. Jewels concentrated, but took it slow. Ever so gently, she heated up the ice with flames from her hands. First it melted, then it boiled rising in clouds of steam, but still so carefully, she thawed Will out.

By the time Jonas returned, holding a single healing elixir and apologizing that he could find no more, Jewels cradled Will? lifeless body in her arms. She thanked him all the more setting the potion beside her. First to heal the wound Jewels opened herself up to the blades craft of this world genuinely grateful that Nioca's mind had perked up enough to gain feedback from his observance. Also thankfully, he thought nothing to distract or disrupt her, even seemed to offer a few mental suggestions.

She saw the wound in all its detail. The torn muscle, the severed veins, the broken bones, the blood loss this she queued for repair. She felt the enchantment that had kept the priests from being able to heal him with normal means. This she shattered. She knit it all back together at a cellular level and watched as the gaping hole in his chest finally closed.

Jewels stopped her work and gasped. The room spun as the drain on her lifeforce quickly caught up with her. With fumbling hands, she grasped for the healing potion to down it then waited until she felt somewhat normal again.

Now for the tricky part to pour enough lifeforce into Will to revive him without draining herself entirely. Jewels closed her eyes and took a deep breath before plunging on. Heartbeat? Check. Breathing? Check. Neural synapses sparking? Check. Lifeforce stable? Check. She opened her eyes and willed his own to do the same. Those unforgettable eyes now stared at her vacantly. Everything seemed to be functioning properly on its own as she let the enchantment go.

The vertigo left her reeling but she clung to consciousness as tightly as she clung to Will. A smile played on her lips as she whispered his name, "Will?" But he didn't respond. She held his face in her hands caressing his cheeks. "Will, speak to me. Say something." She pleaded with him, shook him, screamed at him but all she got back was a blank stare.

I've seen this before. Nioca's dismal thought came through, when someone was shot with a spiritkiller bolt. You've revived w-dueck's body but his soul isn't there.

She argued with him, needing him to be wrong. But I saw the sword it wasn't a spiritkiller. Enchanted, yes, but it wasn't ruby tipped" Jewels rocked the unresponsive body back and forth whispering aloud, "He can't be gone, he just can't." Nioca seemed to shrug dishearteningly. She could feel he held out no hope of ever getting him back. He turned his attention elsewhere as she mourned.

There was little else she could do but return his body to lifelessness. Letting it live on as a hollow shell without a soul was pointless. With Jonas' help, she replaced him on the table and asked to be left alone. She held Will? cold hand after it had no pulse and rested her forehead on it. Frost had already started to reform all over his body. As it seemed she had been doing constantly for the last few days, once again she wept.

Only a few short moments later though, heavy footsteps walked up behind her and an awkward hand clumsily squeezed her shoulder. She looked up to see Jumara, a little worse for wear. "He was a good man," he remarked gruffly. His face showed that he, too, was grieving the loss.

"One of the best I ever had the pleasure to meet," Jewels breathed.

"At least we can rest in the knowledge that his soul will live on in peace in the afterlife."

Jewels couldn't help but feel bitter. "If there IS an afterlife," she commented bitterly.

"Of course, there's an afterlife. Every Corellian knows that." His voice held a tone of disbelief that she could even question it.

"And how can you be so sure?" Jewels demanded. She didn't want to argue with him about it, but she had just been convinced that Will? spirit didn't exist anymore. She didn't think she could bear letting herself be hopeful again.

"Well because the dead always return to their homeland to wander the earth before crossing over."

"Wait what?" Jewels gave Jumara a confused look.

He seemed rather frustrated with her ignorance. "The spirits of the dead, they walk the earth at the place they were born for weeks, months, sometimes years, saying goodbye to friends and family and whatnot. I've witnessed it countless times, haven't you?"

Jewels shook her head trying to picture it. "So you mean ghosts? I've never seen a ghost ever." Jumara's jaw dropped as he stared at her. "Where did you say you were from again?"

"Corel. It's where Mage Er where Will was from, too. A different plane do you call it?" Jewels nodded. You'll have to excuse me. I'm all very new to the whole concept. I thought death was the same everywhere. I had no idea that ghosts were exclusive to the Corellian plane."

"Well maybe not exclusive," Jewels' mind was working fast. A sliver of that hope she didn't want back had crept its way in. "So you're telling me you think Will's spirit has returned to the Corellian plane?"

Jumara nodded. "I'd bet my life on it! Like I said, they always do."

Jewels stood up straight drying her eyes. "Take me there! Take me to Will!" Jumara looked nonplussed at the request. "If there's even half a chance that I can see him again say goodbye to him properly Please, you must take me to him."

"Well uh you see the thing is I'm not exactly sure where he was born. He didn't like to talk about his past. I don't even know his proper name. I called him Mage for all the years I knew him."

Jewels was about to tell him she'd search every inch of his world if she had to when a deep despair hit her full force. Jewels collapsed screaming and clutching her head. The pain it was purely mental. It ate away at the very core of her being, her very will to live. It seemed to last an eternity and yet it was over so soon. It left her breathing heavily and trembling while Jumara tried to help her up. She was barely aware of Nioca having endured it with her until he started vehemently blaming her for whatever had happened.

Jewels shuddered inwardly. She had felt like that before once Well, sort of. She hadn't been able to feel at the time but the after effects of Nioca's mental attack had left her feeling like that every time she pictured his family. She knew without a doubt, though, that this had come from outside them both. An impression of hint of a name had seeped through with the pain. With surprising calm she posed her question aloud. "Nioca, where's Iffy?"

Jumara stared at her dumbly still trying to comprehend what had just happened. "Uh... Nioca's not here, and who is Iffy again?"

Drunken Rescue

By Ackrovan - Oct 8 2009

"Citrus! Get off me!"

The lumberous Kyshakk got her footing and stepped off the blistering Ackrovan. Still dressed in his heavy clad armor, along with his longsword and crosswick (but not his magic shield), Ackrovan needed a few seconds to push himself upward off the ground. Flustered, he took one step back, gazing around him.

"Oh, this isn't good. I've gotten so drunk that I'm seeing things" Ackrovan quickly did the alpabete backwards. *"Nope, this is real"*.

Straightening out his armor and weapons, he pulled out his RMM and began hailing other members. All he could hear was a disturbing hiss at the other end.

"Lord w-dueck? You there."

"Jewels? Can you hear me?"

"Hey Nioca, can you talk? Where are you?"

"Nalyd? Azuma? Iffy? Anyone!?"

He received nothing.

"Hey you, fool! Drop your weapons!"

Unnerved, Ackrovan's attention was quickly pulled behind him as six thickly armoured soldiers came upon him and Citrus. Two wielded long spears, as the other 4 unsheathed their blades. All had a grizzly expression on their face.

Citrus stiffened her legs. Ackrovan turned around, bluffing a cocky smile. "So lads, you found me. Good on you, I must say. Next time though, just stick me; you never want them to know your coming."

"Shut up, you stupid pecker. Drop your things, or get ready to be squed."

"Now, now, is there any reason to insult me? Come, sit down and we can discuss--"

The soldier grew more anxious this time. He yelled, "Drop it now!"

Ackrovan nodded towards his crosswick. "You mean this?" He took it off and held it with his left hand.

"Yes tha--"

In a fit of energy, Ackrovan rolled over and let off two shots from his crosswick. The first one interrupted the man who was speaking as it pierced his throat, releasing a ravel of blood. The

seconded one shot passed another soldiers ear. Stopping on a dime, Ackrovan simultaneously pulled out his longsword and muttered a blessing spell. He ran at an alarming speed, cracking through the soldiers formation. Panicked, one stepped forward and tried to hack at Ackrovan's head. Ackrovan expertly parried the blow and smacked through the soldiers chain mail, digging deep into his rib cage. Citrus, now fully charged, let out a blast of energy, incinerating another two guard and sending one other onto the trees.

The last one ran forward and began slashing as Ackrovan. He jabbed, almost catching Ackrovan by the ribs had he not hasted himself. Ackrovan retaliated, taking another slash at the soldier. Unlike the others before him, however, he was no longer in shock, and was competently able to dodge the blow. He jabbed twice again, then quickly spun around, letting his blade dive onto Ackrovans sword. Catching him in a moment of weakness, Ackrovan caught his blade, and shoved it out of his hands. Before the soldier could plead for his life, Ackrovan stabbed through his heart.

Satisfied at the carnage, Ackrovan sheathed his blood soaked blade back into his side. The last soldier had been knocked down, and shook in total terror for his life.

"Wait! Please! Let me live, and I'll help you! I swear!" the soldier pleaded ecstatically.

"Before you go and waste another pair of pants, I demand to know where the residents of Calamity Refuge have been taken. If you tell the truth, I'll let you leave this grove. If you're lying.....I don't even know how I'll repay the pain." Ackrovan bluffed most profusely.

"Okay, umm, are you looking for a scrawny dude? Real skinny, with a little girl that flashes her boobs at people? Another troop picked them up a bit north of here."

"Ye.....wait, what about boobs? Never mind. Where was he taken?"

"A fort to the southeast of here. I think they're being kept in the lower levels."

Ackrovan took a deep gulp. He didn't like storming a fort full of armed men who were going to try to kill him. But then again, Iffy needed aid, and he might be able to introduce him to his lady friend. It's worth the risk.

"Thank you. Now, turn around and start running." The soldier wasted no time. Using his fear as an energy source, the nor disarmed warrior did his best to flee as fast as he could. The second he stepped out of the grove, however, Ackrovan turned around and shot a bolt from his Crosswick into his head. Citrus schooled at his dishonorable behavior. Acky shrugged, "What? I said he could leave the grove, not live outside of it. Besides, he might report our position to his friends before we can get away. Now then, lets get ready for a bit of a raid, shall we?"

.....

5 hours later...

"Well, at least its remote."

Ackrovan's expression on his face was struck with perplexity as he reflected upon the observation of his arial creature, whom he named Joly, of the fortress. A thick wooden wall surrounded the complex. Archers walked around the walls, ready to deliver a slew of arrows unto

the ground for whom ever dare try to run the fortress. A moot was being built around the walls, but it was luckily far from complete. Now nighttime, Ackrovan couldn't see any other notable features.

Mentally, she saw the the fort through the eyes of his creation; an old shaper trick he learned. He saw a small tunnel diving into the mountains. Inside, he could just feel out Iffy's lifesource. "*Oh dear.....he's quite weak. And his friend."*. Ackrovan zoned back into place. He ordered Joly to flutter away.

He then quickly shaped a small horde of 5 unstable thahds, as well as muttered a healing aura spell around them. Their flesh was quickly replaced and healed as Ackrovan's healing spell took into effect.

Then he closed his eyes and spread out his hands. His fingers spread out, and a small horde of Pyroroamers slowly came into form. Ackrovan closed his eyes and took a few seconds to keep focused; he had reached his capacity of controlled creations.

Ackrovan then shot around, turning to Citrus. In a most commanding voice, he said, "

"Citrus. Take the thahds and seven roamers into the main gate to the north. Cause chaos and slaughter. Tangle up with as many of the soldiers as you can. Once I leave the fortress with Iffy and his friend, retreat back into the woods. Kill any pursuers you encounter. Then meet me back at the grove. We will consolidate there." With an almost wicked understanding, Citrus nodes. Ackrovan waved his hand, and Citrus leaped down upon the soldiers, being as loud and as obnoxiously destructive as possible.

Meanwhile, Ackrovan directed the remaining Pyroroamers ahead of him near the southern part of the wall and ordered a charge. The archers, caught between Citrus and the thahds, and Ackrovan with the Roamers, did not focus on any single target, allowing the arrows to fly in every other direction. Quickly seeing the weakness, Ackrovan ordered the Roamers to run and self destruct, leaving open a large hole in the wall. Perfect for Acky to slip through.

.....

1 hour later...

"Iffy? Lady Friend?" Ackrovan called out as he descended into the lower levels. The people there had barely tried to properly restore or keep clean the bowls of the fort. Rat shit and blood stains soaked the floor. Oh well. At least Ackrovan didn't have to smell it for long.

It wasn't long before Ackrovan stumbled across Iffy. He was strapped up against the wall, in an almost dazed state. Ackrovan burst into the rooms and yelled:

"Iffy my boy! Quick, pull your pants up, we're getting out of here!" Iffy did not respond. Neither did his friend.

Ackrovan quickly saw the situation and decided not to offer up any more fancy statements. He drew out his sword and smashed the chains holding Iffy and his friend up against the wall. Iffy

spoke weakly, "Wait, who, who.....who are you?" He had an extremely hard time choking out the last words.

"Acky. I'm here to save you."

Iffy dipped back into unconscious. Ackrovan turned around and shaped a fresh pair of regular thahds to his side. Tiring, he quickly ordered the slightly disfigured creatures to pick up Iffy and Saph. He then ordered a full scale retreat from the fort.

.....

4 hours later...

Nearly broken, Ackrovans thahds dropped Iffy and Saph on a tired dirt pad Ackrovan rustled up. There they layed, virtually lifeless. Citrus looked up at Ackrovan, almost asking, "So, what now?" with her face.

Teleportation Ahoy!

By Zoe - Oct 11 2009

The man...with a ruby tipped blade...stabbing through her...laughing...the flowers...a bloody red... Iffy and Saph woke up at the same time to nighttime. As they tried weakly to get on their knees, a dark man turned around.

"Look who decided to join the rescue party" Iffy and Saph responded by coughing up blood onto the ground.

"You don't expect me to clean that up, do you?" The man continued to be ignored as Iffy and Saph slowly crawled to each other and attempted to huggle.

"Fine, hug you ***" Iffy and Saph just went to sleep cuddling.

15 minutes of their first good sleep after a torturous, continuous nightmare...

Iffy and Saph woke up again, this time feeling a bit stronger. They stood up rather wobbly, having to lean on each other for support.

...I'm going to kill him.

Don't worry, Saph. I'm not going to let him live after that one.

Heh, the images you're getting are awesome, Iffy.

You're thinking of pretty painful ideas yourself, Saph.

The man interrupted their inside conversation, and startled them enough that they collapsed on the ground. He just chuckled. Iffy then recognized him.

"Not even a hello? How rude"

Iffy and Saph slowly lowered themselves up, while Iffy began to speak rather weakly and attempting to smile.

" 'ello Acky...were you the one who saved us?"

"Sure am. You were chocked up in some dank dungeon being tortured. Mind filling me in as to how you got yourselves into that in the first place?" Citrus made a low growl. Saph chuckled. Iffy sighed.

"Thanks, Acky. They caught us when we were most vulnerable...one of the members of the VRP used magic to torture us...spiritually. We have been near dead since...until now"

"Well, you can thank me with a new mug once we get back to the refuge"

"Umm...yeah. Acky, that's going to be a problem" Iffy then fills him in on what happened to the refuge, with Saph making occasional comments.

"Well then, that explains the lack of an ocean anywhere," Ackrovan shuffled his feet curiously, his two thahds mumbling nonsense behind him. "Any idea where the others are?"

Saph then spoke up, "Just before the portal disappeared...before Iffy and I were able to get through it, I identified where it lead to"

Saph whispers the coordinates. "We should be able to teleport there ourselves"

"Hmmhmm. Well, there's nothing we can do tonight. Rest up, and eat some rations; tomorrow, we'll make a run for it. Unless, of course, you have a better idea"

Iffy coughed a bit before speaking again.

"I could teleport us there...if I wasn't in such a weak state. If you can somehow feed our energy, I could get us there in a flash...quite literally"

"Feed you what? I found some apples." Saph chuckled at the sarcasm. Iffy sighed again.

"I meant magical energy. Under normal circumstances I'd have enough...but obviously these aren't normal circumstances. Would you temporarily be able to give me enough *magical* energy to help me teleport us to the location?"

"Would essence work? I still have a little left over from the battle."

"I can work with several energy types, and essence happens to be included"

"Okay. Ackack will then shed out some essence for your use. Then.....poof?"

"Sure. I just hope it'll be enough so that I don't kill myself in the process"

"Wait, what was that last part," Acky had said as his essence flew into Iffy. Iffy was surrounded by a glowing, blue aura. Both he and Saph turned around and faced each other. They clasped their hands in each other's hands, summoning the little bit of power they had saved during their untortured rest. The raw power channeled through Iffy, and thus Saph, as he weaved it to his own

purposes. And with just a thought: Iffy, Saph, Acky, Citrus, and the rest of Acky's creations transported to the where the Refuge members were, uh, refuging.

After they had teleported, Iffy and Saph slipped into unconsciousness, the last things Iffy saw were some very surprised Refuge members.

Regret

By Sudanna - Oct 12 2009

Nalyd stared glumly at the Scythe he had laid limply between his legs.It was a corruption. A sickness. A. . . A pathogen to his mind as it made pathogens for the bodies of others. It was not this that Nalyd was concerned about. He was a Shaper, yes, but first a scientist. He knew better than to hate a parasite for being a parasite, or hate something harmful simply for being harmful. It was not to blame for it's nature. Even the Rot was not to blame.

He was.

Who had seen the Scythe, and seen not a weapon, not a harmer or killer or corrupter, but a tool? An opportunity? Something to exploit and gain power from? Him. Who had Shaped the Rot? Shaped that monstrosity, that hating, spiteful thing of twisted, terrible power? Him. Without giving a second thought. Without even considering what might happen should it break it's bonds, should it be left to go rogue, should it die. For in death, it had proven to be more a monster than it ever could have been in life.

It exploited his weakness. How? Because it knew him. It knew the Scythe. It was of him, a piece of him, and it looked upon his slight form and knew all. Saw how he depended on the Scythe, saw how he fed from it, drank so deeply of it's beautiful, sweet, lure of a song, for so many years, that he could probably not even live without it anymore. Ever. Just the thought of blocking that devil's orchestra from his mind made him shiver and sweat. Entertaining the notion of throwing it away made him want to vomit. For the first time in his life, he regretted his decision to take the Lifesower apprenticeship. Resented his past self for falling into the trap. Falling for the trap of power and knowledge and independence from the Shaper government. Only to be left so exposed in this one way, this one awful way. The Scythe had only the best in magical protection, only the strongest of wards and runic power. But it could not protect him from himself. And that included his creations.

The shifting of the guard Jewels had assigned to him shook him out of his musing. Normally, he would have protested being imprisoned in this way, but now it didn't seem to matter. He was imprisoned anyway. A prisoner of his own addiction, and of the Rot's control over it. The temple didn't have any cells or dungeons, so Nalyd was in an unused priest's quarters. The guard was nervously sitting in a chair by the door. Somehow managing to nervously doze and be bored. No, Nalyd was just flattering himself. The guard regarded this tiny, oddly dressed and odd-smelling little man as a very, very dull assignment.

Nalyd fell back into his own mind.

The Rot was gone for now, and would be for a time longer. The shock of being separated from it's host had thrown it back into the afterlife. But it would be back. It would be probing, searching, for a trace of Nalyd or Lifesower, all around the mortal worlds. It would find him. He could keep it away for a while - a long while - but the return was inevitable. The futility of his position sapped his hope. There was nothing he could do. Except go again and again to Jewel's shrine. . . but that was physical imprisonment as well as mental. No better. No better.

Nalyd curled up around the Scythe. Once he realized what he was doing, he cringed, but sighed to himself and gave in.

It was a corrupter, yes. A poison and a parasite. But it was too late, now. It was a part of him, and he of it, and while it may come at a terrible, hateful price, that of his very mind, it was a price he had already paid.

The first little probes of the Rot found him. He offered no resistance when it slid back into him.

Cylan Heritage

By Sylae - Oct 18 2009

The small town of Cylan sits beside the ruins of the once-proud seaside castle of a nation dead for over two millennia. Farmers still toil over moist dark soil, and the fishing boats still spread their nets in the glassy harbor. The cottage of Elder Llyth, which had sat on the outskirts of Cylan since anyone could remember, was still occupied by the same woman. She appeared to be a woman not a day past her thirtieth summer, but her eyes held the wisdom of thousands of years. She was as stong as any of the others in Cylan, and just as hardy when the winter came.

She removed her hands from the doughy mass on the granite counter when the sound of pounding came from the door of the small cot. Opening the door, she found a horde of children standing before her. "Elder Llyth! Elder Llyth! There's a ghost in the ruins!" they said over the top of each other. She smiled, although on the inside her heart raced. *Could it be? A spirit, after all these years?* She took her cloak a plate of cooling cookies off of the table and headed out the door.

"Why don't you children show me where you saw the ghost?" She said, handing out cookies. The children rushed ahead, yelling at Llyth to hurry up.

"We were just looking around, and then this man appeared, and we ran," one of the boys said as she ran to keep up with them. Soon enough, they arrived at the hillside ruin that was once a mighty fortress. The horde of children clambered over one of the toppled walls, and Llyth followed.

The ghost was walking through the ivy covered mess in interest, gazing in curiosity at the ruin. Llyth approached with caution. Although ghosts couldn't harm anyone, she didn't want to scare it off. When she cleared her throat, the figure spun around, and she saw it--him, in detail.

The figure was of medium height, and appeared rather frail at first glance. His face bore few scars, although the ancient-looking chain mail he wore bore a large hole through it. Llyth cleared her throat again and spoke, "I am Elder Llyth of the village of Cylan," She smiled, then continued, "I can arrange for message to be sent to your family and friends, if you so desire."

The ghost looked down at the hole in its chest. "No, that won't be neccesary...They're all dead, or will be soon."

"What?" Llyth yelled, surprised.

The ghost laughed. "I drug them all into a war they had no part in, and then when they tried to rescue me..." The ghost gestured to the hole in its chest, then continued. "The battle will likely be commencing very soon."

"Oh..." Llyth heard herself say. The ghost was likely a victim of the war between Hylia and Corellian Deseret, probably one of the Hylian generals taken at the beginning of the conflict. "So, the Hylians are losing? I'd heard that it was anyone's guess."

The ghost laughed again. "So, they finally did try to invade...No, I'm not from Hylia. The war was in Ermaria."

"Ermaria? Is that one of the city-states on the Northern Reaches?" Llyth asked.

"No, that's Ermardon. Ermaria is...well, we called them planes, but it's essentially a different world--are you okay?" Llyth's face had gone bone-white at the mention of the word 'plane'.

"Ah, I think we should speak in my cot."

"So, you're a plane-jumper?" Llyth asked as she set the kettle of water on the small iron stove.

"No, not exactly. I've only been to three, well, four planes, and...wait, how do you know about all this? Only one other Corellian knew about the planes, and he's long dead."

Llyth paused. Should she tell him? "I...I've done a lot of research," At the ghost's skeptical look, she sighed. "I was a researcher working on large-scale teleportation between planes. I was marooned here when things went haywire...That was a little over two-thousand years ago...local years. Now, how did you end up here?"

It was the ghost's turn to sigh. "Born here, outlived all my family, I think it was something to do with the Magi blood, although I've never heard of that stopping old age. Eventually I ended up on the wrong side of a spell or something, and next thing I know I'm waking up floating in an ocean. Not one in Corellia."

"So, do you know anything about planal physics?"

"Just the basics. I woke up in an artificial plane, not sure who made it. Ermaria's another artificial one, linked to the Fire Elemental's little oven...If my math is right, this plane, the one we're both in right now, has a .28 time deviation. You know about the time deviation, right?"

Llyth smiled. "Actually, I developed that standard. So, you knew about the Elementals?"

"Yes. Actually, I was in love with one...Look where that got me." the ghost gestured to the hole in its chest. "The last thing I saw before I died was her searing a squad of Ermarian soldiers."

The room was silent for a minute, the Llyth spoke up. "Before you...move on...I was wondering if...if you'd help me get back home."

"Of course. I mean, it's not like anyone here's goi--" The ghost cut off as someone pounded at the door.

"It's open!" Llyth yelled. The door didn't open. Instead, the person on the other side yelled through the door. "Elder, there's a company of Lancers heading down the road towards us."

Wake Up

By Azuma - Oct 18 2009

Wake Up ---

"Ummm..." Ligrev shyly prodded the sleeping Azuma. He didn't react, Ligrev tried it again. Still no response. She worriedly sighed. *Is he dead?* No, he was still breathing and plus, he saw w-dueck done worse than this. She was about to go back to the counter when he muttered something.

"Y- yes?" she slowly asked.

"Coffeeh, pleeeesh."

"O- ok..." she was relieved that that person was now conscious. It was a bit too long since he has been there. She went back to her station and started to brew the drink. "Ummm... mister... Azuma, right?"

"Nyeee... wut?" Azuma was still struggling with his drowsiness.

"N-nothing..." Ligrev blushed as he answered her call. "Y-your coffee's done."

"Thx. You're a good cook Ligrev." Azuma stretched and yawned as he stumbled towards Ligrev's counter. He tripped and he fell to the ground.

"Oh dear!" Ligrev hurriedly rushed to his side. She helped him up to a seat and served his coffee. He seemed unhurt though.

"Thanks again. You're a nice lady Ligrev." Azuma's comment made the woman blush again. Ligrev returned to her post and he took a sip of coffee. He tried to remember what happened, he failed, he remained silent until he felt a mental prick.

What now?! Azuma was somewhat relieved that Sentience was nagging him. *Well, it wasn't my fault!* Azuma shifted as he mentally quarreled with Sentience. Ligrev noticed his expressions and

showed a worried look. Azuma sensed her, and just smiled at her way, making her return to her duties. *Fine, fine. Damn it, you tool. Just let me finish this coffee.* ---

Azuma stood up as he finished his coffee. He just noticed that he hasn't had his hood on. He pulled it over his head but not before saying thanks to Ligrev again, with her nodding shyly.

"I'm going now." Azuma waved goodbye as he passed her.

"Take... care." She replied quietly.

Azuma stepped out of the Lounge and started heading for the Spam Forum. Maybe he could return to his plane now. He walked, and walked, and walked. It wasn't long until he noticed that something was wrong.

"Damn. I forgot we weren't in the Refuge anymore."

Sunset (Part II)

By Nioca - Nov 2 2009

Nioca was ready to scream. Everything, *everything* was falling apart. Casting out his powers, he tried to track down the other members of the Refuge. To his alarm, he noticed that three were missing. Iffy, Saph, and Ackrovan were in the wind.

He shook his head. There was no time to worry about them. He'd just have to write them off as a loss. He tracked down Syla, who was standing near the front of the Designers' tattered forces. "They're in retreat?" Nioca asked.

"Yeah. That Vergil fellow seems to have scared them." Syla muttered. "Where were you?"

"Making preparations. Listen, you need to get everyone through the archway immediately." Nioca stated urgently.

"The *what*, now?" Vergil asked. He was limping slightly, and looked all-the-more-aggrieved for the wear.

"The archway. It's a two-way portal back to the Refuge." Nioca said, keeping his tone civil.

"You mean the Refuge that happens to be parked a few miles away from here?" Vergil snarled.

Nioca glared at Vergil. "No. The Refuge has been reestablished elsewhere, and you need to get to it."

"I can't get to it, you half-wit!" Vergil shouted. "w-dueck banned me!"

Nioca angrily ran a hand through his hair. "Would you stop countermanding me!"

"Why should I? As I see it, Dubya should be calling the shots-"

"He can't call the shots, he's DEAD!" Nioca shouted. "Jewels is unconscious and possibly dying, Robsta's wounded, Iffy, Saph, and Ackrovan are missing, Nalyd's batcrap crazy, and Pestilence is heavens-know-where! The only remaining members left are Azuma and Ligrev, and lets face it, neither of them are exactly generals here. Right now, you and I are the only people left that actually have a clue here, and I outrank you."

Syla cleared her throat.

"Other than Syla." Nioca amended.

Vergil glared at Nioca. "Oh, right, because you're so important. Because you're the only one that matters in the grand scheme of things."

Nioca closed his eyes, trying not to shout further. "I get it. You lost Kaylas. Right now, we're going to lose everyone if we don't call this battle a loss."

"So you'd just let Kaylas die in vain?" Vergil snarled.

"He already has. And so will everyone else in this valley. We need to get back to the Refuge." Nioca stated coldly.

Vergil stared at him. Silence reigned for several seconds. Finally, he said, "In case you've forgotten, I can't go back until w-dueck dec-"

"I've already rescinded your ban, Vergil." Nioca stated.

Vergil blinked. "But the second w-dueck's revived-"

"He won't be able to do a damn thing. Nor will Jewels. I demoted them both to regular members whilst I was there, and promoted myself and Syla to Adminship." Nioca cut him off.

Vergil looked stunned. "You... you what?!" He stammered.

"Later!" Nioca said, exasperated. "Right now, I need you and whatever unwounded troops are available to hold this valley. Buy as much time as possible. Syla, you need to make preparations. We need to get everyone through the archway. Get the supplies together, then start sending through the wounded and those unfit to fight. And whatever you do, don't let the archway run for longer than two minutes at a time. Once that's done, gather everyone else and get them through. Then send yourself through. No arguments!" Nioca raised his voice just as Syla started to argue.

"And just where are you going?" Syla asked.

"I've got some errands to run." Nioca stated.

Just as he turned to go, however, there was a popping sound. Ackrovan, Iffy, and Saph collapsed in front of them.

"Well, it's about time." Nioca stated. He watched Ackrovan slowly brush himself off. "What's your status?"

"Um..." Ackrovan blinked. Something was confusing him. "What did Iffy do?" He said, shielding his eyes.

"Beats me. Now answer. What's your status?" Nioca insisted.

"Alright... I guess." Ackrovan wavered slightly. "How far did we teleport?"

"I don't know. Can't have been too far... Why?" Nioca asked.

"We must have gone pretty far. The sun wasn't even up yet, but here..." Ackrovan looked fatigued. "I need a drink."

Nioca furrowed his brow. Sunrise? But that was impossible... The sun was *setting*. This was the day's end, not...

"Get those three through the archway as soon as possible!" Nioca shouted to Syla. He turned and sprinted off toward the exit of the valley. Then, in the timespan of a blink, he was gone.

Jewels wasn't going to be happy. Then again, he wasn't exactly living it up himself. He looked up to the starry sky. Indeed, here, it was early morning. And it could only mean one thing. Time was running out.

A rucksack jingled with various artifacts. In his hand, a large black crystal. The inside seemed unusually deep, and flickers of light could be seen trying to escape from within. An aura of power radiated outward from the crystal, inspiring shivers in all the nearby creatures. Aryll, leading Nioca, was trying to put as much distance between herself and the crystal as possible.

They were in the ruins of the old Refuge. Nioca marched into the battered remains of his Citadel, but stalled in the foyer. He could hear someone rummaging around inside. Pocketing the crystal, he reached into his robes, and pulled out a pair of wands. He then pointed the gold-tipped weapons down the hall.

Several soldiers stepped around the corner and froze. They were carrying several items, none of which looked important. However, Nioca didn't care. With a savage cry, he opened fire. Golden orbs of light flew fast and thick, cutting soldiers down before they could draw their weapons. Aryll fired a blast of caustic mist into the fray, sending soldiers scrambling away.

In under 15 seconds, the deed was done. Stepping past the dead soldiers, he made his way into his room. It looked ransacked. He noted, with disdain, that his fountain clock was trashed. But he didn't care. "Aryll, guard up here. I'll be right back." When she nodded, Nioca spoke his password to the secret door. As the illusionary wall faded, he hiked his rucksack over his shoulder and sprinted down the stairs.

Branches crunched underfoot. They were in the forest of Dryads. Alarmingly, Imperial soldiers were scouring it, seemingly purging the forest of life. On occasion, he came across the body of a dryad, or across the ashes of a tree. And up ahead, he could hear the screams of fighting dryads, flames, and the sounds of steel ravaging flesh.

"GET DOWN!" Aryll yelled. She pushed the off-guard Nioca down and morphed into an orange shadow. Her claws glistening in what moonlight was available, she pointed one at a charging band of soldiers behind him. A ray of flame burst against chainmail, setting the forest ablaze as arrows flew over Nioca's head. "GO! I'LL HOLD THEM OFF!" She hissed.

Nioca nodded, then took off into the forest. It was the third group of soldiers that had attacked them as they made their way to the forest, and it was making him wonder how they were

tracking him. And more importantly, why were they engaging in wholesale genocide against the dryads?

He downed a restoration elixir and opened his mind. He could feel the presence of the dryads and soldiers. He quickly started sorting through them... Samuel, Troal, Eoral, Mark... Then he felt something click. A dryad named Jasmine, wounded and desperately fighting a losing battle to protect her tree.

Nioca raised the crystal, channeling his powers into it. At first, nothing seemed to happen. Then, two bright orbs of light, one large and one small, hurtled through the air and impacted the black crystal. The lights absorbed into it and disappeared, and the crystal flickered lazily. He then channeled more power into the crystal. A small hailstorm of lights, some large and some small, poured into the crystal. When it entered, the crystal was flickering with greater vigor.

Satisfied, Nioca turned around. Aryll stumbled toward him, looking somewhat worn but otherwise all right. He nodded, and the two disappeared in a flash of light.

It was quiet. The sun was low on the horizon. Vergil and the remnants of the Designers' able-bodied forces were all that were left as Nioca and Aryll teleported back into the valley.

Nioca approached Vergil. "Time to go. Get everyone to the archway." Vergil nodded quietly, and directed their forces to the portal back to the Refuge. As they lined up, Nioca put a hand on the archway. The runes quickly lit up, and a corridor formed inside of it. "Alright everyone, go! Quickly now!" He shouted. Men quickly started pouring through the archway, Vergil leading the way. As they did, Nioca leaned against the archway, fatigued. Incredible pains were wracking his body. His head spun faster than a top. If he had eaten anything, odds were great that his body would have purged it by now. He was overextended.

When the last soldier entered, Nioca slammed his palm against the obsidian archway. The runes faded and the corridor closed upon itself. Trying to draw on what little strength he had remaining, he channeled his powers into the archway. A few of the runes rearranged themselves, morphing the continuous pattern throughout the stone into a new shape.

"A good precaution." A voice shouted casually. "Might put off the inevitable a while longer. I must say, Mr. Galton... You have proven considerably more annoying than I ever could have predicted."

"Figures that it wouldn't be that easy." Nioca panted, looking up. The Stranger was walking toward him, dark magicks swirling around his hands.

"Of course not." The Stranger stated as calmly as if they were discussing the weather. "But don't worry. It'll all be over soon enough. You... you will make an excellent addition to my collection." The Stranger extended his hands, dark, whispering tendrils pouring forth.

Nioca straightened himself up as much as possible and flicked his wrist. The tendrils dissipated as if blown by a gentle gust of wind. Nioca then downed a healing drought, and prepared for a fight. He weaved a web of protective magic around himself, firing a bolt of raw energy from his palm. The Stranger parried it, sending it crashing into a tree.

"That it? I was expecting-" The Stranger faltered as a barrage of brightly colored energy beams flew at him. With a snarl, he batted them aside, letting some of them splash against his wards. "Much better." He said with a bloodthirsty smile. He fired back, a thousand beams of fire pouring from each finger. They struck Nioca's shielding like a wrecking balls, sending him flying backward against the obsidian archway. His wards were shattered, and his body was ravaged by flame.

Nioca staggered, violet blood trickling down his neck. His hand found the archway, and its runes lit up. The Stranger chuckled. "Really? You expect to escape? How... charming." He approached, a gleam in his eyes. "Let me tell you something, *Designer*. You are an insect. A nothing. You think you know what a god is, simply because you hold the power to reshape a field with your thoughts. But you will learn. In my service, you will learn what true divinity is..." Again, the Stranger reached out with those tendrils.

Rage was all that kept Nioca going. He pushed himself upright and raised his hands in defiance. Energy, unlike anything he had ever released before, poured forth against the Stranger. The very fabric of reality warped against him. The Stranger raised his defenses again, carefully weathering the assault.

The field took on an orange tint. Everything did, in fact. It felt like everything was dipped into a blast furnace. The sun seemed large on the horizon, and an odd force seemed to pull everything downward. Magic itself seemed to be warping, twisting into something unrecognizable. Flashes of light appeared where the magic of Ermaria broke its bounds. Hideous creatures appeared. Pieces of the great temple fell apart. Cracks in the earth formed, filled with fire.

Nioca's energy was almost out. His attacks were starting to lag, and the Stranger wasn't any worse for the wear. Nioca collapsed backwards, against the archway. It was futile. He brushed the archway with his finger, and it deactivated. The Stranger merely smiled. "And what do you hope that to accomplish?" With a smile, the Stranger flicked his wrist. Nioca flew through the air, over the Stranger, and landed behind him. The Stranger turned. "So. Is there anything left in your precious bag of tricks? Or are you finished with this foolishness."

With an incoherent scream of rage, Nioca summoned his last scraps of energy and fired a massive bolt of energy at the Stranger. It went wide.

He felt something snap within. Like he had finally pushed beyond some unknowable barrier. His eyesight vanished, though he could still hear. The sensations throughout his body ceased as his nerve endings all failed. Nioca fell to the ground. His skin took on a bizarre, porous texture, and slowly started melting. Blood poured through it, turned violet by the many potions he had consumed.

The Stranger shook his head. "Pathetic. You hear that? Pathetic! You couldn't even hit me!" He left Nioca on the ground, turning toward the archway. "You've lost. You failed to protect Ermaria. It will now fall. All I have to do is step through this portal to find the Refuge... You may have redirected it, but there's naturally a transport waiting faithfully on the other side. Correct?" The Stranger chuckled, running his hand across the archway. He saw the runes light up slowly. He then turned back to Nioca, stretching forth the tendrils one last time. "Now... time for you to serve your master."

Somehow, even though Nioca couldn't feel anything else, he could feel the tendrils grabbing ahold of him. Piercing through him like fire. They kept him alive for a few more moments, so they could accomplish their purpose.

The Stranger cocked his head. There was an odd noise coming from behind him. A grating whine. He turned around, looking at the obsidian archway. The runes were glowing brightly. Too brightly. The Stranger's eyes scanned the archway in confusion.

Nioca's last attack hadn't missed.

His final blast and struck the gate, knocking a small chunk out of the intricate runework. Energy was feeding back in a failed attempt to open a portal. It kept drawing more energy. More than it could possibly hold.

"FU-!" The Stranger started to scream out.

But the second half of the curse was lost to a massive explosion. The entire valley, and everything within, was vaporized in a cataclysmic blast. A crater miles deep was created, and soot was thrown into the air. Earthquakes wracked the world, heralding what would come next.

The sun crashed into Ermaria, immolating its surface. The entire universe seemed to draw inward, pulled toward Ermaria like a magnet. Stars lightyears away were now within a few hundred miles. Planets collided and crashed.

There was a bright flash and a high-pitched sound not unlike a scream.

And then Ermaria was no more.

Syla looked out at the sky. Refuge sensors had spotted an incoming craft.

She wasn't sure about this. She had never been an 'Admin' before. Whatever that was... Some kind of overlord position? All she knew was that she had suddenly been thrust into a situation she had no idea how to handle.

Thankfully, though, she wouldn't be alone in this for long. She spotted the odd vehicle. It slowly descended, jets pulsing with energy. It settled with a gentle thump, and the cockpit quickly opened. Someone scrambled out, carrying a blue crystal and Crusader's Protectorate.

Syla cocked her head. What was going on? No one else was disembarking... She cleared her throat.

"Aryll, where's Nioca?"

Control

By Sudanna - Nov 5 2009

As soon as the Rot reintegrated with Nalyd's mind, it set to finding Stillborn. The thing was obsessed, and even Nalyd could see that. It wrenched Nalyd's body up, which of course startled his guard. As the tiny man briskly walked to the door, holding Lifesower parallel to the floor. The chainmail-bearing guard moved forward hesitantly, stuttering his objections, and Nalyd reached out one hand, which flashed into claws of his cancerous green fire, and ripped him open from hip to throat.

As the guard's steaming organs slopped to the floor and his empty shell of a body fell into them, Nalyd continued on his way, following the burning beacon of power that Stillborn showed to any bio-mage. The creation was sulking in Jewel's shrine, which the Rot did not enter. Nalyd beckoned Stillborn from the door. When the scarred creature began shuffling to the door, Nalyd roared "NOW!!!"

As Stillborn hurried after him, Nalyd tried to find an exitfrom this temple compound. The Rot was impatient, tired of these constant interruptions brought on by other people, and very, very angry wih Nalyd for severing it's connection. It was not long before Nalyd ended up sprinting down hallways, his huge, loose robes flying all about his body. The Shaper insignia on his back glowed a faint yellow, the Rot was so focused on Nalyd.

Eventually, he gave up and jumped out of a window. He broke a leg, but fixed it in less than a minute. Stillborn landed lightly beside him, taking the two-story drop with no more difficulty than a stair step. The Rot failed to notice the sun racing across the sky, though Nalyd did. There was smoke and a red glow, visible even in the daytime, on the horizon. The Rot was not concerned. It was scanning Nayd's mind for information. Where they were, what had happened, where was the closest Shaping lab. It wanted Stillborn finished, bad. Nalyd was going back to the Refuge.

Nalyd stood on his just-finished leg and raised his arms. Shimmering green light erupted from the ground around him, closing upon the little Shaper and his creation like the petals of a violet.

When they returned from the ruins of the Refuge, the Rot was fuming. There was nothing there but shattered stone and slagged metal. The wasted Shaping lab held nothing useful, and nothing recognizable. If Nalyd hadn't had his master plan for Stillborn and the linked diagram with him, he would have been back at square one, without any tools or materials to advance. As it was, he was down one Shaping lab, stuck with a defective creation, knowing only what it was and what it needed to be. The Rot withdrew from his conscious mind, steaming on it's home plane. Nalyd was left to catch his breath, sitting against the back of the temple, Stillborn standing off to the side. Edging away from Nalyd.

The sun was setting. Nalyd didn't know what it meant, but it seemed symbolic. Had it really been that long? Or that short a time, since the Rot had retaken his brain. Already he was tired, so tired.

Nalyd watched Stillborn nervously stand around. His failure, such a failure. Such a wasted opportunity. All his fault. His weakness.

He numbly watched as people filed through the archway, none of them seeing him in the semi-gloom of sunset. He saw Nioca stop the portal, and as the strange man appeared and Nioca's banter began, he struggled to stand. Nioca needed him. Whether it was some kernel of camaraderie or a simple wish for death, he tried to stumble towards their just-starting duel.

Stillborn's heavy arm reached across his chest, restraining the weak little Shaper. When Nalyd struggled feebly, Stillborn picked up his weak little master and held him to his chest. "It is not safe, Father. We shouuld leave this place."

Sure enough, the other man unleashed his ridiculous barrage of energy beams, which smashed through Nioca and into the wall of the Temple. Shards of stone slashed at Stillborn and Nalyd, but they both regenerated, Stillborn healing Nalyd for him.

Stillborn ran from the scene, as the shrieks of the two combatants rose in volume. The world grew orange around them, and it got hotter and hotter. Nalyd felt the single-celled organisms around him dying en masse, as their threshholds were reached. He was sweating profusely, but Stillborn remained dry. At least he had gotten the cooling systems right. Or terribly, terribly wrong.

They saw the sun getting closer and closer, as multicolored explosions sounded behind them. Stillborn stopped running.

"We are doomed, Father. We cannot escape the sun."

He laid Nalyd down on the wilting grass, and then sat beside him. Nalyd gasped, the terrible dry heat and weariness making speech almost impossible. "We. . . cannot. Take my hand, creation."

He called out to the Rot.

In a place of darkness and vile incomprehensibility, a twisted, timeless and spaceless expanse of insanity. Eldritch horrors called this place theirs, and abominations of the multiverse came here to be fed upon.

The Rot was a mountain of pulsating flesh, it's skeletal humanoid torso protruding from a mountain range of living corruption. The brain cascaded down the sides, like hair, falling in folds and waves of cognition. It looked rotten, falling to the living ground and spreading in a wave, the Rot's swollen and monstrous skull slashing at the sky with it's shattered and overgrown edges. The thing could not raise it's head, and it's mouth was never made to close. The needle teeth gnawed ineffectually at the air.

It twitched one long strand of brain.

Nalyd looked around him in vague surprise at the green and black threads stretching from thin air. They enclosed him and Stillborn in an orb of seething fury, not weaving together but merely blocking out all else. They were lifted from the ground as the millions of tiny threads swirled about them, and then quietly swirled away.

The face of the Rot drooled at them. The thing was mute here, even it's powerful mind unable to breach the fabric of this place. On the horizon, darkness loomed, hulking shapes assaulted the Rot's living mountain. The disgusting brown/orange flesh pulsed blue and yellow in huge, sick patches all over the Rot, destroying the constant invaders this place brought. Missiles began falling all aaround them. The Rot twitched it's brain again.

One in Ressurection

By Jewels - Nov 9 2009

There's a chance. There's always a chance.

None to non-existent. You have to let him go.

Hush! Just gotta go to Corel, find him, and—

And what?

Bring him back somehow. There's gotta be a way.

IF he's there.

You're such a pessimist.

No. A realist.

You know, I don't really apprecia— Jewels was so preoccupied with her thoughts as she hurried down the hallway that she didn't notice Azuma until she was on top of him, having literally knocked him over and fallen on top of him. He moaned in pain beneath her. "Ah, Azuma, I'm so sorry. I didn't see you. Here let me help you up." Jewels scrambled to her feet and offered her hand to a dazed Azuma who took a moment to focus before grabbing it and pulling himself up. "Where are we off to in such a hurry this evening?"he asked.

"I'm meeting with Jumara next to the portal,"she answered hurriedly. "He's going to take me with him to Corel." Jewels paused before forcing herself to finish her thought without tears. "To get Will." Azuma gave her a puzzled expression. "What's Will doing in Corel? And where is Corel exactly?" Jewels' mouth hung open for a moment as she processed his answer. It seemed he

didn't know what had happened to Will, and she didn't think she had the strength to tell him about it. Not right now. She ventured for a generalized non-answer hoping to satisfy him. "Corel is Will's home plane and I have to go get him. If you'll excuse me, I don't want to delay."She nodded at him and started to walk away. She could hear him whispering something harshly behind her.

"Wait,"he called a little timidly. Jewels turned as he fidgeted with his sword hilt. "Could I, uh, help you? I mean, if you need help. Er, do you? Do you need help? Because I could. If you need it."Azuma let the thought trail off knowing she had got the gist and not willing to articulate it better.

Part of her wanted to say no. She didn't even want Jumara with her if—when she found Will. But the truth of the matter was that neither she nor Jumara had a very good idea where to find Will at. She needed all the help she could get. So she nodded at him. "Come along then."

They hadn't walked very far when a very sudden and forcefully urgent thought came through from Nioca. You need to leave. Now! Jewels had been very aware of his agitated state ever since he returned but she hadn't wanted to make things worse by prying into his mind for the reason.

She tried to remain cool and calm in an attempt to balance out his fretting. I'm trying. Jumara and I are going to Corel with the lancers to— The immediacy and intensity of the sense of danger that he threw at her almost overwhelmed her.

As it was, Azuma had to steady her as she stumbled. "Whoa, watch yourself. You alright?"Jewels nodded without thinking though she could barely tell which way was up at the moment.

EVERYONE needs to leave! NOW!!

The weight lifted as Nioca backed off though the gravity of the situation remained implanted in her mind. Okay? She tried to convey her understanding but noted that he had already shifted his attention elsewhere. Realizing that Azuma was almost carrying her full weight Jewels lifted herself up and started shaking her head instead of nodding. "Slight change in plans, Azuma. You wanted to help right?"She barely noted his answer as he nodded. "Follow me, quickly now."Without giving him any sort of explanation, Jewels started sprinting down the corridor and didn't turn to make sure he was following.

After rounding a few turns, Jewels entered a room panting heavily. Her feet had stopped but her mind didn't slow down. She needed to make something—something simple. Opening up to the BladesCraft around her, Jewels managed, without much trouble, to form a simple table with wheels underneath. She was already done with it when Azuma burst in huffing all the more.

He took a few quick glances around before spitting some questions out between breaths. "Don't suppose you—can tell me—what in the name of all things spam—is going on here?" "We're evacuating,"Jewels monotoned while catching her breath from the run and the drain.

"And we came here why?"

"To get this."Jewels pointed a finger at the table next to her choosing to ignore the incredulous tone in his voice.

He looked at the table, then looked at Jewels, and back at the table again. "What, a block of ice? We're evacuating and you're running for your life to get a block of ice?"

"Help me slide it over to the gurney."She raised her voice a little when he didn't move. "Come on now, quickly. Time is short." Azuma huffed and shook his head, but he moved to help her anyway. The ice was heavy but they moved it over easily enough, although the frost where Azuma's hand had been melted away giving him a glimpse of the booted foot inside. "Hey, there's somebody in there!"

"I know,"was all the answer she gave him as she started to roll it towards the door as fast as the little wheels would carry it. Not fast enough, though, to escape Azuma's questions.

"Who is it?"Jewels bit her lip and tried to push it faster but he easily kept up with her and pressed her harder. "Tell me who it is!" She didn't want to have this dialogue. She didn't want to think about it, because if she stopped long enough to think about what was actually happening, she knew she'd be reduced to a puddle of tears. Even the thought of thinking about it had managed to cause one to spill over her cheek. "It's Will,"she finally spat out. She could hear the confusion in his stutterings, wished he wasn't demanding to understand, wished she wasn't the one who had to give him the answers. She stopped the cart and raised a hand to silence him. Closing her eyes pushed out more tears and she forced her mouth to push out the words she didn't want to say. "This is Will. Will is dead. His spirit is in Corel. I have to go bring it back."

Jewels herself noticed for the first time, the obligation she felt over going after him. It wasn't just that she loved him, it wasn't just that she missed him, and it wasn't just that a part of her had died with him. It was that he was dead because of her. She had botched the rescue, it was her fault she had killed him. She had to make it right... her soul demanded it.

Vergil had given her a sideways glance as she approached the portal with Will in tow but he said

nothing and the trio were let through the portal without quarrel. Once on the other side, Jewels grabbed the nearest bystander and asked them to wheel the block of ice over to the citadel. "Find a shade, any shade, and tell them Nioca wants this kept cold."

After making sure they were headed in the right direction, she turned back to the portal intent on going back through only to be stopped by a mixed line of SimpleBots and guards. "I have to go get Stillborn. Let me back through the portal." A confident guard addressed her. "Sorry, ma'am, no one is to be let back through." "But I have to go get my son!"Jewels tried to push past but they easily held her back.

"Ma'am, I couldn't let you thorough if I wanted to. Nioca has changed it to be a one way portal only."Jewels' jaw dropped. She was horrified at herself for not making sure before she had gone through. The guard was not heartless and tried to comfort her. "Others know your son is there right? He is in someone else's care right now?"Jewels nodded. "They'll be sure to bring him through with them. You needn't worry. He'll be fine."

"But—but—" Jewels started stuttering as she allowed Azuma to pull her away from the portal. She allowed herself a cleansing breath as the weight of Nioca's agitation and all the worry that went with it really lifted from her. Faren would bring Stillborn, yes. She had nothing to worry about. Faren would not allow him to be left behind.

Jewels ventured a look around at the refuge. It looked exactly like it had before the whole mess. It was amazing what a little back up and database could do. Almost as powerful as an Ermarian god. She chuckled to herself as she noted with pleasure how densely wooded it was beyond the Refuge's borders. Passing by the pond she looked down at herself and noticed what a fright she looked. Her black silk garments were matted to her form with dried blood and her hair was all a tangle. Streaks ran down her face where tears had washed away some of the filth of war. Rather unflattering. "I need to go change,"she said aloud more to herself than to Azuma. He followed as she wandered towards the Admin Tower.

She didn't have her keys with her, but she didn't think she'd need them what with her door being blown off anyway. To her surprise, though, she couldn't even get in the front door. "What's this?"she mused. "The front door is always open to everyone. Who's gone and locked it?"

Azuma shrugged but nodded to a control panel next to the door that also seemed new. One of the buttons was labeled *Assistance* so Jewels pushed it. A SimpleBot soon buzzed towards them and asked in a monotone voice. *"What assistance do you require?"*

Jewels smiled. This was a rather good idea. She hoped they had been installed in every building, and if not, she intended to make sure they were. "I require assistance in opening this door."

"Unable to comply. You are not authorized to enter the Admin Tower."

Jewels gave half a chuckle. "What do you mean I'm not authorized? I'm an admin. It's the Admin Tower. It's a tower for admins like me. Now open the door."

"Unable to comply. You are not an admin."

Jewels looked at the bot in disbelief, pausing before venturing another question. "And who, pray tell, are the admins then? Anyone?"

"Calamity Refuge is overseen by ArchAdmin Nioca and Admin Syla."

The blood in Jewels' veins began to boil, or was at least close to it. Azuma backed away from the heat she was generating. Through clenched teeth she asked one final question. "What is the member status of w-dueck and Jewels?"

"Both are regular members."

Slowly and stiffly, Jewels turned to Azuma. In a raspy whisper she asked, "Could you excuse me for a moment? I'll be right back."Not waiting to see him nod, Jewels walked around the building until she couldn't see him anymore. The stream of explicits that flew from her mouth were accented by the thunderous explosions of fire balls against the ground. "Motherf— KABOOM! —king, di— KABOOM! —sucking, p— KABOOM! —sy licking, a— KABOOM! —kissing, son of— KABOOM! —itch!" By the time she was done, she was hoarse and she stood next to a ten foot wide scorched crater.

The silence afterwards drew on for a couple of minutes as Jewels tried to composed herself once more. It wasn't so much that Nioca had demoted her, though that definitely didn't help, it was that he had demoted Will, and before he thought him dead. She was only glad that Will's spirit was not present to witness Nioca's betrayal of his trust. He'd be turning in his grave and Nioca would be digging his.

Jewels returned to see Azuma blushing and avoiding eye contact with her while the SimpleBot hummed and beeped in the same spot it had been. She addressed the accursed hunk of metal. "I require assistance. I need to speak to Syla." Syla arrived in short order standing stiffly and seeming a bit uncomfortable in her skin. "You wanted to talk to me?" Jewels was relieved to see that she didn't have a single arrogant air about her. She tried to remain polite and business like as she spoke. "I understand that w-dueck and I are no longer admins, correct?"Syla nodded shifting her weight uneasily obviously expecting a confrontation. "And Nioca made him and yourself admins instead?"Syla nodded again, a bit more enthusiastically at the statement that it was Nioca's doing. "I'm going to cut to the chase, Syla. I don't like it. Not one bit, but if I'm going to fight with someone over it, it's going to be Nioca."

Syla's countenance eased and she relaxed. "What did you want to talk about then?" "Well, I had been living on the 29th floor, and all my personal belongings are there. It seems I've effectively been evicted but can I at least get my stuff?"When Syla hesitated, Jewels quickly added. "Please, Syla? Look at me. I need a change of clothes." Syla sighed. "All right, but I'm going with you, and Azuma has to stay here." "Fine by me,"Azuma intoned. "I, uh, need a coffee anyway."He seemed happy enough to excuse himself from the situation, though after a brief moment of staring off into space he did look back at Jewels. "You're sure you're alright though?"Jewels nodded so he waved in dismissal and headed in the direction of the Lounge.

For the most part, the pair of them walked in silence up to the 29th floor. Jewels shook her head when she saw the SimpleBot hanging a new door onto the suite. The plaque on the door said*ArchAdmin Nioca* on it. I guess when you're ArchAdmin, your priorities take precedence? Syla let her in but stayed close. Jewels looked to the right. The couch, the TV, all the CDs and DVDs. Nothing there was hers. Jewels looked to the left. The table, the hutch, all the dishes, all the food. Nothing there was hers either. Jewels walked past the fireplace and through the garden fingering flowers as she went. Carnation, rose, lily, orchid. Still nothing that belonged to her.

Jewels opened the door to the bedroom and stood still. Now that's unexpected. All the soul orbs sat around the fireplace again, their stands untouched by the blast that destroyed them in Ermaria. What could the powers of internet magic not do? Her eyes fell on Will's orb, black and lifeless as ever. A new pang of emotion washed over her. It can't bring him back?

She hurried over to the closet where the original shoebox remained. Took out the clothes and threw them on the bed but left the mop and bucket. If she was a regular member now, Nioca could do his own cleaning. Then carefully, Jewels placed each of the orbs into the shoebox.

"What are these?"Syla asked. She picked one up seemingly mesmerized by the swirling lights beneath. "And what's wrong with this one?"She picked up Will's.

Jewels struggled to hold back the tears. She didn't know how much to tell Syla. "They—they are decorations. I made them to remind me of the members of the refuge. That one is Nebulan's and that one—" She pointed at the ball of pitch in Syla's hand. "That one is Will's. It's—it's broken. I'm trying to fix it."

Syla put them into the shoebox and looked at the rest of them around the fireplace. "Who else do you have?" Jewels said the name for each as she put them into the box, though she skipped the one she had already put in it. "Pestilence, Nalyd, Vergil, Azuma, Iffy, Ackrovan, Robsta, Nikki, and HellSpawn." "I don't think I've even met those last two. None for Nioca?"Syla prodded.

Jewels gave Syla a small smile. "Oh, I made one for Nioca. He's the real reason I made them. You might say he inspired me." She started walking into the study. There on the shelf was the jar

still intact. Jewels picked it up and gave it a little shake. The crystals inside clinked musically against the glass. "Nioca broke it last time he was here."She gave a little laugh before sighing. "I poured my heart and soul into each of them."

Jewels stared at the jar in silence until Syla spoke up. "They are quite beautiful." "Yes. Quite to die for." She laughed quietly at her double meaning before shaking herself from her thoughts. "I've only one other thing and then I can get out of your hair and hopefully find someplace to wash mine." She sat behind the desk and opened up the drawer on the right hand side, pulled out a stack of paper two inches thick. "My manifesto,"she lied to the curious eyes that tried to see the cover. "It's not quite finished yet."

Jewels tried to balance everything in her arms as she headed for her office. A couple of jiggles of the knob left her swearing again. Nioca had locked her out of that, too... "No matter,"she muttered to herself through gritted teeth. "The inn will be more than sufficient for a few nights."Unfortunately, by the time she arrived, Ligrev was sorry to inform her that all the rooms were filled or rather triple filled by all the new arrivals coming through the portal. The story was the same at the general member quarters.

She was tempted to just show up in Nioca's citadel and take his room. It didn't look like he'd be sleeping there any time soon what with his new suite on the 29th floor. Actually, the more she thought about it, the more she liked the idea. If Nioca didn't want her using her own shower, she'd use his. The citadel was also quite full, though, Nioca and Syla having given the shades instructions to house people in all of the spare rooms there. The shades seemed much too cold for her taste. Maybe just a temporary stay to spurn Nioca then, well, by then Will would be back to set things straight. And if not, she could always just teleport back to Nana for a rest. Nana would probably like that actually. She could just keep her stuff in any odd corner and return to Nana each night or whenever she actually had time to sleep.

It took a little finagling with the shades, but with the time she had spent linked to Nioca's mind she eventually convinced them that he had sent her to stay in his private quarters as a guest since he would be staying in hers. But Nioca's room wasn't exactly what Jewels would call hospitable. He apparently hadn't taken the time to really clean it up since their little... spat. The bed had at least been cleared of debris, but most the rest of the room still held destroyed furniture and scorch marks. Oddly, though, one large wall was completely clear of any mark. In fact, upon closer inspection, there seemed to be no damage to the wall at all. Not a single pitted spot on it. Jewels ran a hand over its smooth marble surface and eyed the vertical line that seemed to mark the edge of the perfection. Very odd indeed how the cracks and scorch pattern on one side of the line didn't carry over to the other.

Jewels left her meager belongings on the bed and left the citadel. She fancied a shower but she knew she didn't have the time for it. Instead she walked around the perimeter of the building until she came to a sturdy tree; one of thousands on this island. She put a hand on its bark and

felt it welcome her in. In the blink of an eye Jewels stepped in on one side and out on the other. Her black silk clothing was spotless, her skin glowing, her hair had not a strand out of place. It felt so much better just to be clean. She gave the tree trunk a thank you kiss before walking towards the portal again. She hoped that Stillborn had made his way through by now.

She stood in front of the portal wringing her hands a little too closely. The portal activated and a flash of light blinded her. Before she could stop pacing, she tripped over something that had not been in her path just a moment before. "Aaahhhhh!"

The lump beneath her groaned. "Ooofff! Cirtus! Get off Iffy's girlfriend!"

Jewels blinked trying to regain her sight. The voice sounded so familiar but she couldn't quite place it. She pushed herself up and stumbled backwards mumbling a hurried apology. "Sorry... whoever you are."

"And you! Get off me before I throw you to the wall!" Ackrovan shouted, as he turned to see who he was yelling at.

"Course, if you insist on throwing me to the wall, I'll have to burn you to a crisp... once I can see you properly. Or maybe I'll just burn you to a crisp anyway for blinding me and tripping me up."

As Ackrovan was about to prepare a rebuttal, he suddenly realized who he was yelling at. His face quickly sobered up. He let go of his anger and said, "Wait a moment....Jewels? Is that you?"

The fuzzy form in front of her finally started to come back into focus but she squinted at him anyway. "Yeah it's me... Ackrovan?" He reeked of alcohol... She thought better of flaming her hands to playfully prove her point. He'd go up like a light.

"Yes! Ha, ha!" Ackrovan walked up and gave Jewels an embracing hug. "Iffy, we made it back...wait, Iffy? Oh jeez." Iffy and Saph were unconscious on the ground, clearly exhausted from the spell and the abrupt teleportation.

Jewels let her gaze follow his to see them. Relief washed over her at their apparent safety. She hurried to kneel beside them to make sure. "Oh thank goodness you made it."

"They should be fine, I think. Just in need of a lengthy rest. Thahds! You, take Iffy, and you, take Saph, and find them a room with two beds to use!" The thahds looked at each other clearly confused. "Oh right. I haven't named you yet." Ackrovan pointed at the thahd on the left. "You will be called Bixy." He nodded to the one on the right, "And you shall be named Bret. Now, follow your orders."

Jewels watched Iffy and Saph go before turning back to Acky. Tears welled up in her eyes from the emotion of knowing that something had finally turned out all right for once. "What happened out there, Acky?"

"Oh, those woods are infested with soldiers, all of them running around, causing mayhem."Jewels was suddenly a bit more on edge. Soldiers? In the dryad forest? "He and Cit got dumped in a small groove, where we encountered, and successfully defeated, a group of warriors. One of them mentioned Iffy and Saph being taken into a fortification to the south of the groove. I shaped up a hoard of minions, and broke in." Ackrovan nodded to the two thahds who were taking Iffy and Saph. "Those are the only two that survived. Anyway, after rescuing them, Iffy and Saph used their magic to transport us where the last known coordinates of the other refuge members were. We were promptly thrown through this archway by Nioca and company. And...here we are." Without letting Jewels soak any of this information in, Ackrovan quickly asked, "So, what have we missed?"

"Well, we had been fighting the Emperor's army and I think we pretty much won but then Nioca started raving about immediate evacuation and—" Jewels paused not wanting to relive the pain... again. "We've taken many casualties," she finally finished.

"How bad?"

"I don't know the full number. The battlefield hasn't been cleared yet. Not everyone has come through the portal yet but... Kaylas and Will are both gone." A tear escaped her eye and she looked to the ground. "Kaylas was shot with a Spiritkiller bolt. There's no way to revive him. I've tried reviving Will myself and it hasn't worked..." She couldn't hold in the sob that came out.

Ackrovan did not respond to this for a few minutes. He leaned up against a tree, trying to comprehend what he was just told. After several awkward minutes, he leaned back, successfully holding back a tear, "I would like to see whoever is in charge. I will offer my assistance for as long as needed."

"Of course," Jewels tried to compose herself again. "Syla's the one to talk to. She's... at the Admin Tower." She pointed a finger in the general direction of where she last saw Syla before giving him another quick hug. "I'm so glad you're alright," she whispered in his ear.

Ackrovan welcomed the hug. He said, "I'm glad you're alright too. And if there's anything else you need, I'll be around." Ackrovan broke off the hug as Citrus walked over to his side.

Jewels waved a final farewell before resuming her pacing in front of the portal, if a little further away. Group after group started coming through and Jewels scanned all of them until finally she

saw Feran join the crowd on Refuge Isle. She elbowed her way over to him still scanning because Stillborn was not with him.

He saw her coming and edged towards her, too. "Lady Jewels! So glad to see you here and in good health. I have something for you."

When she reached him, he held out the haversack she had stored her soul orbs in. She smiled and gave a quick peek inside to confirm. Now she had two sets... what would she do with them both? A small sliver of her mind started to think about it but the rest was preoccupied. "Thank you, Faren. You are most thoughtful, but where is Stillborn?" His face blanched and his eyes dropped. He spoke hesitantly. "I am sorry My Lady, but before we were told of the evacuation, that man came back. The short one with the enchanted scythe. He stayed outside the room and called for your son very forcefully. I-I was unable to make him stay. I have failed you My Lady."As well as he could within the crowd, Faren fell to his knees before her. "Please forgive me!"

Jewels closed her eyes against the worry. Tried to shut out all the terrible things that came streaming into her mind. Her son's life was in the hands of a madman. By the sound of it, the Rot must have returned, a little wiser than to just walk into her sanctuary again. But all her preparation, all her work on making someplace safe. It was all useless. Completely useless when Nalyd had the power to command Stillborn.

Faren's hands held onto the hem of her pant leg when she opened her eyes. With a broken voice she tried to comfort the man. "Get up, Faren. There is nothing to forgive. It is not you who has failed here, but me. I could not make a place safe enough for my son."

Faren did get up but he started to protest her words. "No Lady Jewels."

She cut him off trying to address him firmly, "And no more of this 'Lady' business. I am not a god here. I'm not even a mod here anymore. I'm a nobody. Just a regular 'ole person, a refuge like yourself."Faren started to protest again but Jewels wouldn't have any of it. She pointed him towards the citadel saying there may be a room still available there and shooed him off to resume her extremely more worried pacing at the portal? entrance as soon as the crowd had dispersed enough.

When the portal lit up again, Jewels shielded her eyes and stepped away as another large group of soldiers and Ermarian civilians came through. Her urgent scanning of their faces did not reveal Nalyd or Stillborn, but Vergil was there at the tail end. She waved him over frantically and blurted out loudly, "Have you seen Stillborn? He left my sanctuary with Nalyd and he hasn't come through yet." Vergil returned her worried look. "No, sorry Jewels, and this is the last group. There was no one left on the other side except, Nioca."

"What? Oh no. Too much—too much to even think about it. They could be anywhere in Ermaria then. Vergil I have to go back! I have to find him!"

"You can't, Jewels. Nioca says it's suicide to stay over there."

"It'd only take me a few minutes. I teleport over to Nana, use BladesCraft to find him, and bring him back. It's all so simple, you see?"

Vergil had been shaking his head the whole time. "No, Jewels, it's not safe." She was about to brush him off and just do it anyway when the portal lit up again. Maybe Nioca was coming through. Maybe he had found Nalyd and Stillborn. Maybe—maybe something was wrong. It sounded different. Jewels could tell, she had been standing here listening to it hum to life over and over again for over an hour, and the portal definitely sounded different. Its normal buzz gave way to a high pitched whine interspersed with crackles and pops that made most in the crowd jump. The energy it emitted made the hair on her arms stand on end. "Everyone!" she warned. "Get away from the portal! Now!" At its highest pitch, the arch buckled with a loud crack. It exploded inward in a blinding flash of blue light, the debris being sucked into its epicenter before disappearing forever. The only thing left to suggest that it had ever existed was a pattern of charred ground around its base.

Jewels and Vergil stood in shock and awe. Nioca had not made it through. Maybe that's a good thing. But Stillborn had not made it through either. She had to go back to Ermaria and get them. As angry as she was at Nioca right now, it didn't override the need in her soul for him to be safe as well.

Again, she was about to teleport to Nana when the most foreboding feeling came through the inter-dimensional shift from Nioca. Jewels shuddered violently at its sense of calamity and permanence. A feeling that said "It is finished." Jewels began to feel woozy. Her vision blurred and the sound of Vergil's voice, as she stumbled against him, sounded miles away. She lost all motor function and fell to the ground, landing hard. He called her name but there was no breath left in her lungs to answer him.

Jewels opened her eyes to see Nioca's angry eyes staring right back at her just inches from her face. "What are you doing here?"he asked accusingly.

She looked around in confusion, or rather tried to look around as she stood amid a tightly packed crowd of people. They pressed against her and Nioca on all sides which made backing away from him practically impossible. She was sandwiched there against him, toe to toe and nose to nose. Though, it seemed for the moment that their minds were their own as she felt no thought or emotion from him. "Well, damned if I know,"she shot back angrily. "I don't even know where here is!" A man to her right let out a hearty laugh while a few others snickered. "That's damned funny, heh heh,"he said in a rather jolly voice.

The woman she seemed to be back to back with piped up in a fearfully urgent voice. "No it's not! Don't joke about that. Don't even think about joking about that."

To which the man laughed all the louder. "If I'm gonna meet my maker today, I sure as hell am gonna meet him with a smile."He gaffed again. "Sure as hell! Get it? Ahahahaha! I kill me! Oh, hohoho, hehe, HAA!" By now a good portion of the surrounding people where either laughing or shushing. Neither Jewels nor Nioca changed their expressions at all.

Nioca's voice was curt. "This is the Ermarian afterlife, or at least a holding pen for dead souls who wait to enter the Ermarian afterlife. Who or whatever is in charge of the process seems a bit overwhelmed. I felt you leave to the refuge so again I ask, what are you doing here?"

Jewels furrowed her brow still having no more answer than she had before so she ignored him. "Overwhelmed? Why are they overwhelmed? What happened? Why are there so many people here?"

Ten different people spoke up at the same time, none of which were Nioca, but all of them had about the same thing to say. It was the end of the world, judgment day. The sun had come crashing into the planet. Everything had been burned up.

"The whole planet?"Jewels asked just above a whisper. "Everyone is dead? Everything is gone?"Nioca gave her an almost unperceivable nod. No wonder so many people were so fearful while others were so cocky. She turned her head away as tears ran down her cheeks. As much as she hated to be vulnerable in front of him right now, she couldn't help it. She wanted to ask 'Why?' and 'How?' but even if Nioca knew the answers to those questions, it would not matter. It could change nothing. "That explains it then,"she snuffled. "Nana's dead, so I'm dead."She pulled her hands up to cover her face, her voice muffled by them. "ALL the dryads are dead."

Nioca shook his head more. "Nana's not dead."Jewels brought her hands down enough to uncover her eyes and look at him as he continued. "I put her in a soul crystal. Along with as many other dryads as I could with their trees." "Jasmine?"Jewels breathed.

Nioca nodded. "Aryll should have gotten back to the refuge with it by now. At least I hope she did before—"

Jewels wasn't really paying attention to him anymore. She was too lost in thought. He had saved her life, or tried to at least. With the whole of Ermaria about to die around him, he had gone out of his way to save her life and her friends' lives. A remnant of her people even. Why? Surely he wouldn't have bothered with the dryads at all if not for her. He wasn't out to save a race from extinction, no. In a chaotic, dire moment, he had done something for her! Actively rescued a piece of her world from destruction just for her!

She didn't know how it was possible after the soul bonding spell, but she found herself loving him more. Her perspective of him shifted from that of an enemy she had to love, to that of a friend she wanted to love. Even her harder half gave no argument, though it did remind her about her eviction and his betrayal of Will. A wave of anger washed over her and her hands balled into fists. "You. Are. Such. A. Jerk!" She had accented each word by pounding on his chest though the tight quarters gave her absolutely no room to wind up for anything that could actually hurt him.

"Hey, hey! Knock it off!" Nioca pulled his own hands up to grab her wrists. She struggled futilely to get out of his grasp but there was no where to go. People around them were getting elbowed and started shoving back grumbling the same sentiment as Nioca had.

In mere seconds Jewels went from fighting against his grip to completely relaxing into his grip. Her head lolled to rest on his shoulder. "Why can't you always be this sweet?"she whispered mournfully to which he seemed to have no reply.

After a few minutes of silence, Nioca cleared his throat. "You still haven't answered my question." His voice a bit more gentle. "What are you doing here?"

She lifted her head and dried her eyes. "I still have no idea. I was just standing there on the other side of the portal hoping for Stillborn to come through. I watched the thing implode and then I was here in the afterlife with you."

A harsh chuckling started coming from behind Nioca. The sound of it sending shivers down her spine. Jewels watched in horror as the sea of cramped people seemed to magically part to let the Stranger through towards them. As he neared and the pair had a little more space, they both turned to face him and his laughter.

His voice dripped with malicious glee. "One in life! One in death!"He started clapping. "Bravo! Once again you prove to be full of surprises, Mr. Galton. For the second time in so many days you have managed to kill me. Though I dare say you have taken out quite a slew of others with me. Was the price worth it?"His tone had turned accusatory.

"I didn't do this!" Nioca shot back. "This is NOT my fault!" The stranger squinted his eyes. "Really, now? Are you sure?"Nioca opened his mouth as if to reply but no rebuttal came out. Jewels looked at his face to see the pained doubt in his eye. "Time to stop this foolishness, Mr. Galton. One way or another, dead or alive, you will belong to me."Dark tendrils poured from his hands, streaming right towards Nioca.

In a heartbeat they hit him and Jewels screaming out. "NO!" She did the only thing she could and threw herself in the path of those tendrils, turning her back to the stranger and facing Nioca. Her

breath caught at the stabbing pain of them, her fearful eyes staring into his own. Instead of blocking them from Nioca, though, they only burned right through her ensnaring them both. Oddly, she could feel his pain just as intensely as her own. She had not saved Nioca from pain, but added to it her own. At least, Jewels thought with satisfaction, it seemed to upset the Stranger.

He growled in anger behind her but Jewels didn't care. "You are turning into quite the pest, Miss DeForestal. I have half a mind to—"

Neither Jewels nor Nioca heard the rest of his sentence.

Jewels opened her eyes and blinked away the brightness. Gentle hands helped her to sit up and worried voices asked her how she felt. Syla's face slowly came into focus and Jewels smiled. She threw her arms around the startled woman and pulled her close. She squeezed gently while rubbing her back and held on longer than the extent of their relationship would normally dictate. Syla patted her back awkwardly before pulling back and giving a curious smile. Jewels cupped Syla's face in her hands. "I was afraid I would never see you again,"her voice thick with emotion.

Syla pulled away again with a confused expression on her face. "Um, Okay. I'm glad I could revive you then." "Are you sure she's okay?"Jewels turned towards Vergil? voice. His expression looked just as confused as Syla's. "I mean, she died just a minute ago for no apparent reason. Just collapsed out of the blue."

"It wasn't exactly out of the blue,"Syla reasoned. "She's gone through a lot of emotional trauma recently. It's enough to give anyone a heart attack, I think, but we should still keep an eye on her, though, just in case."

The two helped her up off the ground. Jewels was still a little shaky but otherwise felt perfectly fine and said so adamantly before asking Syla for a status report. Syla looked at her quizzically once again. "How many people made it through the portal? How many Refuge Members are still unaccounted for?"

Syla seemed uncomfortable again. "Well, I'm afraid I haven't had time to count. The last batch just came through a few minutes ago."

Jewels smiled reassuringly. "You don't have to count them manually. The database does it automatically, just look at your RMM-A on the 'Who's Online' page."

Syla smiled weakly. "Oh, of course."

As she brought it out, Vergil butt in. "Why can't you just look at yours, Jewels? And when did Syla become an administrator?!" Jewels felt a little bit paranoid at his question. "I don't have

mine with me and with everyone engaged in the war, somebody had to be left in charge in case no one came back."

Syla fumbled with the instrument for a few minutes pushing buttons and frowning the whole while. "I'm not exactly sure."

Jewels held out a friendly hand. "I could show you how to look it up, quickly. If you don't mind." Syla eyed Jewels hesitantly but eventually passed over the RMM-A.

Jewels held it so Syla could see the screen. "Just click here and here, then scroll down to here." She started muttering to herself. "Uh, Nioca. Nalyd. Will present but deceased. Ligrev made it back fine. Guests present... That many? Wow. Okay."Jewels handed it back to Syla before starting to rattle off instructions. "Tell Ligerv to head out to SamsClub.com and buy a month's worth of provisions along with extra bedding and bath essentials. We're going to need it before the night is done. Send a couple of trustworthy Ermarians with her too. Feran perhaps, and Jonas."

Syla still looked at her oddly but, finding her advice sound, nodded and started heading for the Chat Lounge. "Uh, wait a minute."Jewels hurried after her leaving Vergil behind. "Has Aryll arrived yet? With the crystal?"

Syla stopped, "How did you—" She left the question unfinished and shook her head. "She was here, yes. Handed me a crystal and promptly disappeared without saying a word. She let Nioca's sword just clatter to the ground and left me to worry about him without any answers. That's so unlike her to just leave like that. The only thing I can think of is that he needed her right then. Why else would she leave so abruptly? Happened right before Vergil called me over to revive you, too. I don't even know what the crystal is for, do you?"She produced it and after shrugging her shoulders at herself handed it to Jewels. "You obviously know way more about what's going on than I do."

Jewels gave Syla a sympathetic look. "Don't be so hard on yourself. My first day as an admin didn't go so hot either. Nioca didn't make a mistake in appointing you. And this—" She held up the blue crystal and peered inside. "You recognize it as a soul crystal at least, right?"Syla nodded. "And you know that I'm half dryad?"

"I think its been mentioned by someone before."

"Well, Nioca was kind enough to rescue the soul of my tree from Ermaria as well as some of the other dryads before—" Jewels let her voice trail off. She didn't want to tell Syla the whole truth, not yet. "—before the soldiers in the forest had killed them all. He saved my life,"she finished wistfully. "But we can deal with this later. We have more urgent, if mundane, matters to attend to." "But what about Nioca? Where is he? And Aryll?"

"I'm sure they'll turn up sooner or later. No need to worry. Just keep to the task at hand and the time will fly by before you know it."Jewels shooed Syla towards the Inn while walking back towards the citadel. There were a couple of things she needed to get.

Aryll appeared beside her as she neared Nioca's room. "What are you doing here?"she demanded icily.

Jewels kept walking at the same pace. "There you are. I was wondering when you'd get back."

Aryll moved to block her progress. "You are not authorized to be here. You must leave."

"Please, Aryll. There is no time for this. There are things that need to be done. Now move out of my way."Aryll stubbornly refused to budge as Jewels sighed and fixed her with a bored gaze. "Aryll, I order you to move over."

A look of shock came over her face as her limbs obeyed Jewels' command. Nioca? The thought was timid and confused.

Jewels resumed her trek to Nioca's bedchambers before answering. Not quite, but close enough.

I—I don't understand.

One in life, one in death... one in resurrection. She let her thought trail off at Aryll's further confusion. It's complicated. I just need you to back me up. Jewels approached the bunker entrance. "-ereota emgas phtros!" The barrier dissipated and Jewels hurried down the steps. She set down the soul crystal and went right to Nioca's admin keys and RMM-A. She stopped thoughtfully to observe the fungi domes stroking a hand over the cool glass. Had she been herself, she would have been furious at him again. As it was she had to fight the urge to drop everything and distribute it now. It would be so easy, but of course, this wasn't the time to think about that. She had her priorities.

Aryll had followed her every move seeming still untrusting of Jewels but powerless to stop her. She exited the bunker and glanced around the room. "I'm going to be staying here until we can get things cleared up. Have some of the shades clear out this wrecked furniture and bring in new ones. Have them scrub these walls, too. The bunker entrance is too obviously perfect with the rest of the walls in the mess they're in."

Aryll hesitated for a minute before nodding. "Oh, and don't tell Syla, please. This isn't permanent. I don't want her to worry." "What do I tell her then?"

"Nioca's on an errand. He'll be back as soon as he can. Until then, I'm here to help her in anyway she needs. Let her know she can trust me."

"But what if I don't trust you?"

Jewels turned to Aryll with a small smile on her lips but a commanding fiery flash in her eyes. Well, you don't have a choice now do you? Whether you trust me or not, I order you to tell Syla what I approve and ONLY what I approve. With that she turned on her heel and left.

RMM-A in hand Jewels strode across the grounds. She scrolled through the Who's Online page once more and almost tripped over her own feet when she saw the name Nalyd listed as present and injured. Quickly she pinpointed his location inside the Geneforge forum and started sprinting. She threw open the door to see her son standing tall as ever and cradling the limp form of Nalyd.

He quickly laid Nalyd between the essence and healing pools while Jewels ran up to him flinging her arms around him and welcoming the stabs of energy that ever felt less like pain and more like home. She backed up to cup his face in her hands. "I was afraid I would never see you again,"she whispered, voice thick with emotion.

She began checking him over. "Are you alright? Did he hurt you? I'm so sorry I couldn't keep you safe." "It's okay. I'm fine, mom."Stillborn stepped back from her almost being self conscious of her fretting. "Really. I'm fine. Master saved me from the sun when it fell to the ground."

Jewels turned to Nalyd with a raised eyebrow. She knelt next to him and quickly diagnosed his ailment as heat exhaustion. "Get him some water,"she instructed as she poured some of the liquid from the healing pool over him. Stillborn left before Nalyd's eyes started to flutter open. "So. How is our resident madman?"

Nalyd moaned putting his hand to his head. "Nalyd is... alive he assumes."Noting Jewels' raised eyebrow he added, "And Rot free for the moment."He looked past Jewels to the rest of the room. "Stillborn is?"

"Getting you some water,"she finished knowingly. She looked down and sighed. "How are we going to do this Nalyd? I can't just let you experiment on my son."

"Nalyd's creation,"he interrupted. "And Nalyd doesn't know that the Rot will give you a choice. It doesn't care for Nalyd's wellbeing, much less for yours. It only cares about its purpose."

"Which was?"Jewels prodded.

"Completing the creation of Stillborn, of course. He is not finished. Nalyd knows that you do not approve but Stillborn is to be bound as a servant to him. The Rot will not be satisfied with anything less."

Jewels went into a frustrated thinking pose. She most certainly did not approve and yet had she done much different with herself? "When it is satisfied, will it leave you?"

"Nalyd honestly does not know, but it couldn't hurt."

Stillborn returned with the water and handed it to Nalyd who nodded an acknowledgement. Trying to think about it rationally, she turned to Stillborn. "So you want to be Nalyd's servant?"

The question seemed to take Stillborn by surprise. "He is Master. Father."By his statement he already took being Nalyd's servant as a fact.

"But do you want to be his servant?"Jewels pressed further.

Stillborn got really quiet for a minute before looking his mother in the eye. "Does a day lily want to bloom one day and die the next? Does a goose want to fly south? Does the living fire want to burn with passion in their souls? Nalyd is the Master, I am the servant. It is my purpose."He bent down to help Nalyd stand to his feet.

Jewels stood there stunned for a moment. She had never heard him articulate so clearly. His logic was profound. It had obviously had an effect on Nalyd, too, because the little shaper seemed to stare at his creation in awe. "Okay,"she breathed, turning to Nalyd. "Okay. You may complete your creation, but I want my dragon first."

"Nayld did not know this was a negotiation."

"If you refuse, we keep fighting and you go to the dungeons now. Are you saying no?"

"No, Nalyd is not saying no. Nalyd just didn't know that Jewels was so shrewd."

Jewels started to leave beckoning to her son. "Come along Stillborn. We have someplace we need to be."

"Wait, where are you going with him?"

"Corel,"she called back as she headed out the door.

It was surprising how fast he could run on his short little legs as he came out after them calling, "Nalyd is going with you." "Um, no you're not. You're going to stay here and make my dragon."

"Nalyd has to go with you. If the Rot finds him without his creation, it will tear everything apart to find it, including Nalyd! He must go with his creation."

"I don't exactly want the Rot showing up while we're in the middle of Corel though. I doubt that'd be anything close to a good idea." "Nalyd is going and that's final."He stomped his foot for emphasis which made Jewels giggle. Who needed the toddler years? She had all the tantrums she needed without them.

Jumara and the remnants of the Lancers were already assembled and waiting for transport and Azuma was not hard to find. Jewels strode confidently and purposefully towards the Admin Tower, keys in hand with Stillborn and Nalyd also trailing behind her.

Drama, drama, always the drama. At least she had managed to get everyone to Corel in one piece. She had been worried after Will's last transporting fiasco but with a little technological knowledge and a little luck there had been no mishap. Now, for her first priority—to find Will and bring him home.

The Elements of Change

By Nioca - Nov 14 2009

"Report, Watson?"

"Sweeping success, m'lord. Ermaria has been destroyed, along with everything in it. It is naught but a void. The VRP is destroyed. The Designers that were on the plane are no more. Everything according to plan."

"No..." The man turned around. His skin was pale, but not unattractive. His features were handsome, and his clothing extravagant. "Not according to plan. All of them made it out alive."

"What? But... my lord, how?" The man named Watson whispered.

"They had early warning. A note you sent to our Ermarian operative. Galton was able to perform a retreat into a new Refuge, one we have not located. An unknown number of Ermarians made it out alive. And ultimately, we failed to destroy any of our targets." The man hissed. "Well... save one."

"Yes, but I fail to see how killing the Lord-Designate to the Fire Plane ad-"

"Are you questioning me?" The man hissed again. He stared out the window. "It wasn't a total loss. I learned something important... One in life..." He produced a ruby dagger. "One in oblivion." He paused, a smile playing across his face. "Corel. That'll be Miss DeForestal's next stop. And with Nioca conjoined in her, it should be easy to make the kill. And we'll take w-dueck as well."

"Mastermind. I don't understand how..."

"Jewels is not in total control. If presented with something that drives Nioca, he'll take control over her body. And..." He nodded to a young woman in the corner, who was shaking and wild-eyed. "I think we have that. Isn't that right?" The woman moaned through a gag, looking about as if for an escape route. "In the meantime, there are other things to attend to. We must get the fire elementals ready for war."

"M'lord?"

Mastermind looked toward a dark corner. A man, hidden in the shadows, shifted imperceptibly. Two spots of spiraling cyan light appeared at eye level, mirrored in Mastermind's own eyes. And when he spoke again, the man in the corner echoed his every word. "I am launching a coup. Removing Miss DeForestal as Fire Lord. And I will use their armies to burn down the Refuge."

At the end of these words, Mastermind collapsed to the ground, dead. The light in his eyes was gone.

But the light continued to swirl in the shadowed man's eyes.

Syla sighed. This was not her day.

"I *did* warn you. Nioca explicitly said that neither Jewels nor w-dueck were supposed to touch anything." Aryll stood behind her, surveying the mess.

"Well, *yes*, but how was I supposed to know...? I thought Nioca was just launching a coup and didn't want the other admins to be able to intervene." Syla muttered.

"Well, as it turns out, no." Aryll stated dryly.

They were standing in front of a long line of rubble which once used to make up the Admin Tower. The second the teleporter had activated, the generator had a critical failure. The resultant explosion caused the tower to collapse, and the entire Refuge was now running off of the Citadel's power.

"Look, we'll just activate the back-up Nioca made before he left. No harm done." Aryll said, scanning the numerous people wandering around the new Refuge.

"Um... wasn't the database core you told me about *in the tower*?" Syla asked.

Aryll thought for a minute. "Okay, we might have a problem. Just get the Simplebots and KBots to search the rubble and... well, we'll figure out where to go from there."

Syla nodded, then walked away. First day on the job and she had already blown up the main administrative offices... She stumbled across a Bot. "Mr. Bot? Hello?" She asked sheepishly.

The bot stopped. "[tt]Admin Syla.[/tt]" The bot turned. It wasn't a SimpleBot. It was a squat little bot with two long platforms for legs and no arms. "[tt]Core Advanced Construction KBot #635. Ready for orders.[/tt]"

Syla paused for a moment. "I need you to fix the Admin tower."

The machine clicked for a moment. "[tt]Building known as 'Admin Tower' beyond repair.[/tt]" Two more clicks, then, "[tt]Core Advanced KBot Lab reports enough resources for 'Necro' class Resurrection KBots. Proceed?[/tt].

Syla blinked. "Um... Sure, surprise me." She staggered off. Damned if she knew what a Necro bot was, or how it'd fix the tower.

"Syla, how did you do that?"

Aryll and Syla were staring at the newly rebuilt Admin tower. Two Necro bots wandered past, their job complete.

"I have no idea." Syla shook her head. "I'm claiming the 30th floor. It's likely the one still unoccupied. Mind helping me with the luggage, Aryll?"

Aryll shrugged. "Sure, not like I have anything better to do.

"Let go of me!" Laymar shouted. Two armored fire elementals were holding him down on his knees. In front of him, on the throne of the Fire Lord, sat a new elemental. He glared at Laymar coldly.

The new Fire Lord spoke. "You are still loyal to the treasonous one. Lady Jewels, who has abandoned you for her own purposes. You attempted to kill me." His voice was cold and calm.

"TRAITOR!" Laymar roared. He spit out several words not fit for polite company. "You would betray Lady Jewels, the rightful Fire Lord!"

"I see. And pray tell, how is Lady Jewels' rule rightful?" The new Fire Lord stated casually.

"She was the proper heir to the throne! She brought an end to this war, she helped our plane surv-" Laymar spouted.

But the Fire Lord cut him off. "She has done no such thing. She has merely bent us to her will. If she was a true Fire Lord, why isn't she here? Why isn't she ensuring the survival of our plane right now? She cares not for us." He looked up at a Fire Elemental in general's attire. "General Mebor, execute this traitor."

General Mebor nodded gently, then made a swift motion with his hand. The air was sucked away from Laymar, who quickly started sputtering. The fire around him dimmed. Finally, with one last breath of "Traitor", he collapsed into ash.

"I must confess surprise, Mebor. I expected a more straightforward method. And for further executions, you would be wise to make it quick and clean." The Fire Lord stated.

"My apologies, Lord of Flame." He stated, stepping back.

"Gather the troops. Prepare for an invasion into the Internet Plane. If any of the elementals with Jewels return, they are to be executed immediately." The Fire Lord cleared his throat. "Captain Jarven!"

An elemental approached and bowed. "Yes, m'lord?" There was, for a moment, a yellow spiral pattern in his eyes, visible only to the Fire Lord.

"Get spies onto the Internet plane. Hunt down the Refuge. That is where Jewels would raise her army to conquer the elemental planes. And do it quickly." Jarven nodded and stepped back. "Captain Verton"

Another captain stepped forward and bowed, but made no statement. No spiral pattern appeared in his eyes. "I have a message for the Water Elementals. They need to know of Lady Jewels' betrayal, and her alliance to the Refuge against all elementals. Implore with them that her breaking of their pact was not our doing, and that we need to unite against common foes. And warn them that the filthy half-breeds known as the Bluebloods have also aligned with the traitorous lord." The Fire Lord handed Verton a sealed letter. The captain nodded hesitantly and stepped back. "And finally, Captain Taeor."

A new captain stepped forward, clearly inexperienced. "Yes, sir!"

"Intel has placed Lady Jewels on the Corel plane. You are to take a strike team through a portal to Corel and bring her back here for execution by any means necessary."

"Yessir!" The captain exclaimed enthusiastically.

"General Mebor, once your troops are in order, you are to proceed to the Internet plane and establish a beachhead. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Fire Lord." Mebor nodded.

The Fire Lord stared at the elementals for a moment. "Well, what are you waiting for? Go! Now!"

The general and his captains quickly scattered, off to their various assignments. Only Captain Jarven remained. "Mastermind, what is the purpose of this?"

"Jarven, you must refer to me by my 'proper' title. Even when alone." The fire lord cocked his head. "Walls have ears."

"Very well, m'lord. But still... I do not see the point. Won't the others see through this?" Jarven queried.

"There are only a few that know the truth of what happened, and they would not be believed. The Fire Elementals have been uneasy about Lady Jewels ever since she took the throne. It is not inconceivable that she would betray us. My rule... will be far more in line with Cinead's. Back to the old ways. We will lead with strength, not with surrender." He paused. "Furthermore, we know that Vergil, Jewels' brother, works with the Bluebloods. It is not a leap that he would rally the Bluebloods against us."

"But how could you possibly get the other planes to work with us?"

"Jewels, again. Her pact with the Water Elementals has been damaged beyond repair. The 'heir' she was providing has been engineered into a powerful weapon. An abominable new general for her to muster an army and lead a renegade group of elementals against us. She twisted a pact that would provide peace and unity to her own perverted ends." The Fire Lord smiled. "They'll be suspicious, but Jewels' behavior has been moreso. They already think her untrustworthy... it won't take much to convince them that she's the enemy."

The door opened again, and General Mebor stepped through. "My lord, the other captains have left for their respective assignments, and..." His eyes fell on Captain Jarven. "Captain, what are you doing?! You're supposed to be-"

"'tis alright, General. He merely wished to discuss the specifics of his mission." The Fire Lord stated. General Mebor fell silent. "Captain Jarven, once you find the Refuge, you are not under any circumstances to attack it. They must not know we work against them. Clear?"

"Yes, m'lord." Captain Jarven bowed and stepped out.

However, the General seemed anxious. "My lord... one thing bothers me. How do you know so much about Lady Jewels?"

"She trusted me. She trusted me with her life, as you no doubt know." The Fire Lord stared at Mebor. "However, she assumed I was loyal only to her. When I saw what she had planned, I knew what had to be done."

"Very well. If I may, Lord, I am glad that you proved yourself a true Fire Elemental. I was wrong to ever doubt you." General Mebor bowed.

"Fare thee well, Mebor."

"And you, Lord Kaylas."

Ethreal Escape

By Sylae - Nov 16 2009

"I'm going to go meet the Lancer captain, you stay here." Llyth said as she was walking out. "Don't cause any trouble, or I'll tan your hide." *Yeah, because you can do that do a spirit*, w-dueck thought. He waited a good thirty seconds before reaching for the latch on the door. His hand passed through it. "Oh, right, I'm dead." He went through the door, then walked down an alley and crouched down behind a barrel where he could see the village square.

The vanguard had already arrived, which meant it wouldn't be very long before the rest of the company came. Soon enough, it did, and when it did a fat balding man wearing a captain's uniform came forward from the back. "I demand to see the mayor of this little shithole." He called out loudly. There was a moment's silence, then Llyth spoke.

"I am Elder Llyth, representing the village of Cylan. What business have you here?"

"Puvent, captain of the 29th Mounted. By order of the Queen of Corel, all villages are ordered to report all ghostly appearances made in the last five days. Have there been any in this area?"

"No, there haven't." Llyth said without pausing, and she turned to walk away. Suddenly, an invisible force turned her back around, and a black-robed man rode forward.

"Elder Llyth, you really should learn to speak the truth around a mage. Now, you will listen to Captain Puvent and you will tell him the truth this time." Puvent sighed and repeated his question. Llyth smiled tightly, giving no response. The square was silent for several moments, then the mage spoke again. "We will rape and kill everyone in this town if you do not turn this ghost over to us."

"You're bluffing," Llyth spat.

"Oh really?" Unseen magic gathered around the mage, and suddenly an onlooker fell to the ground clutching his heart. "We don't bluff, Llyth. We have no reason to." He paused, "Surely a scientist such as yourself would understand... Oh, you didn't think we knew about how you came to be a Corellian? That we didn't know you were born thirty-five hundred years ago? We know*everything* about you. Should we tell everyone about your experiments?"

"That was a different life!" Llyth exclaimed. "That was over two thous-"

"Two thousand years doesn't matter when you're dead!" The mage yelled, "Tell those human labrats that what you did to them was over two thousand years ago!"

Llyth looked down, silent for several minutes. Then, w-dueck watched as she pointed towards her cot at the edge of town. Two soldiers dismounted and broke down the door. The gathered crowd was silent as the soldiers searched the small house. Finally, they exited. "It's empty, ser."

"Keep searching! The ghost *was* in there. It can't have gone far!" The captain gestured, and the men fanned out, searching the buildings. "Well, Llyth, you told the truth, so you can rest well knowing that what is about to happen is not your fault." A scream came from the crowd, and an invisible hand dragged a young woman forward. The robed mage jumped off his horse and strode forward towards the woman struggling against invisible bonds. Smiling, he reached forward and ripped off her blouse. "I think this one will do nicely," he stated.

"No," w-dueck heard himself saying. "This is not going to happen. Leave this people alone." He felt himself walking towards the man in the black robes. "If you must have me as a prisoner, then why don't you come over here and get me, bitch."

"Oh, he steps forward! I knew you'd come out if I put on a good show, Mr. Dueck. Although I wasn't expecting you to challenge a mage skilled in the art of Black Magic."

"Yeah, fuck you too." *Now let's just hope Corellian Magic doesn't rely on my physical body*.

"Why not come over here and let me end your tormented spirit for good, Mr. Dueck?" The man carefully said as he pulled a ruby-hilted dagger from his belt.

"No thanks, I actually like this whole spirit thing. It's very convenient." w-dueck said as he gathered his magic.

"Very well, Mr. Dueck," The mage's hand flashed, and w-dueck slid to the side as the spiritkiller flew past him, embedding itself in the wall of a nearby building. w-dueck released he power he had been gathering, and watched as the ground underneath the man erupted into fire.

"You're going to have to do better than that," The mage said as the fire burnt his robes, leaving his body unmarred. Black tendrils erupted from the mage's hands and rushed towards w-dueck, who used magic to slice the tendrils off, and launched a volley of fireballs in retaliation. The mage blocked the fireballs easily, and launched more tendrils. w-dueck cut these off again and threw another volley of fireballs. The mage blocked these even easier than before. *Oh shit, I'm losing strength*. He thought as he attempted to block more tendrils. One got through and wrapped around his leg, immobilizing it. He attempted to slice it off but failed miserably as the tendril split into four and siezed the rest of his body. *Fuck.*

The mage smiled as he lifted w-dueck into the air. "That was pathetically easy. I was expecting something better from one like you." The mage smiled, and w-dueck realized something. *How the hell does he hold up a ghost? Damn, that's some good magic. Where was this when I was in Ermaria...Wait a minute, this is that bastard that captured me in the first place!*

"So, you're with the VRP, then? How's that been working out? I see you've gotten better since the last time you captured me." w-dueck stalled, hoping he could get the guy distracted long enough to escape.

"No, you've just gotten dumber. Although I didn't realize you had fallen *this* low." The man smirked. "Now, I think I'll make you watch what I am about to do." He gestured to the woman who still struggled against her bonds. Another tendril appeared, and she screamed as it ran up her leg. Suddenly, it stopped as the mage gasped for air, shivering, and Llyth stepped forward.

"You humans always forget something. In this case," she smiled, "It was me. And now I'm going to let your lungs freeze because of it."

"Ice...witch!" The mage croaked, "Let...me...go, or...I'll...kill you!"

"Good luck with that," Llyth stated as his lungs broke apart from the chill.

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w-dueck sighed and looked back at the village, watching the fisherman returning to the town from the serene sunset-lit ocean. Corel was a good week's walk to the east, and he hoped the VRP would have an outpost there so he could find out what was going on. *How did they even discover Corellia? Nobody even knows it exists...wait, fuck, the SSMT logged the visit. Dammit...Well, at least Jewels doesn't know about the thing, so she won't be getting herself killed over this damned thing. Or teleport the entire Refuge here, since it's broken...I should get around to fixing that...wait, what's wrong with me? I've known about the Internet Plane for five years and I'm already thinking of it as home? What the fuck? ... Damn, this is going to be a long-ass walk.*

Melons and Trouble

By Vergil - Nov 20 2009

Vergil walked into Paul's Pushy Pub and sat down at the barstool and waited for Paul to come around. A stocky man slowly turned around while cleaning a glass.

"Ello there Vergil. Molten Ash?" Paul asked with a particular happiness. "Got a fresh shipment today, and boy is it a good vintage." Paul leaned towards Vergil a bit more "Or if ya really want, I can pull out the Ice Water, as long as you don't go about singing about cutting off peoples lucky charms, cause that don't fare too well with the law." Vergil grunted and nodded. Paul turned around and opened a cabinet with a unique key. There was a hissing noise as the cabinet opened. With a cloth, he held the pitcher and poured ice water into a stoch glass that he put on a little napkin and pushed it over to Vergil. Vergil drained it instantly. Paul raised an eyebrow but poured Vergil another glassful. Vergil drank half of it and put it down and leaned in. Vergil heard the door open and a breeze rolled in. It carried a scent that Vergil recognized immediately.

"Lashriel." Vergil mumbled without turning around.

"Nice to see you too, sweetie." Lashriel planted herself on the barstool and stared at Vergil with a twinkle in her eye and a devious smile. "So what are you doing in this little nook of ash?" Vergil turned to her sullenly,

"Drinkin' myshelf 'till my sorrow goes away."

She smiled deviously "Oh? Could I be of any help with relieving sorrow?

Vergil walked out of the house into the Fire Plane with a grim expression. *You know what has to be done and it is YOUR job to take care of your homeland* Vergil nodded, mostly to himself. He considered his options of reclaiming the throne. *Well, there is the good ol' option of appealing to*

the population, but my face showing up with the Bluebloods and my reputation for NOT being in the Fire Plane might be a wee bit too problematic for that option. Or I could go to the Palace, and convince the leftover generals to accept me as their new leader, but it is hard to convince generals and it would be even harder to do it if they had already appointed a general as their new leader Vergil thought for a little while longer, then with a sigh, headed off to the palace. Vergil wasn't greeted very friendly, but the guards did not stop Vergil from entering, even if they did scowl at him while passing through. Vergil took no notice. After walking through many halls and corridors, he finally reached to what looked like the throne room. Guards held their spears in front of him in a zeal.

"Who are you and what is your business?"

"I am Vergil son of Cinead, sister of Lady Jewels, and I am here to discuss the future of the Fire Plane with the remaining figures of Power, as Lady Jewels is no longer going to be Fire Lord, I am here to-" The doors opened before Vergil could finish. He shrugged and walked through. And what he saw inside shocked him. Lo and behold, atop a ornate carved throne, was no one other than Kaylas. Vergil gasped

"Kayl-" Vergil stopped with a grimace. This wasn't Kaylas, who ever it was, it was NOT him. Vergil looked at the not-Kaylas with a small shudder. This Kaylas's eyes seemed dead, even if he was moving.

A captain spoke, "Who are you to address Kaylas with such informality?" Vergil's head snapped up with a realization. *That voice...it's a damp and cloying smell. Oh god no.* And with a small shiver of fear Vergil realized who the non-Kaylas and the captain were. *The Stranger.*

"I was just complimenting and seeing if the new Fire Lord was in good health. I apologize, Lord Kaylas," Vergil said as he gritted his teeth, "For wasting your time" And with that Vergil stalked out. *Gotta get the Bluebloods and fast!* Vergil rushed towards a pink dumpster rocking back and fourth. He rapped on it twice, "Delta-Black 13" the dumpster popped open to reveal a half naked Laesp'awn, who ran to catch up with Vergil.

"Who's the target?"

"The new Firelord, Kaylas" Vergil replied while opening a portal to the Ice Plane. "Get inside, quick!" Laesp'awn and Vergil hopped through. They came out in a ornate darked marble room which was dimly lit by a few lamps along the wall. The air was moist and warm. "Sit down and get some clothes on, I gotta rally a few members up." Laesp'awn nodded Vergil put a miniature radio to his mouth "All available 7th Regiment members, this is Vergil, code Delta Black 13, report to exit chamber 67". Within a few minutes two black clad humanoids entered the room. "This is it?"

"Better than nothing." Xelgion replied. Volke nodded in agreement. Vergil sighed and motioned towards the portal. The Bluebloods followed. Vergil looked around the deserted alleyway. "Okay, lets go. The subject is an extremely powerful mage, who if we stabbed in the night, the resulting explosion would cut away half the fire plane."

Xelgion threw a sideways glance as they ran furiously "How we gonna whack him then?"

Vergil motioned to a pack he had on his side "Magesnubbers. I brought 50, and I intend to use them all." Vergil jumped over a pole and reached the side of the palace. "Get out your rappels, 50 feet." There was a zip of ropes and a click of armor. "Jump" All 4 of the Bluebloods soared to the top of the palace. "Okay team. We do this in 2 hours, after the target has gone to bed. Prep yourselves and make sure whatever gadgets you have are working and that your spells are oiled up."

Looking for Trouble

By Zoe - Nov 22 2009

Laughing...laughing...and not the nice kind either.

Iffy and Saph awoke at the same time, sitting up.

Well, it seems we're at the refuge.

Strange...I thought it was destroyed...

It's probably a back-up. Come on, let's go check to see what all happened.

Iffy and Saph walk out of the room to find a huge crowd of people shouting and yelling.

Yikes, like we're going to get through this **.**

They went back into the room. They grabbed their stuff and jumped out the window, not realizing they were about 10 stories up. "Wait...why were we in Nioca's citadel? Oh well..." Iffy cast a sort of spell that absorbed most of the impact. They landed rather awkwardly, and were shocked for a couple seconds, but then stood up and walked on like nothing happened. As well as, of course, ignoring the awkward stares people were giving.

Let's check the logs.

Good idea

-*- A couple of hours passed.

-*- Iffy sighed.

We don't have to...no that's a lie. We do have to.

Let's just get it over with.

Iffy cast long lasting heat protection enchantments on himself and Saph, and they disappeared in a flash.

"****!" **Even with the enchantments it's ****ing hot as hell in here!**

If only he was in the Ice plane...

They then hid as a group of fire elementals passed by.

Our Muse

By Jewels - Dec 3 2009

Jewels sat in the dingy little bar that Jumara had brought her to sipping a rank drink he had set before her after she had asked for Will's usual. Just the smell of it had almost made her gag but she had smiled and thanked him for it, anyway. At least it warmed her up.

She had felt on edge since the moment they had landed on the plane, though she had attributed it to the trepidation of possibly finding Will here. Jumara reassured her again that Corellian spirits always returned to their place of birth before passing to their afterlife. Now that she'd been here a full day, though, she didn't think her uneasiness was all in her head. There was just something about the air here, the essence of the plane, that had the hairs on the back of her neck always tingling.

We'll find him. she thought to herself, waiting expectantly for some reply. She was so used to conversing with herself or Nioca or Aryll that it struck her as odd that none had come. But then, she supposed, what had happened to them was also odd. She could not tell where Jewels ended and Nioca began if they were even separate at all. She was not Jewels anymore, no, and neither was she Nioca. They had become something new.

And although she was at disease to be in Corel, there was something comfortable about being one. Like coming home after a long journey through bitter cold wind and snow to a cup of hot cocoa in front of the hearth of a crackling fire resting in the arms of someone you know without a doubt you can trust. Almost like resting in Nana only with the freedom to do more than rest. Empowered in fact, to own the day.

As nice as it was, though, it HAD to be temporary. Syla needed the old Nioca just as much as Will would need the old Jewels if they found him. Remaining this way for their own comfort just was not an option.

"Jewels!" An accusing voice plucked her from her thoughts. "Nalyd doesn't think you've been paying attention at all. He's asked you three times to look at this diagram and you haven't moved."

She focused on the little man across from her and the picture of the dragon she had wanted laid out between them. "You're the expert here, Nalyd. You should know what will work and what won't. I trust your judgment."

With disbelief in his voice he ventured. "You trust Nalyd?"

"Well, not with everything, of course." She turned to take in the marred features of Stillborn who still seemed to shy away from the little shaper for it. "But I trust you to know how to make this dragon better than I. You know my requirements, the rest is up to you."

"Don't suppose you know where Nalyd can find a shaping lab around here?"

A stiff wind blew into the room as the door opened.

Dantius Arrives

By Dantius - Dec 21 2009

There was a soft hiss as the hatch to the Google vehicle decompressed. A tall man, dressed in ratty travelling clothes stepped out, carefully glanced around to insure he was where he wanted to be, ducked back into the vehicle, grabbed his pack and left. The Chrome Incognito flew away. It had cost him a medium-sized fortune to insure that he reached this destination incognito. Dantius stared intently, watching the seconds tick by slowly, until the craft suddenly exploded. One last trick, to insure that his new life could begin anew, safe from the demons of his prior ones. He took a look around at his surroundings. He was on a medium isle, much larger than he would have expected for such a small forum. It was heavily forested, with a moderately hilly central area. The main complex was a short ways off. He shouldered his pack, and began the walk.

Dantius entered the main forums. Many large buildings circled a small grassy expanse, with a lake and small inn in the center. The place was absolute chaos. Refugees from some plane unknown milled about in the square, with more entering every second from a portal

"Hey! Hey you!" he called, in a fruitless attempt to catch the attention of the multitude of bots fluttering around. He sighed. He would have no luck here.

Dantius stepped into the inn. It was packed. The few bots inside could not keep up with the demand

"You! Bartender!" he spoke, gesturing madly.

"Hello sir. May I get you a drink?" the bot replied in a monotonus synth-speech voice.

"No, not yet. Where is everyone?"

"I am sorry. That question is not in my database. May I interest you in a drink?"

Dantius sighed. He had expended all that effort, and all that cash, to get to a forum populated entirely by bots and refugees. He wandered outside again. Quickly checking the Geneforge, Avernum, Spam, and General forums, he only confirmed what he already knew: No normal members were around, or at least none he knew. Dejected, he sat down by the shores of the small pond in the center of the complex. Suddenly, he heard a voice behind him:

"Hello sir. May I be of assistance?" It was Ligrev.

"Where have all the members gone, Ligrev?"

"I am sorry. That question is not in my database. May I help you in some other fashion?" Dantius thought for a short time.

"Display user logs" he commanded. Dantius scrolled through the logs, growing ever more confused. ArchAdmin Nioca? The last time he was here, it had been w-dueck! Dantius sighed.

"Ligrev! Display logs for the use of the SSMT!

"Certainly!" the bot replied cheerily.

Dantius scrolled through the listings. Fire plane? Corellia? Whoever these people were, they had an interesting taste in vacation destinations. He sighed. He had better just wait for a bit, and hope they arrived soon. If they didn't. though, he wold have to figure out a way to get the the SSMT, and find them. He walked back into the chatroom. A spambot was posting advertisements on the wall, ignoring him. Several refugees watch in mild interest. He sighed and drew his blade, neatly chopping the offending spammer into quarters. It sparked and fizzled, until he reached in and snapped the CPU in two. Checking around one last time to insure no familiar faces were around, he walked into the inn.

"May I help you, sir?" the bot inquired cheerfully.

"Yeah. I'd like a room for a week. And a drink, too."

"I'd be happy to!" The bot swooped upstairs "Follow me!" Dantius followed. He entered his room. It was sparsely furnished- as were most newb quarters in the internet. Nowhere near enough room for his experiments or work. He would have to work on gettinga tower, or perhaps a citadel. But somehow the odds of that seemed slim.

"Is the Geneforge forum currently in use?" he inquired

"No. I would not reccommend using or entering it. It is administered by Shaper Nalyd, and he can be.. touchy when he is disturbed."

"Whatever." He had departed the forums several days ago.

"Dismissed!" The bot obediently departed. Dantius set down his pack, and quickly changed from his ragged travelling clothes to a full set of Shaper robes. Smiling, he belted on his sword and concealed several wands in various compartments. He removed a thin metal case from his pack, and then set off to the Geneforge forum.

Dantius stepped into the Geneforge forum. it had been remodeled. A long, dim hallway, with recessed alcoves that were filled with abstract art, led away into the darkness. Dantius strolled past the minor Shaping labs and libraries. He already knew what lay within. They did not interest him. He stopped before the massive stone door that lead into the inner labs. Carefully extending his mind, he brushed the plant that held the door open. It was a simple creation, and he easily convinced it that he was Nalyd. The door slid smoothly open. Quickly disarming the mines and pressure plate, Dantius strode into the library, pulling out his list. *On the Creation of Wingbolts*, check. *Advanced Vlish Subtypes*, check. *Canister Creation and Modification*, check. *Essence Infusion into Shaped Materials*, check. *Puresteel Crafting For Masters*, check. He grabbed several more books, including a treatise on crystal working and several advanced spellbooks, and opened his case. He then dropped several feet of books into a four inch thick metal briefcase. Finally, he stood in the middle of the room. Casting a spell of his own invention, the spaces in

the bookcases flickered momentarily, and the filled with the books that he had borrowed. Or, at the least, cunningly bent light beams that simulated the books. Of course, if Nalyd ever attempted to read the books, his hand would simply pass through them. Dantius was gambling on the fact Nalyd was too powerful, arrogant, or even insane to ever read them. Of course, if he was wrong, than his plan would collapse about his ears. But, with a little luck, he could sneak in here at a later and replace the books. Nalyd would never know that he had them.

He then strode carefully into the supply room, grabbing a full set of Shaping equipment, plus some gloves, greaves, boots, belts, a breastplate, and even a Shaped Blade that was gathering dust. He then headed into Inner Storage. There was a inch thick layer of dust on everything. Dantius cast a spell, and began to levitate slightly. He slowly floated over, careful not to disturb any dust, and opened a crate lid. He marveled at the treasures inside. Crystalline fibers, purified Essence, and even some Crystal Shards. They were all untouched. Who was this Shaper? He seemed to spend his time, well, Shaping! Dantius stood, torn. On the one hand, it would be unlikely that the Shaper would notice that he took anything- he had disarmed all traps and indicators of his presence, except the view counter, which would be too much trouble, and he probably wouldn't check it anyways. So the only way he would notice something was gone was if he actually used it, unlikely considering the dust coating the room. However, if he did, Dantius really didn't want to face down the wrath of a full Shaper. Sighing, he carefully placed everything back where he found it, Dantius redistributed the dust and turned to seal the door. Suddenly, he stopped. He pivoted a full turn, and something caught his eye. A small box was very nearly buried amidst all the stuff filling the storage. The nigh-illegible label read "Crystal Shard, Flawless" Dantius really couldn't pass this up. All the other ingredients could be found elsewhere. This probably couldn't. In a fit of impulse, he grabbed the box, opened it, and removed the single crystal within Holding it up to the light, he eyed the dark grey stone. It was a deep, intriguing grey, irregularly shaped, perhaps three inches by two by one, and utterly flawless. Just what he needed. He resealed the box, replaced it, and turned closing the door. What were the odds one tiny missing item would be noticed? He felt as pang of doubt as he replaced the weapons and armor. He could always save those for another time. He paused on his way out, eying the Shaper's lab journal, but then decided against it- the incantations protecting it would probably be too difficult to break, and its absence would definitely be noticed, even by the most absent-minded Shaper. Dantius resealed the lab, reactivated the traps, and carefully reset all indications of his presence.

Back in his room, Dantius took a good, long look around. His window gave a clear view of the Google station. The single bed he pushed up against the far wall, as far away as possible from both the window and the door. A single wardrobe would provide good concealment from which to surprise intruders. The desk, he pushed up against the wall next to his bed, so viewing the contents of it would be impossible for someone either standing in the doorway of peering through the window. He smiled, and then withdrew a small pouch from within his case. He emptied the contents onto his desk. Hundereds of thin, long needles tumbled out. This was one of his most ingenious inventions. He had concentrated Glahhk venom onto the tips. Anyone who stepped on them, footwear or no, would recieve a nasty paralyzing blast, enough to stun them for about 10 seconds or so. Dantius began sticking them into the floor around the door and base of

the window. Removing several other ingenious traps of his own devisal, he began to insure that his low-rent room would become his sanctuary.

A Dragon for Jewels

By Sudanna - Dec 21 2009

Nalyd glanced at the newcomer before turning back to Jewels, exasperation on his face.

"And are you sure that Nalyd knows what you want? Dragons can be many things. Serpentine, reptilian, even birdlike. It could be kin to fire or lightning, ice or acid. It could fly, or not, be mindless animals or cultured genii. It might be a machine or a spirit. Or a monster. I need details!"

Jewels turned to him with a gaze that spoke volumes, all of them violent crime scene reports. Her voice was threateningly deadpan. "I don't care, Nalyd. I have other things to worry about. Make it however you like, but leave me alone!" She took a long pull from her drink.

Nalyd stepped back, and looked at the diagram in his hands. It was for a less than conventional dragon. It was about the size of the average cat, for one. Long, thin, and wingless - serpentine - but with a fine, powerful beak, patches of feathers among its scales, and six scaled feet on stubby legs, with relatively thick, blunt claws. It would breathe - well, more like spit - ice shards. He had devised a simple and cheap leather collar that would allow for flight. He looked back at Jewels.

She glared, daring him to ask a question. When he kept staring, she growled a bit and raised her glass to drink again.

He hurried away to a table, leaving Jewels at the bar.

He hadn't worked out the finer details of coloring or design yet, figuring that Jewels would be better at such trivialities, but now that he had no other options, he felt some ideas surfacing. Some patterns. . . He felt the fervor that his art inspired setting in. Yes. . . There was potential here. He could make a masterpiece, here. He could succeed. . .

He unclipped his finely Shaped pen from the thin silver necklace he wore. The diagram seemed to warp in his vision. . . Yes, yes! These feathers could act as temperature control, best placed here and here. Those claws were no good for anything, they needed to be thinner and more pointed, better for climbing or gripping. These legs couldn't move it faster than a snail, it was better suited for an. . . insectoid model. No need for feet, then. But an exoskeleton would never mix effectively with the rest of the dragon. . . Ah! He need only thicken the scales and taper the leg to a point. A big, tough, hooked scale on the end would be just as effective. Lengthen the legs, perhaps, but bend them more. . .

He soon disappeared into a flurry of diagramming, oblivious to everything else in the building. Time passed. It grew darker.

When he finished, he looked at his new plan with pride. It was not built for function, being little more than an ornament, but it was still a fine product of his prowess. It was slightly over a meter long, maybe eight centimeters thick, though the body was slightly flattened. Six footless legs were spread along its length, though the last 25 centimeters or so were too thin to need the support. Each leg terminated in group of three mostly immobile "toes" - large, thick extended scales that themselves ended in moderately blunt hooks. The beak at the front was that of a blackbird - it would eat insects, nuts, grains, small animals, and fruit, all of them whole. There were two lynx-like ears, on the sides of the triangular head. The eyes were large and orange. Its scales were small and flexible, though thicker and slightly raised on its back. There were strategically placed tufts of feathers - between the ears, at the elbows, in two dashed rows along it's back, and in a beard under the beak. These were all various colors. The scales were various shades of green - a dark, forest green along the spine, which faded to an acid green at the toes and almost yellow on the soft underbelly. The tail got darker, becoming a deep blue at the tip, where there was another small group of feathers.

It would be quite fast on the ground, but faster in the air, once it had the collar on. The feet would clack and thump, but it was fast and durable enough to not worry about stealth. It would be able to climb almost anything, with little change in speed or agility. The beak was deceptively powerful, and the eyes were sharp, though the hearing was average. It could raise or lower its feather groups, for display or cooling. It was durable, not due to toughness, but to flexibility. It could just move with an impact and wrap around the assailant, even a sword blade. It moved low to the ground, giving the softer underbelly little chance to become a liability.

It would breath a fine, heavy acid mist, potent enough to eat through stone, albeit slowly. The feet could be used as stabbing or slicing weapons, though not very effectively. The beak was a formidable stabbing or ripping tool, and the main defense, as it was too small to make extensive use of it's acid breath. Perhaps once or twice every hour would it be able to use that weapon. It was not a very efficient animal, truth be told - it would be hungry often, or lazy. It liked warmth, but could overheat easily without ample water. The waste would be semiliquid, which would quickly harden, though it wouldn't leave much. This animal couldn't afford to be wasteful. It's natural environment would be hot, but not a desert or rainforest. The legs were not as effective on soft terrain. A rocky cliff or sun-baked plateau, perhaps. No matter. This creature was to be a pet, and could not reproduce.

Nalyd looked over his diagram a final time, correcting a few calculations, until he was satisfied that all was in order. Then, still seated at his table, he reached out his hands and Shaped.

Almost immediately, he felt tendrils of cold mania gripping him. There was a gnawing sensation in his mind, and his vision blurred. He froze momentarily, quivering in his seat, the creation still growing in front of him, until he tore his hands away from the streams of essence, which flickered and died, as did the glow around the half-finished creation's body. It thumped to the table, oozing blood and various other fluids. The acid in it burned the table.

Nalyd had felt the Rot. It had been drawn to him, to his Shaping. . . It had been looking for him. Even now, it would be combing the dimensions with its terrible alien mind and powers, searching hungrily for its goal. Even now, those needle teeth would be clacking, and the swollen,

broken skull would be cutting at the forever-raining sky of it's damned home. The sea of brain and body would be pulsing, churning. . .

Nalyd shook his head. His monster could not find him easily. Not unless he lured it to him. Not if he was careful.

Nalyd looked at the broken, oozing body of the dragon, oblivious to the stares he was receiving. He reached out a hand tiredly, and slowly absorbed the creature. He felt a tickling at his skull, but no more.

The small Shaper sighed, his spare frame hunching. This was going to be annoying. He pointed one single finger, and a wavering, flickering, spidersilk-thin strand of essence wormed out. It stretched out, almost breaking in the soft currents of air, but eventually began to spool itself. Slowly, the tip of the dragons' tail formed. The essence filled in. Slowly.

Very slowly.

Nalyd sighed.

Dominance

By Nioca - Dec 23 2009

Syla had no idea what Nioca had planned. But she was feeling more and more justified in thinking it was a coup.

In the meantime, she was coming to realize that she was the hardest-worked Admin in Refuge history. Between organizing people, ensuring the Refuge didn't run out of supplies, and making sure nothing exploded, she had her hands full. And if that wasn't enough, it seemed none of the actual Refuge members cared enough to stick around.

She couldn't help but entertain the thought of actually taking total control over this place. After all, with everyone else Designers-know-where, who would actually notice? But no... She wouldn't do that. If only because she sincerely hoped Nioca knew what he was doing. And because she... well, didn't.

The production facilities seemed to be on auto-pilot. KBots of varying kinds strolled around the Refuge as if they owned the place. It seemed Nioca was trying to phase out the Simplebots; instead, there were specialized bots with guns, laser cannons, nanolathers... There were only 3 Simplebots in the entire Refuge.

Ducking a stream of green particulates flowing into the Admin tower, she made her way to what she had determined were diagnostics. The Construction KBots were repairing what they could, and were doing a marvelous job. Most of the physically-damaged systems were back online. The only remaining problems were the way they were interfacing with each other, and systems that interacted with whatever 'Admin Magic' was. Which was, unfortunately, still a lot.

She headed back down the spiral staircase of the tower. Fortunately, the population of the Refuge had dropped by half since they had arrived, as the various Ermarians were placed elsewhere. However, there was still well over 400 people at the Refuge, which was more than it could handle.

The sky was clear, but the humidity was getting to her. Of all the islands, Nioca had to pick a Jungle.

Thankfully, from what she could tell, she didn't have to worry about the 'KBots' blowing someone up. It appeared they had all been deactivated when it came for combat.

"Syla, GET DOWN!"

Syla whipped around in time to see... *something* screaming towards her. She quickly dropped to the ground, getting a good view of lights and dark metal as the screeching thing passed overhead and gently alighted on the ground next to her, going silent.

Aryll arrived, panting heavily. Syla, righting herself and brushing off her clothes, gave her an inquisitive look. Aryll merely shrugged, half-bent over and gasping for breath. Syla decided to look over her RMM-A. "*Avenger*-class Fighter VTOL?" She asked herself. "And why do we have production order for 10?" She continued to stare at the hand-held device. "And what's an Aircraft Plant?!"

"This entire place is running on some sort of AI I've never seen." Aryll said breathlessly. "I don't think it's supposed to run on auto-pilot this long, though... It's like the entire place is getting ready for war."

Syla got distracted from the rather dangerous thoughts by her RMM-A beeping. Apparently, a new *Avenger* had been added to Group 2... What was group 2?

Syla discontentedly brushed soot from her robes. "Group 2" was a fleet of these *Avengers*. Apparently, they liked to land on passing priestesses.

The forums were eerily empty of live humans. Most of the Ermarian refugees avoided the bot-crowded area as much as possible, instead living off to the side in what would be best described as slums. Buildings constructed by the new Refuge bots were crowded with people. Thankfully, they were better than your average slums, but it was still no way to live.

She didn't know what was controlling the forums, but she didn't like it. There was more than just KBots now... Vehicles called "Tanks" and "Aircraft" meandered about. Various construction vehicles and bots created new structures of their own accord as well. There was even a shipyard somewhere on the coast. Most disconcertingly was a project termed "Krogoth", a KBot that stood half-as-tall as the Admin Tower itself. She tried to put her foot down on this, but wound up hitting a brick wall.

Apparently, Nioca had the brilliant oversight to let the AI handle defense without making it possible for anyone else to override. Nioca had given the system the command to build and manage defenses til his return, and that this command could override any other until he shut it down. Aryll suggested that Nioca had expected to return almost immediately, letting him manage the system by hand.

Which raised an important question: Just where the hell *was* Nioca? Syla thought that Jewels knew... She was sure of it. So why wasn't she trying to get him back? And why was she off gallivanting on another plane of existence when the Refuge needed her most?

The more she learned of Jewels and her behavior, the less sympathetic she felt. Nioca was a cold, quick-tempered pain-in-the-ass, which was why she had broken it off so long ago... But she'd rather have to deal with a competent ass than an incompetent cocker with her own agenda.

Her reverie was shattered by another kind of aircraft. This one was of the "Arm" variety... whatever that meant. A *Brawler* class Gunship, if she wasn't mistaken.

A tech-savvy newbie signaled her from the cockpit. "Admin Syla! We've got a problem!"

"What now?" Syla asked, exasperated.

"Neighbors! Come on, I'll brief you on the way!"

Jewels' head drooped slightly. She was feeling drowsy... she had no idea what was in this foul drink, but she knew that she had had enough.

Shaking herself awake, she decided to pace. She always did think better on her feet... did she? She smiled. No, Nioca always thought better on his feet. A small habit of his... and now of theirs.

She shook her head again. Her mind felt fuzzy. Alcohol... She knew better. She had a job to do...

A rough-looking bar patron stood up as Nalyd finished his work on the dragon. "We don't like your kind around here..." He muttered, a threat implicit in his voice.

"Hey!" Jewels said, trying to be forceful. "Leave... him alone..." She struggled to stay awake. She needed to find Will...

She...

She needed to protect Nalyd...

She...

Sh...

S...

The thoughts died as she surrendered to warm contentment.

Jewels wiped a trail of blood from her mouth. She wasn't quite sure where she was, though it couldn't be far...

She gathered her scattered thoughts. She was Jewels... They were Jewels... They were... No, she was Nioca.

Her vision came into focus. No, *his* vision. She kept trying to assert his individuality, even though it slowly was being eroded away. Straightening up, she examined her surroundings. She appeared to be in some sort of abandoned, dead-end street.

"Stay away from me!"

Her eyes flew to the end of the street. Backed against the corner was a hunched figure, a scythe and hand raised in preparation to fight. Next to him was a small dragon and Stillborn. Nioca approached. "Nalyd!"

"Get away, you crazy bitch!" Nalyd's hand started glowing.

Everything came rushing back to Nioca. The tavern...

Dear merciful lords, *the tavern*...

"You didn't see anything." Nioca muttered.

Nalyd pushed himself further back into the corner, energy collecting in his hand. Nioca could now see a ragged body near Nalyd as well.

"No, it is only for me to know. *Control Foes!*" A cyan nimbus flashed briefly around her hand. Unprepared for the mental attack, Nalyd, Stillborn, and the body she determined to be Jumara quickly fell under Nioca's spell.

She wasn't interested in actually breaking into their minds, nor was it total control he was interested in. She merely planted simple commands.

You will not remember anything that happened in the tavern. We left that tavern because a loose torch set the tavern on fire. If asked by Jewels what happened, you will tell her that she was drugged. You did your best to find another tavern, but can't find your way around. You will not remember me entering your mind and implanting these commands.

He let the spell go. Nalyd and Stillborn relaxed, looking somewhat dazed. That was close... too close.

Nioca tried to think. Jewels deluded herself thinking this... *abomination* to be a perfect union between the two. Nioca had enough experience in mental magic to know better. Whenever two minds are bound, there always results a Dominant and a Submissive. While this melding definitely had both personalities present, there was always a dominant personality and a submissive one. With Jewels' homefield advantage, Nioca was the submissive in this soul-binding.

But something was different. And very, very wrong.

Being the submissive, Nioca still had a modicum of self-awareness when Jewels' personality was in charge. He was able to examine the link that held them as one being. And at the tavern...

Jewels must never know. If she knew what had happened... what she had caused... it would utterly destroy her. Even Nioca felt sick thinking about it...

Fortunately, the... *event*... appeared to have, for lack of a better term, knocked Jewels out cold. Nioca was alone in Jewels' body.

Or was it Jewels' body?

She looked at herself in a shattered mirror. The changes were subtle, but Nioca, being a stranger in this body, saw it immediately. This wasn't the Jewels he knew. Several minor masculine features were mixed into Jewels' body. Her jaw was more angular, her build was heavier, and her complexion darkened. And was that an Adam's Apple hiding just under the surface of her throat?

She couldn't help but smile at the thought of these changes being permanent for Jewels. As she did so, she also noticed that her canines had lengthened slightly as well. No... these changes would probably disappear once the connection was broken.

If it was broken.

No, it *would* be broken. Nioca would make sure of it. She needed to find w-dueck quickly. Before it was too late for them.

Nioca closed her eyes, scenes from the tavern playing through his mind. The terror... the blood... the primal awe-inspiring power... The awareness that the blood on her lips wasn't hers...

Nioca turned around and approached the still body of Jumara. His clothes had large holes burnt into them, and in each hole, the skin was blackened and flaking away. Most notable was a deeply-charred ring around his throat. As if someone had grabbed him around the throat and choked him half-to-death.

Shaking her head to rid herself of the memories, Nioca cast a battery of healing spells on Jumara. He started stirring and coming to consciousness.

The smell of acrid smoke wafted through the alley, and a dread curiosity gripped Nioca. She meandered to the intersection where the alleyway began. From there, she could see the orange glow of what remained of the tavern. The tavern that, not five minutes previous, they had been enjoying a drink at. Well, enjoying was a strong word, but it still was a nice and friendly atmosphere. Now it was ashes drifting along the wind.

Nioca's job was clear. He had to make sure that he and Jewels remained as separate as possible. He had to fight this meld with every fiber of his being. Where their two personalities met, calamity was soon to follow. When they combined, something unwholesome was released into the world. So long as the meld continued, everything around them was in danger. Including themselves.

She felt Jewels stir inside of them, and his consciousness rejoining with hers. Nioca felt his control slipping. Memories of Nioca's brief time alone grew fuzzy and distorted beyond legibility.

"Jewels?" Nalyd approached, holding his head. He appeared to be in pain.

"Yes, Nalyd?" Jewels responded.

"I..." He seemed dazed...

Jewels wondered why that was. As a matter of fact... "Nalyd, where are we?" Jewels asked.

"Um..." Nalyd blinked for a moment. "There was a... a fire at the tavern..."

Jewels frowned. Something seemed off. Then, without warning, she blurted out, "All yours, Jewels."

"What?" Nalyd asked. That was an odd thing for Jewels to say...

"What?" Jewels responded, completely unaware of anything strange happening.

Nalyd simply shook his head as Jumara staggered toward them. Jewels, meanwhile, gasped with delight: She had spotted the dragon. "Nalyd, it's wonderful!" She squealed.

Nalyd blinked. He had no recollection of ever completing the dragon.

Search

By Zoe - Dec 25 2009

Do you even know where you're going?

Not entirely sure, actually. He is trying to hide from everyone, after all.

Iffy and Saph wondered around the Fire Plane for hours, barely avoiding the elemental patrols going through the area. Iffy and Saph quickly hid again when the heard something rushing past. They barely saw a group sneaking along. One of them looking familiar...

What is Vergil doing in the Fire Plane?

Saph shrugged, and they continued on. While passing by a remote building, Iffy suddenly felt the presence of who they were searching for. They rushed over to the door, only to find that there wasn't one. They tried sneaking in quietly, but they failed miserably.

The man inside shouted at them, "Damn you Iffy! Why did you have to come over bothering me? This better be for a good reason" Iffy put on a big fake smile. "Ah, cousin! I am so delighted to see you! Now I need your locating skills. After that, I'll leave, and we won't have to worry about dieing" "Or I could just kill you and your partner now, and I won't have to deal with your bull**** any longer! Ruse!"

A girl stepped out of the shadows. She appeared to be of around 18 years of age and had pale eyes just like Saph. She took out a glowing staff, while Iffy's "cousin" drew out two daggers, one being blue while the other green, and rushed at him.

Ruse shouted, "I've got your back, Esur!"

Iffy cast a spell equipping himself and Saph with their respective armor, with Ruse doing the same with herself and Esur. Saph blocked Esur's attempt to attack Iffy. Iffy leaped up, jumped off Esur's head, giving time for Saph to attack him, and launched a fire projectile at Ruse. She blocked it with a simple shielding spell. While Saph fought close range with Esur, Iffy attempted to slow Esur and Ruse with a slowing spell, only to be countered by a hasting spell by Ruse. Ruse blew a strong force of wind towards Iffy, but instead of blocking it, Iffy just let it hit him. Unknowingly to Ruse, Iffy set a trap spell on the ground while he was knocked down. He got back up and created a cloud of blades around Ruse, who sent a wave around knocking them away from her. Iffy sent a blue flame towards Ruse that exploded before reaching her, covering the area around her in a think dark cloud. Iffy took this chance to set another trap spell. When Ruse finally managed to clear the cloud, Iffy got over to her and punched her in the neck.

Though still out of breath, Ruse still managed to stab Iffy with a sharp ice spell. Iffy kneeled down and set yet another trap spell when he landed face down, with Ruse remaining oblivious.

Ah! Iffy, don't take too many hits...

I'll be ok, Saph. A quick healing spell with fix this up.

Just don't suffer any fatal blows.

Ruse kicked Iffy hard, sending him flying a couple of feet, his blood covering more of the floor. Saph winced in pain from the blow to him.

"Ha! How pathetic. Esur, you said they were powerful. I can see you were mistaken"

Iffy cast a couple healing spells and got up.

"What, getting up for more abuse?"

Iffy chuckled.

It's showtime, Saph.

Saph smiled while still fighting with Esur. Iffy set off the trap right under Ruse. The resulting explosion crippled her, and she ended up limping over to yet another trap that exploded, this time poisoning her in the process. She began puking. Esur tried running over to her, only to run into the second trap Iffy laid, which pierced and bent his armor in the side, causing him to collapse. Iffy casually walked over to the puking Ruse, and binded her so she couldn't move. He walked over to Esur and did the same.

Esur glared at him. "Okay fine, I'll do what you want. Tell me who you need to find. Just let us go afterwords" "We need to find the location of the one man. And you better know who we're talking about" "Ah, yes. There's no one else you'd be speaking of. But I'd prefer if we would be alive before I did the search"

Iffy cured Ruse of her serious wounds and sickness, but still left her binded. He walked over to Esur and got his armor off. He then cured him of his wounds, unbinded him, with Saph keeping a close eye on him.

Iffy sighed. "I would have searched for him myself, but he's very good at keeping himself hidden even through my magic. You being an expert at this, I figured I could bug you real quick, but you decided to make a scene out of it" "You expected me to just go with it? Ugh. Now. This is a tricky one"

Esur gave Iffy a list of supplies he needed. After inspecting the list to make sure he couldn't do something with it to try and kill him, Iffy got the supplies out of the "fridge". After just a few minutes, Esur had the location of the man Iffy and Saph were seeking, who was the same one who tortured them.

While Iffy and Saph were leaving, Ruse glared at them. "Hey! Aren't you going to set me loose now?" "Naw, it'll wear off in a couple of minutes"

After they walked a good distance a way, Iffy collapsed.

Easy, Iffy. You used a lot of your energy during all that, and we still haven't fully recovered from that spiritual attack.

We just need to get out of here before our enchantments die off and we die from the heat.

Iffy took an energy elixir and drank it. He took Saph's hand, and she channeled energy to him while he transported them back to the refuge.

Back at the refuge, Iffy and Saph narrowly avoided an aerial bot.

Umm what the ** is going on here?**

I don't know. Let's just go somewhere away from all these bots.

They eventually stumbled across a sort of "slums" (thankfully better than most, but still not entirely decent living areas). Some of the remaining Ermarian refugees went over to them when they saw that Iffy's a mod, saying stuff like: "Hey! Could you help us out please?" "Do you know how to get rid of those bots?" "Please! We..."

Their voices trailed off as Iffy and Saph ignored them, picked a corner, and snuggled up falling asleep.

Back in Business

By Vergil - Dec 29 2009

Vergil motioned to the Bluebloods. They padded behind him, soundless. He motioned again for them to stop. He pointed at the balcony where a red-clad guard was stationed. He made a motion to Laesp'awn then drew a line on his own neck. Volke and Xelgion grabbed his legs and held him upside-down. Laesp'awn held up his hand in a motion to go down, and as Volke and Xelgion lowered him down, he took out a rope, formed it in the shape of a U, then hooked it around the guards neck. He pressed a button on the end of the rope and a faint hiss was heard. With a vicious smile, he jerked the two ends away from each other. The guard's head was soundlessly torn off his neck. The Bluebloods descended from the roof. Vergil patted Yamato. Volke drew his dual stilettos from his chest. Xelgion unsheathed his scimitar. Laesp'awn hugged his ripper crossbow affectionately. They picked the lock to the door and sneaked in. With little effort, they managed to reach the two bedroom doors that opposed each other in the hallway. Vergil carefully pushed open the door and with a grimace saw Kaylas lying peacefully on his bed. Vergil picked a short spike out of his pack, and set it down on the ground pointing at Kaylas. The spike briefly clicked, then a low hum started emanating from it. He took another 20 spikes and set them in the same fashion. Vergil slowly crept up to Kaylas, drew Yamato with a silent whipser, and put the tip of the blade in the middle of Kaylas's throat, and quickly drew it back in a swift motion. Kaylas's jaw dropped and unleashed a hellish moan. Vergil saw the space around Kaylas warp and bend and he felt the magical discharge building up, only to be snuffed out by

the magesnubbers he had set around the room. After Kaylas's body stopped twitching, a dark cloud wafted out of his nose. Vergil snapped his head up.

"Just what I thought"

Vergil grabbed the butterfly box out of his pack and shoved it over the dark cloud with a grimace.

Poor Kaylas....I can't believe he was subjected to this....but the bastard that did this do him will be in for a little surprise. Vergil motioned his head in the direction of the other bedroom. They followed with him. The Bluebloods put down the magesnubbers in all the corners of the room, while Vergil held the butterfly box over the captain's head. Volke drew his stiletto's and ungracefully cut a "X" into the captain's neck. The room twisted in the way that Kaylas's had, but offered no disturbance otherwise. The dark cloud poured out of the captain's head and Vergil captured it as well. Off in the distance, Vergil heard clanking noises.

"Damn it! Gamma-6!"

Xelgion snorted "This wasn't part of the plan, Vergil, calling every guard in the palace."

Vergil turned around and hissed "We need to get out of here. Everyone on me, if we stay together, we might make it out alive." Just as Vergil finished the sentence, guards burst into the room.

"We have intruders, call in reinforcements, repeat, we have intrud-" The guard was silenced by Xelgion's scimitar lopping off his neck.

"Through the window, quick!" Vergil shouted. Dozens of guards appeared at the other end of the hallway as soon as they exited the room.

"GO! I will handle them." The rest of the Bluebloods nodded and popped out the window. Vergil's eyes sunk back and his limbs started to pop.....

The being cloaked in shadow sighed. It felt the small itch of one of its spawn dying... The being always felt what its lesser felt. Until the lesser of the dying host went completely numb. The being recoiled in shock. This had never happened before. And where numbness faded, excruciating pain replaced it. This was not the minor pain that it felt when one of the lesser died, it was a mind-racking pain from which it had never felt before. It was in complete disarray like it had never been before. It felt the pure feeling of rage. A moment later, another feeling was numbed, and then replaced with more pain. The being roared a silent scream of agony and anger, a force so powerful it burned as energy within the being's mind. The massive superpowered mind of the being assembled itself into one rallying thought.

"*Destruction*"

Plans

By Zoe - Jan 4 2010

While Iffy and Saph slept quietly, undisburbed, a long ways away something is stirring...

The woman who wanted Iffy dead was sitting at a desk, giving instructions to yet another assassin. "And remember, he is very powerful so use whatever dirty tricks you can to get the advantage. We are not liable for any injury, pain, or death while..." The assassin cuts her off. "I'm very well aware of what you're about to say. I've heard it far too long..." "I've heard you're an experience assassin?" "Yes, and this 'Iffy' you described to me shouldn't bee too tough, but I've learned not to underestimate" "Good, he isn't one to. And one more thing, there'll probably be a...thing that looks like a young lady travelling with him. Be very careful. He ripped off my uncle's arm once before" "Very well. I'll bring him back alive, well good enough alive for you purposes, as was requested"

The experienced assassin jumped forward when he heard the sounds of teleportation. "Now with that, you should go do your job. We have...buisiness to attend to"

The assassin left in a flash, eager to do his job. "So, Nix, I see that you're back. Obviously joining the VRP was a waste of time, with the whole destruction of Ermaria and all" The man growled. "I thought I told you not to refer to me as my real name. The walls sometimes have ears, you know. And if they were to figure out my name," Nix sighed. "I didn't care for the VRP's cause or anything. I just joined them and being loyal was easy, as their jobs were something I didn't mind doing anything. I merely joined to find other things to use against Iffy and his bonded partner, Saph, Esur and his bonded partner, Ruse, Eva and her bonded partner, Emair, and qUe and her bonded partner. So far I only know the location of Iffy and Saph"

Nix pulled out various things that he had collected while in service of the VRP, some of which including some spirit killer weapons. "Killing Iffy is enough to me. I don't see why you have to massacre his whole entire family" "Don't make me explain again. You know how I don't like repeating myself. Now let's work on getting Iffy's power so I can maybe find the others and attain their power as well" "So power-hungry" Nix glared. "Let's just find the damn Refuge already"

-*- Iffy started up breathing heavily. Saph sat up quietly next to him. The Emarians glanced over.

Iffy...

It's nothing. I'm fine.

Iffy stood up, stretching, Saph following after and speaking outloud, "Sure. Fine. Let's just go"

She glared at the Ermarians that decided to give them awkward glances, and the two walked out, heading for the Inn.

To Mead

By Jewels - Jan 4 2010

At an unseen command from a confused looking Nalyd, the dragon stepped forward and sniffed at Jewels' outstretched hand. It looked up at her with intelligent eyes seeming to take in her features. Then without warning it jumped on her. "Oh!" Jewels stumbled back from the weight more surprised than anything else. She could feel it's claws clinging to her as it scurried up her leg. It more tickled than hurt, though pinpricks of sharpness belied how easily it could hurt her if that was its intent.

Like a living rope, it curled around her leg once on it's way up, then looped her waist twice before climbing under her hair, up her back, and wrapping itself around her neck. Most of it's negligible weight rested comfortably on her shoulders while the rest seemed to move with her. It hissed softly in her ear and the tip of it's tail seemed to stroke her neck. It was much warmer than she had expected. A wondrous scarf to rival all others. "It's perfect," she murmured to Nalyd spinning once from the thrill.

She ignored the odd stares and turned shaking her aching head. The last thing she remembered was drinking at the bar. How long ago had that been? "No more liquor for you," Jewels chided herself aloud.

Time to put the pieces back together. She started walking to the end of the alley vaguely aware of the others following her. Stillborn, Nalyd, Jumara- Wait... "Where's Azuma?" she asked turning to the others. Every face was as confused as her own.

"Right here." The voice echoed from the end of the alleyway. They all hurried forward to meet him. He looked intently at each of their faces ending on Jewels with cautious concern. "I found those rooms for the night you sent me to get. There wasn't much left. I only managed to find one room with two double beds. Someone will have to sleep on the floor, the rest will have to share."

"Nalyd does not need a bed. He does not sleep." The little shaper commented with an air of authority.

"Oh, okay," Azuma muttered. His eyes still seemed to search everyone's faces. Jewels wondered what he was looking for. "This way then." He took Jewels' arm and started guiding them all East. Behind them a plume of smoke billowed high into the sky but Jewels was suddenly too tired to care about it. Sleep sounded wonderful right now. She found herself leaning heavily on Azuma's arm by the time they got there.

He had felt it from the moment she had told him it was time to leave the Refuge. He had felt the subtle change, but he had ignored it. It still looked like her... mostly. It still sounded like her... almost. Her eyes still shown with the same fire, didn't they? He wasn't so sure anymore. Standing here so close, with her arm on his, the differences were screaming at him. If he had not held her

in his arms before, he would have never known, but this was not the same creature that had opened up to him in the Fire Plane... and it scared him.

Azuma glanced back at the pillar of smoke wafting away on the wind. With good reason, it scared him.

Jewels sat across from Jumara munching on breakfast in the inn's common room. "Where to Jumara?"

He had a small map of the area spread out on the table between them. Corel lay at the center of a valley with mountains on all sides. Their destination lay to the east on the other side of the range. "Well," he traced a line going mostly straight East, "the mountain pass would normally be the fastest, but there are reports that it's snowed in. We might be able to dig our way through but there's no telling how much time that will take." Jumara put a finger on a dot south of Corel. "Our best bet would be to take the road through Mead and then head on to Cylan. It's a bit out of the way but it'll be better than risking the weather turning even worse."

Jewels nodded as she examined the map. "How long will it take us, then?"

"Three days walk to Mead. Another two to Cylan."

"So long?" Jewels frowned. "We... we won't be too late will we?"

Jumara turned thoughtful, a sympathetic smile on his face. "Hard to say. There's no telling how long a spirit will stick around. Long enough for them to consider all their 'business' taken care of and usually not a day longer. On the bright side, I understand that Mag- er, Will was rather old. Might mean he has a lot to do."

Jewels continued to frown, absently stroking the head of her new dragon for comfort. "Or it might mean that he had plenty of time to take care of it already."

Jumara reached out and took her hand taking on an assured tone. "We'll find him, Miss, I can almost guarantee it." Jewels looked at him doubtfully as he continued. "If he had no other unfinished business in this world, he'd still have you. I've never known a spirit to move on that didn't first say goodbye to their love."

Jewels could feel her face getting hot. Would she really be enough to keep him here? She took back her hand a bit awkwardly and smiling weakly. "What are we waiting for then? To Mead."

"To Mead!" he echoed.

Demons and Hellfire

By Sylae - Jan 4 2010

w-dueck pulled himself out of the wall and slowly drifted into the room, hiding behind a nearby tapestry. He froze as he heard voices, and strained to hear.

"...any news from Ermaria ... been nearly a month..."

"...worry, time flows differently ... should arrive soon..."

"...tell that to Osan..."

w-dueck smiled, backed into the wall, and moved through it to the next room.

He froze as he recognized the crystal throne in the center of the room. He quickly went back into the wall, leaving only an ear protruding from the wall. He heard more voices.

"I worry. We haven't heard anything from Ermaria in almost a month. Could something have happened?"

Another voice answered. "I worry as well. But the Designers couldn't do a thing, even if they knew about our plans."

"You forget, one of them was born here--" The first voice began.

"And he's dead. So we won't be having much trouble from him, will we?"

"My apologies, Lord Osan."

w-dueck heard nothing for a minute, then the first man--Osan, he presumed--spoke again.

"How fares the construction site?"

"Very well, My Lord. The foundations have been completed and the first crystal is nearly ready to be moved."

"Already? That puts us almost a week ahead of schedule."

"Yes, My Lord. However, we have had increased resistance from the barbarians. They've been striking fringe mining camps. Increased patrols have helped little."

"Continue as usual. You may leave."

w-dueck frowned. Who was this Osan, and what did he have planned?

In a city as large as Corel, nobody notices a ghost wandering through the streets. Especially in the slums, where one could be living well one day and dead in a gutter the next. w-dueck doubted he'd be getting much notice, even given his outlandish clothing. He stopped for a minute outside a tavern and listened to the gossip inside.

"...Thurn challenged me ... tomorrow night, behind Eldnen's..."

"...made her scream all night long ... had to, with those prices..."

"...arrested Finlok last night ... spat on a towersider's shoes..."

"...dumbass ... what'd he get?"

"...soldiers that took him ... said he was going to Deseret..."

w-dueck smiled and floated on to the next tavern.

Jumara rolled up the map, his mind was somewhat occupied with the events of last night. His uniform was badly burned and tattered, and his body still ached from the severe burns he had sustained. Most importantly, he was wondering how an entire tavern went up in flames that quickly.

Jumara stood as a squad of Lancers entered the tavern. "Are you Captain Jumara of Fourth Cavalry Company?" the squad leader demanded.

"I am," Jumara replied carefully, mind racing.

The squad leader pulled out an envelope. "The great Queen Mykella'elth has heard of your deeds. She has invited you to a luncheon at the Royal Tower." Jumara slowly reached up and accepted the envelope. The squad leader nodded and continued, "It begins in three hours. Inside this you will find authorization papers. We'll accompany you there."

"What is this about?" Jewels demanded, "What do they want?"

"The Queen has invited us to a luncheon in three hours...It's a great honor, we must attend," Jumara stated as he opened the envelope.

"How did she find out about us? Haven't we been careful?"

Jumara shook his head as he read a letter from the envelope. "Jewels, who is the one person other than us who knows of this place?"

"Are you saying they know where Will is?" Her voice rose with hope.

"I don't know how else they would know about us. Here, read this." Jumara handed Jewels the letter.

"Hurry up! This shouldn't take all day!"

The group meandered through the various streets. To the Refugees, it felt like an endless maze. Jewels couldn't shake a feeling of distrust. It seemed to her that they were going deeper and deeper into this mess of buildings, not working their way out. Or was she just getting paranoid, like Nioca?

"Where exactly are you taking us?" Jumara asked.

"Oh, don't worry. We're taking a detour to avoid any trouble." The squad leader called back.

"What kind of trouble?" Jumara persisted.

"Last person invited to a royal luncheon never made it. That's why we're escorting you there."

Jewels paused. She was sure they knew what they were doing, and yet... and yet she couldn't ignore this nagging feeling that there was something wrong.

"Jewels?" Nalyd asked. He could her here muttering something under her breath, though he couldn't make out what it was. "Are you feeling okay?"

Jewels didn't respond.

The group stopped in an abandoned back alley. Jumara piped up again. "Um... what are you playing at here?"

The squad suddenly drew weapons. "We only want Jewels and her son. If you three stand down, you will not be harmed." The squad leader said matter-of-factly.

"What...?!" Jumara gasped. "What treachery is-"

The entire squad suddenly burst into flame. "We will not ask again." The fire elementals started snickering.

At once, there was a flurry of action. Flashes of light and rasps of steel as spells and swords flew. Jewels threw two blasts of ice, instantly killing two elementals, as Jumara managed to get his sword up in time to block a decapitating blow. A globe of acid spun gracefully toward an elemental's head, creating a scream that could be heard for blocks. Azuma took a defensive position with Sentience in front of a confused Stillborn, holding off the five elementals trying to bring them both down.

"HOW DARE YOU?!" Jewels screamed as an elemental tried to blast Stillborn with fire. As she flamed up, she felt... complete. The blurry line between herself and Nioca was gone. Time seemed to slow down. She saw Nalyd bisect an elemental with his scythe, saw the ashes fly in beautiful arc...

No less than 20 elementals were charging her. More were pouring out of the neighboring streets. Jewels laughed at these loathsome creatures; who were they to challenge her, come between those she loved so dearly? She raised a flaming hand, a plume of dark crimson fire pouring out. The bloody flame enveloped the charging fire elementals, somehow burning them alive. They collapsed into statues of charred ash.

The remaining elementals paused, staring at Jewels. Something about her was causing them to stop dead in their tracks and stare with wonder. Then, overcome with terror, the remaining elementals fled, save six. Jewels could feel something different about those that remained... a presence. Like their minds were not their own.

With supernatural speed, the last six elementals attacked. One charged Azuma and Stillborn, who was promptly getting pushed back by its ferocious attacks. Nalyd and Jumara wound up on the receiving end of another, both of them fighting just to hold a single elemental at bay.

The remaining four went for Jewels. Non-plussed, Jewels raised her hands and summoned forth another cloud of hellfire. The elementals, however, simply cast a spell of their own, blocking the flame. Still unphased, Jewels unleashed a torrent of spells. Ice blasts, hellfire, storms of daggers,

and black lances of energy poured out of her hands. One elemental got skewered by the attack, though the others managed to parry it.

The squad leader, panicked, took a swing at her with a gleaming claymore. The slash was made with incredible speed and precision, but to Jewels, it appeared he was holding back. With a furious scowl, she twisted her wrists. A pair of broadswords made out of the same fire as she formed in her hands, and she idly flicked one to block the attack. The flat of the flaming sword smashed against the claymore, and the force of the blow knocked the squad leader back. With horror, he watched as his claymore split into two pieces, the center melted by the infinitesimally brief contact with the flaming blade.

Jewels then took his head off with the other sword.

The final two elementals charged with howls of delight. Jewels raised both of her flaming blades and swung forward at the elementals. They raised their blades to block, but the flaming swords sawed clean through the metal, and then through them. They too collapsed into ash.

Nalyd delivered a decisive blow to his elemental's groin. As it collapsed in pain, Jumara delivered a stroke of mercy. Azuma, however, was having more difficulty. With his blade unwilling to harm the elemental, the best he could do was try to hold it off. And hit-by-hit, it was gaining the advantage. As one stroke took off a small bit of hair, Azuma stumbled backwards. The elemental raised its blade, grinning wildly...

And then screamed in agony as a pair of crimson-fire blades sprouted from its abdomen and chest. As Azuma watched, the elemental burned into ash.

He gasped. He only partially recognized Jewels standing behind the dead elemental. The flames that made up her body were a bloody crimson, same as the fire she had been projecting. Where her eyes had been, two slits of yellow light could be seen. And when she spoke... It was a voice deeper than he had ever heard from Jewels, one laced with sinister intentions that belied the innocent sentences.

"Azuma! Stillborn! Thank goodness you're alright!" Jewels summoned sheathes for her newfound blades and flamed down, returning to normal. She hugged Azuma. "I was so worried..." Her voice returned to normal as she wrapped a stunned Azuma and Stillborn into a group hug. "And Nalyd!" She ran over to hug Nalyd.

Nalyd and Azuma exchanged glances. Jumara, meanwhile, was picking up the letter that the elemental squad leader had dropped. "The invitation's legitimate. They must have ambushed the real squad and took their place... Well?" Jumara motioned for the others to follow as he led the way to the Royal Tower.

Jumara bowed deeply as the servant ushered them into the high-ceilinged room, then looked up at his companions and motioned for them to do the same. He breathed a sigh of relief as they did -- apparently they didn't have royalty in the Internet -- and straightened to look at the Queen.

"Please, come forward," Mykella'elth said serenely from the head of the short table occupying the room. "I am afraid we must hurry, I have much to tell you. Guards, you may leave us." she

waited until the doors shut before continuing, "Please, sit, before Osan learns of this. Some of you are mages, are you not? Could you ensure our privacy?"

The room was silent for a moment, then Nalyd spoke, "Nalyd has found that his magic works here. He will watch the doors." His scythe flashed in the dim sunlight as small particles streamed off of it and slipped under the doorways, "Nalyd sees nobody eavesdropping," The petite shaper continued.

"Good. Sit." The Queen gestured, and the Refugi slowly sat, "I will cut to the chase. Your enemies have come here, and taken over my kingdom. I am but a pawn in their game. They are building something near Deseret...and it has the power to unmake worlds." She paused. "Intel suggests they are called the VRP."

Azuma snorted, "The VRP is destroyed. I battled them myself, lady." Jumara felt his face go white as Azuma talked.

The queen smiled, "Insolence... I could have you killed...but I won't. The cost is-" The queen was cut off by Jewels snorting in derision. "Yes?" She asked through clenched teeth.

"Nothing." Jewels shook her head and smiled, though it was clear it was a smile meant to inflict grievous harm. "I just find it amusing that you think you can kill us."

If there was blood left in Jumara's face, it was gone now. He looked as if he had seen an army of the damned all bearing for him. The queen smiled back, malice in her eyes. "You think you can defeat an army?" She watched Jewels glower, her brows furrowed. "Then I suggest you keep your mouth shut, brat."

Jewels was visibly shaking, and looked like she was about to do something stupid. However, Nalyd grabbed her arm. "Jewels, what the hell is wrong with you?!" Nalyd hissed. "You've been like this all day! Just calm down!"

The queen started again. "The man you seek, your enemy also seeks. They use my troops to search for him. However, I have heard much about him. Mage, w-dueck, whatever you call him, he is the Fallen Prince."

Jumara gave a nervous titter. Mage, the Fallen Prince? Impossible! He said as much, and the Queen frowned. "My lady, I have known Mage for a long time, and he...most certainly...is not the Fallen Prince."

Jewels interjected, "Wait, who is this Fallen Prince and why is he important?"

The queen glared at Jewels for interrupting. "You don't know the stories?" the Queen asked, "Oh, that's right, your worlds do not know...The Fallen Prince, or Thornslasher as the Hybenese savages call him, is an ancient unaging figure of Corellia. His father was the last duke of Cylan, and his mother was an angel from the icy nether. His father, the Duke, had him killed at a young age, but less then a month later he was reported to have rescued a woman in the streets of Corel. Over time, he has appeared in many of our tales, carrying out deeds both good and evil."

Jewels snorted, "So? Why is that such a big deal? So what if he was in a few stories?"

"Jewels, the kingdom of Cylan fell two thousand years ago," Jumara said.

"So now you're saying Will is two thousand years old?" Jewels eyed the queen oddly. "Have you ever seen him? Human life-span aside, he couldn't last a day on his own, let alone two-thousand years."

"He is the son of an Angel. Angels do not age." The Queen stood and pulled a book from a nearby shelf. Opening it, she flipped to the middle and showed the illustration that lay there to Jewels, "Is this your Will?" Jewels nodded slowly, and the Queen snapped the book shut and handed it to her, "*Tales of the Fallen Prince*. Keep it, they're in every scrivener's shop in the city."

Jewels took the volume. "So you're saying Will is in this...Deseret? To destroy this device?"

"I believe so. Now go, before Osan finds out about this meeting."

"Nalyd believes it is too late for that." Nalyd stated.

"Eavesdroppers?" The queen rose, and there was an audible note of fear in her voice.

"We were intercepted on our way here. Demons posing as part of your army." Jewels stated more coolly than she felt. "They know we're here."

"Jewels, seriously, what's going on with you? You aren't yourself." Azuma asked.

"I'm fine! Can everyone stop asking what's wrong with me already?!" Jewels snapped. Sweet merciful lord did these people get on her nerves sometimes. Couldn't everyone just leave her alone for five minutes? Although... she couldn't deny that something had changed. When she fought, it was with powers and rage she never knew she had. And she was finding her temper and patience increasingly short.

It was frightening, the changes being wrought on her. She had to admit, she had been somewhat enthused when she learned that she and Nioca were one. But she felt like her own identity was fading away, being replaced. She loved with the same intensity, yes, but there was a lingering fury behind it. Waiting on a moment's notice to strike. And the power... being a fire elemental and holding the power of destruction was one thing, but this? She felt like a walking timebomb. And it was beyond the sum of Jewels and Nioca's combined capabilities... She looked down at her newly-acquired broadswords hanging at her waist.

She shook her head. "How long is this voyage to Deseret going to take, anyway?"

"Roughly two weeks." Jumara replied, his arms crossed. He was rather upset after Jewels' display with the queen.

"Two weeks?!" Jewels shouted. That was too long, much too long...

"Hey, I'm not thrilled with the idea of being stuck in here either, but unless you have a better idea..." Jumara shook his head.

Jewels thought for a moment, then stormed off to the upper decks.

Jumara glanced once before turning to the others. "Is it her time of the month?"

"Nalyd doesn't think so... Nalyd is feeling something very strange from-"

"Hey! What the hell do you think you're doing?!" A shout came from the upper deck. Suddenly, the entire cabin pitched backwards, sending all its occupants rolling to the back of the cabin. Above decks, Jewels had fired off a massive blast of flame and energy, causing the ship to accelerate to ridiculous speed.

One day later...

Sailors tossed line to the men on the pier, and the Windwaker was pulled in. "Captain Pola, we weren't expecting you for two weeks!" The harbormaster shouted.

The captain, white-faced, merely shook his head. Jumara and the entourage disembarked, looking at the bustling Deseret streets. They were surprised by they were surprised by the vast amount of people in the streets... far beyond what they had seen last time they had visited a mining town. That and the tower being built on the outskirts of the town. Rumor said that almost all Deseretian crystals being mined were going to it.

Almost a mile away, they could clearly see the two massive hexagonal crystals resting beside the foundations. Jumara noted that each one had to be a hundred feet long, larger than any Deseretian stone he'd seen. Shaking his head, he directed them towards the tower.

Jewels suddenly gasped. She spotted someone coming through the crowd to greet them.

"w-dueck!"

Can't Kill a Dead Man

By BM - Jan 5 2010

"What did you want to show me?" Said a women in silver robe.

"My assignment is complete, Elaine," said Pestilence.

Elaine raised her eyebrows. "So that is the new bio-weapon?"

"Yes."

"With the cure, I presume."

"Of course. No bio-weapon is complete without the cure."

"I need a demonstration."

"You could see it in the recordings I sent to you."

"So that's the effect of this weapon?"

"Precisely."

"And no one its immune to its effect?"

"No, there is one person who is immune or at least who could resist this weapon."

Her eyes flashed with anger. "So, you sent me a failure?"

"No, the only one I know that will get a full immunity is Jewels, an admin in Calamity Refuge, and I'm sure you already know about that issue?"

"Yes, but-" "I don't want to talk about that, she is immune to the weapon because its made from her genes. There is a chance her bloodline is also immune to the weapon."

"How many blood relatives does she have?" asked Elaine.

"Only one that I know of. Now about my payment..." said Pestilence.

"Yes, please follow me."

Pestilence followed Elaine to the warehouse. "This is it." She opens a safe and takes out a golden arm handing it to Pestilence who examines it carefully. "I can assure you it is genuine."

"Yes, I know that."

"We also have another assignment if you are interested. The Organization can reward you with riches and power."

"Thank you for the offer but I decline."

She shrugs, "Well, that's too bad, but if you change your mind, contact us."

"Of course."

Pestilence left the building and had just arrived at a google station when a group of men stopped him. "What is this about?" he asked.

"That thing you're carrying belongs to us," said one of the men.

Pestilence analyzed the situation. "Who paid you to do this?"

"Well, since you're dead anyway I could tell you." He grins, "The Organization of course, they need to keep their secrets you know."

"I already expected this, but I didn't expect a bunch of amateurs like you." He grinned back.

"Ha ha ha, very funny dead man." They raised their weapons to attack.

Pestilence turned the Orb of Pestilence into a bow and fired arrows from the Orb of Blood, three of the mercenaries fell down. One of them cast a fire ball that hit Pestilence burning his hood. Pestilence then cast spell that sent the spellcaster to meet his maker wearing a hideous face. The merc leader slashed his sword at Pestilence yelling, "Die!", but the sword only phased through Pestilence's body inflicting no harm.

"How could a spirit be killed by your sword, human?" Pestilence asked as he touched the man shouting, "Degenerate!" The man suddenly started to scream in agony as his flesh rot and fell down until he become a flawless skeleton. "This is not good. I need to go back to CalRef as soon as possible," he thought. He took a google transport to his lab and waited.

Defeat

By Zoe - Jan 17 2010

The assassin had contacted Nix and whatshername again and was speaking rather quietly, "I have found the Refuge"

"Where is it?" Nix replied.

"I found it by typing in Calamity Refuge in Google"

Nix facepalmed. "What the ****? You mean it was that easy as that?"

"You should always consider that..."

-*- Iffy and Saph walked out of the Inn, quite refreshed after eating a quick snack and drinking sweet coffee. They headed for the Google port, and saw two transports coming in from different directions.

-*- Nix lost communication with the assassin. He scryed and found that he was attacked by an army of noobs somewhere near RuneScape.

He sighed, saying, "Well I guess I'm going alone" Nix headed for the Google port.

-*- A lady, looking like she was in her early 20s, walked slowly to the Google port. A young looking guy was walking next to her, appearing to be around 15ish.

"Eva, it's time. Let's remove Iffy from existence. Then that will be one down" the guy said

Eva replied, "Getting closer to stopping that damn man's plan. Let's finish this, Emair"

-*- Iffy and Saph watched the two transports come. The first one to come had two people in it. A lady stepped out, a guy followed.

"Sister!" Iffy exclaimed, quite surprised.

Oh that ***.**

Eva and Emair walked over, but keeping a distance.

"Ah Iffy! Excellent timing!" Eva grinned, Emair keeping silent.

"Sister, what are you doing here?"

"I've come to kill you. So the man's plans are guaranteed to fail"

Iffy sighed.

I should've known.

She's a ***, what can you expect?**

Eva and Emair, and Iffy and Saph both prepared themselves for battle.

They then paused, shocked, as Nix stepped out of the Google transport, though they don't actually know his name.

He laughed, saying, "No go on. I'll sit here and watch"

Iffy shouted at Eva, "Eva! If we team up and get him, we won't even have to fight!"

Eva grunted, "Whatever. Fine. Let's just end this"

Eva, Emair, and Iffy launched various long range spells at Nix. He simply absorbed them and shot them back out as raw energy at them. Iffy and Saph ducked, while Eva and Emair jumped far into the air. The raw energy passed them and hit two unfortunate Emarians, killing them instantly. A tiny dissipating bit of energy struck the Admin Tower, but only left a tiny mark. Nix pressed on slowly. Iffy, Eva, and Emair slowly stepped back launching different types of spells, but they all got thrown back. Saph ran off to get something. Eventually Nix during one round combined the spells absorbed and launched a big ball of energy at Iffy. He deflected it with a magic shield, sending it flying in an arc and smashing into the 1st floor of the Admin Tower, leaving a very obvious mark.

Okay, I'm coming back...ugh can't stay away for too long.

Good.

Iffy, Eva, and Emair all grouped up and launched a combined mix of spells at Nix. This time when he threw it back as raw energy, the three bounced it back with combined magical shielding. With each volley, the energy got stronger stronger. While it got tougher and tougher for the three, Nix seemed to be having no problem. Then Saph ran over and threw a recently mixed potion at Nix while the energy was going towards him. It disrupted his spell and hit struck him, making a small crater and knocking him back several feet, landing on his back. He simply healed himself.

"Damnit" Eva said. "At this rate we're just going to use up all our energy. And then we would be sitting ducks just waiting for him to absorb our power"

Nix charged towards the four. Eva and Emair, and Iffy and Saph ran in opposite directions away so they wouldn't be one large target. Nix transported near Emair and tried stabbing him. Eva tried blocking him, but he still managed to graze against Emair a little. Eva racked him and blew him back several feet, stunning him. Iffy noticed while he was flying that the dagger was tipped with a bit of ruby...

"No!" Iffy shouted.

It was too late, though. Emair fell on his knees in pain, Eva following. Before Iffy and Saph could intervene, Nix teleported over and did the finishing blow on Emair. While Emairs spirit was being ripped, only sustained by the bond, Nix took advantage of the unique situation and absorbed every drop of spiritual power that the pair had, completely killing them. Nix smiled, glowing a tiny bit with his new-found power. He launched a big bolt of dark blue energy towards Iffy and Saph. With them dodging, it hit the Admin Tower where it was struck before, blowing a large chunk from the side.

******ing ***** *** **** ***** **** *** *******!**

As if he wasn't powerful enough!

We'll have to revise our plans.

Yes, but what are we going to do now? If we stay and fight, he'll annihilate us. If we run, he might destroy the Refuge.

Somebit I don't think he wants to waste his time on that. He'd probably try following us or figuring out the location of another of your family.

True, I don't know why he's going after us though.

Well it's plain obvious he's going for us. He probably just wants our power.

Well I got that when he attempted to get my power.

"I'm sorry to cut our little party short, but now I must take my leave" Nix shouted. He did a little mocking bow and jumped into a Google transport. Iffy and Saph made no attempt to follow. *Well that solves our present dilemma.*

It appears that that SimpleBot over there was watching. Do they have security cameras?

Yes. We can access the recordings from my RMM

Good. I'd like for the others in the Refuge to see the threat. It pains me to...ask...for...help, but it's the only way we'll ever be able to fight him at this point.

Iffy and Saph went over to the corpses of Eva and Emair. There was no sign of their souls whatsoever. They were just empty shells. Iffy and Saph cremated their bodies with magic, created a grave sign, and walked over to the Inn to rest and wait for the other refuge members to come back.

Welcome Home

By Sylae - Feb 4 2010

w-dueck was aghast as Jewels ran forward and tried to embrace him. "Will! We found you!" Onlookers snickered as she went through w-dueck and nearly tripped over a crate.

"What is going on? Why are you here?" w-dueck asked over the din of the harbor. "Actually, hold that thought. Come on, I know a place." He started walking off to the north.

"Will, we came to bring you back...and you have some explaining to do...I heard you're 2,000 years ol--"

"No! Don't talk about...that. Ever. People could hear. Now, could someone catch me up?"

"Listen, I can't go until I tie up a few loose ends...The VRP is planning...something. I don't know what it is, but it's big." w-dueck stated as he looked out the window to the street below.

"Nalyd thinks you should just come with us." Nalyd replied. "Nalyd thinks this place smells bad."

"You haven't spent most of your life here, Nalyd. Believe it or not, I care about Corellia."

"w-dueck, you've been gone for however long and nothing happened. I'm sure this world can handle itself." Azuma stated.

"14 years, and if we don't do something it'll come back to get us. The VRP isn't building that tower for poops and giggles."

The group was silent, then Jewels spoke, "Fine, but we're taking you back right after. This place gives me the creeps."

w-dueck nodded. "Okay then. Well, there's some people we'll need to talk to. Unless, of course, you--whoa. That's the funniest...bird I've ever seen." He was talking about the creature that had appeared out of nowhere and was now perched on Jewels's shoulders.

"It's a dragon, Will. Nalyd made it for me." Jewels said as she scratched it behind the ears. "Isn't it cute?"

"It is. I didn't know you could Shape stuff like that. Nalyd, maybe we could work something out at the Refuge...the SimpleBots are good, but they're just too stupid."

Jumara had secured horses and supplies for the voyage inland, and the group had just set out. Everyone walked, except for the dragon, which was curled up on some saddlebags, much to the packhorse's dismay. "Those mountains off to the west are where the crystal mines are, to the south and east of Deseret is the ocean." w-dueck said to no one in particular, "To the north lies the desert of Hybenon, and the 'savages' that inhabit it. A few people owe me favors, so now's as good a time as any to drop in and say hi."

"So we're walking through the desert to speak to the savages that live there? And they'll help us?" Azuma grumpily asked from the back of the caravan.

"Yeah, basically. Don't worry, it's only a day's walk, more if their scouts don't find us first."

"Hey, Will," Jewels said as she looked up from the book she was reading, "You were born here. Yet nobody here knows about the Internet. How'd you get out?"

"Oh, well that's--" Jumara closed his mouth as w-dueck glared at him.

"I had a magical mishap. Let's change the subject."

The desert was silent for a minute, then Jewels spoke again, "What sort of mishap?"

w-dueck stopped and spun around, facing her. "It's none of your damn business! Drop it!"

"We'll make camp here tonight," w-dueck said as the sun touched the western horizon, "Make yourselves at home, but don't make too big a fire. We don't want to attract undue attention. I'm going to take a look around." He nodded and walked off into the cliffs.

Climbing the spire was easy enough, when all he had to do was float, and soon he was atop a stone tower rising hundreds of feet into the air. He sat down on the hot ground and stared off, thinking about the last time he'd been in the peace and quiet of the desert.

The sun was shining high above the next day when they spotted the first signs of the hold. "There's someone ahead," Jumara called back as they progressed slowly along the rough trail, referring to the figure on horseback fast approaching.

"Not very good scouts, I see," Azuma stated as he saw the man, "He's raising enough dust for an army."

"Azuma, they've been watching us all morning. They know this desert better than you know the back of your hand. They are only seen when they want to be seen," w-dueck stated as he floated to the front of the group, "Oh, and watch what you say. They take offense easily." Azuma grunted in reply.

The packhorses were halted as the riders reined up in front of the Refugi and proclaimed in a loud accented voice, "Wetlanders, halt! You are in the territory of the Syphria clan! What business have you in this land?"

w-dueck stepped forward and proclaimed, "I have come to meet the elders of Syphria, as is my right as a spirit of this world."

The man looked down at w-dueck, "You are a spirit, and thus may proceed. These people with you are not, and must turn back."

"They must come with me, scout. Jewels deForestal is Thornslasher's *miernen*," he gestured towards Jewels, her dragon hissing lightly as he did.

The scouts eyes widened, "You are either very honored or very stupid, spirit. I will take you to the hold, if you will follow me."

"What's a *miernen*, Will?" Jewels asked as they proceeded along along the trail.

"The closest thing to a wife the Hybenese have, it literally translates to 'devoted'" w-dueck stated, "I'm pretty sure that a woman who sneaks into a castle and crosses planes for a man would qualify."

The valley they were led into was no different than the rest of the desert, devoid of life and surrounded by tall spires. The scout dismounted when they reached a low cave opening, and led his horse in, "Come on!" he called, and they followed him into the dim space.

They arrived into a large cave where several brown-clad men waited. "These men will take your horses. We will gave your supplies moved to the guest chambers."

Azuma looked up to see a large metal contraption attached the ceiling. "The caves are lit by a system of mirrors and crystals. Follow me, I will take you to the elders." he took them down one of the connecting tunnels and into a room full of mirrors. Nalyd looked around and tapped one of the nearer ones. Immediately the room went dark, and he tilted the mirror back to it's original

position. Light was restored, and the scout stated, "I'd appreciate it if you didn't touch the lighting system. A month ago we had to use torches for several days because someone tripped."

The silence was again broken several passageways later, "We're going up," Jewels noted.

"The cave system continues in nearby spires. This hold was once a dragon roost. The Syphria just raised the ceilings and some other things. Everything else is tge work of dragonfire," w-dueck stated as they continued walking. Soon they came to another chamber, and their guide stepped aside.

They entered the small room to find one man sitting at the far end of a low table. w-dueck cleared his throat and looked back at the rest of the group, "May I present to you Kelyn Nilux, leader of the Syphria Clan, and my son."

"You have a kid! When did you plan on telling me *that*?" Jewels exclaimed, "What else don't I know about you? Are you a serial killer too?"

"No, and I also can't see the connection between having children and being a mass murderer."

"CHILDREN??? That's plural!! What are *they*, kings?"

"No, Jewels, they're dead. Anything else you want to bring up?" w-dueck asked from the window overlooking the desert far below.

"Anything else I should know?" She asked coldly.

"Yeah, one thing. You're a different person. Not the woman I proposed to. I don't like this new Jewels." He stood and walked out of the room."

"They've got perhaps two thousand men in the city, more in the mining camps in the mountains."

"I sent a messanger to the Moriin, asking them to handle the camps," Kelyn said as he peered down at the map of southern Hybenon. "We can have three thousand ready by morning."

"That'll be more than enough. Those men are conscripts, and they can't lift a sword, much less fight us." w-dueck replied.

"If I may ask, how do you plan on destroying these crystals?"

"Well, I was planning on winging it, like that time at Mead."

"Well then, I have something to show you."

The room Kelyn took w-dueck to stank of sulfur and smoke. Men were busy at work, creating...

"We call them dragon's teeth. If aimed correctly, one can fling a lead sphere up to a mile," Kelyn said as he gestured to the long steel tube laying on the ground, "Mages can enchant them to go further or explode on contact, or we can fill a hollow sphere with acid..." He grinned, then turned to the workers, "Let's give our ghostly friend a demonstration,"

The men lifted the tube and locked it into place on a cradle, then rolled it so it was pointed out the window. One, a mage, placed his hands on top of the tube and murmured something.

When the smoke cleared, w-dueck looked out the opening to see where the sphere had landed, to see a flaming crater ten feet wide in the opposite mountainside. "We have seven, counting this one, and carts to pull them," one of the men said.

"They'll do," w-dueck said.

Night had just fallen across the city of Deseret, and Thall's watch had ended. He leaned back against one of the towering crystals to rest.

"Thall, we need a fifth for bones. Interested?" another guard said, and Thall shook his head. "No, I'll enjoy this cool while I can. Captain has me guarding a caravan going inland, and it's supposed to be hotter than dragonfire."

"Okay, okay. Think that Sammel wi--hey, what's that?" The other guard pointed out into the dark, "I just saw a flash...probably nothin--" He was interrupted as an explosion tore into the ground in front of them. "poop! Rogue mage!"

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w-dueck instinctively dodged the sword that swung down towards him and threw a fireball into the man's face. The roar of cannonfire drowned out his scream of agony, and w-dueck looked up to see a lead ball embed itself into the crystal and explode, spraying shards everywhere. He looked back down to see a man stab him in the chest. He grinned at the man's confused face and impaled the man with a spear of ice.

He floated up above the battle to survey the scene. Azuma was...screaming at his sword, Nalyd had just sliced of some fellow's arm, and Jewels had conjured a pair of blades from somewhere and was using them quite effectively.

A long time later, the battle was over, and the enemy was in full retreat. "Kelyn, get those dragonsteeth on the crystals! Let's blow these things into dust!"

The dusty streets were devoid of life, except for Azuma and w-dueck, who were walking slowly down the way for no particular reason. They turned the corner to see a bored-looking man sleeping in one of the many booths of crystals.

"Is that all this place has, crystal?" Azuma remarked.

"The crystals mined in the mountains to the west are very high-quality for magical use. Arguably the best stones I've ever seen...hey, could you do me a favor?" w-dueck asked.

"Depends on what it is."

"See those three stones?" he asked, pointing to the velvet tray in front of the sleeping man, "Could you buy those and hang on to them for me? I'll pay you back when we get back, of course."

Azuma thought about it for a minute, then nodded, "Sure, why not? ...hey, wake up. Wake up!"

The man jumped awake and glared at him, "What the hell do you want?" he yelled.

"I would like to make a purchase," Azuma said and laid down some coins onto the table, "For those three."

"Fine," the man said as he bit down on the coin, then placed the crystals into a small bag. "Here. Now let me sleep."

"I'll be back someday," w-dueck said, "Preferably less dead." He nodded and stepped away from Kelyn. "Good luck handling the Corellians. The dragonsteeth should help with that."

"Will, we need to go," Jewels said as she stepped forward.

"Oh, everyone's ready? Great. Let's do this." w-dueck walked down to the assembled group. "Okay, this might sting."

"Wait!" Kelyn yelled, "Let me know if I have a brother!"

"Will do!" w-dueck yelled, then gathered his magic as the dragonsteeth fired in salute.

When the cries of cannonfire died off, they were gone.

"Holy poop!" w-dueck yelled from atop the tower, "What happened?"

"I know as little as you..." Jewels said, "but we can sort it out later. For now, let's get you alive. Bot!" she yelled, and a bulky machine bristling with weapons appeared, "[tt]Yes, Administrator?[/tt]"

"Bring me w-dueck's body," she stated, and looked back at the rest of the group, "If you guys could give us some privacy? Thanks." By the time the bot arrived with w-dueck's cadaver, they were alone on the roof of the Tower, and Jewels gathered her magic.

Syla watched in silence as Jewels finished the ceremony and the spirit faded into the cold body at her feet, then pressed a button on the RMM and watched as a horde of bots rose up with weapons armed. "Jewels, you have some explaining to do."

"What is this, Syla?" Jewels exclaimed, her voice slurring from fatigue.

"Don't pretend you don't know. You've been holding Nioca's spirit captive inside you," Syla snarled.

"What? I never--Who told you this?"

"It was obvious, Jewels. Do you think I'm a moron? Bots, take w-dueck away. She can have him back when Nioca walks with us again."

Warm Welcome

By Nioca - Feb 5 2010

B-but... I don't understand-" Jewels stammered. Gunships circled over ahead, waiting for Syla's signal to fire. Syla herself had drawn Crusader's Protectorate, pointing it directly at Jewels' torso.

"Drop the act. I don't know why or how you captured his spirit, and I don't frankly care. Surrender, and you'll live. Resist, and you die." Syla stated, her voice completely level.

"I didn't capture his spirit!" Jewels yelped hysterically. "If you'd just let me explain-"

"And what possible explanation could you have for this?" Syla hissed. She couldn't help but think back to when Jewels had been purged of the toxin... "I'm not sure what disgusts me more. This blatant violation of our trusts, or that me stopping Nioca from killing you seems like a grievous error on my part. But thankfully..." Syla's free hand was starting to glow, "that's one mistake I can correct. Last chance."

Jewels stepped back, looking like a leaden weight had been swung in her face. Her head and shoulders drooped, defeated.

"Good. Now-"

Jewels' head suddenly snapped back up, her eyes a bloody crimson. Her arms snapped out, blasts of hellfire turning the gunships circling her into molten metal. Syla fired an icy bolt, but Jewels wasn't even phased. A lance of hellfire shot out at Syla's heart.

Caught completely off-guard, Syla only just got a shield up in time. The blast caused the barrier to reverberate crimson, and she stumbled back from the force of the blast. She lost her footing and slipped, sliding to the edge of the Admin Tower's roof. Crusader's Protectorate spiraled in a graceful arc down the side of the tower as Syla went over the edge.

Jewels, now an image of crimson fire, approached with a demented grin. Syla was only just holding onto the edge of the roof with her fingertips, fruitlessly struggling to climb back up. "No one denies me, Syla. Not you. Not w-dueck." She raised her hand.

A geyser of ash sprayed from Jewels chest as she was suddenly lifted into the air and hoisted over the edge of the Admin Tower. As she flew, she seemed to snap back to her normal, corporeal form. Syla felt someone grab her arm and start pulling her up. As she desperately clambered up, she heard a muffled thump at the base of the Tower.

"Think she could survive that?" Her rescuer asked.

Syla peered over the edge. Jewels lay motionless thirty feet from the tower, a hole in her chest only just visible from the dizzying distance they were viewing it from. "If she does, we're all screwed." She shuddered. "Thanks for the assist, Aryll."

Aryll sheathed Avenger, which had lost its regular glow. "It's the least I can do." She exhaled deeply, taking a glance at the horizon. "Now what?"

After an hour of trying to figure out where to go next, Syla had settled on a plan. From what she knew about Dryads, their trees had regenerative powers. Slim as it seemed, she figured that there might be a chance, if Jewels was absorbed into it, that it'd break the bond the two had and return Nioca to them.

The real trick was getting Jewels' tree out of the soul crystal. Which was why Syla was waiting outside the BoA forum, looking for Aryll. And now, she could make out two distinct figures approaching.

"You wanted me?" A wary Iffy approached, escorted by Aryll.

"Yes. Nioca left this soul crystal, and I was hoping you could get the beings contained within out." Syla showed Iffy the dark soul crystal. Several motes of light seemed to pound against the edges of the crystal from within.

Iffy looked it over. "Yes, I think I can get them out..." Iffy closed his eyes, and a glowing nimbus surrounded him and the crystal.

Orbs of light poured out of the crystal. They shot high into the sky, illuminating the island, before streaking back down to the earth. One orb landed particularly close to the group, which materialized into a wounded dryad. Another morphed into a tree, and still another coalesced into a Nephilim. Finally, the grounds were bathed in only moonlight once again.

Iffy wavered slightly. "Have you seen Jewels or Nioca? I thought I saw Jewels on the RMM, but..." He blinked, slightly unsteady.

"They should be back soon. Jewels brought w-dueck back, he's up in the Admin Tower resting, but Jewels had to leave temporarily." Syla stated. Iffy looked somewhat bemused; she couldn't tell whether he bought it or not. Either way, though, he sidled off with a weary goodbye.

Syla groaned as she hefted Jewels' body against another tree. "Come on, how hard is it to get sucked into a tree?" She muttered. This was their sixth attempt to have Jewels get pulled into her home tree, with no success.

"Maybe it's that one over there?" Aryll panted, pointing out yet another dryad tree.

Shaking her head, Syla lifted Jewels again. The two of them pulled her over to the tree Aryll had pointed out and set Jewels' body against it.

At once, they could tell something was different. Jewels seemed to be sinking right into the tree instead of merely resting against it. Soon, Jewels was absorbed completely.

"And now we wait." Syla muttered.

Morning dawned. Somewhere, a rooster crowed. And was promptly hit by a magical bolt of ice.

Syla blearily blinked awake. It wasn't just the now-partially-frozen rooster's call that had woken her. A rather disturbing sound was coming from the tree Jewels had been absorbed into, as if

something was pushing its way through slime. Alarmed, Syla pulled Crusader's Protectorate and stood at the ready.

Nioca suddenly fell out of the tree, unconscious and unclothed. Syla let out a sigh of relief. It worked. Draping a robe over Nioca, she nudged Aryll awake. "Oy. I need you to help carry him."

Aryll shook her head once, then staggered upright. With great difficulty, they hoisted Nioca up and carried him off to his citadel.

The Sorting Room, the Sitting Room

By Jewels - Feb 6 2010

Nola looked around, her leaves shaking in trepidation. It was bad enough that she had been attacked by an Ermarian army, ripped from her homeland, plopped dizzyingly into this unappealingly moist soil and warm, foul air with no idea where her dryad was; but now two humans were dragging what looked to be the corpse of Nana? dryad towards her. She was appalled when they shoved Jewels? cold, lifeless body up against her trunk, not just for their callous attitudes but more for the keening wail that came from Nana through the vibrations of her roots.

Nola stretched out a root to meet the closest of Nana, entwining it in an earthy embrace. It was the closest their kind could get to a supportive hug. The wailing vibrations calmed a little to start mimicking the rustling leaves they usually used for communication. Like trying to listen to someone speak underwater, Nola attempted to understand Nana.

Piercing agony...All was dizzying, piercing agony. Where were they? What had happened? Her Jewels...What had happened to her Jewels?!

Nana was trying to get her bearings but she didn't recognize anything. The trees were different, the sky was different, even the soil was different. It was difficult to concentrate on her surroundings, though, with the excruciating pain that felt like her insides were being ripped apart splinter by splinter.

Jewels was dead? Now, she would die, too. The process had already started. ...What were they doing to her poor Jewels?

The human females were impatiently dragging Jewels away from Nola and towards Nana. She froze, not daring to move a millimeter. To Nola, the stillness spoke volumes. Nana hoped she could save Jewels, and Nola could only hope with her. The second Jewels touched her bark, Nana started to absorb her.

Then it was chaos.

Nana started screaming. Well, as much as a tree can scream without vocal chords. Her roots writhed; her branches shook, nothing that the ignorant humans noticed, though. They were too

preoccupied with whatever they had brought Jewels here for to see that Nana's limbs bowed against the wind or feel that the earth was vibrating beneath their feet.

Nola didn't know if something was wrong or not. She had never seen a tree revive their dead dryad before. She didn't think Nana knew what to expect either. Nola tightened her hold on Nana's root communicating as best she could, "I'm here...I'm here.." It was all she could think to say.

BLASTPHEMOUS!! Unbearable trespass! Unforgivable damage! Nana found the corrupted desecration nearly unendurable. It took all her willpower just to keep from vomiting the being back onto the ground. Only the knowledge that this had been Jewels, and might be again, kept her hanging on. Clinging to who she knew Jewels to be, Nana started the slow process of pulling away everything that wasn't her.

By the time she was done, Nana was furious. She had absorbed the whole of everything in both Nioca's and Jewels' minds. Everything that had transpired in Nioca's life from the day he was born to the alleyway in Corel was now laid bare in Nana's consciousness. Every thought, every action, every magical spell, every devious plot...Her sanctuary for Jewels was contaminated with his presence. The damage was irreversible.

Don't blame him, Nana. Jewels' weak thought was a welcome ray of sunshine on this stormy day.

Indeed, came an equally weak reply, I am not the one who used soul-binding, black magic without having a shred of knowledge about it.

Nana's anger rose at his insolence, but Jewels tried to temper her. He's right, Nana. If it weren't for my meddling, the Stranger would have plucked him out of an over-crowded, Ermarian afterlife to do who-knows-what with by now. I totally take the full blame for this. Nioca remained less than grateful. He was less than thrilled at the thought of being confined within a tree with Jewels. It was all too... intimate.

At least we seem to be ourselves again. Jewels sighed looking out at Syla and Aryll as they waited under the canopy. The memory of Syla's accusing finger surfaced in front of them all. {color|green|I don't suppose you're going to tell them the truth...Smooth things over? Tell them I'm not really a monster?}}

Nioca's grunt indicated he didn't believe the last one himself. That might cause additional complications... as if our situation wasn't complicated enough. His mind started wandering through a hundred unacceptable possibilities. I'll see what I can do but no promises.

Jewels sighed again. Right...Nana, I want to rest in peace. Can you help Nioca get back to his entourage?

Nana was more than anxious to get rid of Nioca, but the energy she needed to create a body for him was going to drain all of them. Jewels and Nioca slipped back into unconsciousness while she worked. When it was ready, she had just one thing left to do. Nioca had caused Jewels so much suffering and here he was, at her mercy. She could wipe his entire memory if she wanted to, make every bad memory he'd ever had resurface, or remind him of the face of every person he had ever murdered...but no. Then Jewels would have to suffer. Being mind linked, she would

have to shoulder his misery along with him. Besides, Jewels wouldn't want that for him even if they weren't linked. She loved him too much.

No, Nana would do something else. Something Jewels had been trying to do all along, she would smother Nioca with love-- as much as she didn't think he deserved it. Nana delved into Nioca's mind digging out every good time she could find and refreshing it. Hugging his mother, laughing with his father, playing with his siblings as a kid, his first pet, his first kiss...She wanted him to remember the joys in his life more often than the disappointment...more often than the pain. And then she burned into his mind every good thing Jewels had done for him, every good thought she had of him, the whole of her love for him and the members of the refuge.

Nana knew that Jewels still wouldn't approve but since Nioca thought it morally correct to inflict horrible, false memories when it suited him, he shouldn't mind being flooded with wonderful, true memories. Even if he did mind Nana didn't care much.

With great satisfaction, Nana finally expelled Nioca. Exhausted as she was, she was only half way done.

The smell of dead leaves and smoke filled her nose. The sound of a slowly burning fire filled her ears. She lay on her stomach and a weight pressed down on her upper back while something sharp pinched at her ear. She opened her eyes to see the charred ground beneath her in the middle of the jungle floor. Small fires smoldered themselves out around her, not faring well in the humidity.

She scrambled up disturbing the weight which jumped off to her right screeching his disapproval that his resting spot had moved. She was dizzy and disoriented...but she was alive. In fact, she had never felt more alive and she couldn't help but smile when the dragon crawled up to rest at the back of her neck. She'd have to name him one of these days.

She turned to see Nana standing tall and proud behind her. Ever the problem solver, she was. When Nana had realized that reviving Nioca had drained too much of her life essence, she had transferred her to a neighboring native tree which was more than happy to live on in the dryad. Nana had saved them all.

Nana had picked out a dark brown robe with a large hood for her. It would cover her face effectively and, as a bonus, hide the dragon around her neck as well. Hoping to blend in with the Ermarian refugees more, she grabbed some more soot and ash and rubbed it into her clothes and smeared it on her face. She couldn't hide from the database, and she couldn't hide from Nioca's mind, but she didn't want everyone noticing her if she could help it. She pulled the hood down over her face and walked towards the main campus.

First stop, a computer interface to check the *Who's On-line* feature for herself. Sure enough, her name was listed. Hopefully, anyone looking for her would look past the ordinary. She hoped not to have any distractions. Nioca was, of course, in the Admin tower already. Taking care of business, no doubt. His mind was busy with technical jargon that amazingly seemed to make sense, but he wasn't paying attention to her and that's how she wanted it.

Nalyd and Stillborn were together, as to be expected. She hoped beyond hope that Stillborn would be safe, though it seemed the chances of him having a peaceful life were slim to none. Azuma was at the inn probably drinking coffee. All seemed well.

The last name of the Corellian party stood out to her as if it were written in red. Will was in a back room of the inn. A worried tear rolled down her face when she read the status after his name. "*UNKNOWN*" Better than deceased she supposed but, unknown? What did that mean?

It wasn't hard to convince Ligrev to let her look after him. Ligrev was more than happy to delegate the task since she had close to 400 Ermarians on the grounds always asking for something or other. She said she had tried to tell Nioca that she was too busy to look after him, but he had refused to have Will inside the Admin tower or his citadel for "Security" purposes. Ligrev also handed her the small bag she had left on Nioca's bed before she left. Looked like he wasn't up to be hospitable.

Azuma caught her wrist when she passed by with a bot carrying Will's body, but after a few intense moments of staring at her, he broke out in a sincere smile and simply said, "Good to see you well rested."

She sat on the cold stone floor of the BoE Forum, huddled in a corner with the cold stone wall of the locked Moderation Center at her back. Kicked out of Nioca's citadel, locked out of the Admin tower and her office, this was one of the few places she was allowed to be as a regular member where she could be relatively alone. BoE had been dying for years after all. No one came to the BoE forum anymore.

Sitting on the floor was one of the dozens of positions she had taken up while waiting. She had sat in the rickety chair she had managed to snag as long as she could stand it's uncomfortable seat. She had paced the floor back and forth till her shoes had literally worn through. She had stood leaning against the wall until her legs had no more strength to hold her up before finally sliding down to rest where she was now.

He lay, ever still, on the bed she never left sight of. It was little more than a cot, scrounged from the refugee camp when others had turned their back. Her eyes were level with the thin sheet that covered him. His body was cold as ice, colder than a corpse, and yet he lived. Status unknown, indeed. All that moved was the rise and fall of his chest. She hardly dared to take a breath herself, lest she not be able to hear one of his. It was all she clung to...all that kept her going...all she cared about.

She fought sleep, the urge to close her eyes for just a moment. She couldn't look away, not for a second. She didn't want to miss it.

The sound of movement roused her. She snapped to attention, disoriented at first, and then angry with herself for falling asleep anyway. She held herself still and listened hard, desperate with hope, yet so wary to raise that hope falsely. Another sound reached her ears: the rustling of the bed sheets and a moan from the cot.

She scrambled over as quickly as her sore body would allow, tears escaping her eyes. One hand searched for his while the other reached to stroke his face. Her heart raced when his freezing

fingers interlaced with hers of their own accord and an unstoppable smile stretched across her face when his eyes fluttered open.

She gasped as a sudden new fire burned within her when he smiled back. She struggled to hold it back but it was hungry, oh so hungry, and desperate to be fed. It threatened to consume her if she did not satisfy it first. The fear of burning in her own fire tickled at the corners of her mind as she felt her temperature rise.

Stalemate

By Dantius - Feb 14 2010

Dantius sighed and leaned back. The books were proving most enlightening when it came to Shaping. Already he had learned a great deal of information on topics ranging from creature creation to crafting and essence infusion. Several spells had already been added to his repertoire. In just a few days, he had learned more than he had in years. Suddenly, he stood up. One of his wards had been tripped. The Shaper was coming for him. He had to act quickly. He threw a good deal of energy into the traps and wards already placed. Quickly gathering up the items on the table, he threw the pile into his case. Removing a long, this metal staff from the case, he closed and locked it. He tossed the case out the window, and soon followed suit. Removing several bricks from the base of the wall, he shoved the case in the preprepared depression and replaced them, sealing them off from the rest of the world. Giving the staff a few experimental swings above his head, he strode out into the grassy expanse near the lake. Several refugees looked on in curiosity. Dantius flashed them a disarming smile and turned back to look at the window of his room. The Shaper had already triggered several of his traps, and many of his wards had been deactivated. Suddenly, a face emerged at the window.

"YOU!" The small man jumped out the window. Dantius regarded him with curiosity and disdain. This was the shaper? He wore the characteristic heavy robes, sure, but he was hardly imposing. He could easily just reshape his body into an imposing eight foot titan. "How dare you! How dare you sneak into my lab, steal my experiments, pilfer my knowledge!" he raged.

"How dare you steal my secrets, rob my vaults, take my items! And, to add insult to injury, you hide behind traps, cowering like a terrified Servile in a rat hole! You are nothing more than a coward, a false Shaper, a traitor! You are the lowest of the low! You are SCUM!" Finished with his impressive tirade, Nalyd seethed with rage.

"I'm sorry; I don't know what you are talking about. Would you care to elaborate?" Dantius said, smiling the whole time. "AAAAHHHHH!" Nalyd screamed incoherently, drew his scythe, and charged Dantius. Deftly spinning his quarterstaff above his head, Dantius spun out of the way and hit his adversary solidly behind the knees. With a soft sigh, the shaper crumpled. "That easy? Surely you co-"

The blast of energy from Nalyd caught Dantius completely by surprise. He was flung thirty feet, and landed unceremoniously in the murky shallows of the lake, his staff thirty feet in the opposite direction, behind Nalyd, completely inaccessible. Rising, dripping water, seaweed, and mud, Dantius glowered furiously at Nalyd. Casting several spells, he drew his sword and charged. Nalyd attacked with a simple spin. Dantius countered easily. Then Nalyd tried to hit him in the face with the butt of the scythe. Dantius jumped back, and smashed Nalyd in the hand with the hilt. The two continued to fight for a short while, trading blows, when Nalyd suddenly parried and hefted Dantius' sword to the side.

"I see you are skilled in the arts of battle, Shaper"

Dantius made no reply other then planting a solid kick in the small man's chest. Nalyd flew back several yards with a surprised expression.

"Never be so foolish as to pause a battle when your opponent is within striking range!" Nalyd leapt up, burning with rage. He doubled his attack on Dantius, striking blows so quickly and variegated, the Dantius found himself soon backed up against the shore. With a deft spin, Dantius found himself weaponless, again. As Nalyd swung his scythe for the killing blow, Dantius whipped out a short, curved blade. He managed to parry the blade an inch from his neck. Pushing the blade back, Dantius took advantage of Nalyd's confusion at Dantius' ability to seemly produce blades from thin air to draw yet another blade, this one wickedly twisted and dripping a sickly green fluid.

"You're running out of blades, Shaper. And time. I have plenty of both, trust me." With that, Dantius redoubled and doubled again his attack on Nalyd. He forced the Shaper back to the middle of the field. They stood trading blows again, until Nalyd hit Dantius with a punch to the gut. Doubling over, Dantius let down his guard for a precious second, and the venomblade was knocked out of his hand. Nalyd swung for yet another overhead killing strike, and Dantius again narrowly blocked it with his blade. Nalyd leaned close.

"You are weakening!"

"That did I say about pausing battles?" Dantius smiled, and, with a sinking feeling, Nalyd looked down. A crystal wand was placed against his torso. He looked up again.

"Oh dear." There was a flash of blinding white light, and Nalyd was thrown back, disarmed. Dantius took the opportunity to sheath his blade, and grab again his abandoned quarterstaff. Hands shaking from the impact, Nalyd scrambled towards his scythe with a single mind, picked it up, and again faced Dantius, this time not so certain. Dantius, panting with exhaustion, also turned to face is opponent. Saluting him with the staff, they then attacked, slowly and tiredly. Sloppily exchanging blows, they continued until a flick by Nalyd disarmed them both. Dantius withdrew an athame for the final blow, but Nalyd grabbed his hands. They fought over the athame, first moving towards Nalyd's chest, then Dantius' then Nalyd's again, and finally once more towards Dantius' when the both were suddenly paralyzed. A figure ran around the side of the inn.

"Stop! Stop it!" They were both thrown back, Dantius landing near the water's edge, and Nalyd near the bushes of the inn. Dantius slowly recovered locomotion, and attempted to discern the new entry. His eyes focused and unfocused, and finally, he realized that he was just too

exhausted. He downed the contents of a pod, and frustrated, he shaped two Vlish guards, retrieved his weapons, and turned to leave. Nalyd struggled feebly against the figure holding him, clutching his scythe close to him, but Dantius only caught one snippet of phrase spoken by the new entity.

"No, father. Please, he is too like us." Frowning, Dantius entered the inn, slamming the door behind him to the complexities of the outside world. He would need to think on this, for a long, long time.

While You Were Sleeping

By Jewels - Mar 18 2010

w-dueck uttered a low moan as reality returned to him. His head was pounding and he was freezing...where was he? A sharp intake of breath caught his attention, and somehow he knew it came from Jewels. He attempted to say something but all he got out was another moan as his head painfully throbbed.

Then she was closer, right next to him, her warm fingers on his face and grasping his hand. w-dueck opened his eyes and there she was, beaming, eyes shining with tears. He felt butterflies in his stomach as he stared into her deep hazel eyes. His mind was still as he stared up at her, a slow smile forming on his face.

"Hey sleepy head, how do you feel?" she cooed.

w-dueck tested his muscles and groaned again. He slowly lifted his other hand, flexing the fingers, and ran it over his chest where he had last seen the gaping wound that had killed him. It was now whole but he still ached all over. "I feel... alive," he finally managed.

"I was really scared you weren't going to make it this time." Her voice wavered as one of those tears spilled down onto her cheek.

He thought of wiping it off but it sizzled and evaporated within seconds, so instead he tried to cheer her. "Bah, nothing can kill me. At least not for long. I'm practically immortal." Jewels' smile widened as she gave a little laugh. The movement only caused more tears to squeeze out onto her cheeks.

He noticed how flushed she was as they disappeared faster than the first. The temperature in the room kept rising, as it seemed, so did Jewels'. The heat of her hands and the transfer of warmth to his freezing body felt so good, even though it almost burned. He pulled her closer, drinking it in. w-dueck tried to read her face as Jewels' eyes flitted from feature to feature on his own. The joy in her smile was evident but there was more... so much more behind it. The quiet between them dragged on as he tried to understand it.

Unexpectedly, her lips were on his, burning hot and urgently pressing into his. Now he could almost feel the emotions coursing though Jewels and flowing throughout the room, the

passionate love, the lingering sadness, and an intense longing. But there was something else... something he could not place. Was it fear of the longing? Or pain from it? Maybe both? Then, suddenly, a wave of anger and disgust rippled out from her. She pulled away shouting, "Oh, just shut up!!" The words echoed off the walls amid a sob as Jewels sat back cringing and clutching her head. "Uh, I didn't say anything," he replied dumbly.

Jewels looked up at him hesitating. "I wasn't talking to you," she finally whispered dejectedly.

w-dueck looked around, realizing he was in the BoE forum on a very uncomfortable cot, but he could see no one else around. "Then who?" he asked just as confused.

She was still looking at him as she spoke again but her words were not to him. "Why not? Why shouldn't he know?" She paused for a moment before continuing a pained look on her face. "No, I will not stop talking out loud. Deal with it. Now why not?" She paused again and rolled her eyes. "Well, I think he does. I think he needs to know a lot of things going on around here." Her voice was incredulous and accusing, rising after another pause. "Unforeseen complications?! What, like me not even being able to kiss him without you butting in with your snide comments?" Jewels rolled her eyes again and pursed her lips, an angry laugh escaping her lips. "Oh, okay, it's not your fault you think it's gross. You know what? I'm telling him. ... No, I don't care. ... Shut up, Nioca! Just! Shut! Up!"

Jewels fell into silence holding her knees to herself and turning away from him. w-dueck had heard only half the conversation but he shuddered at the thought of it. Grasping for understanding he gritted his teeth and growled, "How?!" Jewels flinched at his voice and he realized he had said it much harsher than he had intended.

"It was an accident," she whispered, once again despondent. "This wasn't supposed to happen. I didn't mean to. I didn't..." her words trailed off as more sobs swallowed them up and she buried her face in her skirt. w-dueck wondered if she wasn't still responding to Nioca.

In seeing her pain, he realized how little it mattered. He only wanted to comfort her. "Come here," he instructed softly holding up a hand. She looked up hesitantly so he repeated it. "Jewels, come here." Then she was in his arms again, head resting on his chest. He could almost feel the intense relief that flooded her, and the gratitude of knowing he knew but didn't care.

Suddenly she looked up, and asked quietly, "What are you doing, Will?"

"Uh, sitting here, why?" he replied, once again feeling dumb.

"I don't know...I just felt something strange..." She trailed off as a knock came at a door.

The door opened, and Iffy came in, trailed by an emotionless Saph. "I see someone has come back from the dead...'ello Will. Nioca mentioned you were awake. He wanted me to bring you these." He laid down w-dueck's robe and leaned his staff against the wall before looking from Will to Jewels and nodding at the door. "Would you mind giving us a few minutes?"

Jewels cleared her throat, "Oh, sure...I have some things to do. Don't you dare leave, Will. You need the rest." She walked out the door, closing it behind her.

w-dueck groaned as he straightened up on the cot. "Hey Iffy, how've you been?"

"I've been alright. Except for one small problem," Iffy said, and took out his RMM. He punched some buttons and handed it to w-dueck, "It's a recorded video feed from a bot."

He watched the battle in silence and a little disbelief. "Wow... So, what'd you do to deserve that?"

"He's after the power of my siblings and I. He already attempted to get mine, and now he has Eva and Emair's."

"Hold on. Hold on... I recently died, so I'm a little slow."

"Sorry to bring this up while you're recovering. I'm sure you have a lot of other stuff that you're stressing about."

"It's okay, I was already awake, but who... the hell... were those people?"

"You talking about Eva and me, or that mysterious man? I come from a...really messed up family."

w-dueck's head was thoroughly spinning by this point, "Uh, why don't you just start from the beginning."

Iffy laughed, "In case you didn't know, Saph and I share a very special bond. The same applies to three other pairs. Well, now two after recent events. All I can tell you is that that man is seeking our power."

w-dueck shook his head and laughed cynically. "Don't you just love power?"

Saph broke her silence and said, "Power is like those orgasms. Most people just can't resist them."

"Wow. That's... er... accurate." w-dueck said, astonished. Then he remembered where he'd seen her before, and it all made more sense.

Iffy continued speaking. "Anything else you would like to know?"

"Yeah, one thing. What do you need from me?"

"I was merely informing you because it happened on your refuge. That, and I think it would be better to let a trustworthy person know."

"Well, if you ever need me, I'm here for ya," w-dueck said and smiled weakly.

"I think I'll leave you to your resting for now. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"I don't think so... Actually, if you see Azuma would you send him my way?"

"Certainly. Rest up and don't get yourself killed again."

"Awesome. I?l try not to. Thanks for coming by," w-dueck said as Iffy and Saph left the room.

Jewels cringed at having to leave the room. She had waited so long to see his smile again, but even if Iffy had not come looking to talk to Will, she would have had to leave. The burning... the raging fire inside terrified her. She had never felt anything like it before. She had never known what fire really felt like but now she thought she might. This was not the warmth and comfort

she knew and loved. No, this felt more like she was starving... but not for food. Something else... she wanted—no, needed something else, and fast, or this new hunger would surely just consume her.

She ran to Nana as fast as she could. It was all she could think to do. Maybe Nana would know what to do.

Nana cringed at the sight of Jewels running pell-mell towards her. She enveloped her and soothed her as best she could. Nana had hoped that Jewels' mixed physiology would have exempted her from what her Dryad heritage was doing to her, but instead it seemed to only worsen the effect. Nana once again cursed Nioca and his female companions for their reckless invasion and the irreversible damage they had caused. To Nana, the trespass would always remain unforgivable, but she would not let Jewels know. No, Jewels must not know the extent of the injustice done to her. Nana would keep her oblivious. She could suppress the memories and also the fire but she couldn't tell how long it would hold. This wasn't exactly a common occurrence.

One good thing had come from Nioca's presence, though, and Nana was going to take full advantage of that. As she comforted Jewels, she also took the time to impart knowledge. Though Jewels would not know how, she would know everything important that Nioca knew. Every priest spell, every scripting technique, every technical detail of this new refuge... Jewels would know it all, and she would help w-dueck retake control of the Refuge and put Nioca back into his proper place. It was the least Nioca could do for her after his assault, whether he did it willingly or not.

The refuge was full of people just milling about aimlessly. The chat lounge was also full of people, just getting drunk.

Iffy was approaching Azuma who sat at the bar with a coffee in his hands. The mention of his name got his attention and he came in for a closer view. "w-dueck is awake. Said he wanted to see you sometime."

Azuma turned and smiled, "He is? Good. I'll head over when I finish this."

The scene, which was pretty uninteresting, dropped away as w-dueck floated up through the floor. He stopped for only a moment beside the bed of a snoring man. w-dueck didn't recognize him.

Again, the scene fell away as w-dueck rose towards the Admin tower. He came to rest on the very top and turned to look at the refuge. Part of the scene before him made him happy. To see the Refuge so full? That's why he had built it, a place for people to come, to stay... Full was good. Although the people below lacked the life he had always pictured. They were subdued, with good reason he supposed. They would need to heal first.

Sinking down w-dueck came to his floor and gave it a cursory sweep. Odd... everything had seemed just as he had left it until he came to his sleeping chambers. Clothes lay strewn about on the bed and floor, wrinkled towels hung over the shower door and a hairbrush lay next to the

sink. w-dueck came closer... Was that a bra? He shook his head as an alarm sounded. In an instant he sunk down to Floor 16 to read the monitor. ***WARNING! WARNING! Multi-phasic distributor coils out of sync. Processor overheating.*** *w-dueck reached out to fix it but swore when his hands passed right through the controls. He heard himself swear again, or was it him?*

He turned around to see Nioca at the controls with Syla standing next to him. "What did you do?" he accused her.

"Nothing," she protested. "I only flipped the switch you told me to."

"Well, flip it back! Now!"

Syla complied with Nioca scrutinizing her carefully. The alarm stopped and a message rolled across the monitor. ***Multi-phasic distributor coils back in sync.***

"That wasn't the switch I asked you to flip. I said the 'coil inducer' switch. That was the 'coil induction' switch. Completely different things." Nioca and Syla continued to bicker over whether the directions should have been more careful or if they should have been followed more carefully. w-dueck scowled. Nioca wasn't his favorite person right now. He didn't like the idea of this link he had with Jewels' mind, but at least Nioca was taking care of the Refuge like w-dueck had asked him to. At least he could trust him with that much.

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w-dueck was jolted awake by a knock at the door, and the BoE forum came into focus once again. What a realistic dream...

Azuma opened the door and walked in. "I heard that you wanted me w-d."

w-dueck blinked a few times and sat up slowly. "Yeah, remember those crystals?"

"The ones you asked me to get in Corellia?"

He nodded. "Yeah, those. I think I've got gold around here somewhere..." Although a little bit wobbly, w-dueck managed to get up and go over to the robe Iffy had brought in.

Azuma dug in a pocket and came up with them. "I've got them right here. What are they for anyway?"

w-dueck smiled to himself. "Its a surprise. You'll probably find out soon. Oh, and if you could keep this on the low-down, that'd be great."

"Sure, no problem, I can keep a secret. Anyone I should avoid specifically?"

w-dueck turned to look at Azuma, only answering with the same smile. He found some coin in an inner pocket of his robe and handed it over. "That'll cover it, right?"

Azuma made only a cursory look at the amount. "Yeah, that's enough." The two men made the exchange without any fluff. The way business deals should be done.

"Awesome, thanks," w-dueck turned the crystals over in his hand admiring how they caught the light. Yes, these would be perfect.

"Anything else? I have some stuff to do."

"No, I think that's it. Thanks."

Azuma nodded and started to leave but turned around when his hand reached the door. "Don't die again, Will. Or I'll kill you the next time I see Jewels cry because of you."

Azuma smiled and chuckled a little, and w-dueck laughed with him but wondered if there was any truth to it as Azuma stepped out.

Robe still in hand, w-dueck decided to put it on and secured the crystals where his gold had been. The weight of it felt good on his shoulders. He grabbed up his staff just out of habit but stopped and swore when he saw it. The crystal ball on the top was cracked and dim.

He got restless waiting for Jewels. The door creaked as w-dueck pulled it open and stepped out into the sunlit morning. It appeared Nioca had picked a good home for the Refuge, if a little hot and humid for one Admin's taste.

He turned around looking for where the Tower was now. Spotting it's mass in the skyline, he stretched his muscles and headed past the pond. "Morning! Need help?" he called out to a queasy-looking newb.

"Uh, who are you?" the newb asked.

"I'm w-dueck, ArchAdmin of this fine Refuge."

The newb laughed, for some reason. "I'm looking for the Geneforge forum...?"

"Over there, it's the building that says 'Geneforge' in front of it."

"Oh, I see. Thanks."

"No problem," Will said as he walked up the stairs to the Admin Tower doors. He was startled to find that the doors were closed shut and a fingerprint scanner hung on the wall next to them. "Oh, that'll have to go," he said as he put his hand on the scanner.

"*Not Authorized*," the scanner blared. w-dueck frowned and tried again with the same result. Fully annoyed at this point, he punched a button labeled 'Assistance'. Minutes later, an incredibly battered SimpleBot arrived.

"Took your sweet time...I can't get in."

"*You do not have proper permissions to access this area*."

w-dueck frowned. "Uh, yeah I do. Your chips fried?"

"*My circuitry is in perfect order. Yours, however, may need replacing. This area is limited to administrators only*."

"Oh really? And who are these administrators?" w-dueck asked, laughing.

The bot buzzed for a moment, "*ArchAdmin Nioca Galton and Admin Syla Prescot are the current administration*."

w-dueck froze, mind reeling. After all he'd done... he'd died to save Nioca's ass. And this was what he got?"...I'd like to speak to one of them, as is my right," he managed to say.

"*Admin Syla is already on her way down*," the bot stated.

"Thank you..." he said through gritted teeth. The door opened, and Syla came out, "Syla! How are you?" he asked sarcastically. "I bet you're just dandy, living up there in my tower!"

Syla looked at him a bit nervously but formally stood her ground. "Nice to see you up and about, w-dueck. What can I help you with today?"

He started laughing. Nothing was funny about this whole thing, but he was fucking laughing his ass off. "Are you that stupid? You could start by reinstating me as the ArchAdmin!" He might've said something more, but it was lost in more laughter.

"I'm sorry, but you'll have to take that up with Nioca. He's the only one who can do that now," she stated more calmly than she looked.

"Then go get him!" w-dueck roared.

Syla shifted on her feet nervously. "He's busy right now. The distributor coils needed inducing and they're a little touchy right now. He has to concentrate on it for the sake of Refuge safety."

w-dueck paused for a moment at the comment then shook his head and tried to push past her. "If he can't come to me, I'll go to him. Out of my way!"

A sudden burst of energy from Syla sent w-dueck flying back ten yards. He landed hard on his butt, a little dazed from the shock. As soon as he regained his senses, though, his eyes slit in anger. He got up gingerly and brushed himself off before stalking towards Syla purposefully.

Syla stared, a worried look on her face. "Stay back... This is your only warning. I'll...I'll ban you if I have to," she stammered and pulled out her RMM, then paused. She pushed a button at random then winced as the SimpleBot, who had been hovering there the entire time, lost power and fell to the ground.

w-dueck regained himself enough to sigh and step forward. "I see you've taken my custom model, too. To ban someone, you hit the red, then the second, then scroll down, pick them, and use the green to cycle to a duration. Then hit red again. But that won't be necessary," he said, picking up the hulk of the Bot. "I'll leave by my own free will." He set off towards the north.

"Hey! What are you doing with that bot!?" she yelled as he walked away.

"You fried the Hive module! It's useless to you! Besides, what are you gonna do, take it away?"

Syla watched as he disappeared into the jungle, then sighed and headed back into the tower.

The tunnel was silent excepting w-dueck's quiet breath. He straightened as the sound of a hatch opening echoed from the southeast. Several seconds later, a light appeared in the small chamber a good half-mile away, and w-dueck quickly doused the glowing orb above his head, leaving Subsurface Tunnel 82 in darkness. A few minutes later, the loyal SimpleBot he had reprogrammed hummed forward, followed by Jewels.

His boot heels clicked against the steel-grate floor as he stepped toward Jewels. "Scan her," he ordered the machine. Sensor arrays appeared and a second later, it beeped and reported she was bug free.

"Will...what is this place, these passageways?" Jewels demanded, "What is going on here?"

w-dueck gestured towards the wall, "I'll start with your first question. There are 84 separate tunnels connecting the underside of the Refuge to 34 access hatches on the surface of the Isle. They are mostly used by SimpleBots to move quickly without being seen, and for drainage in certain areas," he pointed down to the floor, where a trickle of water could be seen running under the grate, "Most importantly," he continued as he tapped a conduit on the wall, "they carry energy to transmitters across the Isle, blanketing the entire area in Admin Magic, allowing everything from SimpleBots to RMMs to the CRAS, essentially everything electronic, to work. I arranged this meeting here because the concentrated magic in these cables seems to interfere with other magics, which hopefully nullifies whatever link you have with that bastard... I hope."

Jewels frowned, "But that still doesn't tell me what you're doing..."

He sighed, "Jewels, I hope you'll understand if I don't get into the details, due to the obvious risk that would create to my person, but here's the basics: See, I built this Refuge myself. The Admin Tower itself took a year to design and build, even after I designed the Bots. I didn't go through all that trouble just so someone could up and take it over," he paused, "I plan on eliminating this little coup of Nioca's before more shit hits the fan... Oh, I've been meaning to tell you...Thanks for saving me."

Jewels smiled, "Well, once we found you it was easy enough. Your friend Jumara helped more than me, with the search." She was silent for a minute, and w-dueck stepped forward to embrace her tightly. Several minutes later, she spoke up. "Listen, Will, about Nioca?

"Let's not ruin the moment, Jewels."

"But it's important..."

"Please? It can wait, it really can." He sat down on the floor and leaned back against the wall, motioning for her to do the same. "For now, I just want to be with you."

Full Circle

By Jewels - Mar 18 2010

w-dueck paced back and forth in the empty corridor. Iffy and Saph came into view following the same loyal SimpleBot he had used to fetch Jewels. All was quiet except for their footfalls. They looked around obviously surprised that these tunnels existed. w-dueck broke the silence, looking up at them both. "I need help, Iffy. I need someone I can trust."

Iffy glanced at Saph then back at w-dueck. "And you think you can trust us?"

w-dueck stopped his pacing to face them. "Or rather, I want to know if I can trust you, if I can confide in you and count on you when it matters..." He paused and looked meaningfully into each of their faces before continuing, "Because it matters, Iffy, now more than ever."

"You may not think we're very trustworthy, but believe me, we're more trustworthy than a lot of people."

w-dueck nodded. He wouldn't have asked them to come here if he didn't already believe that they could be trusted. Just having them summoned by a SimpleBot could have been reason enough for a snitch to report him. Time to really test the loyalties... "As long as you are more trustworthy than that snake, Nioca..." He paused to gauge Iffy's reaction to his challenge of Nioca's character.

Saph simply snickered, but Iffy didn't seem to make any emotional reaction. "While Nioca's actions are questionable, at least he saved the refuge."

A neutral answer... Not as good as w-dueck had hoped for but good enough to continue. "Then let me ask you a question, Iffy. Who do you think should be the Administrator of the Refuge?" Just the thought of Nioca being in HIS tower touching HIS controls sent a shiver down w-dueck's spine, not just from anger but from a noticeable temperature drop in the slender hallway.

There was no hesitation to Iffy's answer, though w-dueck noticed he could see his breath as he spoke. "You are the rightful Admin, Will. You created this site. You hold opinions over everyone else who admins the Refuge. It should be your decision."

"It's only common sense," Saph chimed in.

w-dueck nodded his approval. "That's good to hear, because Nioca doesn't seem to think I can handle it anymore. Nioca doesn't think I can handle more than being a regular member..." His fist slammed into the wall in anger leaving a bit of frost behind, but his voice was quiet and cold as ice as he continued. "I aim to change that, Iffy."

"Just don't do anything too rash," Iffy's backpedaling still showed his neutrality. "You must also consider what Nioca has done for us, as well as against you. Don't base you actions entirely on what he's done wrong. Remember that."

A low chuckle left w-dueck's mouth. "Don't worry about Nioca, Iffy. I only want control of my refuge back. Nothing less, nothing more." Well... maybe a little more, but Iffy didn't need to know that. "So what do you say? Will you help me?"

Again without hesitation, Iffy spoke confidently. "Of course."

"We'll both help," Saph added. "So what do you need?"

"Guys," Will paused looking from one to the other of his new rebel partners. "I need a distraction."

Saph smiled and gave a little laugh. "Sounds fun."

Iffy and Saph walked purposefully towards the Administration Tower. They stopped at the hole created by their earlier battle and observed the three bots that worked on restoring it. Iffy approaches one bot, "Hey. Umm yeah that hole was kind of, well, some-bit my fault, some-bit not. I think I'll take a look since you don't know what kind of energy you're dealing with."

The bot whirred and buzzed blocking his path for a moment while it computed. *"Moderator Iffy, you may have access to the ground floor."* The bot moved to the side letting him pass, while Saph remained motionless where she stood.

Iffy gave a wink in her general direction before making a show of examining the damage. A minute passed before an alarm went off. Iffy looked up, seemingly surprised while one of the bots whirred into the hole and started scanning the entire floor. The monitors displayed a flashing message; *Emergency Call; Ground Floor: Activated.*

Minutes later Nioca and Syla burst into the room. "What is it?" Nioca huffed, "What's the emergency?"

Iffy shrugged, "I don't know. It just went off all by itself. I didn't touch the thing."

Nioca looked to the bot in the room. "Confirmed?"

"Confirmed,?" it droned. *"No one activated the Emergency Call button."*

Nioca threw his hands in the air in disgust. ?erfect! Something else that isn? working...What else could possibly! Go! Wrong?! As if in answer, every single alarm in the building went off simultaneously. Bells, whistles, horns, and sirens all blared while every single warning light on the board lit up. The monitor started scrolling a warning in big red letters, *WARNING!! WARNING!! CRITICAL ERROR!! CORE OVERHEATING: EXPLOSION EMINENT!! WARNING!! WARNING!!*

"What the..." Nioca started letting out a string of profanity that Iffy was not used to hearing from him. Nioca ran over and started pushing button after button with no response. "No, no, NO! Don't do this to me, you stupid piece of machinery!?Nioca continued to push buttons to no avail until the monitor changed. *WARNING!! EXPLOSION IN 10...9...8...*

"Get out!" Nioca yelled, "Everybody out!" He grabbed Syla and Iffy's arms, pushing them out the hole. They all hit the ground running. Nioca screamed at anyone close to do the same.

Syla pulled out her RMM while she ran. The display was still counting down. *3...2...1...* Syla's face went white.

The ground started to shake, making it hard to run, as a resounding crack thundered through the air. Then all was silent for a few seconds. Nioca, Syla, and Iffy all turned around to stare at the still-standing tower. "Was that it?" Syla wondered out loud looking at a hopeful Nioca. Iffy grinned.

Suddenly, a deafening series of booms ripped through the sky as the Admin Tower burst apart in a mushroom cloud of fire, smoke, and debris. A huge chunk of cement flew straight towards the trio faster than any of them could react. It connected with Nioca and Syla? heads, knocking them flat and out cold.

Iffy turned around to stand over them still smiling. There was a shimmer to his right and Saph appeared, smiling as well. ?hat went pretty well,?she quipped turning around to view the smoking crater where the Tower used to be.

"Not too over the top?" Iffy asked.

Saph shrugged before smiling at him. "I like over the top."

"You think they'll notice their bruises are more fist-shaped than cement block-shaped when they wake up?" Iffy knelt down beside them, giving each an injection in the side of the neck, which should be no less than four to six hours.

"They won't know what hit them," Saph laughed. "How long will you leave the illusion in effect?"

"Until w-dueck gives me the go-ahead. He doesn? want any of those new bots interfering while he works.

Saph nodded as she helped Iffy carry the two, soon-to-be-former, Admins to the citadel for a little nap.

Nioca groaned as he awoke, then jolted up, reeling. The Tower! It had exploded! He looked around, and relaxed when he saw he was in his room at the Citadel.

"Good afternoon, Administrator Nioca," w-dueck stated, and Nioca jumped. "So... how was your rest? You took a mighty painful blow on the head there." w-dueck sat on the edge of the bed and grinned.

"What do you want?" Nioca demanded, struggling to get up, but w-dueck's firm pressure on his chest stopped him.

"I just want to talk. Iffy, if you and Saph could go comfort Syla like we talked about? Thanks." Nioca hadn't even noticed Iffy standing by the door, but relaxed once he left. "So, Nioca, firstly I'd like to say thanks for getting the Refuge back to this plane in one piece. You picked a pretty nice spot, I must admit. However, there is one thing that's bothering me..."

"And what is that?" Nioca asked, already knowing the answer.

"I imagine you thought I'd never come back, and probably thought Jewels wasn't fit to lead the Refuge. I'll admit, you'd make a fine Admin. As it is, you're lucky you are recuperating here and not in a cell below the Tower." w-dueck's grip on his staff tightened, and Nioca could see a faint shimmer in the cracked orb at its head.

"So what happens now?" Nioca tiredly asked.

"You go back to being a global mod. Officially, this will all be an accidental error on your part, although everyone knows what actually happened."

Nioca was shocked by how calm w-dueck was. "That's it? Not even a slap on the wrist?"

"Yep. As much as I want to beat the shit out of you, I won't. You saved many lives and the Refuge. I suppose after all this you're back even." w-dueck stood, and Nioca hurriedly joined him, rubbing a bump on his head as he did. w-dueck stretched and headed towards the door, but stopped. "Oh, one more thing?"

"Yes?"

w-dueck spun and punched Nioca in the face, knocking him to the ground. The staff's orb flared, and Nioca was pressed down by an invisible force. "If you ever betray me again, I will personally destroy everything you love while you watch." The pressure lifted, and w-dueck left.

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w-dueck had returned to his quarters and showered, ignoring the various feminine belongings that Syla had left, although he did take full advantage of her loofah. It managed to reach places his just wouldn't. Presently, he was restoring his RMM to its peak performance as he headed down the stairs. No wonder she was having trouble...this thing is half-broken! *What the hell is it doing on Dvorak?*

He entered the sixteenth floor, surprised to see Jewels pulled up at an array of screens. "What'cha up to?" he asked, sitting down at another array.

"Keeping the Refuge from exploding. The Nethergate forum has been powerless since before the move, it looks like." she stated, not even looking up.

"Oh...who noticed?"

"Some newb thought it was Geneforge. Tripped and broke his leg. Woulda died if the door'd closed behind him. It was pitch black in there, apparently."

"Oh...it online now?"

"I sent a bot to fix it. According to the diagnostics, it's just an electrical error. Until then, it's running off BoA."

"Blades has a class B, so it should be more than sufficient to light and heat dust."

"I know that. Also, there's a notice to do a geologic scan... want me to do it?"

w-dueck looked at her wondering just how she knew. Jewels had never done any of the technical stuff before. "Sure. Also, put in a PO for some thermal couplings, model 614-RH," he tested her.

"Okay," Her hands flew confidently to push all the right buttons while she barely glanced at the screens. One started beeping, and she cleared her throat. "There's a database error in Sub-level two."

w-dueck stood. "I'll handle it. Keep in touch, okay?" he grabbed an earpiece off a nearby shelf, attached it to his ear and RMM, and headed out smiling to himself. He didn't know when Jewels had the time to become so tech savy, but he liked it.

Soon, he arrived in the archives below the Tower. Unlike the last time he was here, the place seemed disorderly. Archived posts were strewn all over, and several shelves were moved. "Jewels, has anyone been down here recently?"

Her voice buzzed in his ear, "Uh, according to this the last time someone entered was you, when you gave Nioca that backup..." she trailed off.

"Well, this place is a mess...it's like somebody's been living in here! Could you have a Bot come clean things up?"

"Sure. Wait...oh, eternal fire. There's someone in there."

"What? Who?"

"An assassin. Nioca threw him in there until you could talk to him... this was when you were getting Jumara."

"Oh... Well, I don't see anyone. He probably found his way out of here." w-dueck sighed, and carried on. He soon found the problem; a piece of conduit had been taken off the wall and lay on the ground. The exposed wires had pulled apart. He gathered his magic and repaired the wiring. He kept his shielding active as he returned to the door, slightly spooked at the idea of someone in there with him. "I'm closing the door," he said, looking inside one last time, "Wanna join me?" silence answered him, so he locked it and headed back up. He thought he heard laughing, but it must've been a murmur in the pipes or something.

"What was that?" Jewels asked.

"Oh, I was just talking to Basement Guy." w-dueck replied before changing subjects. "I think we ought to order some roofing tile. The Avernum Board was looking pretty shabby.

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w-dueck closed the door leading into the fifteenth floor control panel with a quiet click, then checked his RMM for signs of Jewels-- good. Over at the Avernum Board checking on the room and far away from the tower. He plopped down in front of the various screens, and typed in a quick command. A holographic diagram of the Admin Tower's primary reactor appeared in midair. He typed another command, and the diagram flared red. *REACTOR ERROR* messages popped up on all the screens, and his RMM buzzed as Jewels called him. "Will, there's something wrong with the reactor! My RMM says it's unstable and leaking!"

"Its okay. I'm running simulations," he lied, "Suppress any CRAS alerts, would you?"

"Um, okay... Need any help?"

"No, I'm good... Actually, could you take a few Bots down tunnel 53? There's a short in the lighting system? Thanks." w-dueck hung up, and stepped outside the control center.

A soft bluish light radiated from an open hatch in the circular tube of the reactor. w-dueck created a strong shield and stepped through the hatch, landing waist-deep in steaming water. He slogged along down the tube for several minutes before reaching an energy-filled node. He set his staff in the crook of his arm and pulled out the three crystals, and several pieces of Corellian currency. He tossed them above the node, and they paused in midair. He grabbed his staff, and watched as the crystal flared to life, absorbing the massive amounts of energy around it. When he felt they were full, he began working. Energy flowed every which way, and time passed. Sweat poured off w-dueck-- he had never put as much care and concentration into something before.

Finally, he was done and held out his hand. Energy faded, and a ring fell into w-dueck's palm with a light pat. He turned and slogged back to the hatch and into the control center. Typing a quick command, he watched as the screens faded back to normal.

He looked down at the ring, admiring his craftsmanship. Three Deseritian crystals, set into an etched gold band. Incredibly thin--almost microscopic--copper lines ran throughout, connecting the crystals. On the inside, a silver inlay read *Ti mala'quo en ferran ji'miermen*. He smiled at the phrase, and translated quietly, "My devotion will last for eternity."

The door opened, and he hurriedly pocketed the ring. Nioca entered and cleared his throat. "My RMM said there was a reactor leak, but no CRAS went out. Thought I'd check it out."

"Yeah, I was just testing out a new reactor bleed-off system, in case too much energy gets in the system. It seems to be working fine," w-dueck lied.

"Oh... okay. So you're aware there's a lot of radiation in the hallway?"

"Yeah. That was from installing a few last-minute things... I'd avoid going underground for a couple hours unless you have good shielding. It blew off a lot of magic into the tunnels."

"I'll remember that," Nioca said, and backed out of the room, closing the door behind him. w-dueck pulled out the ring again and returned to studying the copper lines closely.

A Long Time Coming

By Jewels - Mar 18 2010

After all the excitement with regaining control of the Refuge, things had begun to slow. The sun had set a few hours ago and most of the Ermarians had retired to their makeshift homes while just a few members roamed the grounds. It was slow in the chat lounge. Only Will and Ackrovan were standing inside talking quietly when Jewels walked in.

"Jewely!" Ackrovan exclaimed, happy to see somebody that he recognized.

Will stood and made a deep bow in front of Jewels. "Hello, My lady..." he intoned.

"Acky!" Jewels walked over to give him a hug then curtsied to w-dueck. "My lord... are we having fun tonight?"

Will stood next to her staring deeply into her eyes. In a smooth voice he murmured, "The moon gazes with envy at you, the magnificent sun!"

Jewels blushed putting her hand up to wave him off. "Aw... shameless flatterer you."

Undaunted, Will continued. "Your eyes are the stars of the night..."

Ackrovan rolled his eyes. "Shesh, couples..."

Jewels playfully protested to Acky. "I haven't even said yes yet."

w-dueck paid them no heed though he did start to seem nervous. "Your face? The beautiful but of a rose. Uh... or however you say that."

"Bud?" Jewels offered.

"Yes," Will stepped back sullen. "Now the moment's ruined..."

Jewels felt disappointed, and a bit surprised that she was enjoying herself with his seranade. She attempted to bolster him on. "Oh, no... You can get it back, I'm sure."

He smiled at her invitation to continue. "Ah, her rhetoric puts me to shame," he started enthusiastically. "Alas, I must submit to your will. Take me! I demand it."

"All right," Jewels joked. "I'll take you... but I'm not telling you where to."

At this point Will moved to one knee gesturing theatrically with his arms. "I am dirt when compared to your glory. I am the peasant, whilst you are the queen. A king would give a thousand golds to see you!" Meanwhile, Ackrovan pulled up a chair and sat down looking mockingly interested.

Jewels put her hands on her hips indignantly. "Only a thousand? I'm not some cheap hooker!" But she smiled with her words unable to pretend she was mad.

"Only the blind man lies ignorant to your beauty." Ackrovan spit out his coffee, laughing hysterically, but it didn't deter Will one bit. "Only the deaf boy can escape your glorious tongue!"

Jewels interjected, "Well, actually... I can use my tongue in other ways." You could almost see the mischievous flaming horns grow from her head. "No one shall escape!"

Will stood back up, one hand over his heart and the other outstretched towards Jewels. "Whilst I, can only stand here and enjoy it all. Alas, those may mock my honesty," he shot a nasty glance at the still laughing Ackrovan, "they laugh at wounds that have never felt pain." After cleaning off his spilled coffee, grabbing a coke, and moving to Iffy's couch, Ackrovan made a show of settling in and getting comfortable.

"Is there any way I can get a video of you serenading me with all this?" Jewels asked.

w-dueck broke from his poetic verse for a moment. "Sure thing. Just make a copy from the security cameras will you? Uh... I mean..."

Jewels looked at him quizzically. "Doesn't it automatically make a copy that gets stored in your suite?"

w-dueck looked down in shame. "Her voice speaks only truth, yet I am selfish to ask the Queen to do labor... What fool am I, mooning over a love that will not have me? I must away." Will started walking out of the lounge quickly.

"No, don't go!" Jewels called after him playfully. "Please stay and moon all the more."

He stepped out the door only to step right back in, arms wide. "Twas only a moment. I have returned, love!"

Jewels' hands flew to cover her heart as she tilted her head to one side. "Now, where were you? Oh, yes. You were about to *moon* me." She gave him a wink.

Will walked back to her slowly. "'Twas nothing of your concern, lady. Merely the hopeless labors to meet you in victorious equality. I have failed, whilst thou hast risen above the angels of darkness, blinding them with thy serenades of truth, thy beautiful golden notes, from thy platinum throat. The Gods themselves must worship thee, for none could be greater!"

Jewels sprightly remarked, "You could *sooo* land yourself a hottie with all this sweet talking. You need to try it on someone who is a little less complicated... and someone who isn't almost 3000 years younger than you. A cradle robber are you!"

Will frowned and shook his head. "Alas, it could not happen, for I am merely a virtual remnant of mine self. My soul died when it came upon your visage, for mine soul knew it could never have you! I have become a hollow shell, seeking what I cannot have."

She tried to encourage him lightly. "You could pull it off. Just find a nice girl's email address and away you go."

w-dueck stared at her with soulful eyes. "A dog, looking through the butcher's window... I couldn't, nothing could match what I have seen. Nothing could come close!"

"Really," she protested, "keep this kind of stuff handy. I'm having trouble stopping myself from taking you seriously..."

He gestured lively, walking over to the ever smirking Ackrovan. "She speaks! She speaks! There, now I have met all desires of life, none reasons remain." Ackrovan deigned to just take a sip of coke in response. "There is no point, wasting air she could breathe," Will continued, "food she could eat, water she could drink... I am a parasite upon her radiance."

Jewels took a few steps back towards Will as he now seemed to be serenading Acky. "Will, you better not be committing suicide."

He ignored her. "But no longer shall I waste away, sapping what I cannot handle."

She attempted to interrupt again, drawing closer, "Cuz, I'd never forgive myself if you did."

He turned showily with his eyes closed and arms up in the air before flinging one arm across his upturned face. "Goodbye, cruel world, goodbye!" He paused dramatically while lowering his arms and his gaze back to Jewels. "I wish I could have, but I cannot. She demands I stay with her, to warm her with love she already has." He took small slow steps towards her closing the gap as he spoke. "She asks for my presence for one more terribly wonderful day, breathing in her sweet scent, until..." He stopped at a loss for the right word and lamented. "Alas, my rhetoric cannot match hers, she is straight to the point, practical, but still, still, agile with her sweet..." He stopped again frustrated. "Adjectives cannot describe it. I have failed...again." Will hung his head dejectedly only a foot from her.

Jewels reached out to lift his head back up and did what she did best, smothering Will with love.

When Will was able speak again, it was only in a whisper. "Ah, so sweet, but crushing! Could but I take the pressure..."

Jewels whispered back as she rested her head on his shoulder. "I expect more poetry at our wedding. I'll be sad if there's not."

w-dueck's eyes lit up. "Is that a yes?" he asked hopefully. Jewels only smiled and nodded. "So, have you picked a date yet? I mean..." Will attempted to save the moment by rewording it poetically but couldn't think straight enough. "Bah! I fail! Epically!"

Jewels just hugged him tighter. "Is tomorrow too soon?" she asked him, watching as his face brightened even more, in surprise.

"Seriously?"

"Seriously," Jewels laughed. "I need to make my claim before any other girl hears your prose and steals you away."

Will laughed with her. "Impossible, my lady. Absolutely impossible."

Vergil teleported into the Refuge proper, only a little worse for wear. He stretched his arms, cracked his neck, and rested a hand on Yamato. *What a mess...* He needed to find Jewels. He found her walking out of the Chat Lounge on w-dueck's arm. Both beaming and laughing as if they didn't have a care in the world... and at a time like this? Inconceivable! Vergil stalked over to them, none-too-happy. He called out gruffly, "Jewels, I need to talk to you."

He didn't like the way she smiled at him or the way her eyes lit up when she ran over with arms open for a hug. "Oh Vergil, I want to talk to you, too." She turned back to w-dueck and waved him on. "You've had a long day and tomorrow will be longer. You go on, get some sleep."

Vergil shuddered at the smile w-dueck gave his sister. "I'll try, but you know I won't be able to." He did some silly little bow then sauntered off towards the Administration Tower.

Maybe that last death of his had killed off a few too many brain cells... and yet it looked like they had still put him back in charge of the place. "Jewels," Vergil started again but she interrupted him with another squeeze. He might have been able to enjoy it if he wasn't so upset. "I'm so glad you're here. Did you see that? He didn't even bat an eye that you had been unbanned without his permission. Or maybe he just forgot what he banned you for." Vergil nodded impatiently but Jewels wouldn't stop talking. Typical... "It's so endearing, don't you think?" Vergil stopped nodding but she didn't seem to notice. "I'm gonna marry that guy," Luckily her head turned to watch w-dueck walking away because Vergil couldn't hold back a gag at the thought. Jewels finished with delight, "Tomorrow!"

"WHAT?!" Vergil roared unable to contain himself anymore. His previous concerns slipped from his mind as this concept assaulted him. "No way! Absolutely not! I forbid it!" Jewels tried to interrupt him but it was his turn to block her out. "You're only a century old! You're not old enough to get married."

"Humans get married way younger," she protested.

"Yeah, and *half* of them end up DIVORCED! If that... that..." A slew of derogatory and degrading nouns and adjectives flew through his thoughts. All fit what he thought of w-dueck at this moment but the pained look on Jewels' face made him tone it down. "*bastard* even THINKS about you like that, I *swear* I'll... I'll..."

Jewels took advantage of his short pause to interject quickly, "Walk me down the aisle!"

For the second time Vergil's previous concerns slipped from his mind. His tone of voice went from fury to unbelief. "What?" That smile... it was so infuriating how impossible it was to be mad at her when she put on that smile.

"Vergil, I want you to walk me down the aisle... please?" She continued to talk about her reasons why but his own thoughts dominated his mind. After everything... with the blue bloods, with w-dueck, with Cinead... she still wanted to honor him like this? Instead of disowning him like their father, she just kept lavishing him with grace he didn't feel he deserved. "...besides, you knew

this was coming." Vergil tried to focus on Jewels' words again. It was obvious she was oblivious to what he was thinking. "It's not like this is some big surprise, or anything. Will proposed, what feels like, over a year ago, and when I thought I lost him... You can't imagine the pain. Please, Vergil, share this day with us. Walk me down the aisle and give me away to him."

She finally stopped to wait for his reply. What else could he do? She'd still get married if he said no. "Sure you don't just wanna shack up with him for a while, first? Test the waters?"

Jewels let out an indignant cry and punched him in the arm... hard. Vergil had to bite his lip to keep from yelping. "I thought that's what you *didn't* want," she protested.

"Well, if you're going to anyway..." he whined, "...'Till death do us part' is a really, really, *really* long time for us. I mean... are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure." Her voice was confident and he believed it, or at least he believed that she believed it.

"Okay," he finally relented. Jewels immediately squeezed him again and against his better judgment Vergil let himself just be happy for his sister, hugging her back. When she pulled away, his face went serious again. "But absolutely NO pictures or videos! You tell that SoB if I ever see *anything* like that, I will pummel him until there is nothing left! You understand me?"

Jewels pouted playfully, "Aww... That's no fun."

"I mean it, Jewels. I will go crazy! That's just a fact of life."

"Fine," she relented then started to walk away. "I'll see you tomorrow, then. Round noon? Don't go disappearing or anything."

"Wouldn't dream of it," he called after her.

"Wait, wasn't there something you wanted to tell me?"

The question brought the weight of reality smacking back into him but he couldn't bring it up now. "It can wait," he hollered as he turned towards his own room. Sure it could wait... but how long before it blew up in their faces he couldn't say. Soon, probably. Very, very soon.

Preparations went off without a hitch. Most people were just happy for something normal to be going on; those who weren't just stayed out of the way. Jewels had decided that the wedding would take place in the forest next to Nana so she could participate. This encouraged more of her dryad kin to participate and they had bustled about hanging garlands of leaves and flowers and making honey cakes for the reception. Though actual weddings were rare, the dryad tradition was for the bride to be inside her tree at the beginning of the ceremony. She would emerge in whatever clothing her tree decided upon but left a foot remaining in her tree. Sometimes it would be a beautiful gown but more often they came out *au naturel*. Thus weddings were usually well attended.

Jewels knew she wouldn't be able to stick to all of the traditions of all her people so she had picked a happy medium. Nana had still made her a gown. It shimmered like satin in the rays of the noon day sun that filtered through the canopy. There wasn't enough room for chairs so people

stood on either side of the aisle instead and followed her and Vergil to the front after they had passed.

Will stood at the front, beaming as his bride came closer. He graciously took Jewels' hand when Vergil offered it and was surprised at how cold his own hands seemed in comparison to hers. There were no bridesmaids, no groomsmen, and no priest to officiate. Just friends and acquaintances come to witness as the two made their vows to each other. Each spoke, from their heart, the promises of a lifetime, and to spite Vergil's comments the night before, when both were done they ended together. "Forever, always, on past the end."

Jewels pulled out a simple golden band she had made with bladescraft that morning. Nothing fancy, she hadn't wanted to tax herself, but the perfect symbol for her unending love. It paled in comparison to the ring that Will slipped onto her finger. It featured three beautiful gems that seemed to sparkle of their own accord. Once on, it flashed brightly, sending out a slight shockwave. Tiny copper tendrils fanned out, wrapping themselves around her finger more in delicate, vine-like curls. Jewels gasped as wave of energy ripped through her body. When the initial wave dissipated, she could still feel the tingle of power tickling the nerves of her hand. She stared at Will with his cocky smile. He'll have some explaining to do later. Then there was a tender kiss followed by much clapping and congratulations and merriment. The dryads pulled out their woodwinds and dancing ensued. One lone person walked back towards the Refuge rather than join in the celebration.

'I am glad you came. Sure you won't stay??

'You're lucky there was no priest asking if there was any reason you two shouldn't be wed. I would have had a few things to say.?

'Am I supposed to live the rest of my life in celibacy just for your sake??

'Yes. It's the least you can do.'

'Come on, Syla's staying. Come and dance with her.?

'No thanks. Not in the mood. I need to go get myself drunk for tonight. I don't know if I'll be able to stand it otherwise.

Jewels frowned but resigned to let Nioca be. If he wanted to have a pity party, that was up to him. There were plenty of well-wishers to keep her mind occupied otherwise. The afternoon turned to evening before people started dispersing. After many thanks, good-bye's, and winks, Will and Jewels headed up to the 29th floor together.

Full Moon

By Jewels - Mar 18 2010

Nioca had left the reception knowing full well what he would have to endure, not only tonight, but most likely many nights to come... for the *rest of his life!* If he had to feel everything she felt for w-dueck... he shuddered anew at the thought. He didn't know how he would make it through any of them and it seemed Jewels didn't care.

Oddly, it stung. He seemed to have vivid memories of Jewels caring. Her kneeling beside him when he had fallen out of the window, holding him when he had almost gone crazy, granting him mercy when he killed her kin in the fire plane, stopping Kaylas from finishing him off and getting him to Nalyd when he was poisoned, refusing to fight back after she was cured from Nalyd's "antidote", and practicing some risky magic to keep herself from hurting him. Then after the mind link... her constant forgiveness and genuine feelings of love towards him, no matter what he threw at her, it rarely relented. And finally jumping between him and the Stranger in their afterlife and being the reason he wasn't dead now. Somehow these all stood out to him as significant events and mirrored a caring Jewels. So it was odd that she brushed him off now.

It was also odd that though he knew there were just as many examples to the contrary, he could only recall the vaguest details of them. She had tried to kill him once, hadn't she? She was a danger to the whole refuge, right? He held her responsible for the death of his family. Isn't that what he had once believed? And she had helped w-dueck wrench control of the refuge back despite its precarious nature. *That* he knew for sure. He would have suspected Jewels of messing with his mind except she seemed oblivious to the same things he remembered so vaguely.

He just couldn't make sense of it, but then he didn't really want to make sense of it right now. Right now, he just wanted to forget everything and block her out. An alcohol induced coma should do the trick.

Nioca woke up in a sweat. His heart was pounding, his breath was heavy, and his thoughts were racing. *No, no, no!* This was just what he *didn't* want to experience. Why did he have to wake up now? The darkness in his room made the visions in his head all the more real. Like he was there, in the room, looking out at w-dueck with Jewels' eyes, and he did not like the look w-dueck gave him... gave *her* back one bit.

They were in Jewels' suite, her bedroom no less. Thankfully they were still clothed but in short order she sat on the bed while Will's head had disappeared under her skirt. He thrilled... NO! He felt *her* thrill at w-dueck's teeth tugging the garter belt off her leg. Nioca sat up in the darkness feeling queasy and too disoriented to realize where he actually was. He rolled over and fell out of his bed landing hard on the cold, stone floor.

A moment's pause from Jewels' end. "What's wrong?" Will asked her.

"Nioca's awake," she replied simply. "He can feel what I feel, in a way."

"Oh really?" Once again Nioca did not like the look w-dueck gave Jewels one bit. "Can he feel this?" He bent down and gave her a passionate kiss on the lips. Nioca shuddered.

"Sort of," Jewels responded, a little embarrassed herself, that Nioca seemed unable to occupy his mind elsewhere at the moment.

"Can he feel this?" w-dueck's lips started tracing a line of kisses down her neck. Nioca cringed and got to his knees attempting to crawl away but found no relief.

"He doesn't like it," Jewels giggled as it tickled her. It was the understatement of the year as far as Nioca was concerned.

"Oh, sure he does. He just doesn't want to *admit* that he likes it. He's just afraid to give himself over to it." That devilish smile crossed his face again and Nioca braced himself. "I wonder... can he feel this?" His fingers started walking their way up his... Gah!, HER leg.

"Will," Jewels whined, torn between the two. "Maybe we should wait. Let him fall back asleep again or something." But w-dueck's fingers didn't stop climbing. Nioca could feel the trepidation, the anticipation, the longing... and he squeezed his head in a vain attempt to squeeze the feelings out. If only he could concentrate... think about something else... *anything else!* In pity Jewels still argued for him. "Really, Will, this is so mean...," but Will cut her words off with another kiss as he found his mark and her body reacted in arousal, sending out a wave of chemicals to wake up every cell in her body. Now ten times more aware of every touch.

To Nioca's dismay and disgust, his body reacted, too. First, by flooding with a mixture of adrenaline, phenylethylamine, and testosterone; then by retching and heaving while all the alcohol he had previously drank passed by his taste buds a second time. This was unbearable. He had to get away... *he had to!* Jewels' protests had been drowned out by her own desire. He could tell she had given up trying to convince Will to wait, and she had managed to put Nioca's dilemma to the back of her thoughts.

There had to be a way to get them to stop. Just long enough for Nioca to regain his bearings and knock himself out again. There just *had to*... He forced himself to think, what could he do from here?

...and then he sensed it.

There was a fire smoldering in the back of Jewels' mind with him. It had been covered up... hidden... but her recent 'activity' was stirring it up. Maybe with just a little coaxing, he could wake it... make it burn, bright and hot and more intense than her current desire. W-dueck would probably get hurt, but Nioca cared little of that right now. He had warned him she was dangerous, after all. Nioca just needed to get away. Desperately he needed to stop... needed *them* to stop... Will and... *w-dueck* and Jewels to stop!

He concentrated on the fire. The hot, burning, desperately hungry fire...

Jewels was still a little self-conscious that Nioca was 'watching' them. Only it was worse than just being watched... she was being 'felt', too. It was as much of a violation of privacy for her as it was for Nioca. A part of her lamented that she would likely never be able to have an intimate experience that Nioca would not share, if not during, then after the fact. She could keep no secret

from him for long. In a passing thought, she realized she'd never be able to 'fake it'. Nioca would be sure to inform Will just to spite her. And yet, her current hormone level spoke louder than their shared anguish. It filled her senses with the here and the now and buried her worries to be dealt with later. There was just Will and her in this room and, for the moment, nothing else mattered.

W-dueck was enjoying himself. Perhaps too much... The thought of 'pleasuring' Nioca was almost as enticing as pleasuring Jewels. After his betrayal, being able to torture Nioca with just a touch bolstered him on. Of course, having Jewels in his arms, her lips on his, her hands pulling him in, her squeals of pleasure in his ear... that was all pretty good by itself. Messing with Nioca was just a bonus.

Once Jewels had stopped protesting for Nioca's sake, though, the fact that he even existed just seemed to melt away. Jewels felt more real while the world around them faded. He started to unbutton his tux, fumbling in his rush. She swatted his hands out of the way impatiently and popped them open with ease. Immediately, her hands were on his body, they were so hot he yelped, but it didn't faze Jewels who was soon reaching around to cling to his back. With surprising strength, she pulled him down to her. Her lips left a trail of burning kisses up his torso and neck until she stopped on his ear.

"I need you," she whispered, sending another thrill through his body. He pulled back to look at her face and stared in wonder at the flickering flames that danced in her eyes. "I need..." she started to repeat herself but hesitated in confusion. "I... I need..." A look of realization crossed her face as she whispered in horror, "Oh no... No!"

She screamed, back arching beneath him as her entire body erupted in flame, enveloping him, and reaching all the way to the ceiling. W-dueck cried out in pain as his flesh melted under her touch. The sudden, excruciating heat felt like it would consume him in seconds.

Somewhere deep within him, though, a survival instinct kicked in, and his body temperature dropped drastically. From the inside out, his whole body froze into a moving block of ice. Billows of smoke and steam immediately started pouring out from between them as their bodies sizzled together.

Her fire died down and dissipated though the pillow beneath her head still smoldered. The look of shock on her face was joined by relief as she asked, "Will, are you okay? I'm so sorry, I don't know what happened."

Out of danger, Will's own body returned to relative normalcy. He checked himself over as he replied. "Yeah, don't worry about it. I think I'm okay. Everything seems to be intact... except..."

Jewels tried to sit up in, worry in her voice anyway, "What? What's wrong? Do you need healing? Does anything hur-"

He cut her off with a kiss on the lips then trailed a hand down her side. "The problem is... you seem to have burned off all our clothing." W-dueck paused and smiled as he watched that sink in. "A pity, too, because that was a nice tux," he teased. Almost like she needed confirmation, the

hands on his back slipped down towards his torso and beyond. He pressed against her in response. "There's nothing in the way anymore," he smiled as he kissed her again.

Just then, an alarm sounded, but the closest monitor was in Jewels' study. W-dueck had neither the desire, nor the will-power to leave his position to see what was wrong. "Nioca," he called out, "be a dear and see what that is would you? We're a little bit busy at the moment." Jewels opened her mouth in indignation at being used as a com-link. *Perfect position for another kiss*, he thought.

The buzzing of the RMM in his pocket at least distracted his mind from the failure of his little ploy. W-dueck could turn into ice? Was there no end to the surprises? At first he was relieved since the intensity of Jewels' fire was far greater than he had expected, but when they didn't skip more than two beats over it, Nioca became really frustrated. He hoped beyond hope that this alarm would require their attention.

He pulled it out and read the words as they scrolled across the display. *"WARNING!! WARNING!! Fire Safety Override failure. ERROR!! Emergency Transportation for Refuge Convocation initiated. In 5... 4... 3..."*

Nioca watched in horror. "Oh crap."

Nioca's thoughts, coupled with the sudden, cold rigidity underneath her and the myriad of astonished cries rising up around her, made Jewels stop mid-kiss to see what was going on.

Ligrev stared back at her from behind the lounge bar. "Oh dear..." she exclaimed.

Jewels turned her head as gasps and snickers reached her from the other direction. She froze in horror. It seemed like every single Refuge member was standing there staring at them. Jewels was mortified as even Nioca's thoughts turned to morbid glee. Will tried to sit up, but her nails dug into his shoulders like vice grips. "Don't you dare move!" she growled at him.

"Okay, okay," he winced, "let up a bit." But Jewels wasn't about let up as the snickers turned into outright peals of laughter at their expense. Will tried to turn towards Ligrev with only his head. "Ligrev, do you have any spare clothes in the back?"

"I... I think s-so," she stuttered.

"Get them please," he ordered having to talk a little bit louder over the increasing laughter and jeers. She was back in less than a minute with one lone pink frilly skirt and tossed it at Will, unwilling to get very close. It gently floated down so it covered his backside.

Jewels closed her eyes and tried to imagine it all away. What just happened? Her question had been rhetorical, but she found Nioca's mind answering automatically. It showed his desperation to get away, his part in making her flame up, and his *partial* installation of the so called 'Emergency Transportation for Refuge Convocation' procedure yesterday. It was supposed to bring all the Refuge members to the chat lounge at a time of crisis, but he hadn't worked out all the bugs yet. ... This was *his* fault. Jewels' eyes opened into fiery slits as she roared, "Nioca!!"

At the same time another voice rose above the din as a figure in the back pushed his way forward. "What the ice does everyone find so funny? I was having a perfectly pleasant dream when that damn alarm went off and teleported me here." By the end of his sentence, Vergil had pushed forward enough to look Jewels in the eye as she lay on the bar counter under Will. His eyes quickly mirrored hers with slits of blue flickering flame. "Oh, you're dead meat, Dubya! I'm gonna *kill you!*"

Vergil tried to get to the front faster but was held back because of so many people already crowding in for a better view. Jewels was only marginally terrified of what her brother was about to do, but in her mind's eye she felt the relief of Nioca as he made it to the door of the lounge and stumbled out of it, still too drunk to walk straight. Nioca laughed to himself and mumbled something about serving them right. Her anger flared, and Will started whimpering, "Hot, hot... Jewels, too hot!"

She didn't care anymore. Jewels pushed Will off of her and flamed up causing everyone within a ten foot radius to step back from the heat. She floated above the counter, naked in her flame and fury. "Jewels! Cover yourself!" Vergil admonished but she was already on her way flying out the door towards Nioca.

He sensed her coming and tried to pick up his pace but only managed to stumble and fall to his knees. She picked him up by the robe as she flew by and went shooting into the forest with him... away from witnesses. She dropped him in the same clearing where her wedding celebrations had been held and watched as he hurriedly padded out the flames on his robe. Jewels hovered back and forth making sure to stay far enough away from the trees not to singe them.

She was so angry, so very angry, but try as she might, she could not be mad at Nioca. Logic dictated that this was *his* doing, *his* plan, *his fault!* Yet logic was constantly being overridden in her mind, now, by a magic that wouldn't allow her to hate him. There was no logic, only anger and pain with nothing to point them at. Jewels looked down at Nioca, who had shakily gotten to his feet and was currently trying to focus enough to cast a few shielding spells on himself. "You won't need those," she stated in disappointment. "As much as I think I would rather that you did, you won't need those."

Jewels was despondent. "What am I supposed to do, Nioca? Honestly, what in the multi-verse am I supposed to do? You're in my head. I can't change that. I'm sorry, so what am I supposed to do?" Her frustration doubled when it seemed he had no answer for her either, but it was short lived as anger and frustration gave way to exhaustion. Jewels flamed down all the way, her bare feet crunching on the dry leaves underneath her. Nioca looked away but she didn't care one way or the other. He already knew her more intimately than anyone ever would. What did clothes matter?

She walked over to him. To his credit, he stayed where he was despite how uncomfortable he felt. "What are we supposed to do?" she asked again quietly.

"I honestly don't know," he responded.

His eyes met hers for the first time since the wedding and Jewels saw something there. Something she hadn't noticed before. The irises, they were... *green*. Hadn't they been blue before? She stared in wonder as she started to notice something else.

"We should probably get going," Nioca suggested, even more uncomfortable from her scrutiny.

"I can't," Jewels whispered. After Nioca's mental question mark she added. "I need something."

"Clothes?" Nioca ventured, though now he started to notice something too. He felt her need and her fear of the need as it grew. The leaves under her feet started to smoke as she backed away from him. Each step she took, the pull of the need doubled.

"I... I can't control it," she whimpered as one final step turned her into a raging fireball. Nioca was knocked backward from the heat of it but his mind was also sent reeling from the desperation Jewels felt to feed the fire. But with what? Neither Jewels nor Nioca had any idea and the flames only grew higher.

'Knock me out,' she begged.

'What? Are you crazy?'

'Hurry! Before I start the forest on fire. KNOCK ME OUT!' Nioca started to protest again but was drown out by her mental scream, 'Just DO it!'

Nioca shrugged but didn't see another way to flame her down either. She even mentally chanted the words with him as he worked up his smite spell. When Nioca let it go, he was astonished at the power behind it and realized that Jewels had been channeling her own power through him to help the attack against herself.

The one hit was all it took to send her flying into the tree behind her. A sickening crack thundered out from where her head hit the trunk and she fell to the ground limp and flame-less.

Nioca ran over wondering if it was prudent to prepare a healing spell when Jewels still wouldn't be able to control the fire. At the very least, he could stop any bleeding. Before he reached her, though, two strapping dryads stepped out of their trees to block his path.

"Stay away from her!" one yelled.

"You can go no closer," the other dictated forcefully. A third dryad stepped out from the tree Jewels had been knocked into and gently lifted her up into his arms.

"I'm trying to help her," Nioca protested as he recognized Jasmine running up. "She needs healing." He noticed a brief scowl cross her face when she looked at him but it soon disappeared as she inspected Jewels.

"Haven't you done enough damage?!" the first growled.

"Kalven, that's enough," Jasmine admonished harshly. The look they exchanged made Nioca wonder what he was missing. She gingerly touched Jewels' forehead but pulled away as if burned. "It's the fire fever," she told the others. "Worse than normal... so much worse."

"Wait," Nioca interrupted, "you know what's wrong with her?"

Jasmine shot him a calculating look, like she was deciding just how much he needed to know. Finally she spoke, "Yes, the fire fever. It is a malady among our people. Uncommon, for sure, but not unheard of."

"And you know what caused it?" Nioca pressed.

All three male dryads looked severely at Jasmine, obviously telling her to lie with their eyes, but she noticed that Nioca had noticed, so she answered truthfully if still vaguely, "There can be many reasons for the fire fever, though ultimately, there is only one underlying cause."

He could see she would not to go into specifics, so he moved on to the most important question. "Is there a cure?"

The dryad who was holding Jewels spoke harshly before Jasmine could answer. "There is no cure for her, *human*." His tone was derogatory... of course. Elementals were all the same.

He tried to walk away with Jewels but Jasmine caught his arm. "We shouldn't lie to him, Stenan." He scowled at Jasmine now but didn't walk away. She turned back to Nioca, "What Stenan means to say is that *we* don't have a cure for her..." She paused taking in the glances of the others before continuing, "but *you* might."

"No!" Kalven yelled.

"Absolutely not!" insisted the third. "It goes against all our ways."

"But she is only half dryad, Ryland. She has more ways than us and her fire fever could destroy us all if not kept in check."

"Jewels would not want it," Ryland protested firmly.

"*Nana* wants it," Jasmine stated matter-of-factly. The other three gaffed and huffed at the idea but made no more complaints. She addressed Nioca once more. "You said before you were trying to help Jewels." Nioca nodded. "If you still want to help Jewels, then Nana would like it. In fact she has requested it."

"Nana *requested* me?" Nioca asked suspiciously, "Why?"

Jasmine seemed to hesitate to answer but finally said, "Nana says you have the cure."

Reluctantly, Nioca agreed to help and followed the four dryads over to Jewels' tree. Her limp form slid quickly into Nana's trunk. For some reason, the shiver of the leaves above his head made him think of weeping. "Now what?" he asked.

"Just put your hand on Nana's trunk and think of healing," Jasmine gave him a tight lipped smile that he didn't quite trust.

"That's it?" he asked still suspicious?

"That's it," she assured him.

He didn't really believe her, but touching a tree... what harm could it do? Not knowing what to expect he stepped up to Nana and reached out his hands.

Suddenly, Stenan jumped forward pushing him away. "No! I can't let this happen! It's disgusting!" He visibly shuddered.

Kalven doubled over, "I think I'm going to be sick..."

Ryland hung his head with his face in his hands. He mumbled between his fingers, "I can't believe you're okay with doing this to Jewels!"

"It's an abomination!" Stenan reiterated.

Nioca stood mutely looking from Jasmine to the other three. He seemed not so sure he wanted to 'help' anymore.

Jasmine noted his hesitation and stared at the other three with severity. "Can we please not talk about this in front of him?"

"By all means," Stenan looked on eagerly. "I agree that Nioca should leave."

Jasmine was pained at the lost opportunity but relented. "The cure can wait, Nioca. If you wouldn't mind leaving, I need to discuss some things with my kin."

Nioca nodded. "You know where to find me," he said simply though the look in his eyes told her he may not come back if she asked.

Jasmine's head went to her hands as she sighed. "Tell me when he's gone."

"I can't see him anymore," Kelvan stated.

"Fine, let's finish this then." Jasmine started chiding them. "You know as well as I do that the fire fever will only get worse if we don't do this. Nana wants it this way," she insisted as if saying so would make it any less horrible.

Ryland lifted his head and spoke softly. "Jewels would *never* want this!" The truth in his words stabbed daggers into Jasmine's heart. He continued as if to twist the knives, "Didn't we just celebrate with her this afternoon? Didn't she just marry the one she calls Will?"

Jasmine spun on him savagely, "She bonded with Nioca first!" The words hung in the air eerily before she finished, sounding defeated, "And dryads bond for life. That's just a fact of life."

Kalven was beginning to regain his normal shade of green when he interjected, "She didn't *want* to bond with him in the first place. It was all those... those *stupid, idiotic, ignorant,* human females' fault."

"You think I don't know that?" Jasmine snapped, "It doesn't matter. The trespass has been made... the damage has been done. The fact that she has the fire fever proves it. Nioca is the *only*cure."

"How do *you* know?" Stenan growled angrily. "We haven't even tried! You said it yourself; she is only half-dryad. What about Will? Can't we at least wait to see if he can be her cure?"

Jasmine blinked back tears her hands flying to her mouth. She had never thought of that. Oh, what had she almost done? "But... What about Nana?"

"Nana? What about Jewels? She would never forgive us," Ryland lamented. "It's... It's... such a trespass!" His hands went back to cover his face.

"Okay," Jasmine sniffled quietly, "You're right." A rustle of leaves caught Jasmine's attention. "We have to at least try, Nana." She paused for another rustle of leaves. "As a last resort. Nioca has to be a last resort."

Nioca was frozen to his spot. He wasn't quite sure what to make of it all or whether or not he should have cloaked himself in order to eavesdrop. He couldn't even think about it... it was just too much. One thing he knew for sure; he was *never* going near Nana again!

He watched as Jewels emerged, clothed and looking dazed.

"Lead her back to the refuge before she comes to her senses," Jasmine instructed one of the others.

Somehow Nioca made it back, himself. He collapsed in his room, exhausted, and fell into a restless sleep.

The moon hung high and full above her head. Jewels stared up at the night sky not really thinking about anything when someone started calling her name. She thought she should find out who it was but didn't really know how to. The voice got louder while she pondered it until a hand reached her shoulder and it was as if she had just woken up from a dream. She turned around to see Will standing there, half naked. The other half was wearing a very frilly, very pink, skirt.

She couldn't help but snicker. "It looks good on you," she joked, "You wear it well."

"Thanks," he said in like tone. "I kinda like it. Breathes well. Think I'll keep it. Ligrev said I could." They both laughed some more before Will turned more serious. "Jewels, where have you been? I've been looking all over for you. You went flying out of the lounge like a fiery bat out of hell and left me to fend for myself with Vergil."

Jewels searched her memories over the past few hours but came up with little. "I went... walking," she finally stated, though she was unsure if she really did.

"I see you got some new clothes," Will noted indicating the pale green dress she wore. Oddly she didn't remember putting it on or even intending to get dressed.

"I think I must be too tired to think," Jewels mumbled. "I really am tired." She leaned her head against his bare chest. For once it felt warm under her cool cheek. "Carry me?" she pleaded.

He smiled and scooped her up in his arms ready to carry her over the threshold a second time, but she was sound asleep before he got there. New refuge, new members, new life, new wife... this was turning out to be a very good idea.

What?!

By Zoe - Mar 25 2010

No one noticed when what appeared to be a young woman step onto the Refuge. She appeared to be holding a bundle, but no one paid enough attention to look at what it was. She appeared to be in her early 20s by human age, and was wearing very dark clothing. No one even noticed as she registered merely as qUe.

She quietly observed the current situation. What appeared to be a newly wedded couple went into a large Tower. Cute. They also appeared to be in authority. Noted for later. She then spotted Iffy. He turned his head and gave a very surprised look at her. qUe smiled, and disappeared behind a building.

-*- Nix was multitasking between resting himself and observing a screen. The screen showed images of the Refuge. The screen then fizzled and went black. "Dammit. I guess I can't watch the Refuge anymore. No matter. Soon I'll be rested up. And I can continue on my mission. I must--" Nix stopped talking when whatshername walked in. Nix sighed, and continued resting and revitalizing.

-*- Iffy simply looked astonished as the woman walked away out of sight. He started to move foreword, but Saph stopped him.

No, Iffy. I don't think it's best to approach her right now.

I'm so confused. I know I've seen her somewhere! And I sense...

Iffy's thoughts trailed off when Saph interrupted him.

It's qUe. One of your-our-erm...your bloodline.

Then we should probably follow her.

And what? Fall into a trap again?

We may not have a choice, Saph. We must take risks if we want to be able to defeat whoever that guy is. He's been gone for far too long now.

Saph reluctantly agreed, and they ran after qUe.

qUe giggled, opened up a portal, and ran inside. Iffy and Saph followed her into it. Right after they disappeared, another portal opened up...

-*- Esur and Ruse stepped dizzily out of the portal onto the island of Calamity Refuge.

Esur shouted, "Where are you Iffy!? I know you're here! Now come out and play. I'm ready for you!"

A few confused newbies simply stared at Esur and Ruse. Ruse glared at them with her cold, pale eyes, and they ran off. Esur then proceeded to walk and shout various things such as "Where the

**** are you, Iffy?" and "Stop hiding so I can kick your ***!" Esur stops when a lady walks up to them.

She then calmly says, "Hello, I'm Jewels. I'm an administrator here. Is there something I can help you with?" Esur says, "Yes. I'm looking for this guy named Iffy. Travels with a small looking girl named Saph. You know them? They're dangerous, and I need to destroy them."

The Admin gets a surprised look on her face. "Oh... Well..." She seems to adjust something on a small device. "Let's see if we can find them. Would you mind explaining how they are dangerous?"

Esur gets suspicious of the device. "Well, you see, they hold great power within themselves. And they almost killed us, you see. I was going to, er, 'contain' them so they don't, you know, actually kill anyone. Because I'm sure they've killed already." She simply replies, "This news is... disturbing, to say the least. Iffy and Saph have not shown any violent tenancies since they've been here. And no members have gone missing that I know of, but perhaps we can sort this out. If you'd follow me."

She leads them over to the Admin tower. Esur and Ruse talk mentally amongst each other. They become even more suspicious, and decide not to trust this strange woman. Esur grabs Jewels from behind and holds her in a position with his knife, ready to slit her throat at any time.

"Now you tell me where he is right now, or I am simply going to kill you and claim your soul!"

"JEWELS!"

Someone had shouted the Admin's name. He was running over, carrying an odd looking sword. Esur was distracted long enough for Jewels to shove him away into Ruse. Jewels received a nasty cut from one of Esur's daggers, but healed it with barely a thought. The mysterious man went in front of Jewels and an energy shot forth from his sword, creating a shield that blocked a nasty spell that Ruse had just prepared.

"Azuma! Thank goodness." Jewels seemed glad to see him appear just in time.

"Who are these two?" Azuma asked her.

"I have no idea, but they seem to want to kill Iffy, Saph, and anyone else that gets in their way," Jewels responded then shot a strange energy out of her ring as a counterattack, but, unfortunately, it missed Ruse by about 20 degrees. "Gah, how do you work this thing?" Ruse smirked.

-*- Iffy and Saph were lost in a dark cavern.

******! I think we lost her.**

They heard a slight giggle. Iffy and Saph run over to the source of the giggles. They were greeted with a burst of energy hitting them from behind, sending the pair right into the cavern wall. qUe dropped down. Iffy and Saph struggled to get up.

An odd voice came from the bundle qUe was holding. "I think we have done enough damage, qUe."

qUe replied, "Reth. We're done as soon as they say they are done" She says it nice and loud for Iffy and Saph to hear.

Iffy and Saph attempt to say something, but they collapse.

"I think that's a yes," qUe said with a giggle. She walks over to Iffy and Saph.

"Now give me one good reason as to why I shouldn't kill you," she said, sounding serious this time.

Iffy replied, "We need to stop whoever that guy is."

qUe paused for a second. She looked deeply into Iffy's eyes, and glanced at Saph's.

"Well. This isn't the same cold blooded killer I had seen the last time," she said after a few, long, awkward seconds. She continued, "You also seem to have misplaced your main soul box. Mind telling me where it went?" Iffy sighed. "I have changed a lot. And as for my soul box, it got trapped when the whole Refuge was plane shifted to Ermaria."

"I see. So I won't kill you. In fact, once you get your soul box, we could possibly help each other stop that man. Whatever his name is. But first, you need to get your soul box."

"We've been kind of busy, so we haven't gotten the chance to do so."

"We'll make that the first step, then. Without it, going after him would be suicide." She paused when she saw Iffy start to slip off into sleep. She went over to him and transmitted a bit of her energy to him, waking him up.

"We should probably get to...your Refuge. You need to rest up before we can retrieve it. You'll need every bit of energy. But I myself need to rest for a few minutes before I can transport us out of here. And no, Saph, an energy elixir would not help me. The spell needs to recharge anyways. So, Iffy, while we are waiting, mind telling me how exactly you changed?"

-*- The battle wasn't going so well for the two Refugi. While Azuma was keeping up an excellent defense, Jewels wasn't doing so great on the offense, and both were beginning to get tired. Esur and Ruse seemed to have just as much energy as during the start of the battle. Jewels managed to get a great shot at Esur, piercing his armor. He cursed, and then Ruse healed him and quickly repaired his armor as well. Jewels took their moment of weakness to shoot twice at Ruse. The first missed, but the second hit her foot, which caused Ruse to fall on her face when she tried to jump back. Esur leaped at Jewels, but was thrown back by another energy shield from Azuma.

Jewels and Azuma suddenly get reinforcements when a large number of about 30 ground unit bots arrive. Ruse hasted Esur, who then charged through the lines, cutting down 8 bots before they had a chance to react. Jewels shot at Esur, but missed only to destroy one of her bot allies. She shot again, hitting Esur while he was destroying another 2 bots. He started to fall, but regained his balance. He quickly summoned a bizarre box. A small bit of energy flowed into him. He began to glow, and went berserk, destroying the remaining 20 bots. All the shots they had managed were dissolved in Ruse's energy shield. Esur went berserk against 3 tank bots before discharging the energy burst back into his small box. Next, a group of 20 ground units, 4 tanks, and 12 VTOL bots charged at Esur and Ruse. Esur apparently had chosen a different bit of energy to flow into him. He glowed a different color. He went even faster than the last time, cutting through half of the ground units as well as 1 tank before they had time to react. The

remaining tanks and ground units focused their fire on Esur. He dodged most of the shots, but a couple hits from ground units and a particularly large hit from a tank sent him flying a few feet. He quickly got back up, dispatched the rest of the tanks, then went back to the ground units. The 12 VTOLs swarmed around Ruse. She deflected several of their attacks, destroying about 5 of them. One managed to get a hit on her, and when she stood up to heal herself, Jewels shot her down. Esur, after having taken care of the rest of the ground units, rushed over to attack Jewels. Esur decided it would be smarter to leap over her when Azuma created another shield, which ended up being useless. Esur leaped on one of the VTOLs and caused it to crash into another one. He leaped again and destroyed two more. Ruse had managed to heal herself and destroy the rest. Esur sent the energy back into his box. Both he and Ruse smirked. Jewels and Azuma looked rather desperate at that point. All four then turned to the sounds of a portal opening...

-*- "So you already know how after the ceremony where Saph was drawn out of me, I changed. You should know this personally. After all, it changes everyone," Iffy said, shuddering a little bit. qUe nodded. "I know. I know all too well. I haven't met anyone who overcome the corruption it brings, besides myself."

"Well, how did you overcome it?"

"Reth warned me. I killed my own sister for her soul. I found that Reth was right. I then listened to more of what he had to say. Now look at where I am now. Your turn. How did you figure it out?"

"With my greed I attempted to kill one of my brothers. I failed. He then went after...what was my love. The corruption robbed me of my memory of her, but I realized after my brother killed her, what the corruption had done," Iffy sighed. qUe thought for a second. "Can you at least remember her name?"

Iffy struggled to remember. "I...I can't seem to."

qUe walked over to him and pressed her hand on his forehead. She concentrated a bit. "Here, this should help."

Iffy thought for even longer. "I think...I'm beginning to remember...it starts with an N...then an i...then...Nix! That was her name!"

qUe smiled. "You've just become even less corrupted."

Iffy sighed, struggling to remember anything else. He then gasps. "****! We need to get back to the Refuge right now!"

qUe raised one eyebrow. "Why, is something wrong?"

"I can't explain. We just have to go right now!"

qUe shrugs. "Alright." She opens a portal and the four enter.

-*- Nix once again heads for the Google transport, being fully restored, with more power than before.

-*- Azuma manages to shield himself and Jewels from one more large blast from Ruse before sheathing his sword, looking very exhausted. Ruse knocked him down with a blast of force. Esur ran over to Jewels, who managed to shoot him in the shoulder, but he still managed to make it

over to knock her down to the ground. The four then looked back at where the portal was, which three figures, one holding a bundle, stepped out.

"Iffy!" Jewels shouted. Azuma smiled weakly.

Esur smiled. "Finally. Iffy is here. And now I can kill you! And this time, you have to face my soul box as well. No fooling around like before!"

Esur brought two different energies out of the box this time. They mixed in him, causing him to glow two different colors, co-dominantly. He charged at Iffy at an amazing speed. Saph barely managed to get in front of Iffy to block a violent, lightning fast series of hits. She slowly had to back away under all that Esur was doing. Jewels wanted to shoot him, but didn't in fear of accidentally hitting Saph. Iffy tried to attack Esur, only to be attacked by Ruse, having to defend from her. Neither Esur nor Ruse noticed when a hand appeared from the bundle qUe was holding. Two rays of energy flew from the hand, hitting both Esur and Ruse, with a prompt explosion. Saph managed to jump away. Esur and Ruse weren't so lucky. Ruse stumbled to get up, and attempted to heal herself but was tackled by both Jewels and Azuma. Esur jumped up furious. He rushed over to Ruse. Jewels and Azuma managed to jump away. Esur tried getting energy to Ruse before he screamed in pain for a split second. He forced the energy back into his box.

"Enough of this nonsense," qUe said. She then smiled, saying, "Iffy, this is a perfect opportunity. You'll need the help for regaining your soul box and fighting whatshisname."

A chuckle was heard. Everyone looked towards the source. Nix simply said, "I'm sorry, but you'll not be receiving his soul box any time soon. I'm afraid I'll have to take Esur's souls with me. As for you, qUe, I'll be back for you. Iffy, don't make this any harder than it has to be."

Iffy looked at him puzzled, glanced at Esur, nodded at qUe, then looked back at Nix, determined.

Let's do this!

Iffy ran over to Esur. Esur stood up, furious, but was knocked unconscious by a very tired and irritated Jewels. Saph ran over to Nix to distract him. qUe hopped on a building and attempted to assist Saph. Nix merely absorbed qUe's shots and redirected the raw energy towards Saph as a blue bolt, which she dodged. Iffy managed to make it to Esur, muttered his script, and thrust his hand into Esur. Esur screamed and struggled, but Jewels and Azuma managed to hold him down. Iffy took out his soul box. He proceeded to suck Esur and Ruse's souls into the box. Nix ran over and grabbed the box as well. They both attempted to pull it in. Everyone just stopped and watched, not sure if they should break the struggle in fear of harming Iffy or worse. Esur and Ruse got sucked in during the struggle, leaving their body's as empty husks as before. Eventually the box split and half of the soul energy went to Nix, the other half to Iffy. Nix simply absorbed it while Iffy created a new box seemingly out of nowhere for it, which is then absorbed into him.

"At least he got half," qUe quietly thought to herself. Reth summoned a flaming sword in the air, which qUe caught. She leaped off the building and attempted to land on Nix. She proceeded to slash at him after he dodged her. Nix took raw energy and blew it right through the sword. Saph threw a disruptor potion at Nix. Unfortunately he, being more alert this time, caught the potion, and through it right back at Saph. She dove for it, and pocketed it, disappointed. Iffy rushed over to Saph, and drew out soul energy. Instead of sending it into him, he sent it to Saph. Saph began

glowing, and rushed at Nix. Nix was barely able to dodge all of Saph's punches until one finally connected with him. She took his moment of weakness and slammed her spiked fists into him multiple times, eventually giving him a powerful hit that sent him flying a few feet. He just stood up and healed himself.

"I must be off, now," Nix said. "I would have liked to get all of Esur's power, but half will be enough for now. You can expect me later, qUe." He smiled and ran off.

"Shouldn't we chase him?" Saph said with a bizarre voice. Iffy remember that she was still in effect, and drew the soul energy back out of her.

"No, I think we'll leave him be for now," qUe replied.

Iffy looked over to see Jewels and Azuma collapse from sheer exhaustion. qUe sighed. "Poor guys. That guy was all defensive, and the lady seems to be struggling on the inside. They weren't near prepared enough to face Esur, let alone when he was utilizing his soul box." Iffy and Saph picked up Jewels and Azuma, and carried them over to a couple of bots who knew exactly where to take them.

A New Saga

By Sylae - Aug 5 2010

Optimizing...please wait...

w-dueck sighed and set his head down on the console. *Gods, I'm tired*, he thought to himself, *Well, this place won't fix itself...* He stood and stretched, glaring at the monospace on the console's LCD display. It beeped and a progress bar advanced a percentage point. *It could blow itself up in no time, but it takes ten damn minutes to optimize one percent? That makes sense.* he sat down at the console again and set his head down. He hadn't slept for three days...

Sometime later, w-dueck awoke to a chill in the room. His head jerked up, shaking a layer of frost from the screen, as he heard footsteps in the room. Suddenly, something pulled him up and he was slammed against the wall.

"Hello, w-dueck. Sleep well?" Nioca said, appearing from the doorway, two cold-eminating shades flanking him. "Sorry to interrupt your nap."

"What is this about, Nioca? Is this some sort of prank?" w-dueck demanded, struggling against the invisible bonds.

"No, it isn't. I'll be taking over your little Refuge for my own purposes now. And you're going to help me." he smiled and brushed the frost off of the console. "Now--"

"The hell I am," w-dueck said. *Men screaming as the ground explodes. Molten rock pouring up from the earth, death and chao--* something struck his face, and he realized Nioca had punched him.

"None of your heathen magics now. If you try that again...remember, I have a connection of sorts..." *Jewels...*

"Fine, fine, I'll help," w-dueck said, blood streaming out of his nose, "But if you do anything to fucking hurt her, I'll..."

"You aren't in a position to ask, worm!" Nioca screamed, an insane glint in his eyes. "You will give me the fucking access to this demon-damned tower, and now!"

w-dueck thought, mind racing. "Everything's coded to my DNA, I can't give you physical access...however, I can give you mental access."

Nioca was silent, thinking it over. Finally, he nodded, and he sat down at a console. "Tell me what to type."

"Open a terminal window...now, type *killbore -d*. Good, now select option 3. Then hit enter."

Nioca paused before pressing the final button. "I hope you realize, that if I die, so does she. Is this still the right code?"

"Yes," *Please, gods, work. Don't put her blood on my hands...*

Nioca pressed the enter key.

The lights in the room dimmed as energy was poured into the Tower's computing systems. Nioca's face lit up in ecstacy as he was linked to the Refuge, "I can see it all..." he breathed in awe, and the magic holding w-dueck released, dropping him to the floor. "It's all here, every ruitine, every circuit...I am truly a god now!" He began laughing, "I AM CALAMITY REFUGE!"

Suddenly he froze. The lights returned to normal, and the console beeped. *Operation completed*. The shades hissed as their master remained frozen in place. Suddenly, Nioca blinked.

w-dueck stood and said, "Who are you?"

"I am Calamity Refuge..." the whisper was bairly audible.

"Synchronize to the local cluster as a processor client. Auth Red-83920-Cylan Hope."

"Synchronizing..." Nioca said in a flat voice. He blinked again, "I am SimpleBot 69937, alias Nioca Galton. How may I serve?"

"Excellent. Perform standard maitenance examinations, and quantify and parse stored data. Submit results to the Hive for analysis."

"Very well." The crazy glint in his eyes slowly faded, replaced by the dull gleam of the mindless. The shades hissed in confusion at their master's condition.

Suddenly, the door slammed open, and Jewels rushed in, "Oh, you're all right...Nioca's...gone."

"I know," w-dueck said. "He wanted the Refuge. The Refuge got him. Absorbed his being, you could say."

"But he's...and I'm..." Jewels trailed off, stuttering.

"He's still there, what little was left in the end. He's just been turned...mechanical. He's so much like a machine, he's become one. You are now...linked to the Refuge. Eventually, you could speak to it, and it could speak back." w-dueck stated. "I can't believe what I just did...it could've killed you too..." he closed his eyes and shuddered, "I'm so sorry, Jewels. I just...didn't know what to do..."

"It's okay, Will," she said, a glint in her eyes. "Here, I have to show you something in my rooms."

Jewels climbed the stairs with Will in tow, huffing behind her. "What's so important that you can't just tell me about it? I still need to recalibrate the reactor cooling systems."

"This is way more important than that, Will. And I don't think I could adequately explain it to you. You're just going to have to see it for yourself." Jewels stifled a giggle as she pulled him along. What, with him refusing to come to bed while there was still work to be done, she had barely seen him in the last three days. The most she had gotten from him was a passing kiss on the cheek since the little emergency teleportation incident. This morning she had decided that it was time to remedy that.

All day, she had been getting things ready. A quick trip to the flower shop, a lingerie store, and a wax...She had gone all out. She had been walking across the grounds intent on stealing him from his work when Nioca's plan had come through to her. Jewels had gone into a full-out sprint trying to reach them in time.

Something had happened, though, when Nioca's mind had connected to the Refuge. Jewels' mind had been overwhelmed with so much information she almost passed out. And now, walking up the stairs with Will behind her, she was finding it very hard to concentrate on what she had been working on all day.

She could see everything that was going on but it was like she was viewing it as a third person. The majority of her brain was drowning in the sea of data and processes and computations that left her almost breathless. She was determined, though, not to let her day's work go to waste. She concentrated intently on the moment and the clutter subsided a bit. Enough for her to start to look forward to the rest of the night.

Jewels let him open the door and tried to keep a straight face when he glanced at the "mood" she had set in the room. He eyed the trail of rose petals on the floor before cocking an eyebrow at her, "And just where is this thing that is so important I have to see it for myself?"

Jewels cleared her throat. "It's, ah, in the bedroom."

"You sure it's more important than the Refuge right now?" His voice was rather annoyed.

"Absolutely. Definitely. The most important thing in the multi-plane at this very moment." She held her breath hoping that he wouldn't brush her off.

A big grin broke out on Will's face. "Well, if it's that important I guess I better do something about it then." Jewels joined him in smiling as he swept her off her feet and carried her down the hall.

She let herself relax in his arms. Let herself enjoy the feel his presence, his caresses, his kisses. Jewels let herself go completely...and couldn't get herself back.

Like a computer, her mind started organizing everything she knew, everything Nioca knew, and everything either of them had ever known. Forgotten things were simultaneously remembered. Hidden things were all made clear. All of the memories Nana had suppressed hit her full force and Jewels lost control.

Her body tensed and bucked against Will. Her fingers curled and scratched his arms. Her temperature rose until Will was sweating from heat rather than exertion. She tried to talk to warn Will to get away from her but it came out as a moan. What Jewels wished Will would understood as danger, he took as her in the throws of passion. Instead of running he matched her intensity and pressed in harder.

A single tear managed to run down Jewels face as she realized what was about to happen. In an instant a dark red flame exploded out from her incinerating everything within three feet of her and melting everything within ten. Jewels found herself falling through a floor that no longer existed.

She reached up with her left hand to the space where Will had been only a moment ago, heart crying in anguish. A surprisingly bright flash from her wedding ring blinded her just before she slammed into the floor beneath her and lost consciousness.

Jewels looked down at the small village and shook her head. Cylan was where Will had been born, two thousand years ago. And it was here he would live again, she hoped.

The cottage was as small as the others, and tidier than most. Jewels knocked on the door and waited. "It's open," a woman's voice called, and Jewels entered.

"You've the feel of a fiery one about you, little ember," the woman inside said without looking up, "And...something else...earthy, it feels like." she looked up and smiled, "I'm Elder Llyth."

Llyth...why was that name familiar? "Jewels deForestal. I'm looking for someone who might be able to help me with a ghost problem..."

"You have him, don't you? Yes, I can feel him, in that ring of yours."

"What? How did you know?" Jewels asked?

"An Ice elemental can feel her children when they're close, Jewels. I didn't recognize it the first time, but now I do." Llyth said. *Why is that name so familiar?*

"I'm...I'm his wife. I was wondering if you could help me...make him live. He talked about a woman in this village helping him last time, and..."

"Girl, I can't help you here. The only place I could help you is in my labs, which I can't reach. If you could help me get there, I could help, but..." she trailed off.

"I can have you there tonight." Jewels said, smiling.

The plane of the Ice Elementals was unvarying in nature, just an endless range of glacier-covered mountains. Long-considered inferior to the other elementals and shunned, the Ices had lived with little contact with others and grown self-suffecient. Their own, unique culture grew out of those frigid mountains, and at the head of it was their capital, Frigedia. Long, dark winters had encouraged the Ices to learn, and it soon became the Technological and Scientific elite of the elementals.

Therefore, the arrival of Dr. Llyth Jiendra was met well.

Jewels shivered and pulled her fur-lined cloak closer as the two walked up to the frozen gates of the city. Guards hefted weapons and glared at the two, in case of trouble. One stepped forward, stopping the two.

"I'm sorry, miss, but your friend must stay. Councilman Torean has barred refugees from the city." *Refugees?* Jewels thought.

Llyth glared at the guard, "Back in my day, anyone was welcome here. What is the meaning of this?"

The guard blinked, confused, "Haven't you heard? There is civil war in the Fire Plane. Nobody even knows who's in charge over there. I'm sorry, but either you go in or stay out here, but your friend can't enter. Rules are rules."

Jewels gasped. *War? In the Fire Plane? How?* Llyth's reaction was different. "Well then, boy. Why don't you go hop and tell Torean that the woman who spanked his bottom for stealing icecakes has a guest, and be quick about it! We'll be waiting in your guardhouse."

Fifteen minutes later, the pair was escorted into the Council Palace. "I was once a fairly obscure scientist," Llyth explained.

Jewel's mind spun. Not only was Will's mom alive, but she was a scientist? And there was war in the fire plane? The whole thing was confusing beyond belief.

"Well, Jewels, the process will take about two months to complete. We can transfer him to a crystal here from your ring, and one more transfer, then rehab." Llyth said

"Two months!" Jewels exclaimed, "I once did the same in a day--"

She was cut off by Llyth, "You likely had a body to work with, a concious soul, and lots of luck. I, on the other hand, have to find a donor body, take a soul out of hibernation, and deal with no luck."

"Oh," Jewels said, "But he'll be fine, right?"

"He might look a little different, but his soul will be the same. Is that okay?"

"Sounds good to me."

"Okay then, let's go to the crystal room."

FIRE

w-dueck jolted awake, and his body spasmed. *Shit! What's going on?*

Suddenly his ears picked up noise. It took him a minute to decypher it, but eventually, "Stop moving. You haven't learned how to control your new body yet." *Stop moving, Dueck.* Eventually, his muscles stopped spasming, and he was able to concentrate on listening.

"Good." The voice kept changing, fading in and out like someone was trying to adjust the volume. "Listen to me. Your old body was destroyed in a fire--" *FIRE*. His body flinched. "--and your new home has to adjust to your mind. Just rest, and your body will do the rest."

...

Sometime later, he heard yelling. A voice: "It was all that was available! He would've died!"

Another voice, more familiar: "You're saying there was *nothing* else?"

A third voice: "Shut up, I'm trying to sleep." Wait a minute...

"Well maybe if you didn't destroy his in a fire--" *FIRE*. w-dueck's eyes opened and he jolted up, only to see Jewels and another woman standing there, plainly interrupted by his awakening.

"Well, look at that, you woke...him up." Jewels said flatly.

"Jewels, it's so good too see you!" he exclaimed, brushing some hair out of his eyes. *What happened to my voice? Am I sick?* "I can't remember anything...just Nioca...something with a Bot...then pain...lots of pain." he felt himself shuddering.

Jewels looked to the other woman, then the door. The other lady rolled her eyes and left. Jewels hesitated, then gestured towards a mirror and said, "They had to give you a new body. You should look..."

"Um, okay..." w-dueck said. "I hope they didn't give me small junk," he laughed as he stood up and walked to the mirror. He glanced over at the reflection and collapsed.

"Will, Will! Wake up!" Jewels said, and w-dueck's eyes opened. Then it hit him.

"What the FUCK, Jewels!?!? What happened to me!?!?"

Jewels yelled back, "I wish I didn't...but I had to...to save *you*. We'll make it work, I promise..." she started crying, and w-dueck just lay there, stunned. After a while, Jewels dried her face and laughed shakily. "Well, I can't exactly call you Will anymore, can I?"

"No, I guess not," he said, forcing himself to keep his, no, *that* voice steady. "I'll have to think up a name."

A knock at the door startled him out of the trance. "Who is it?"

The voice of the other woman came through the door, "It's me. I'd like to speak to him." He closed his eyes as Jewels left. The voice of the other woman spoke again, "Will, I guess that's what you've been calling yourself lately...I don't know how to say this...but...I'm your mother."

He felt himself laughing. Not only had they done *this* to him, try were mocking him too. "My mother died six weeks after I was born. Don't mock me. My father murdered her."

"Will...that's not true. She escaped him, and he told you that lie. Will...you must believe me...Akkare." w-dueck flinched again, but she continued, "Akkare Nilux d'Cylan, son of the Last

Duke of Cylan. You must understand, I meant to tell you, but...you dissappeared. I failed you then, and I'm sorry."

"Don't talk to me," w-dueck said harshly, and he heard her get up and leave.

Jewels pulled her ear from the door as she heard Llyth nearing it. The door opened, and she stomped out. "How'd it go?" Jewels asked.

"He's all yours," she growled, "and don't let me see his ungrateful hide again." she stomped away, and Jewels entered the room again.

Will hastily rubbed his--her eyes as she entered, then looked up at her, then snorted. "You have to admit. Other than the whole change, I really upgraded." Jewels had to agree. A perfect oval-shaped face, with brilliant emerald-green eyes framed by waist length black hair. Will cleared his throat, and Jewels blushed "Sorry."

"It's okay," Will said, then continued, "This body's a halfbreed, just like...my other one. It's wierd, though. Sometimes I feel like I'm drifting away, and I have to hold on, or I'll float off..." he was silent for a time, then spoke up. "I've decided on a name."

"Oh?"

"Sylae Jiendra Corell. My family name was Cylar, my mother's maiden name was Jiendra, and I'm from Corel. It works, doesn't it?"

"It's catchy."

"Listen, Jewels. I don't know how this'll work out. If you want to leave me, I understand."

She thought about how to answer him, "I don't even know if I swing that way. I mean, what about children?"

"I made...reserves...in case of the worst, if it counts."

"I don't know, it's just..." she trailed off.

"Jewels, I'm willing to try this if you are. I'll do whatever it takes. Promise." Green eyes stared up at her.

Jewels was silent for a minute. "There's something I need to tell you. You've been repressing the memories of what happened that night..." she went on to explain in detail. "...but it won't happen again. It's just a stage..." she looked down, and saw a pale face staring back at her.

"Well, as long as it doesn't happen again...I'm fine." a shaky laugh, "but just in case, let's get a new body lined up, eh?"

From the air, the Refuge looked much better than it had before. Six months had passed since the Ermarian incident, since the Refuge's return All of the walks looked neatly trimmed, and all of the buildings were repaired. The Google Transport touched down on the new landing strip and smoothly slid into the station. She stood and entered, and was greeting by a hovering Bot, with the looks of a recent upgrade. "*Hello ArchAdmin. Welcome back to the Refuge*."

She smiled. "That is not my name," she said and stepped past the Bot... "I am First Magus Sylae Corell." ...and into the fresh air of Calamity Refuge.

Not a Mechanic

By Sudanna - Aug 5 2010

*Tik-tik-tik-tak-clickikikikik-**clunk***

Nalyd looked up from the array of glowing jewels and small, pulsing organs.

"What was that?"

Stillborn, standing in the stone circle in the center of the Shaping lab, started.

"What?"

Nalyd twisted in his seat and tried to see around the console.

"The, ah, the thing, that stupid conduit, did it fall out again?"

Stillborn peered at the small block of stone from across the room.

"I don't think so. . ."

"Ah, dammit."

Nalyd slid out of the creaking chair and knelt at the base of the console. He pulled on a tab of leaflike material along the edge of the rectangular console, and the side of the stone block did nothing.

Nalyd pulled on it again, and it snapped.

The little Shaper stared at the torn greenish slip in his hand. Looked at the tiny remnant poking out of the side of the console.

"RUAGH!"

Nalyd stood up and whirled, his hands stretching out to the right. Half of the stone shell on the console ripped itself off and smashed into a cupboard next to Stillborn. The building groaned in protest as the shattered wood twisted itself back into shape.

"Master. . ."

But Nalyd was already tinkering with the steaming array of organs and wiring within the device.

These last few months had been taxing the capabilities of this small laboratory. Nalyd had already had to piece together two makeshift power spirals out of junk he'd found in other forums. The damn things sparked and caught fire constantly, and he had to have Stillborn drag them in every time it rained, but there was no other way to carry out the improvements he was making on his creation. They were getting increasingly delicate and complex, and the basic machinery that

he had access to just wasn't cutting it. The more important tasks had to be delayed while he was wasting time trying to piece together machines he wasn't trained to construct. He was a Shaper, not a mechanic, godammit!

Stillborn shuffled in his circle. He was becoming less and less human, though there were only a few visual clues to this. The muscles in his huge body no longer resembled anything human, for one. The most striking feature was that his hair had turned from dark brown to a deep green, and was almost like down.

"Master, I-"

But the creature living as a part of the console took this opportunity to shriek. The various crystals in and on the console blazed intensely, as the creature within pumped and writhed. An organ within ruptured and fluid spilled out, making the internal machinery erupt into a shower of sparks. Nalyd recoiled as fire blew out of the tangle of wires and crystals in the base. Electricity arced at Nalyd's outstretched hands, but he caught it with his spindly fingers and let it dance among them until he fell back onto the floor. He left burnt handprints on the wood.

Stillborn stepped forward and knelt at his master's side, but Nalyd slashed at him with a stiff hand.

"Back in the circle, creation! I will do this on my own if I must!"

Stillborn stepped back, watching as his master kicked the remnants of the machine, shattering what was left of the stone shell and letting the smoking guts scatter in the corner. Nalyd had begun self-Shaping recently, since Stillborn himself was proving to be too frustrating to work on most of the time. He was already growing taller and much stronger than he used to be. Stillborn glanced at Lifesower, where it leaned in another corner of the room. Nalyd hadn't touched it in a long while. Considering how attached to it he was before, this was worrying.

But it seemed he would be touching it now. Nalyd grabbed the glittering Scythe out of the corner, wincing through his anger as he touched it. He stood before the Shaping circle and slammed the butt of Lifesower into the ground. The wood cracked, and then cracked back into place. Nalyd had grown tired of magically repairing the structure of his lab and just enchanted it a couple weeks ago.

Lifesower remained standing completely upright as Nalyd stretched out both hands and let green fire crawl down his arms. Stillborn braced himself. He could never predict how being Shaped would feel, and he seldom even knew what it was going to do.

It seems like his spine would be going, this time. Unless there was another reason it had just broken in half.

I See What You Did There

By Zoe - Aug 11 2010

After gathering up a few supplies, Iffy, Saph, and qUe with Reth gathered in a circle. They wished to waste no time at all. And off they went to another plane to search for Iffy's soul box...

FOUR MONTHS LATER...

A fire raged through a town, burning buildings and soldiers alike. "Finally, this mess is over!" qUe exclaimed.

Pfft. We could have had a little fun. But no, qUe's little pyro decided to make use of their explosive material to raze the place.

qUe glanced at Saph.

Now, now Saph. You do know there were thousands of soldiers inside, right? Nothing compared to the 560 that we fought at once to get to this damn town.

qUe glared at Iffy. "There something you two are keeping from us?" qUe questioned.

"Sorry, just Saph being...Saph," Iffy answered.

Saph glared at Iffy.

"Why do I always get glared at?"

qUe shook her head. "Let's just get your soul box already. We've spent months in this damn place."

A Google ship was appearing in the distance, heading towards the Refuge. Eventually, Nix exited the ship. He headed towards the Inn.

Ligrev was pouring coffee into a member's cup when Nix walked in. She glanced at the various posters portraying various people considered hostile. Her face grew pale when she realized that the man was one of them.

She turned towards him. "I...I'm sorry, but I'll have to alert a moderator or admin." She started to hit the button to warn the Refuge when Nix extended his arm and magically paralized her. The spell proceeded to force her to the ground. "I won't be having you spoil my coming. Now, enough of that nonsense. I'd like some coffee, please."

Ligrev, shaking, stood up and poured him a cup of coffee, being as careful as she could in not spilling any. She tapped her foot at the other button to warn any admin or moderator.

"I saw what you did there. No matter, I'll simply teach them a lesson when they come over."

Ready Yet?

By Azuma - Aug 20 2010

Dazzling lights. Fluttering. Beautiful. Zooming in and out. They were everywhere.

Having fun are we? Hahahaha! It has been a while. It has been an oh so long while, Azuma. I truly cannot wait for that time. Do not worry, I will not rush you. So, until that time, careful now.

BOOM! ---

"Eeeuuuugh... what happened?" Azuma's awakening greeted him with a piercing headache, making him lie down again.

"Don't get up silly... you're badly hurt." Ligrev rushed towards him worriedly. The click-clacks of her nursing equipment could be heard throughout the Lounge.

"Urrrrg... Ligrev, I didn't know you cou-" another sharp pang stopped him from speaking.

"With all the healing magic that's around, what use are these skills, right?" She paused as she poured some ointment on a burn. "But sometimes..." she resumed, "being cared for personally is the best treatment for wounds." Azuma was about to say something but stopped, wincing, as Ligrev pulled a bandage tight around a wound on his torso. "Try not talking and just lie down," she reprimanded him. Ligrev continued to administer aid to Azuma. She was very skilled in handling him. She let out a sigh though, every time she saw another severe wound, a broken bone, a disassembled organ.

"Thanks- ah, easy..." Ligrev just chuckled at Azuma's discomfort. "Say, how's Jewels?" he asked her as she wrapped another bandage around his arm.

"Lady Jewels? I think she's in her quarters resting. I don't know much since the bots just dumped your body here. I was surprised to see you were still alive really..."

"Ah. it's good to know that she's -ah- OK." Azuma closed his eyes and tried his best to rest as Ligrev dressed his wounds.

The room remained silent for the remainder of the day as Ligrev nursed Azuma. When she finished, she found him sleeping soundly already. She heaved a sigh of relief. It's good that he finally got some decent relaxation after the fight. It must have been a truly horrible fight for him to be this badly injured. She chuckled as she heard him snore. It was good to know that he's well now. This was the first time she's been close enough to Azuma to actually derive his face. All the while, since he was in the Refuge, he was always in his cowl, at least, when she saw him.

She pulled down his hood, sliding it down to his coat, every moment feeling excited. She gulped as she pulled down the last part of the garment and she saw... saw...

"Aaaaaaah!"

Just then, the sword that the bots threw in with Azuma shone blue. Azuma himself stirred awake instantly. No grogginess. No slurring. He was promptly awake and rushing to the side of the now delirious Ligrev, holding her up with one arm and getting his sword with the other free hand.

"Ligrev! Ligrev! Speak to me!" He shook her, trying to get an intelligent response but none came. She continued garbling on and on.

"lolololol0010102lll!!!!11!!!1!!111 pewpewpewbbqjejejejelzr" Ligrev mouthed incoherently, white froth now building up around her mouth.

"Damn it! She's getting worse! Sentience, now!"

Sentience flared brightly blue. Azuma plunged it towards her chest. A brief flash of azure light and she noticeably calmed down. Azuma pulled the sword out of her, and threw it aside, with it protesting but Azuma didn't care. Ligrev was what mattered to him now, holding her as tightly as he could.

"I hope I'm not too late... not again... please... If I am... I'll, I- I-" tears were running down on his face already. It slowly trickled down on his garb and one eventually dropped to Ligrev's face.

"D-don't... cry... please." The wavering voice was almost inaudible, but Azuma heard it clearly. Hearing those words made him cry more.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry!" he cried out, drawing her nearer to him, clutching her closer. ---

Ligrev was slowly regaining sanity and consciousness. She felt warm as Azuma held her. It was also making her blush. She looked up and saw the same dark silhouette that was Azuma's face but was surprised when a tear dropped on her cheek. "What happened?" she weakly asked.

"Y-you were poisoned." Azuma said penitently while lifting Ligrev up. Even for his lithe body, she didn't put a strain on him. Ligrev was bothered by it but dismissed it early.

"Poisoned? By what?" she weakly asked while she was brought down to a nearby couch.

"Something bad. Really bad. Something that happens when I let my guard off..." he paused as he fixed up his hood so that it completely concealed his face again. "And I won't let it happen again." Azuma looked grief-stricken as he finished. Ligrev noted the expression. She kept quiet about it though. Azuma was already stressed from his injuries and now from her, she won't add the bother of asking him why... His injuries! She must have put a strain on him while he helped her up. His wounds! They might have opened up again. How stupid was she to let him do that. She hurriedly grabbed him and started feeling around to see if something went wrong.

"Hey! That tickles!" Azuma choked back his giggles as Ligrev groped around his body. She stopped but wasn't convinced. Azuma was still clueless on what she was doing.

"Your wounds. They're all healed." She went near Azuma's face, determined to get an answer, after all, she went through the trouble of patching him up.

"Oh. Ah. It's nothing special." Azuma replied, making Ligrev lean back from him. "Sentience and I share something like a link. Whenever we're both unstressed, I can regenerate light to moderate wounds."

Ligrev folded her arms, displaying a childish tantrum. "After all I've been through, tirelessly bandaging you up, you, you, you just heal up like everyone else does!" and with a 'hmpf' turned her head away from Azuma.

"Oh come on. Don't be like that. See this?" Azuma pointed around his ribs. Ligrev cast a glance from the corner of her eye.

"Yeah, so?"

"Feel it."

"No."

"Come on now."

"I said no!"

Azuma sighed and quickly jerked her hands onto his chest. Ligrev was surprised. She was about to dart them back but she gave in and started feeling around.

"Broken?" Ligrev continued on checking Azuma out. There were still the broken bones she mended earlier. "I thought you regenerated injuries, just like everyone else. Hmp."

"Well, I- uh- please don't be like that anymore." Azuma placed his hands on her shoulders and tried to rub them gently to make Ligrev relax again. She did, though she didn't want Azuma to know that. And she doesn't want him to see her blushing. She continued on with her stubbornness.

"Well?" Ligrev said, feigning a demanding and angry tone.

"It's just that, I can't heal all injuries, including broken bones. Though they will heal... up... faster." Azuma meekly explained. He cast a glance at his sword. The sword flickered a slight hint of blue.

*Well, it's not *MY* fault that a sword that can't kill can't even do the opposite right.*

Ligrev turned around to face him again, and stared. Stared into his eyes intensely. Azuma felt squeamish. "Hmp. And after all I went through! I mean, look at my hands! I swear, I might never make a good cup of coffee again by the strain you put them through." She blurted out in his face. "Look at this! Heck, I might not even hold a cutting knife properly anymore!"

Ligrev stopped her tantrum abruptly when Azuma held her hands again. Tenderly, she felt them clasping hers, intertwining, almost eloping. She looked up at Azuma, up to his eyes. She fell into a daze from them. She felt lost in them. "Please Ligrev... I'm sorry to put you into this mess. It's all my fault. If it's any consolation I wi-"

Azuma shut up instantly as Ligrev drew him close to her lips. She asked and he replied without moment's hesitation. They didn't know how long they were like that, it was all a blur. They were on the floor, back to couch, up the stairs, dropping and rolling on the floor again, to the bed... ---

The morning after, she was tracing his face. There was no fear, no more malice this time, only the bliss from last night. She saw him dreaming. She hoped he was dreaming about her. She embraced him lightly, smiling as she watched him sleep.

"I hope we'll be like this. You know... Together... I'm always alone whether you believe it or not." She paused to caress him, gently playing with his hair and grasping his arm softly. "Sure, there are a lot of people in my pub but no one really is there because of me. It's just 'Ligrev, coffee', 'Ligrev pass the bread', 'Ligrev this', 'Ligrev that.' After what they want, they leave me. They'll only come back when they need something again. I'm just a bartender after all... But you came without asking for something, and though I did give something precious, I'm happy that you did. Hehe." She giggled as she ended and felt warm as she pressed on Azuma slightly tighter.

"Me too, Jewels..." he replied, asleep and in his dreams. ---

Azuma woke up to see Ligrev still beside him. She was asleep. He didn't bother to wake her up so she could rest when he stood up. It was a tiring night for both of them. He found his clothes on the floor and started to dress quietly. He pulled out a piece of paper from a pocket and grabbed a nearby pen and started writing.

Dear Ligrev,

I'm sorry to leave but I have to. It's nothing special but I have to do this for the better. No! You've done nothing to make me leave. Really! It's just me... being worried... worried about you. I hope you aren't crying now. It'll just make me sadder. With the nature of this place, I just can't be me. I want to be more than me now... I hope you'll understand but maybe you wont. Ah crap. I suck at this.

P.s. Please tell Jewels that I'm gone but I'll be back for her. -Azuma

He felt satisfied with it, if not regretting. He put it on top of a dresser and hoped for the best that she would see it. With a silent sigh, he left the room. But he hadn't heard her. Her murmur. Her cry. Her despair.

"Don't leave me..." --- It's been four months since Azuma left. It wasn't a choice. It was a duty, so he had to, for her. She's probably going to go rawr on him when she sees him. He was lying back and drifting along the Spam Space; that little pocket universe he found in his Internet travels. He pulled Sentience from the floor and stared at it, noticing the fine runes and glyphs the blade has.

What? I'm just admiring the work... What do you mean I never did this before? Azuma chuckled. *Hey, buddy, do you know if I should return now?*

Up to you buddy.

Am I enough now? You know... for her?

I don't know! I'm just a sword for goatse's sake.

Azuma snicker-snorted. *True.*

So are you?

I don't know.

You'll never know if you don't go.

Heh. I guess you're right. Thanks buddy.

Azuma stood up and fixed his hood, making sure it covered his face. He was in a random spam section now. *What sector is this in? It looks dead. Oh, there? Calamity Refuge is too far to walk... guess I'm hailing a Google cab. And there's traffic along the Apple highway, too.* The n00bs plaguing the section were alerted to his presence and started to growl.

"Damn it." Azuma cursed as he braced himself for a n00b rush. Sentience glowed blue, telling Azuma's it's good to go.

Just be ready. I need to practice it.

They were off, a pack of them altogether, some of them going to the side and to his back. They were going to try to surround him. "Well that's a new one!" Azuma exclaimed. "Too bad I've got new guns too!"

Azuma took his cloak off as his body started to fire up. From his head first then towards his whole body. "Nice. I still got it." The n00bs attacking froze suddenly as they saw Azuma turn into a fire elemental. It was only a momentary pause, as one of them tried to jump Azuma, with the others following. Azuma just smirked as he spread out his arms, controlling the living flame to consume the foolish cretins.

Sentience noticed a thin, black streak running along Azuma's cheeks. It was worried but Azuma didn't heed. After the last of the n00bs was dead, Azuma reverted back to normal.

"Ach. It still stings though. A lot." Azuma griped as he clutched his fist, noticeably in pain. "I can take it though."

Sentience was still worried about that streak it saw. *I didn't feel anything different. Maybe you were just seeing things. Anyway, let's go. She's waiting for me. And I'm waiting for me to make her stop waiting.*

Honeymoon's Over

By Jewels - Sep 9 2010

Jewels watched the Google car fly overhead and rushed to meet its occupant. "Right on time," she noted. From a distance she saw a beautiful woman step out of the vehicle and address a simplebot. Before Jewels arrived, the woman had dismissed the bot and started walking towards her sporting a big grin on her face.

With open arms the two met and shared an affectionate hug. "Welcome home, Will," Jewels whispered in his ear.

"It's good to be home," he whispered back pulling away just a little to look Jewels in the eye.

"But please, call me Sylae. We didn't go through all that rehabilitation together just to start slipping backwards on my first day here."

"Of course, Sylae." Jewels looked down then back up at her sheepishly, "Just a habit."

Sylae smiled reassuringly, "I understand. I still have to remind myself not to stand in the bathroom." They both shared a lighthearted chuckle before Sylae gave Jewels a meaningful look. "I've missed you." She leaned in towards Jewels, lips pursed. Automatically, Jewels flinched, pulling back and out of the other woman's arms. Sylae cringed herself, looking hurt. "Jewels, I've been in this body for four months now. When are you going to let me kiss you again?"

"I...I'm sorry. I'm just... not ready." In truth Jewels didn't know if she'd *ever* be ready but she didn't voice her concern. The husband she loved with every inch of her being was in there somewhere... shouldn't that be enough? Still, she couldn't bring herself to even think about that yet.

Sylae let out a disappointed sigh but didn't push the issue. "So what have you been doing these last two weeks?"

"Oh, a little of this and a little of that." Jewels had been returning to the refuge every couple of weeks to visit Stillborn and to straighten things up before Will... Sylae came back but she didn't feel like getting into all the details at the moment. "Come on. Let's take a walk around the grounds."

"All right but let's head towards the Administration Tower. There are a ton of things I need to do now that I'm back."

"What? I thought maybe we could just relax a little. Spend some time together, enjoy the scenery, do some mingling... I haven't exactly told anyone what happened. They think we've been on an extended honeymoon." Amid her protesting she noticed that Sylae had already started leading them towards the tower.

Sylae gave her a hesitant sideways look. "I'll add it to my to-do list."

"What's on your to-do list?" Jewels asked with her own disappointed sigh.

"Well, I was planning on integrating the version 5.2 Hive development upgrades..."

Jewels interrupted him, "Done."

Sylae stopped short, obviously surprised. "Uh, and initiate a geological scan of the Refuge Isle..."

"Finished it two months ago." Jewels interjected.

Sylae continued questioningly. "Upgrade the reactor management consoles to interface with the RMM's?"

She hesitated while Jewels seemed to think about it for a minute. "The system has already been set to make the necessary computations and adjustments. It will probably take a few hours to compile."

"When?" Sylae seemed skeptical. "How did you know I wanted it done?"

"You mentioned it before I left this last time," Jewels bluffed. In truth, her link to the Refuge had become increasingly stronger since the... incident, almost worryingly so. It had allowed her to make changes to the computer, database, and Hive just by thinking about them but it was very draining and sometimes hard to turn off. Jewels had spent more than one sleepless night unwillingly purging databases and recompiling backups. It was like having a virtual server in her head and she didn't want to risk making Sylae feel guilty about her decision during the... incident.

"What about refurbishing the BoA forum and moderation center?" Sylae tried. "I wanted to undo some of the stuff Nioca messed with while he was mod there."

Jewels sighed as her mind automatically assigned ten simplebots to start working on it. She whined in exasperation, "It's already been taken care of, Wi... er, Sylae. Please, just... stop thinking about work and enjoy the walk with me."

As they got closer to the Administration Tower, Sylae looked anxiously from the door back to Jewels. "Can't you understand, Jewels? I've been away for too long. I just have to *do* something right now. I don't know how you've accomplished so much while I was gone but with it all out of the way... I've always wanted to try conjoining simplebot machinery with magic. Seems like a perfect time to do it."

Jewels shook her head. That was something she wouldn't be able to do remotely. Besides, it was obvious that Sylae was anxious to get her hands on something constructive to do. Different body, different name, same mind; she didn't know why she expected anything else. Jewels gave up. "Okay, go play with your bots. I think I'll go for a walk in the woods or something."

Sylae nodded her approval. "That sounds refreshing. With all the work you've been doing I'm sure you could use the break." She gave Jewels one more affectionate squeeze before disappearing into the tower leaving Jewels still shaking her head.

Disappearing Act

By Jewels - Oct 8 2010

Jewels did start walking, but not towards the woods. Not yet... Instead she headed for the Geneforge forum for an impromptu visit with Stillborn.

She opened the door quietly hoping not to rouse Nalyd's annoyance at her disrupting his work again. She immediately wished she hadn't though when an inhuman, blood-curdling scream ripped through the forum. It echoed off the walls and chilled her to the bone.

Jewels stood stark still with her eyes squeezed shut until an explosion reverberated through the halls. The scream had subsided to be replaced by a string of expletive in Nalyd's voice. At least she wasn't the one to interrupt him.

Jewels composed herself before walking forward into Nalyd's work area. She still froze once she saw Stillborn. These last three months, as she had been coming back periodically, Stillborn had started to look less and less human, and this time was no exception. Jewels barely recognized him but he still seemed to know her.

"Mother!" he exclaimed from his platform. He made no move to come greet her but there was what appeared to be a smile on his now elongated lips. Nalyd whipped around to scowl at her but did not protest at her presence. He was too preoccupied with fixing his machine to even bother with any other form of acknowledgment.

Jewels tried to steady her heart from the shock of his appearance. She slowly walked forward setting herself to hold him in a tight embrace. Since Nalyd's changes, the physical feeling of touching Stillborn had also changed, for the worse. No longer just a cheese grater, his touch now felt like it grated faster. Like putting her cheek up to a belt sander, she decided. But the tear in her eye was not from her own pain, but the pain Stillborn was continuously going through.

"Are you sure you want Nalyd to do this to you?" She asked him every time she came in and he always gave the same answer.

"Yes, It is my purpose."

She had given up fighting for him to change his mind and simply hugged him again. "No matter what he does to you, or what he changes you into, I will always love you. You will always be my son." This elicited another smile from him and Jewels tried to tell herself that Stillborn was happy being Nalyd's guinea pig but she couldn't believe it.

Nalyd's swearing interrupted their exchange and the little figure crawled out from under a console holding a burnt piece of equipment with wires hanging out of it. "Where is Nalyd going to get another one of these? Even if Nalyd could find one it would cost him a lung and a heart valve."

"Can't you just cut them off yourself and then regenerate?" Jewels quipped.

Nalyd scowled. "Perhaps Nalyd will just cut them off of Stillborn and hope he survives until Nalyd can get a replacement."

"Oh, give me that," Jewels stepped over and snatched the broken piece out of Nalyd's hand. Her mind went into the Refuge's parts schematics. Nalyd had been over exaggerating at its importance. It was only a simple energy converter. Crucial, yes, but not impossible to find.

Jewels turned her back to Nalyd and feigned a close examination. "It's not that broken. I think I can fix it." Covertly, she stuck the broken piece into her pocket while using the Refuge schematic and the Blades Nexus to create another part. She rubbed her sleeve on it, pretending to clean it before turning around and handing it back to Nalyd. "There, try it now."

Nalyd nimbly snatched it back and examined it in disbelief. "How did you do that?!"

Jewels shrugged. "I'm just learning my way around the Refuge better since Will's been away is all." She felt no twinge of guilt for lying to him. Deity knows he'd be demanding she make him all new equipment if he knew what she was capable of. "I need to use the healing and energy pools," Jewels commented now that Nalyd was completely distracted with the miraculously fixed part and putting it back into place.

He waved one hand at her while the other held the part an inch from his hood. "Yes, yes. Go do what you want. Nalyd doesn't care."

Jewels walked over to the pools and started drawing on them just as her and Nalyd's RMMs went off. She hollered to him from her perch. "I'm going to my study. I won't be able to get that. Why don't you take it? Looks like you could use some fresh air." Then she promptly vanished from Nalyd's sight without waiting for his response.

The End

After 249 posts and over two years of collaboration, FT ends, but the story yet continues! To continue the Fanciful Story find or request a copy of Rebirth.