

Tarutaru  Classics

THE EPIC OF
GILGAMESH
HELLKNIGHT

A SAD RETELLING



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PHOTOGRAPHY BY: ELYSIA

FIRST EDITION

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1



A dull clank reverberated in the halls of Garlaige Citadel, disturbing the still, dank air. In ages long since passed, Garlaige stood as a defiant fortress deep within the heart of Beastmen territory. Alas, ruin bears no mercy and time ravages on without pause for legacy. Bulwark walls, painstakingly hewn from the mountain face of Sauromugue itself, erode and crumble after years of forsaken memory. Another clank echoed down the Garlaige's dark stone corridors, stirring the creatures that have since infested this somber shrine. Then silence once again.

Gaping holes speckled the ground, exposing a great cavern below. Undoubtedly they were scars from a siege long ago, as rusting blades and crushed bones littered the Citadel floor. Can it even be called a citadel now? More like a weary crypt, the very air itself reeked of decay and death—heavy, moist, and rotten. Truly a place Altana Herself may have rather forgotten. Sleeping within the shadows of Jeuno's soaring white towers, of late Garlaige Citadel has been besieged anew; this time by children eager to test their fates.



Once more a loud clank pierced the silence. In a hidden nook off the main hall, the light flickered wildly, shadows dancing on the granite walls in response. An irritated grunt followed shortly after. The torch flame calmed and revealed a young man not a day past twenty-four. His arms firmly wielding two Centurion Swords at his sides, he faced his enemy. Before him lay a giant Borer Beetle, clearly agitated, whose wings were flapping furiously. The beetle snapped its mandible jaws, seeking an opening in order to impale those who had disturbed it.

The man lunged forward, swinging his right hand down. His sword blade grated against the stone floor. He spun clockwise with his arms, striking the beetle's striped green shell with each blade. A loud metallic clank resonated with each hit as they landed, not on the beetle, but on the stone ground. The beetle's chitin shell remained whole. In retaliation, the beetle spit a slimy substance onto the man's chest. He could feel it sapping away at his strength.

Exasperated, the man wiped the beading sweat off his forehead and sighed. "What gives? I've tried hitting this thing five times now and it's not taking any damage. I just bought these swords from the auction house too damnit! At this rate they'll be dull before I can sell them back..."

"You haven't been watching it closely enough, Hellknight. You have to pay more attention or you're going to get us all killed," a tall elvaan woman chided, fists in a guarded position.

"Yeah you moron, it's your fault we're in this mess in the first place," yelled an angry elvaan male several yalms away, knelt on one knee. "If you didn't freaking pull with Bomb Toss, we wouldn't have linked this beetle from hell now would we? Seriously, who the hell decides to pull with an A.O.E.?!"

"What do you mean Deity?" inquired Hellknight, confused. "This looks like the same beetles we hunted in Ronfaure. The colors are even the same! And Jing, shut the hell up and do something useful for a change instead of sitting over there while the rest of us fight. ... On second thought, stay back there where you belong, amateur."

Insulted, Jingex snapped back. "Your face is an amateur D:" The young elvaan searched his robes and pockets for his stash of ginger cookies, having seen the urgent need for his energy to be restored. "I was the one that saved your ass from getting owned by burning that Siege Bat you so nicely linked with my awesome magic," he muttered as he munched on bits of cookie.

"Too bad that one bat took it all out of ya. It's alright Jing, some guys just can't put out as much as the rest of us can... whoa!" Hellknight taunted as he evaded a quick thrust by the beetle.

"Your face puts out D:" Jing retorted, wiping his mouth with his sleeve.

"Enough guys, come on let's focus or this thing is going to wreck us," ordered a hume female as she regained the beetle's attention. Throwing a length of hooked kaginawa around the beetle, she cast a ninjutsu to bind its movements and to slow it down. "Look it's about to use it again, its Rhino Guard ability. We need you to dispel it Hellknight, that's why our weapons aren't doing much to hurt it."

The beetle raised its thin, translucent wings and slammed its head down onto the ground, emitting a shrieking noise. A greenish white shield enveloped the Borer Beetle as it resumed its previous stance. Suddenly beetle began evading most of the attacks levied against it.

"Oh, Dispel. Why didn't you say so sooner Ely! You've got it, let me show you the power of Blue Magic," exclaimed Hellknight excitedly. "Oh and guys, call me HK."

With that Hellknight stepped in front of the beetle and channeled arcane energy—Blue Magic. It has long been forbidden in the Middle Lands to attempt to harness the power of beasts. Ever since the Federation of Windurst experimented with the fearsome art of summoning has channeling any form of magic other than elemental been outlawed. However, across the great ocean no such fears existed. In fact, it was fear that drove the sages and sorcerers of Aradijah to delve into making the power of the beasts that hunted them into their own. As Hellknight channeled this force, he remembered the teachings of Balrahn that were imbued into his soul when he added the mantle of Blue Mage to his skills: *“A fire to fight a fire. A thief to catch a thief. A beast to fight a beast.”*

A blue aura surrounded Hellknight as he started to mold the energy into the form he desired—that of the conniving Opo-opo of Yuhtunga Jungle. He released the spell and locked eyes with the beetle. It was drawn to his blank gaze and lowered its guard, the greenish white shield materialized once again only to shatter and fade away.

“Good job HK, now it’s our turn. Ely set me up? Deity, be my Fuidama partner?” asked a blonde elvaan man equipped with daggers. Both Elysia and Deity nodded. “Jing be ready when you see Ely start,” he said as he fist bumped Deity and retreated into the shadows.

“Where the hell did Khale go? This isn’t the time to be running off!” Hellknight questioned as he broke his gaze with the beetle.

As soon as he did, the beetle broke out of its trance and arched up in rage, snapping the kaginawa chains that bound its body. Without warning, it lunged forward with a ferocious force towards Elysia in a huge power attack. Too late to dodge, Elysia put her arms and katanas in front of her face, clenching her teeth for the imminent impact. Hellknight ran forward trying to intercept. At this range and at that speed, the beetle would surely impale Elysia with ease. He had to push her out of the way, but he was just too far, and the Borer Beetle was moving just too fast.

Suddenly a bright flash of light appeared between Elysia and the beetle. A hexagonal disc of pure blue light stopped the beetle in its tracks, shielding Elysia from the force of the attack. Then, crack! A sharp angled line marred the pale blue surface, growing and crackling. Moments later the ward shattered into a mist of fine glasslike shards, sparkling in the air as it caught the light from the torches on the walls. Clearly this attack had killing intent.

“Ely... are you alright?!” shouted Hellknight.

“Yeah, thankfully. Smac casted Protect right in time to take the brunt of it,” Elysia panted, relieved. Behind her, next to Jingex, Smac smiled, his staff shimmering with a soft white glow. “Jing, get up and get ready!”

“Your face is ready D:” Jingex shot back, brushing the crumbs from his flowing robes and adjusting his Seer’s Crown.

Resuming her battle stance, Elysia provoked the stunned beetle once more, parrying the beetle's razor sharp jaws with her katanas. Deftly and quietly, Deity lined up behind the beetle punching the shelled insect from behind with her wind-imbued Boreas Cesti. She could sense a sinister destructive aura seeping out from ahead of her. Jingex had begun rechanneling the raw elemental energies that created and bound this world together. Black magic is truly a sight to behold.

Sensing that his allies had a plan, Hellknight too, began to channel his own form of magical energy as the blue aura returned to envelop his body.

Once Elysia felt that Jingex was far enough along in his mystic incantations, she unleashed the Blade: Rin technique on the Borer Beetle, slicing off one of the giant insect's large pointed mandibles. Before the beetle could fully react in pain, Khale reemerged from the shadows behind Deity to cripple the beetle with one surprise, sweeping swing of his daggers. This Viper Bite cut, enhanced by the secrets of the thief guilds, opened up a distortion in space, dulling the beetle's senses and reflexes. At that moment, Jingex completed the casting of his spell.



Sending the raw might of his mana into the distorted void, Jingex molded the unbridled forces to his will. The Borer Beetle squirmed in pain as its green carapace began to crystallize and freeze. Deity then let go a three hit combo while Hellknight simultaneously released his blue spell, calling forth a bright staff of light to bludgeon the incapacitated beetle. The block of ice shattered, quickly ending the beetle's life.

Exhausted, the entire group fell to their knees as Smac tended to everyone's wounds.

"You know that was really close, we could have easily wiped," noted Elysia as she counted the number of ninja tools she had left. "How did you find this camp anyway, it's a nice spot, away from all the other overcrowded areas. People these days swarm Garlaige and fight for pulls."

"I don't know, we've always used this spot for our current level of skill for as long as I can remember." Hellknight recounted, pressing a finger to his chin in thought.

"Hey look here guys, there's a weird marking on this wall," Jingex said as he started counting the kills the party had done since arriving. "Awesome, two more and I'll have enough points to get my next level badge and qualify for new spells from the shop in Jeuno."

"Oh wow Jing, I think this is the mark of the Untouchables. This must have been their secret camp back in those times," Smac explained as he traced the symbol carved into the wall. "This piss ugly yellow coloring proves it."

“The Untouchables? That legendary crew? I had heard stories of their vast skill when I was young. There’s not many of them left anymore are there?” Elysia asked, perplexed at the history.

“Your face is untouchable D:” Jingex snorted. “A legendary crew of misfits more like it, I bet. Pfft, HK here would fit well with them I think. Hell he could even be a pearlsack with ‘em at the rate he screws things up.”

“The only thing I screw around here is your mom, Jing...” Hellknight began before being stopped by an eerie noise.

Seemingly from every direction at once, the earth itself seemingly let out a ghastly hiss. Startled, Hellknight scrambled up and thrust his swords before him, readying to attack any foe that may be on its way towards the group. The hiss subsided only to be replaced by a rumbling. The ceilings shook off accumulated dust and ash and loose stones dislodged from the walls, hitting Hellknight in the back. Caught offguard, he stumbled forward as the rumbling escalated into full quaking. Hellknight lost his footing, tripped over another of the falling rocks, and fell through one of the gaping floor holes, into the dark depths below.

“HK!” yelled the party as confusion and panic took over. They hurriedly started dashing towards the grand stairwell that led to the cavernous catacombs below the Citadel.

2



Beneath the floor of the Citadel laid an enormous hollowed out cavern. None that live knew for certain why such a great space exists beneath the foundations of the fortress, but rumor had it that a great evil dug out this cave as its nest, silently snatching fools who dare to desecrate this tomb called Garlaige. Most, who in rash resolve venture alone into the lower depths of the pit, were never heard of again. The few alleged survivors returned scarred, refusing to recount the horrors that slept within that abyss, dreadful memories eating away at their sanity.

Years ago, the Grand Duchy of Jeuno, weary of trying to silence this persistent rumor, sent an investigatory probe from the Armathrwn Society down into the deep. Yet the report returned inconclusive. No signs of missing people, no signs of a great beast haunting the grounds were found; nothing but an eerie atmosphere and faint seismic activity was noted. "Perhaps it is just the imagination; the mind playing tricks in the dark," noted the report's author. The Duke, assuming these rumors were but fanciful tales boasted by deceitful adventurers, declared the claims fraudulent, and ordered that eternal torches be lit beneath the Citadel. Perhaps those that were missing had the misfortune of simply falling into a subterranean crevasse in the dark and were never discovered. Perhaps it was truly just the imagination...



Into this pit fell Hellknight, losing consciousness upon impact. Luckily for him, a small Tarutaru Black Mage chanced upon his body and signaled his friends over to his find. Curious as to how any intelligent being would fall down one of the gaping holes above, the Tarutaru began humping Hellknight's body, hoping to wake him. Not able to stir him, one of the Tarutaru mages took a large femur from the ground near them and swung back as far as he could, almost tipping over, then slammed the femur down hard onto Hellknight's back.

Wincing in pain and tears welling in his eyes, Hellknight sprung awake and scurried back away from the impish child-like Tarutarus before him, one wielding a giant bone as large as the mage was tall, smiling wryly. He fumbled around for his swords, his hand rested on a smooth round object. He looked down at what he grabbed and realized he was touching a rotting skull. Startled and shocked, Hellknight let out a yelp that scared the Tarutaru in front of him, causing them to begin casting black magicks at him. Being hit with five bolts of lightning was not exactly a welcomed wake up call.

Hearing the ruckus and seeing the bright flashes of lightning, Khale directed the party towards the disturbance, certain that Hellknight would be at the root of something like that. After making a turn around a large flat-top hill in the center of the cavern, the party was reunited. The bone wielding Tarutaru, dressed in a leather chest-guard attached to a clinking waistcoat of tiny bones and topped with a purple demon skull, spun the femur in his hand while grinning widely. Hellknight leapt into Khale's arms, pointing wildly and blabbering incoherently at the group of five Tarutarus before him.

"Skulls. Glowing yellow eyes. Giant heads. Huge bone swords. Zombies. They're magic baby ZOMBIES I tell you and they want to EAT ME like they did to that guy over there!" Hellknight freaked as he trembled in Khale's arms, pointing at the skeletal remains with one hand, and clutching Khale's chest with the other. "SAVE ME!"

The Tarutaru exchanged confused words among themselves in a language the party did not understand.

"I think HK's been hitting the Red Moko Grass for more than just stylish clothes." Smac conjectured.

Hellknight shot Smac a dirty glance and got on his feet, hunched over in a tackle position. He was convinced that the knee high Tarutarus before him were concocting a plan to roast them all. Finally, the femur wielding mage stepped forward, frightening Hellknight and causing him to once again jump into Khale's arms, clinging onto his neck. In the back, Deity and Elysia tried to muffle their giggling while Smac facepalmed and shook his head at the sad display of machismo.

"Watashi wa Hajirou, yoroshiku," the Taru mage said while kneeling before the crew and bowing his head slightly. Seeing the confused and helpless faces that appeared before him, Hajirou tried a different approach. "Hi, I'm Hajirou, nice to meet you!" he declared cheerfully, extending his short, stubby arms.

Hellknight refused to let go, suspicious of the gesture. Hajirou continued, "We were fighting skerutons, find Coffe key for friend, find your friend instead waru. He did not wake up, so I took this bone to wake him." Hajirou swung the femur around to demonstrate why he had struck Hellknight. Both Elysia and Deity laughed, noting how cute Hajirou was.

"That sounds like HK alright, always finding excuses to catch a siesta. And to think I was almost worried that you bit the dust," Smac said, shaking his head at Hellknight in disgust.

Then, again from all directions at once, a sharp hiss cut through the air. Louder this time... more ferocious. Beneath his feet, Jingex could feel a faint vibration. Loose bits of calcified bone and soil erratically skipped about. *Rum dum, dum drum. Rum dum, dum drum.* A pattern of four distinct impacts with earth bounced and echoed off the granite walls of the pit. In the distance, a tiny figure

dashed towards the group. As it got closer, the yells started to distinguish themselves against the backdrop of the rumbling. *Rum, dum dum drum.*

The quaking had terrified the Tarutaru mages. Clutching onto Deity's legs, they huddled around close. *Rum dum dum, drum.* The rumbling magnified both in intensity and tempo. Jingex began to lose his balance, not to mention the tiny mages who were clinging for dear life. Only Hajirou remained steadfast, unshaken, peering off into the darkness towards the figure. Even with the lanterns that the Duchy had installed down here, the cavern was still terribly dim.

Rumdumdumdrum. Rumdumdumdrum.

Hajirou could faintly make out the form of the figure. It was his last Tarutaru friend, whom he had sent out to seek for more skeletal apparitions to obtain a key from. The fearsome rumbling had reached a crescendo... then...

Silence.

Without warning, an uneasy calm was restored to the cavern. Now, Hajirou could hear his friend's frantic screams clearly, "Nigete! Hayaku hashire! Saketto! Saketto-sama! Nigete!"

A foreboding chill ran down Hajirou's spine. He turned to look at his petrified friends, who all too clearly knew what those shouts had meant. Gripping his makeshift femur staff tightly, Hajirou's mind raced with a million thoughts. He turned his head upwards to look at the faces of the puzzled non-Taru party and hearing their perplexed mumblings, he knew that they were grossly unprepared to even be down here in the pit. He had to act and there was no time to explain what was going on.

"Σ(͡° ͜° |||)┐!!!" he quickly drew in the grey ashy soil with his giant femur and motioned up towards the ceiling. "Run! Nigete! Hurry!" Hajirou barked some orders to his fellow Tarutaru and they instantly began chanting.



“What? I think... I think... they are... warping? What’s going on here, guys? I have a bad feeling about this, we should seriously ge...” Jingex started when he was cut off by the scream of the running black mage, just around the large flattop hill they had come past but moments ago.

Having tripped, the Tarutaru struggled to get up and continue at his dash. He took not two steps forward when four massive booms resounded nearby, accompanied by a ghastly hiss.

Rum.

Dum.

Dum.

Drum.

The earth shook violently in response, causing the Taru to fall onto his back. Panicking, the Tarutaru instinctively reached out for magical energy and a red glow surrounded him. It was the unknown factor that panicked him. He had to see what was lurking under the cover of shadows, he had to know. Unable to keep his concentration in his sheer terror, he waved his hands wildly at the dark air in front of him, the swirling energies manifesting as a small flashes of fire. Seemingly in reaction, the hiss grew louder. He saw.

Light. Hellknight thought he could see something. He got off of Khale and onto his feet and stared off curiously at the frantic Taru black mage, desperately trying to cast a higher tier fire spell. Between the flashes he could have sworn he could see a massive outline. But nothing that big could possibly have been down here. Impossible. A larger burst of flame leapt from the Taru’s hands and struck something. A patch of flame floated high in the air, whipping and turning, revealing two large red eyes and razor sharp mandibles. This time a shriek, raucous and menacing, filled the air. Hellknight was pulled from his gaze by the sound of four whirring hums and a slight breeze brushing past him as the air behind him was pulled in. The four Tarutaru mages by Deity had warped away.

Glancing about, Hellknight questioned, “Hey where did the little devil go with the giant bone sword?”

Jingex looked about until he felt a surge of energy forming ahead of him. But it was not called forth by him, nor by Hellknight. It was too large a force, pure destruction, well beyond his current ability to draw and control. He could feel an aura of unbridled carnage filling the room. He then realized what the current situation called for, and began concentrating his remaining energy into an escape. He only hoped he could muster enough to finish the spell... and finish in time.

It was then that Hellknight found little Hajirou, bolting towards his fallen friend. He too could feel a powerful raw force being drawn from all sides to Hajirou’s location. Awestruck by the amount of power being concentrated before him, Hellknight ignored all else around him. Hajirou turned back and winked at Hellknight, then rushed on. Gone was Hajirou’s cheery, lighthearted disposition. The giant

smile on his face had vanished the moment the rumbling returned. All that remained was a cool, resolved poise. This was a highly skilled and experienced mage. A bright blue glow started emanating from Hajirou's right hand, while in his left a pale golden light shimmered against the dark background.

Suddenly the shrieking stopped, the fallen Tarutaru having lit up patches of rotting cloth and debris around him. A giant claw like leg arched high above him. Spent, he could do nothing further to delay his fate. Covering his face with his tiny hands, he shut his eyes. Elysia screamed, "Noooooooo!" as the massive leg began to rush down.

Hajirou suddenly stopped in his tracks and stood perfectly still, the cacophony of noises and yells circling around unable to disturb him. He thrust his left hand forward and the golden light vanished, reappearing in the vast nebulous space in front of his fumbling friend. It was then that the party truly understood the massive size of the creature hidden in the shadows. Two massive, angled, rings of yellow energy snapped down onto the dark outline and stunned it, stopping the claw in mid air. In immediate succession, Hajirou thrust his right hand and pointed towards the cowering Tarutaru. A familiar whirring humming echoed against the walls as a vortex opened and transported the target away in a flash of green sparkles.

The Tarutaru wiped the sweat from his brow, and sighing in relief, Hajirou began to gather more energy, turning his head and shouting "Run!" at the overwhelmed party. Jingex quickly hastened the incantation for his frustratingly long spell. Seeing that Jingex was only halfway through invoking escape, Hajirou grimly realized that he could not yet finish the job.

The mysterious beast stepped forward with two legs on both sides of Hajirou, blocking off his paths of retreat. *Rum dum*. Roaring in anger at the loss of his previous prey, it was not about to leave empty handed. It jabbed its head forward, revealing its gruesome face. Sharp razor like jaws on each side snapped and dribbled a mucous substance. It began spraying a fine green mist from its grotesque mouth, slowly creeping its way towards Hajirou.

Hellknight looked on in horror as the tiny Taru who, just moments ago, was happily taunting him with a giant bone seemed entrapped in a perilous cage. He started to lunge forward when Khale grabbed his arm, pulling him back.

"What Khale? We have to do something! We can't just leave him to that ... thing!"

"HK, we can't do anything about that, it is well outside the range of our current jobs. It's suicide to run in there, we don't even know what it really is!" Khale explained, trying to calm his friend down. "He told us to run, look at Jingex, he's almost ready, all Hajirou is doing is trying to buy us some time."

Begrudgingly, Hellknight's arm went limp, and he stopped resisting. It just didn't sit right with him. He usually could not sit back and watch while others were put in harm's way, especially for his sake. As much as he hated to admit it, Khale was absolutely right. These newbie jobs were in no way,

shape, or form ready to stand any sort of chance against a beast of this caliber—one that struck fear into the very fiber of this high level Tarutaru black mage, the most fearless type.

The green mist inched closer to Hajirou as he jumped about, somehow able to dodge the beast's swipes with his small stature. Deducing that the green mist was a venomous breath, Hajirou knew it had to be dealt with quickly. Molding some ice magic in his mind, he slammed his palm onto the ground. A blue-white glyph drew a wide circle around him, trapping the beast within its range. A spinning blue loop snared the beast, emitting a rapid ticking rhythm as magic tendrils anchored the beast's limbs and bound its movement. Now its full form was revealed to all; a gargantuan scorpion with four muscular, claw-like legs and a mammoth stinger tail, frozen in mid air.

The mist closed in on Hajirou and he had to act quickly. The chains that bound the scorpion's movement would not last much longer. Holding both hands in a circle at his chest, he drew deeply on his remaining mana reserves. The air around Hajirou began to warp and bend as the magical concentration overflowed, his robes floating and waving gently. The binding glyph began to crack and fade on the ground as Hajirou could hear the beast shatter the magical chains that froze its movements. He did not have much time left. Finishing off the incantation, Hajirou snapped his fingers, sparking the magical energy saturating the air around him; a single loud snap punctuated throughout the cavern.

Light. In that instant, the entire area around him burst into flames, igniting the venomous mist and forcing the remnants to drift in the opposite direction as the fireburst redirected the flow of air. White hot fire swirled violently like a tempest on the high seas. Brilliant wrath. That was all Jingex could think of when he saw the explosion, shielding his eyes from the intense flash. Hellknight stood jaw-dropped. He could feel the searing heat from the inferno before him even though Hajirou was several yalms away. The raging flames burned ravenously, all consuming, roaring and crackling. The earth around Hajirou became a charred circle of ash and dust. The scorpion screamed in pain as its carapace scorched in magical fury. This was the ruthless destruction that follows in the path of the fabled Black Mage.

Hajirou closed his eyes and bowed his head. "Firaga three," he whispered as the flames subsided, a satiated smile snuck its way onto his lips.

The scorpion continued to scream in pain, hissing laboriously. The blue glyph on the ground was faint now, it would be free within seconds. Hajirou casted a final spell on himself, and as the whirring humming pierced the air, he mouthed to the party, "Run!" vanishing in a puff of green shimmering light.

The glyph vanished completely now and the scorpion regained control of its limbs. Furious at the resistance he faced, and the apparent loss of two prey, it turned its attention to Hellknight's party, just a few yalms away. Stumbling forward as it adjusted to using its numbed limbs, the scorpion lunged towards the group.

Rum dum dum drum. The earth wailed in seeming pain as the scorpion slammed each of its four legs down into the ground. *Rum dum dum drum.*

It was close now, just a few more steps. *RUM DUM DUM DRUM*, the ground rippled. Outstretching its right claw leg and preparing to slash in a wide horizontal strike, the scorpion swung with all its demonic strength. Just then the last words feverishly left Jingex's lips and a swirling dark vortex distorted the space around the party. The same whirring humming that had stolen two meals from it has just snatched away meals three through eight. Enraged, the scorpion slammed the earth with all four legs. Garlaige Citadel itself trembled in respect.

Outside the entrance to the Citadel, a vortex opened and the party fell out, tumbling over each other as they went. Hellknight covered his face with his hands.

Light? The sunlight was just too glaring for his slowly adjusting eyes. However, he had never been so relieved to see the sun again. The ground vibrated gently. Yes, he was truly relieved, however, Hellknight was not one to flee from challengers to his ego. After having been put through that hellish, helpless nightmare, he could not leave this to rest at the cost of his integrity...

3



Jingex sighed deeply. Exhausted, he kicked back and leaned against a nearby boulder. He didn't want to move at all. That last spell took its toll. In reality, the party was lucky that Jingex was able to force the spell to cast with less mana than normally required. At times, he questioned whether or not a curse was placed on the group. This was the fifth time this month that he had narrowly escaped certain doom while with Hellknight. And once again, it was all Hellknight's fault. He looked over at Smac, who was tending to everyone's wounds and was trying to alleviate some of the fatigue with divine magic. Without uttering a word, Smac could read the distraught look on Jingex's face and nodded in agreement. Eyebrows furrowing, they glowered at Hellknight, who, in response, smiled nervously.

"Well that was quite a close *claw* wasn't it...? Heh... heh heh," Hellknight mustered, his hand rubbing the back of his head anxiously.

A blank expression appeared on everyone's face. Khale looked the other way; Deity shook her head in shame. Elysia blinked rapidly, lips twisted, unable to comment. Jingex and Smac were less amused, looking at each other to confirm that their ears had heard the same thing. Suppressing the boiling rage inside themselves, all they could do was facepalm and scoff heavily. Jingex, too tired to move, could not call up the strength to get over there and choke the living daylights out of Hellknight. He could always be raised if it got that far. If only he had a bit of mana left to nuke the fool to oblivion. Smac's face twitched slowly, still incredulous, thinking, "*He's damn lucky I'm stuck on White Mage...*"

Elysia sat idly, lost in thought. Hellknight asked, "Hey Ely, what's wrong, are you alright? Something is bothering you, I can see it."

He hopped over to where she sat and put an arm on her shoulder, encouraging her to say what was on her mind.

"Saketto...," Elysia whispered. "That's what he was screaming right? The Tarutaru who was being chased by that monster? Saketto... could it be?"

Perplexed, Hellknight shrugged. "I don't think I follow Ely, go on."

"My old linkshell leader... he was a monster hunter. He used to travel the lands between the three nations, collecting bounties on deadly creatures both real and rumored. But... one day he came back from a hunt... changed." Elysia recalled.

“Changed?” asked Jingex, while punching messages into his linkpearl communications orb to explain to their guild what had just transpired.

“Yeah... he came back in tatters. His clothes shredded. He returned weaker than he was when he set out. The Duchy categorized him as “develed” and stripped him of abilities that he was no longer fit to use. He had no urge to regain them. His spirit broken. Paranoid, schizophrenic, he spent the rest of his days sequestered in his Mog House, refusing to talk to anyone. He became obsessed with this beast that he called...”

“Serket. Lord of the Arachs. The Scourge of Despair,” Khale named off, Elysia nodding. “To think we had just seen that myth, let alone escaped alive,” Khale said gravely.

Elysia grabbed her knees and held them tight, trying to keep her composure.

“In Jeuno there have been rumors, whispers really, of some sinister being lurking inside Garlaige. Stories vary wildly on why it’s supposedly there. Some say it guards a great treasure put there by the Duke himself. Others claim it was the true cause of the rout of the Citadel, a Beastman relic from the Great War. Elusive, no one has ever returned with concrete proof it actually exists, only its name is passed around... more as a warning than a call to arms... The Venom-king Serket.”

A grim silence cast over the party as they came to terms with how serious their latest encounter was. Seeing Elysia shaken to her very core disturbed Hellknight. He had promised himself that he would not let her fall to harm, no matter the foe—beast, man, or god. However here, he seemed powerless. Looking at the pensive faces of his friends, he could not stand this suffocating air anymore.

He had to prove himself able again, to prove to his friends he could be depended on when the situation calls for it, to prove to Elysia that he could protect her. He had been running from responsibility all his life, Lady Luck guided his path, and strong-willed resolve had been his motto. But today, Serket had taken that away from him, as they had run, owing all their lives to a single brave Taru Black Mage. He had to retake the reins of his story.

Drowning his own fear in blind resolve, Hellknight declared, “If this Serket is such a notorious monster, then there’s only one thing we can do: Kill it. We may have been too weak as we are now to take it on, but we’ve taken tough beasts before, we can crush this thing when we are at our best.

“Hajirou did not hold Serket back and tell us to run as he warped away. No... He mouthed ‘Go!’ He held it back to buy us time to get out and come back. If a Tarutaru can stand before Serket by himself without shaking and we can’t do the same as a party, then we don’t deserve to call ourselves elite.”

Was it with resolve or denial that he drowned his fear? Hellknight couldn’t decide, preferring not to dwell too deeply on it. All he hoped was that he gave a convincing enough rally. He turned to face the doors of Garlaige, the ground still vibrating rhythmically. He swore he could hear an annoying

buzz, but dismissed it as imagination. Khale and Deity smiled, both noting a familiar bravado in Hellknight that they thought was long lost. They had missed his side of him, secretly tucked away deep inside. They both agreed that Hellknight was right.

Jingex scoffed. "You're face is elite D: HA that's funny. Sounds good to me, I can't let no Taru runt show me up. Don't let this get to your head asshole, if you screw up this time, I'm not looking out for your ass."

Hellknight grinned. "Oh I didn't know you were checking out my ass, but thanks Jing."

A shocked expression crossed Jingex's face, then his eyes narrowed, "No you. Your face is ass. Jerk. I try to be nice and this piece of shit...URGH!" Jingex waved his hands as a vortex opened. "I'll be at Port Jeuno," he snapped as he stepped through and the vortex closed in a whirring hum.

Content with himself, Hellknight continued. "Smac?"

"You had me at treasure. I'm in. I'll be at Port Jeuno too, at the auction house. Khale, come grab me there?" Smac said as he too cast warp on himself.

Kneeling down to take Elysia's face in his hands, Hellknight nodded to her. "Don't worry, we won't turn out like your old leader. I promise. My word is bond. Come, let's head back to Jeuno before that damn scorpion forgets who we are."

With those words, somehow, Elysia felt much more at ease. "*It'll work out, somehow,*" she thought to herself.

Using warp scrolls that Deity had cleverly reminded the crew to obtain from the Jeunoan Gate Guard, the rest of the party hurriedly arrived back to Port Jeuno. The Duchy had seen better times. Ever since the enigmatic Empire of Aht Urhgan emerged from its isolationist policies and opened the sea route between Al Zahbi and Mhaura, Jeuno had fallen in stature, no longer the nexus of business and leisure. However, there was still much commotion inside the white stone walls of the towering city.

"Guys I have to stop by my Mog House to grab a few things and swap jobs. You guys do the same." Hellknight instructed as he hurriedly dashed towards the residential district.

"Let's meet up at the Merry Minstrel in Lower Jeuno!" Elysia shouted to Hellknight. "Yeah let's all meet up there in a bit. Khale can you let Jingex and Smac know on your way?" she continued. Khale nodded in acknowledgement. "Take your time guys!" Elysia laughed as she walked towards the stairs to Lower Jeuno.

About twenty minutes later, Smac arrived at the Merry Minstrel pub, tiptoeing to see if he could spot anyone at a table. The restaurant was surprisingly packed for this time of day. Seeing Elysia's familiar shimmering Noble's Robe and her waving him over, Smac made his way through the crowd. There, Khale, Deity and Jingex were also sitting. Smac was relieved he was not the last one to arrive.

Elysia and Deity picked up a menu and began perusing the daily specials and signature dishes. Smac gave a confused look as he pulled up a chair.

Deity loosened her Haubergeon straps and set aside her Hagen against the wall behind her chair. It was difficult to move around and eat with them in the way. Humming quietly to herself she was torn between two choices.

“Ely, should I try out their Shallops Tropicale or skip straight to dessert and have their Snoll Gelato with their famous strawberry glaze?”

“Hmmm tough choice. Fish does sound good, though. How about we split an order of Merry Pescatora and Shallops Tropicale and finish it off with the Gelatos?” Ely suggested, eyeing the pescatora a waiter just served the table next to her.

“Great idea Ely, let’s do that,” Deity agreed. “Khale, anything for you?”

“Naw I’m good thanks, I’ll just have this glass of Chocomilk here and wait for the waiter to bring out the Marron Glaces I asked for. Thanks though,” Khale explained while adjusting his feathered Duelist Chapeau.

He grabbed a copy of the Jeunoan Gazette from an empty table and began reading the day’s news.

“Seems the Duchy is lowering taxes all around. They must really be hurting for people to come back after the Developer’s Council started seizing and smelting all that counterfeit gil from traffickers and brought on this recession. Seems like they cut a deal with the Near East too and Sagheera is going to charge less for Cosmo Cleanse,” he said as he flipped through the pages.

“Great, maybe I can actually afford to go back to Limbus and finish off my HQ Choral Set. Bastards. I hate that wench though. Everytime I buy some overpriced Cleanse from her she gives snide remarks insinuating I smell or something. I let her know what’s what though. She knows her face likes to be dirty too D:” Jingex mumbled as he buried his face into his crossed arms, seemingly trying to nap. His airy Marduk’s Jubbah ruffled as he moved about.

Smac looked at everyone slowly, bewildered and finally spoke, “Um... hey guys weren’t we going to go slay that evil Serket thing like... now? You know.... Giant scorpion? Poison god or something? If so, shouldn’t you avoid eating fish and meat if you’re going as a White Mage, Ely? And Deity, shouldn’t you be eating Sushi? And Khale this isn’t the time to be reading the newspaper, and Jing just... what?! You can’t seriously be taking a nap now... seriously???”

Everyone blinked at him confused themselves, seeing nothing wrong with that they were doing.

Finally, Ely said, "Oh, I forgot you haven't been with us that long Smac. Sorry! Trust me, by the time HK is ready, this food will be well digested and won't affect me at all, same with Deity. We could eat a Bison Steak and we'd still have plenty of time for the effects to fade. Sit back, eat what you want! Relax!"

"Are you serious? That... long? Sure... then I guess..." Smac said slowly, unsure of whether or not this was a giant prank. He sat down and started looking through the menu. "*I suppose I am a little hungry,*" he thought to himself.

"Yeah chill dude. You'll get used to this. It's kind of a nice thing to spend this time letting loose. I sure as hell know we're all going to just get wound up again and pissed off when we head out and HK starts screwing up... again. So you might as well savor the luxury now while you have it." Jingex yawned as he began to drift off into sleep.

"Hmm very true. I'll take you guys' word for it. Let's see here... anything exotic?" Smac said to himself as he peered at the menu. "Waiter! I'll have one order of Rotisserie Black Chocobo, with sauce and all that jazz," Smac yelled out to the staff.

Elysia shot a cold stare at Smac after he placed his order then shifted her eyes to his left. Turning his face he saw that Deity too gave him the same disapproving look. To his left he saw a small boy playing with his baby chocobo pet. The tiny plump bird "kweh-ing" softly as it ran in circles around the boy.



Nervously smiling, he said, "Now now... it's on the menu, it's a delicacy in some parts of the world!"

"WARK!" the little bird cooed beside Smac, tapping his Ares's Sollerets with its tiny beak. It rubbed its feathery head against him.

The boy quickly ran over and picked up the baby chocobo, apologizing, "Sorry sir, LuckyInfinity just loves to meet new people! I think he likes you!"

LuckyInfinity flapped his tiny wings and hopped into Smac's lap, nuzzling against his Adaman Hauber.

Elysia shook her head at Smac, disgusted. Defeated, Smac called out to the waiter, "On second thought, cancel the first order. I'll have a... a...a... Tavnazian Salad instead... and whatever these two are having." Sighing, Smac looked over again at Elysia and Deity who were both smiling now. "*Low carb bullcrap...*" he thought to himself.



Meanwhile, Hellknight arrived at his Mog House, panting heavily from the mad dash. Turning the handle, he was surprised when the door did not open immediately. He pushed slightly harder. It didn't budge. He took two steps back and rammed the door with his shoulder, busting it open and tumbling headfirst into the room.

It was an epic mess. Old pieces of armor and weapons, three different sets of holiday attire, woodworking tools, gil coins, random farmed spoils, thingamajigs of all different shapes and sizes filled his Mog House in a haphazard manner. No rhyme or reason to the chaos. Digging himself out of the pile he dove headfirst into, he emerged with a Goblin helm sitting crooked on his head. He waded through the sea of junk like an oar through water, desperately searching for the gear he needed.

"Moogle, where are you? I need your help! I need to find my Scorpion Harness and my Koga Chainmail slip and my ninja tools. Oh my Terra Staff also, and those 8 different katanas we set aside last time I dropped them off, do you remember? And..." Hellknight stopped himself, realizing his housekeeper was not responding. "Moogle?"

It was then that Hellknight slipped on a jar of Slime Oil that he had kept to craft some Silent Oils that he never got a chance to get to. On his way down he knocked over two mannequins and his Harpsichord, possibly damaging it upon impact as the sound of snapped strings hummed.

"Nevermind Moogle I think I found the harness on this here mannequin." However, there was still no answer.

Looking over to his left, he saw an odd puff of pink fuzz. He yanked it and fished out his lost friend. "Moogle! There you are!"

"Oh you've returned master! Kupo! Thanks for saving me! Kupo! I thought I'd be buried under there forever!" the moogle exclaimed, excited to be able to spin around and fly in mid air again.

"I need to change to Ninja, can you make that happen while I look for my stuff?" Hellknight commanded as he dug around some more in his junkyard of a home. "I am going to be soooooo late!" He grimaced at the thought of what was coming to him.

"Yes sir, kupo! Changing to Ninja now!" the moogle announced as he spun and sprinkled magic dust over Hellknight.

Upon breathing in the dust, Hellknight sneezed and fell over once again, accidentally opening up his delivery box and allowing a deluge of backed up mail items to fall on top of him. After being pelted by a cheap blue ring and a rusted looking sword, an especially heavy object bonked Hellknight on the head.

"What on earth was this again?" he asked himself as he tore open the packaging. "Oh right! So that's where this thing disappeared to! I was looking for this the other day, I must have forgotten that I sent it to myself. Whoops! This might come in useful later.

Moogle I'm taking this along too, so that you can help me later when I forget again ha ha..."

Hellknight carefully rewrapped the mysterious item and tied a large pink ribbon around it so that he would remember what it was. He then stuffed the object into his gobbiebag and continued on his scavenging hunt for gear he needed.

Sometime later, Hellknight emerged from his house and dashed again towards the Merry Minstrel. Upon reaching the pub, Hellknight looked around and saw the party gathered around a table. Walking over, he was surprised to see them all passed out with Jingex snoring away while Smac drooled slightly, mumbling something about fried chocobo. In the center of the table was a large Monopoly game board with hotels and houses all built up, and multicolored paper money scattered all around the table, most of it with Smac. Gently coughing, he stirred everyone awake. Groggily everyone rose, rubbing their eyes and reorienting themselves. Khale let out a big yawn.

Jingex frowned at Hellknight, "What the hell took you so long jackass!? Do you know what time it is?? Do you know how long we've been waiting for your worthless ass? LOOK, we pretty much finished this damn board game and you *know* how long this damn game takes to finish. Oh and *screw* you Smac, you totally were cheating. Give back those two squares next to GO! Look, I'll trade you my four airship routes for them, that's quite a deal! I want my goddamn Bastokan Slumlord properties back D:"

Smac just smiled widely waving his wads of game currency in the air. "Some guys have it, some guys don't. What can I say, I am a business man. Money just comes to me. And if you think I'm bad, take a second look at Sibe, he totally rapes me in riches. But anyway, I take it it's time to go?"

All in agreement, the party went down to Port Jeuno and rented out a few chocobos to hasten the short trip back to Garlaige Citadel. The crescent moon gleamed in the night sky above them. It was barely a crescent now, tinged a faint purple hue. Dismounting at the entrance to the old fortress, Hellknight stopped to take a deep breath.

"This time will be different," he thought to himself and he stepped through the heavy steel doors and into the dark corridor with the rest of his party.

The earth rumbled softly again. Lord Serket still awaits...

4



The party navigated through the labyrinthine halls once more. The upper level of the Citadel was eerily vacant now, making for hasty passage through the old castle. They could hear the deep rumbling from below fluctuate in volume as they approached and passed by the wide, crumbling gaps in the stone floor. Reaching the grand winding staircase leading down into the lower depths, Hellknight slowed his pace, heavy thoughts started creeping into his frame of thought. Each step down, the booms grew more ominous, and slowly, he could begin to hear that bone-chilling hiss once more.

“Should I stop and let them turn back before it is too late?” he thought to himself before shaking his head roughly, shedding his doubts. “No, nothing will happen. I will defend everyone. I can. I must. I made a promise. I can’t fail. Not again. Never again.”

Hellknight suddenly tripped on some large mass, skipping down three steps before regaining his balance. Turning around, torch in hand, he whistled to stop those behind him from also falling. He waved his torch above the spot, revealing a fallen galka ranger, garbed in a leather tunic, his bow tossed several steps down. Deity gave a small gasp and turned away. Hellknight saw what she had seen—the galka’s lower half was corroded away, a green ooze bubbling softly. Jingex grabbed the wall for support as he gagged then yelled in horror as he felt a thick wet substance smeared on the cold stone surface. Blood. Jingex immediately began to regret agreeing to come along on this small crusade.



The group arrived at the bottom of the steps and entered the grand cavern. The smell of fresh blood stained the air. Hellknight could hear the hiss nearby, overpowering. Creeping up slowly along the walls of the central flat top hill, the party peered out into the open space. There it was, in front of their eyes—Lord Serket Venom-king. Its four colossal legs pounded the ground, as it strafed to the left. Serket's brutish tail swung violently in the air in quick nimble jerks. Hellknight focused behind the giant scorpion as it moved out of the way, squinting his eyes. There was someone there, engaged.

It was a group of seven. All dressed in leather tunics and cotton robes, yet somehow high level.

"Gilfarmers," Khale said, frowning. "They're Chinese money traffickers. The Developer's Council has been on a witch-hunt against them, tracing their movements and network of transactions."

Serket crouched low, stabbing its stinger into the ground. Then it released and sprang up and behind the shocked gilfarmer alliance. Snatching the large galka with its jagged jaws and critically biting his torso clean through, Serket hissed with glee. With its mandibles open, it easily flung the galka back like a ragged doll. As the limp body sped through the air it sprayed a fine mist of blood and collided with a nearby elvaan ninja. Both were knocked back far, slamming into the granite wall on the opposite side. The force of the galka corpse snapped and crushed every bone and organ in the elvaan's body.

The remaining five gilfarmers screamed in horror as they turned to look towards the cratered wall where their friends had flown. Before they could react, Serket whipped his dual pronged tail and impaled three Tarutaru mages in one fell swoop. Their lifeless corpses slowly slid off the two spikes of Serket's stinger tail. Only a mithra mage and a hume male remained. The mithra was paralyzed in fear, unable to move, no matter how much her mind was telling her to flee. The hume yelled desperation, charging headlong towards Serket, polearm extended.

The vile scorpion stood his ground, merely swiping one of his mammoth claw legs. The hume's leather tunic was easily shredded and the claw gouged a large diagonal laceration in his chest. The hume dropped to his knees. Serket stretched open his acrid mouth, snapping his jaws voraciously. In one slow bite, he severed the top half of the hume's dying body, the morbid sound of crunching bones echoed clearly across the cavern. Uninterested in the feeble mithra left standing, Serket jerked his tail and flung her back and through the air, choosing instead to savor his meal. The ill-fated mithra landed a short distance behind the party, still hiding behind the flattop hill.

Triumphant, Serket began to slowly creep back into the shadows, the thundering booms of his steps faded into the distance.

Rum dum dum drum.

"It's enraged HK. This is the worst possible situation. Those gilsellers must have pestered it for far too long, when they were clearly outmatched." Deity deducted, trying to stay calm in the face of the carnage around her.

“It’s okay. I’m used to dealing with pissed off people,” Hellknight said with a chuckle, trying to break the grim aura. “I’ll be able to calm it down. Alright here is the plan. Ely support us from the back, stay out of Serket’s path. Jing, back her up and help us out where you can, I’ll leave the music choices up to you. Khale stay nearby and enfeeble it with your magicks. Deity, Smac up front with me, but don’t stay too close to it for long, we saw how quickly it can attack at close range. Its tail is the primary threat. We have to restrict it somehow, if you guys see the chance, take it.”

Hellknight was about to continue when he was cut off by the ominous rhythm they had all quickly learned. *Rum dum dum drum*. Serket was starting to creep back towards their location.

“We don’t have much time,” Hellknight finished. “Everyone get ready and don’t let down your guard!”

Elysia stepped forward and placed her hand on Hellknight’s chest. A warm glow surrounded them both as she called forth the holy white magic of Altana. Orange shards of light slowly spun around Hellknight, quickening their pace gradually.

A gentle ticking sound crackled faster and faster as Elysia chanted, “Winged boots. Flash of light. Lift from this soul the weight of time. Travel as the sound flies, coming with the crashing thunder, departing with the echoing boom. Haste!”

Somehow, Hellknight’s arms and legs felt lighter. He could move more freely, react more quickly.

Rum dum drum. Serket had sensed their location and was closing in on the party’s location now. *Rum dum drum*.

Emboldened and resolved, Hellknight and Smac assumed their battle stance. *Rum dum drum*. The booms were louder now, faster too. Elysia moved her hand from Hellknight’s chest and extended it up into the air, the warm glow shifting into a cool blue aura. Deity closed her eyes and silenced the chaos around her, reaching deep inside her mind. Peace. While she mediated and honed her mind against all distractions she unsheathed her Hagun great katana. Its blade reflecting the light from the eternal torches plunged into the ground. *Rumdum drum*.

Elysia finished. “Azure ward. Split the shield by the sixfold path. Wipe away the clash of blades. Protectra four!”

An explosion of blue light filled the dark abyss, covering each person with a barrier of divine power. Then, as the light faded away, Hellknight shouted, “Scatter!”

Rumdum, dum drum. Rumdum drum, drum.

On command, each member jolted in a different direction, away from Hellknight. A towering form slid suddenly from the left. Lord Serket had arrived, arching its back and lifting its front legs high into the air. It roared violently and crashed its legs down in challenge.



“To think that you would return back to my lair, foolishhhhhh one. I am master, king, and god here. You dare to *trespasssssss* ... where the Dawn *Goddesssssss* Herself has abandoned to my power. Name yourself, mortal, *ssssssssso* that I can etch your name into the *agelessssssss* stone of Garlaige with these *clawssss*, a warning to those to follow you,” the scorpion lord hissed, whipping his body about to demonstrate his strength.

Hellknight was surprised. The scorpion was behemoth, much larger than he had originally imagined. But it did not matter, he had a task to finish.

Tossing his katana in his hands, Hellknight taunted, “I serve no master, I bow to no king, I pray to no god. It will be your name that I shall carve into the rock, your gravestone, your terror forgotten as it fades into myth.”

Infuriated at this insolence, Serket slammed his legs down hard, the very foundations of Garlaige quaked, ready to crumble from the stress.

“You throw away your *sssssssecond* life by coming here. I shall teach you not to squander the grace of the gods. There will be no third life. You are but ants in the afterbirth. I shall crush you into dust and scatter you to the winds. No quick death lies in your short future. I shall *ssssssssssavor* your suffering until you cry out for mercy.”

With that Serket whipped its deadly tail at Hellknight, but he was able to evade. A deafening boom struck when Serket's tail hit the ground.

"That's how you had thought to calm it down, dumbass?!?! You enraged it even more you idiot!" Jingex scolded, visibly angry. "I have to do everything around here, you *batshit crazy asshole!*"

Putting his flute to his lips, Jingex began playing a slow, melodic tune. The song resonated against the hard stone walls, easily filling the large cavern like an auditorium. When the notes reached Hellknight's ears, he felt a surging strength well up from deep inside him. His soul had struck a chord with Jingex's song. Meanwhile, Serket's wild thrashing had begun to slow.

Hellknight reached into a small bag tied around his Swift Belt and from it pulled out a small piece of paper. Ripping the sheet in two, he whispered, "Mahou no kage: Utsusemi: Ichi."

His shadow lengthened and wrapped itself around him as the ninjutsu took effect, warping the space. He parried a quick slash by Serket's left claw. Thanks to Elysia's buff, Hellknight was easily able to gauge and see Serket's movements. Acrobatically leaping forward, to the side, and backwards, Serket was unable to score a direct hit.

While the scorpion was distracted and frustrated by the nimble Hellknight, Khale positioned himself behind it. He planted his Auster Staff into the ground and grabbed the shaft with one hand, the other outstretched at Lord Serket. The cut green orb at the top of his staff emitted a dark green light as Khale started his incantation.

"Binding coil. Iron shackles chained to the silver gate. Tie his limbs to the rock of the Earth. Gravity!"

A swirling mass of heavy, dark green energy spilled onto Serket's brown carapace. His body slammed onto the ground, legs flat, as if crushed by some cosmic force. It struggled to stand itself up fully, only able to resume a crouched position. Each movement it made was beleaguered and slow.

This was Deity's chance. Seeing the creature impaired, Deity opened up her third eye, anticipating Serket's movements. She rushed in close and gracefully and targeted Serket's bladed legs. Spinning upwards, she swung her Hagun deftly in a semi circle. The light reflecting off the tip of her blade traced a crescent moon in the air. She had cut clean through one of Serket's claws, the heavy carapace shard plodded onto the ground with a loud thud. Quickly flipping out and away, Deity escaped the spray of corrosive green blood that came out seconds after. Serket let out an unnatural scream as it felt its first wound.

"Meddlesome *bratsssss!*" The pained scorpion gasped, stumbling and thrashing to regain its balance, reduced to three legs.

It turned towards Deity, tail arched back, ready to strike. Serket lifted its remaining front claw up and slashed horizontally. Deity parried with her Hagun, blade shaking against the force of the strike,

giving off frenzied scraping noises. Focused on resisting Serket's frontal attack, Deity did not notice as the scorpion-lord snapped its tail, racing towards Deity's back. Unable to drop her guard to her front, and unable to dodge, she was helpless in this pincer attack. She braced for impact, hoping that her high quality Haubergeon would blunt some of the force.

But, before the dual pronged stinger could land its blow, Hellknight intercepted, back to back with Deity, both katanas crossed, blocking the attack. However, Serket was not yet done. Twisting its tail counterclockwise, the two venomous ends dislodged themselves from Hellknight's crossed blades, spinning to stab at his exposed neck in two successive strikes. Hellknight ducked his head, leaving a shadow image where it once was, the tail jabbed twice at the wispy clone. Serket sensed that her attack had failed, tricked by illusions. Hellknight rolled out from under the tail and somersaulted back away from the stinger head. He brought the katanas down, slashing the scorpion's tail. A metallic sound rang as the edges collided with Serket's steel hard carapace, unmarred.

Frustrated, the lord of the Arachs darted around to face Hellknight, his interest in Deity lost as he brushed her off. She fell to her knees, panting, her Hagun blade had almost shattered like brittle stone when it was meted against the force of the beast's claw. To Hellknight, the Venomking spat:

"You who crawl upon the clay, writhing in the lowly dust, you dare to strike my obsidian shell. Dare to reach for the orb of sky. Dare to crush it in your fist, dare to snap your mortal *chains*, bound by those Undying, breaking limits placed before you. Ignorant child! Pride of the blade, a fool's dream. Fortune favors you, who dare to sever my slaughtering claw, what countless souls it sent to the world of shades. *Know your place.* I am *sovereign* here, it will bend to my will. You who reach for the orb of sky, I tell you, you grasp at the fleeting wind, never shall you hold it in your fist, never shall you see the sun again. Within my nest shall be your grave, known only to these timeless walls, doomed by zealous pride, pride on the blade."

The great scorpion inhaled deeply, spewing a sinister dark green mist, much more menacing than the breath he shot at Hajirou. This mist blanketed the center of the cavern, moving fast. Upon breathing the noxious gas, Hellknight's chest constricted in pain, sharp spikes stinging his very core. He coughed violently, looking over to Deity who, too, hunched over retching. Poisoned air, potent and deadly. Soon after Hellknight could hear Elysia's frantic coughs as well. Jingex's minuet ceased to soothe as he, too, succumbed to the venom storm, dropping his flute. Khale, from afar, saw how his friends each began to falter as the scorpion reared its head. Realizing that time was short and that he had no other alternative, he dove headfirst into the green cloud.

Khale stepped between Hellknight and Serket and placed fist to chest, gathering mystic energy within. Instantaneously, he released, a translucent pointed shield appeared before him, bending the light like a lens. Then, pointing his Auster Staff at the vile scorpion, both hands gripping firmly on the wooden pole. The green orb atop the staff sparked alive, a bright spiral began to form inside. Aided by the magical properties imbued within his Duelist Chapeau, he shortened his incantations, a gentle breeze whooshed through his blonde bangs as he went on.

His staff began to pulsate. Serket, sensing another surge of black magic saturating the air, lunged a claw towards Khale. Elysia's ward, that blue disc of light, reappeared in front of Khale, stopping Serket's giant claw. The air began to blow swifter, disturbing the green mist. Serket slammed the barrier again, this time piercing the ward as it shattered like glass but was stopped yet again by another magical field.

This time it was Khale's, the phalanx shield was a wise precaution. Khale stood calm and still, continuing his casting. The air began to whistle as it picked up speed. Serket slammed a third time with his massive claw and the spell began to crack but it was too late.

Khale had finished. "Aero three."

With a burst of light from the tip of his staff, a maelstrom of wind blustered forward, clearing the air as the poisonous mist retreated to the other side of the cavern. Bits of stone and debris were picked up by the gusts, slicing at whatever impeded its path. Serket covered his face, his hard carapace skin protecting him from the spell. Once the winds stopped he slammed the damaged barrier again, this time breaking it and striking Khale on his side. Tumbling over, Khale grit his teeth to muffle his pain. Arm broken, he would be unable to cast anymore spells. He shuddered to think what would have happened to him if he had not been protected by those warding spells.

Ridding itself of the annoying Red Mage, Serket turned to other easy prey. It spotted Elysia and charged at her, still coughing from the effects of the venomous air she inhaled. Merely sweeping away the storm would not cure them of their ailment and it knew that. Once again Hellknight intercepted Serket's attack.

Removing another slip of paper, he ripped it with two fingers and he wheezed. "Utsusemi: Ni."

Four shadow copies appeared surrounding Hellknight before vanishing. However, unable to dodge as nimbly as he was before, Hellknight's illusions were cut down one by one.

Meanwhile, Elysia climbed up the flat top hill, hoping to find better footing and safety up there. Reaching the top, she used her staff as support to stand herself up, her legs wobbling feebly as they began to numb. She touched the white crystal on her Apollo's Staff and prayed, asking Altana to lift her divine veil. As if in answer, her staff beamed with rays of white light, illuminating the dark cavern. As the divine light shone on her party, their poisoned bodies cleansed. The scorpion roared as it whipped its tail forward, irritated by the blinding light.

Hellknight followed the tail and turned to Elysia, yelling at her to dodge. It was then, with his guard dropped, that Serket's tail suddenly changed directions, diagonally slashing Hellknight's back with its two stingers. Deity tried to grab the scorpion's attention, sensing that the tide was turning in an unfavorable way. She had to buy some time, Hellknight will be able to pull through, he always did, somehow, somehow. She believed in him, she just had to buy him some time.

"Wake up HK, what has changed you so? Why are you so lost? Wake up!" she thought to herself as she drove her great katana through Serket's side.

Her Hagun was forged to slice, not to pierce, but she could not anticipate a suitable angle at which to penetrate Serket's black-brown chitin shell. Only a direct stab would damage him now, and she had no time to wait. Twisting her Hagun's hilt she caught the beast's infuriated gaze, its red eyes glowering at her reckless attack. Serket spun wildly, claws and tail easily brushing Deity twenty yalms away, the brave samurai laid unconscious upon impact with the ground.

The scorpion king leapt high into the air, brushing the bottom of Garlaige's floor above him with his tail, then pounded the earth with a resounding boom. The earth rippled as water. Ashen soil, stone, and sand buried all of Jeuno's eternal torches. Darkness consumed the cavern once more. Only dim red glows spotted the quaked floor where the torches once were, their eternal flames vainly trying to peak out from under the earth.

Jingex, Smac, and Hellknight huddled together at the one remaining lantern-torch. Serket's red eyes hovered in the dark, then vanished as it blinked, cleverly camouflaged along the ground. A shrill shrieking hiss filled the cavern, bouncing off the granite walls to seem as if it came from all directions, masking Serket's stalking movement.

Jingex, hands shaking, forced his hands to bring his flute to his lips once more as he played once more. His music barely registered, drowned out by the deathly hiss. Suddenly a flash of blue light blinded the trio, accompanied by a shattering crash as Serket broke through Elysia's remaining wards from above, landing in the middle of them. In two quick kicks of each hind claw, Serket cast aside Smac and Jingex. It was determined to deal with Hellknight alone. It snapped its jaws rapidly in excited joy, seeing the ninja crawling on the floor, its red eyes glowed with barbarous pleasure, victory within its jagged claws.

Smac struggled to his feet, blood dripping down his arm. His adaman hauberk weighed heavily on his distressed body. Gripping his great axe's intricate shaft for support he turned towards the beast that flung him. Fury boiled from deep inside him. No one casts him aside so easily. No one. Smac tapped the bhuj's dark blue blade gently, smearing blood across its golden etchings. The blade hummed softly in response.

Jingex stirred beside Smac, whipping his head around at the sound of that somber hum. During his long life as an experienced bard, Jingex had heard all manner of whistle, clash, and tone, but of all sounds made by beast, man, or god, only two have ever made his soul lie so still, one being the sound ringing in his ears now—the cry of a hallowed weapon of the Hydra Corps. Forged by binding a soul to molten metal, these rare living weapons hold unparalleled power; dark relics of the Great War. A cold sweat drenched Jingex's body, frozen in awe and fear.

Smac whispered softly to his bhuj, "Awaken, Bravura."

The hum wavered softly, pulsating slowly. Serket sensed a foreboding power growing and dropped Hellknight's beaten body to the ground, glancing about the cavern until he settled on Smac, his relic bhuj faintly glowing in sync with the vibrating hum.

“Do you seek my slumbering power?” the relic bhuj asked softly.

It was barely a whisper in Smac’s ears, yet he heard it clear as day, his very soul binding with the weapon in his hands.

“Yes.”

“How worthy is the foe?” Bravura asked, a hint of a yawn in its voice.

“It does not recognize us. Respect paid unto none,” Smac barked back.

The hum flared sharply, pulsating quicker, higher.

“Then wrath eternal shall it taste. Come, together we go,” the weapon boomed, anger rising.

Serket focused all attention now upon the elvaan warrior, his bhuj growing ever more ominous. Yet it was still not afraid. This was its domain. Pounding the earth furiously with its three claws once more, it seemingly challenged the elvaan to charge. *Rum dum drum. Rum dum drum. Rum dum drum.* Smac began to charge straight towards the evil beast.

Bravura began to shout at Smac, growing in anger with each command, growing in volume. The humming intensified after each declaration, ringing in the air.

“Prove your strength! I shall grant you god-killing might.” Bravura ordered.

Smac charged faster, both hands gripping tight.

“Show me bloodlust! I will rend flesh from bone!” the bhuj commanded.

Light coalesced about its bladed head. Serket swung his spiked stinger at Smac, cutting his right shoulder with a heavy slice. Blood gushed out from the wound, but the elvaan forged ahead without wince or step missed.

“Pierce its body! And I shall cleave life from fate,” the relic cried out.

The scorpion snapped its tail back, gouging Smac on his left side, shards of adaman plates fracturing and falling to the ground. But Smac still moved forward with a fearsome haste. Berserker rage had consumed his soul. He was close now. Just two steps and he will be in range of Lord Serket’s body.

The hum was deafening now, drowning out even Serket’s frenzied pounds. Voice booming, Bravura howled:

“*Come!* Together we go! Grip my guard and guide my blade! *Swing!* We are one force, unbreakable, *unstoppable.* Defend and you will age! Parry and you will fade! Dodge and you will fall! *Come!* Weapon and Master! Our souls as one! Keeper of the Metatron Torment! All Creation, *tremble before us!*”

Serket hoisted his front leg, claw soaring in the air, body reared up on hind. Smac slid in underneath the scorpion lord and Serket began to crash his claw down to crush the insect who dared to challenge him. Jingex watching from afar now felt as if time had slowed, for but an instant. As the giant scorpion's claw came rushing down, Smac twisted Bravura up in a suicidal attack. The claw slammed down, piercing Smac through his leg, but not before Smac landed his mighty blow, slicing at the scorpion's underbelly.

A warp in space ruptured open from Bravura's heavenly blade, spilling out raw orange-red energy. It tore and snatched at every fiber of Serket's being, his steel-hard carapace cracking wildly. Consumed in deathly pain, the beast thrashed heavily, green blood oozing from every crack and bore that Bravura had inflicted. Awestruck, Jingex could not form words in his mind to describe what he had seen. This was the power of the fabled relic weapons.

Smac fell forward, blood pooling on the ground around him as Serket breathed laboriously, weakened and fatigued. Elysia screamed at the sight of Smac's relentless, foolhardy attack. Seizing at the threads of his fleeting life, Elysia desperately tried to infuse divine magic into his body and cure his wounds. All she could muster was to stop his bleeding, she could not aid him further until she could get closer.

Hellknight stirred his aching body, roused to break his beaten daze by Serket's painful shrieks. Serket, seeing the accursed ninja stumbling away, wrapped its tail around Hellknight's broken body, lifting him up into the air. The dark carapace armor on the surface of the tail proved too tough for Hellknight to slice or pierce with his katanas in his current form. Seeing Elysia crying out in fear and sorrow as she looked out upon the scene of carnage, Hellknight reached out one hand, still gripping a katana.

Serket twisted his tail a little tighter, crunching the few of Hellknight's bones left intact. The scorpion lord hissed as it screamed,

"So I see! She is the object of your deepest desire. You who dared to defy master, king, and god, who reached so eagerly beyond limits and laws set in times *agelessssss*. Now you shall face my judgment and furor. Gone is the chance you had for a lenient death. Fortune forsaken. Now face my vengeance. Watch as I end your world."

Stepping forward towards Elysia on the flattop hill, Serket repulsively dangled Hellknight's body above her head as it offered up a monstrous deal.

"Be at ease, girl. As god of this realm below the foot of Garlaige, I *ssssssshall* bestow upon you a godly power. In your hands lies the power to change fate itself. Submit to my will and I will unshackle Death's chains from this fool's soul. Obey my words and I shall let your friends *passsssss* safely back to sun's embrace.

"Daily do you toy with the threads of life, priestess of Altana. The measuring ruler bestowed when you were blessed by the Dawn Goddess. Today, in your hand, I place

the loom and the sickle. Do you wish to save their lives? Weave their threads back into the pattern of destiny? Do you wish to save this cursed life whose insolence brought this doom upon you?

“Whose thread shall you cut? Your world or theirs? Your life or *hissssss*? In your hands is the power to create life anew, or snatch it away, your judgment absolute. Not even I shall revoke your choice.

“Am I so cruel, girl?

“Am I not generous?

“Am I not merciful?

“Speak girl, which world shall live and which world shall end?”

Distraught at this morbid choice, Elysia sobbed. What had gone so wrong to put her in this situation, before her placed this horrible choice? She could see no way out of this dilemma. All paths laid shut. Elysia looked at Hellknight’s face, bloodied, bruised, black hair damp with sweat. In his eyes was a dull, lost look, yet it told her to choose him. But how could she make such a heavy selection? Her duty was to preserve life, not take it away. Not his. Never. What choice did she truly have? She looked away from Hellknight’s gaze, she could not bear to see his face when she made her decision.

Serket, impatient, twisted Hellknight’s body tighter still, the hume desperately trying to suppress his desire to scream. Those horrible sounds were as blades needling Elysia’s very heart.

The Venomking repeated, “Choose, girl! Kneel or run!”

The scorpion lord opened his mouth as if in crooked smile at Elysia’s choice, its body excited, its tail winding up ever tighter at the calamitous suffering about to be wrought against these haughty ants. Hellknight was in shock as he saw Elysia begin to fall to her knees, defeated.

“How could this be happening? Not again. Why must this happen? I made a promise. This cannot be!” His thoughts raced inside his mind.

It was then, as Serket gleefully tightened his tail grip instinctually, that Hellknight realized that the shell on the inner lining of the scorpion’s tail was not as hard as the outside armor that he had fruitlessly tried attacking earlier. He felt no obsidian spines against his back and chest. He reached deep inside himself to block out the throbbing pain his body was stricken with and in one swift strike, plunged his katana through his stomach, piercing through Serket’s softer underlining.

Serket hissed in pain, reflexively straightening his tail to alleviate the sting and dropping Hellknight onto his chitin back. Hellknight coughed up a burst of blood, gripping onto the back of Serket’s left jaw. Faced eye to eye, Hellknight spit another burst of blood into Lord Serket’s large red sphere. Before Serket could react or speak, Hellknight thrust his other katana into Serket’s other eye

with his free hand, the blade piercing through to the other side. A final image of a wry smile crossing Hellknight's face appeared in Serket's fading mind as Hellknight gasped heavily.

"Nin....po! Mi....jin.... Ga...ku....re!"

A kamikaze explosion burst from Hellknight's body, vaporizing the scorpion's head. The lifeless corpse fell limp and descended onto the ground forever, falling together with Hellknight's body. He did not move, he did not speak, his eyes closed. Elysia slid down the hill, tumbling over as she reached the bottom. Running over to Hellknight's side, she saw the full extent of the damage that Serket had inflicted upon him, and the severity of the wound Hellknight inflicted on himself. She placed her head against his chest. She could sense a faint beat—tired, slow, and weak.

Drawing deeply on the pure clear light of white magic, she placed both hands upon Hellknight's chest. Blood stained her shaking hands. She had never attempted to infuse so much divine power into such a maimed body. Normal regeneration combines the power of white magic with the strength and willpower of the wounded. At his present state, she was unsure if Hellknight's soul would be able to handle and accept the amount of white magic needed to repair his broken body. She had to trust that his will was intact, that his resolve was still strong.

A kaleidoscope of colors burst from Hellknight's body as the spell was completed. But Hellknight did not rise as a normal Raising would have done. He was still, deathly still.

Khale came to stand by Elysia's side, hand on her shoulder as she looked away from Hellknight's body. A few yalms away, Jingex and Deity were sitting by Smac, trying to avoid looking in Hellknight's direction. Jingex had immediately gone to Deity to wake and mend her with his minor cures after Serket had been felled. Now working on patching up Smac's wounds, Jingex wanted to delay seeing, with his own eyes, what Hellknight's state was.

Smac, regaining consciousness, and seeing Hellknight's fallen body, asked, "Guys, what happened?"

"The asshole over there trumped you in idiocy. That's all I'm going to say about it," Jingex snapped, pressing Smac's side admonishingly.

Although no wound existed there now, the sharp pain still remained. Smac recalled what he had done, then eyes widening, realized the gravity of the situation.

Tears began dripping down Elysia's face as she gripped Hellknight's dusk gloved hand. She looked up at Khale who tried to force his lips into a comforting smile, but he couldn't push himself to lie. Silence. Somehow after all the rumbling, hissing, clashing, and thundering that the party had suffered through underneath the base of the Citadel, it was this silence that ended up being most unnerving at all. Elysia closed her eyes, she did not want to see anymore.

A finger graced her cheek, wiping away her stream of tears with a gentle caress. Thinking it was Khale trying to comfort her, at first she paid no heed... until she felt a strange substance left on her face.

"Blood?" she thought.

Opening her eyes and glancing to her left peripheral field of vision, she saw a bloody gloved arm holding her face, smearing it with the small droplets stained in purple leather.

"Well guys," a familiar voice cracked and coughed.

Elysia's eyes widened as she saw Hellknight spoke, eyes half closed.

"Well guys..." Hellknight began again. "I don't know about you guys but I feel sort of... *stung*. I thought Garlaige would have been an awesome place to level... but something about it just plain *bugs* me," he finished as he coughed up a chuckle.

Elysia buried herself in his chest, overjoyed that things turned out ok after all, somehow, somehow.

Jingex and Smac looked at each other then looked at Hellknight, their eyes twitched repeatedly at the comment they had heard. Both Smac and Jingex leapt forward ready to strangle Hellknight for his terrible wisecrack. Unfortunately, before they could move too far, Deity tripped them both with her Hagon, shaking her head at them both, then looking over at Hellknight, she facepalmed herself.

After spending a few restful hours fixing up minor scrapes and bruises, the party gathered by Serket's fallen body, still in awe at what had transpired here. Hellknight looked down and noticed the severed claw Deity had sliced early on in the battle. Wrapping it up and carrying the venomous claw on his back, Hellknight led the party out of the Citadel, emerging out into the dark moonless night. The fresh air was a welcome respite from the dank underworld from which they had come.

As they walked, Hellknight reflected back on the trials of the pit, thinking,

"I kept my promise... for now, barely... but... how long can I really last? Are Serket's words really true? Am I just temporarily blessed with the luck of it all? I almost lost everything again... my entire world... again... When will I be able to lift this awful curse? Why is the path ahead so murky in my mind"

He swatted his head as he heard the tiniest of buzzes whizzing by his ears. Slowly they headed back to the soaring white tower of Jeuno.

5



Arriving back before the white gates of Jeuno, the party sighed a breath of relief. The sun began peaking out from under the jagged peaks of Meripataud, blazing the sky. As dawn came, the party walked down Port Jeuno's grand promenade, the early bustling of merchants, airship pilots and patrolling guards moving all around them. Hellknight walked towards the center of the city and stopped to look at the auction house, gearing up to open for full business. In the corner of his eye, he caught a passing image of a familiar crimson figure busily perusing the early stock of crafting materials put out for sale. An idea suddenly formed in his mind.

"Guys... wait up!" Hellknight shouted as he caught up, struggling to carry the giant claw on his back. "I have an idea!"

"No," Jingex snipped. "Whatever it is you are thinking of, no. I don't have to hear it, I already know it's either dumb, wrong, or just plain not worth my time."

Upset at being so easily dismissed, Hellknight retorted, "Much like hanging out with your sorry ass. Terrible." Hellknight scanned Jingex's form quickly, putting hand to chin in a pensive pose. "Elvaan bards... ridiculous, can you please dress more like men?" he laughed, noting Jingex's frilly jubbah with bells and ruffled linings.

Shocked, Jingex replied with a cold stare, "Your face likes men. Elvaans have the highest charisma, asshole."

"And yet, your face still looks like one. It's tough having to look at that everyday," Hellknight said as he turned his back and crossed his arms, confident that he had gotten the upper hand.

Defeated, yet steaming with anger, Jingex waved his arms wildly as Smac restrained him from smacking the hume.

"As I was saying before being rudely interrupted," Hellknight continued, ignoring Jingex's deathgaze, "Listen, if we sell this V. claw on the auction house, we'll only get 250k tops. And look, there's like 18 claws up for auction. Instead, we can trade it for some lightning beads."

Realizing where this line of thought was going, Khale and Deity sighed quietly. Hellknight's gripping addiction had begun to rear its head again. Long has he struggled against it, fanatically dreaming of hitting that one golden streak. But the house always wins, no one's coffers filling except those of the Developers' Council.

"With those beads, I can craft some Jupiter's staves. Just one would more than double our profits," Hellknight explained, slightly drooling, a crazed look in his eyes. "But if... if we make two, that's roughly 1.2M gil, like five times the profit! And I remember that when we left yesterday, the moon was a waning crescent, slightly purple, so that must mean today is New moon Darksday. It's guaranteed I tell you. Guaranteed! I am totally due for some HQs!!!"

The loony ninja rambled on, gripping the venomous claw tight against his chest, leering at his party members in front of him. It was clear he wasn't going to let the claw go, so the party gave in, allowing Hellknight to run off gleefully towards the auction house.

Creeping up behind a small female Tarutaru with a miniature Duelist's Chapeau, Hellknight slapped the mage on the back.

"Maiev! Have I got a deal for you! Look!" he said as he brandished his loot. "I know you've been looking for some venomous claws. Well I got one cheap, right here, freshly cut! Look! It's still even oozing green blood. How about we make a straight trade? I give you this, you give me five lightning beads."

"Five? Do I look stupid? You get two. Gimme that!" the Tarutaru demanded as he threw Hellknight two cut purple spheres. "Now get out of my way, I have to poop!"

Walking back to the party, sitting patiently at a table by the Bastokan airship gate, Hellknight weighed the two lightning beads, checking for imperfections. As expected of a master goldsmith, the dark violent beads were flawlessly cut, light reflecting and diffracting in a mesmerizing shimmer inside the sphere. As he made preparations to initiate the process, Jingex narrowed his eyes and inquired,

"Where are the rest of the beads, HK? I only see two."

"Two's all I could get. Don't worry, I got this. I'm due for a good streak," Hellknight answered confidently.

Jingex's brows angled sharply, wrinkles appear on his nose. "Two? You're going to gamble away our loot on two 25% chances? Are you daft?!"

"Yeah, that's all I need. Two for two, watch me. The stars and planets are in alignment, I can feel it. I can see jackpot. Trust me," Hellknight said as he donned a yellow apron, stamped with the logo of the Woodworker's Guild.

Kneeling on one leg, Hellknight traced out a crafting square on the ground, sealing off the area within from outside distractions. He would need utmost concentration to produce an exceptional item. He laid down both a carved piece of mahogany wood and one of the lightning beads in front of him. Hellknight reached into his Gobbie bag and took out a shard of wind crystal. Placing it in the air in front of his face, he slowly took his fingers off the light green crystal as it floated in the air. He removed out a pair of carpenter's gloves from inside the pockets of his apron and put them on. He put his hands on both sides of the floating wind crystal. The crystal began to spin as it turned into pure wind energy, consuming both the mahogany wood and the bead. The aroma of wood chips wafted in the air. With a single burst of light, the synthesis finished, leaving a floating staff where the crystal was.

Smac grabbed the staff from the air, inspecting it. "It's a dud. Only a regular lightning staff. Strike one, HK."

Hellknight shifted his eyes nervously, "It's still alright... this next time will do it. I gotta warm up, you know?"

Quickly throwing together the materials and restarting the process, Hellknight placed another crystal in the air. His eyes narrowed. Something was different this time. He felt it as the crystal spun, winding blowing through his long black bangs.

"*This one's the big one, come home to daddy!*" he thought as he infused more energy into the crafting.

Suddenly the crystal rematerialized from the green swirling cloud of energy and stopped spinning, dead in its tracks. In a loud crack, the crystal shattered into tiny fragments. Hellknight remained knelt, shocked at this unfortunate turn of events. He turned his head slowly to look up at his friends. There, he met only cold, narrowed stares.

Jingex grabbed Hellknight by his neck, shouting,

"I knew it! You piece of crap, you just failed. Twice. 250k gil. Gone in a flash." Grabbing the regular lightning staff and slamming it horizontally at Hellknight's neck, Jingex gave a grave warning, "Now look here asshole, we aren't leaving empty handed. You are going to take this piece of crap you popped out and put it on the auction house for the going price. Nothing more, nothing less. I don't care if it's only worth 10k, I am getting *something* for my time fighting that goddamn scorpion."



Hellknight fell on his backside as Jingex sat back in his seat, shaking his head. "And another thing, yo....—"

"Oh-hohohohoho!"

Jingex stopped mid sentence, a cold chill ran down his spine. Looking to his left, he saw Khale warp away, and Deity casually stepping up and walking away briskly, not looking back. Jingex's ears had just caught wind of the other sound that froze his soul in fear, that terrible, horrible sound.

Elysia quickly gathered up her things resting on the table and motioned to Smac. "Hey ... um Smac, how about we go see the thing you um... wanted me to see... all the way over there, on the *other side* of the city."

"Oh right... that thing with the stuff. But you know what Ely, let's go up to Ru'lude Gardens instead. It's much safer... to ... uh... speak privately there! Jingex, why don't you *come join us?*" Smac asked desperately, jabbing Jingex in the side.

However Jingex was paralyzed.

Elysia got up and started walking away, forcing a nervous smile, "I'll meet you up there guys, you guys should hurry. *Really.*"

Smac kicked over Jingex's seat, knocking him to the stone pavement and caught up with Elysia. Upon impact with the ground, Jingex snapped out of his trance and went into full dash, screaming at the top of his lungs, sweat dripping down his hair.

Hellknight coughed gently, thinking about how rude his friends were to leave him so suddenly, just because he happened to hit a bad streak. Or rather, extended his bad streak. Oblivious, he brushed off the dirt and dust off his Scorpion harness and fumbled around for the lightning staff, pouting audibly. He finally found the round head of the staff and pulled it forward but then, something stopped it. Believing it to be caught on something, Hellknight turned around as a small pigtailed shadow was cast over him.

At the other end of the staff laid a tiny foot, pinning it on the ground. A small Tarutaru woman stood before Hellknight, garbed in a black and white striped uniform—the Combat Caster's uniform. Her blonde pigtails blowing in the gentle breeze, she tilted her head slightly to the left and put one hand to her mouth, the other crossed her chest, touching her bent elbow.

"Oh-hohohohoho!

Why so grim and so full of fear?

It's only I, Shantotto, here!

I was just stepping off the airship when thought I felt someone critically fail.

So I came to look and found you here, which saved me the trouble of chasing down your tail.

You're really quiet, boy, is something the matter?

Calm down and relax, this is just idle chatter!"

Hellknight's eyes widened. He scanned around him looking for someone to hide behind, but shockingly, seemingly all of Port Jeuno had emptied in the span of two minutes. He looked back in front of him, somehow able to put on a fake smile. He only hoped that he would not offend this tiny Taru. Before him there stood Lady Shantotto, the former Minister of Magic from the Federation of Windurst.

This was no average Tarutaru. They are all evil deep down inside, but Shantotto... she had an especially sinister quality about her. There was no one alive that did not shirk in her presence, her unique laugh was purported to have driven many men insane. Gulping slowly, he knew why she had come looking for him. He might yet die this week.

"Shantotto!" Hellknight said nervously, voice quavering, "fancy to bump into you here! I was just about to fly down to Windurst to see you! Don't worry about a thing, we are going along right as scheduled!"

He had just told a bold faced lie to the crazed Witch of Windurst. Sweat started beading on his forehead.

"That's good to hear, Hellknight, that you'll meet the date due.
From the first day, I felt that I could count on you.
Eight million gil, paid from the Orastery's coffers,
But your quote was the best, out of all the other offers.
The last guy I dealt with tried to scam me, acting totally unprofessional,
My temper lost, I casted Flare Two, his body bursting in fine clouds of shrapnel.

Oh-hohohohoho!

Hellknight's eyes glanced from side to side, his jaw dropped. He could not tell if what she had just said was true or not. He wouldn't be surprised if she actually did murder the poor idiot. Who would really dare to try to swindle Shantotto? Then again, he was precariously close to doing the same thing, already having lied to her face. He shifted his feet nervously and he nodded in humble obedience as Lady Shantotto continued.

"Twenty five staves I had ordered and I expect them all HQ.
Two days you have yet, so for now I guess I'll just have to make do.
However dear, what I have seen right now is just cause for quite grave a concern.
But since you're a good little boy, I'll save my snap judgment for when I return.
...And if, by chance, you don't manage to complete our bill...
Just remember, Hellknight, that I am licensed to kill.

Oh-hohohohoho!"

The Tarutaru mage walked away, attending to other business she had in the Duchy, her unmistakable laugh fading away. Hellknight sighed heavily, he had stared into the face of Death again, and its cute pigtailed form was far more foreboding and ominous than before. Two days. He was quite literally, screwed. He shuffled nervously, stomach in knots. He had submitted his foolish, arrogant contract offer to the Orastery last month for a delivery of Jupiter Staves, confident that he was "due for a golden streak."

He used the Orastery's full upfront payment of eight million gil to buy fifty lightning beads, confident that he would at least break even and deliver the owed staves. The recognition from the

Orastery for completion of such a large bulk order would make his woodworking skills famous, and business would flourish at the worst. Best case scenario, he would make fifty Jupiter Staves and have an extra twenty five to sell, an estimated fifteen million gil! Or so he thought.

His mind imprisoned and at the mercy of synthesis gambling addiction, Hellknight ignored the possibility that he would fail all the synths. And that is exactly what had happened, with eight million gil vanishing in a pile of wind crystal dust. All he was able to manage was 3 HQ staves. He had no other money to buy more chances to complete the order and now he only had two days. His empty gil pouch had never felt so heavy as it did now. Feeling sickly, he put up the lightning staff on the auction house and decided to head to the local pub to distract his heavy mind.

As he walked up the stairs towards Lower Jeuno, all he could hear in his head was that wicked laugh over and over again...

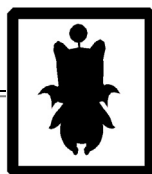


Oh-hohohohoho!

Oh-hohohohoho!

Oh-hohohohoho!

6



Stumbling into the doors of the Merry Minstrel again, Hellknight was surprised to see his friends there as well, all sitting around a table. A round of ale had been ordered and the several glasses were long empty. Smac moved woozily as he signaled the bartender to send down another round. Hellknight walked over to join them and see what was going on.

Jingex was tipsy, his head starting to wobble slightly. As Hellknight got closer, he saw that Jingex was talking to a short hume male, clad in a jade-colored Justacorps.

Jingex pointed at the hume and argued, “Kefkaz? What the hell sort of name is that? You’re doing it *wrong*! Get out of here you clown. Come back when you have a cool name asshole. Look there, now *those* are some cool cats.”

Jingex pointed over to a nearby table at which sat three tall elvaan samurai, all peculiarly dressed in black robes instead of metal armor.

Smac waved energetically, almost falling over, yelling, “Yo! Xxxsephirothxxx, Xsefirotx, and Sepheerothe come on down and play a round of beer-pong with us!”

However, the three elvaan ignored Smac, turning their backs to him. Raging, Smac grasped around for his Bravura. However, Elysia had secretly stowed it away three rounds of alcohol ago. Defeated, Smac sat down and downed another glass.

Seeing Hellknight, Jingex remarked, “Oh and here comes the party-crasher. We were having so much fun without you too. You’re on the tab by the way. You owe us all that at the least. Look at what hanging around with you has done to me. I’m turning into a freaking alcoholic.” Jingex hiccupped, the sudden shock almost made him lose his sense of balance. “And what the hell did you get yourself caught up in with that demented Tarutaru?! If I get caught up in any type of bullcrap with her because of you, I am going to cut you with my knife. She scares the living crap out of me!”

Jingex shuddered at the recent memory of her laugh, along with everyone else, each gulping down a large mouthful of ale.

Suddenly, the party’s linkpearls all began to vibrate. Hellknight took out his pearlsack, a symbol of his promoted status in the linkshell, and checked the message.

“Looks like Sibe is calling us. He wants us to meet at his Mog House, stat. Everyone gather there.”

Begrudgingly, Smac and Jingex stumbled out of their seats. Elysia, seeing their unfit status, casted two quick spells on the both of them—Deodorize and Silence. Hellknight went over to the bartender and looked at the bill. “40k?!” he exclaimed, realizing that the tab was well above what remained in his bank. Then, a mischievous smile appeared on Hellknight’s face as he signed Sibe’s name on the bill. The bartender gave him a suspicious look.

Hellknight started walking out of the bar when his attention was grabbed by a small Tarutaru bazaar next to the exit. Checking out the goods inside, he saw a mysterious bag, listed for 10k gil. He asked the Tarutaru quickly to explain his item and after hearing the story, he gave the shady seller his auction house slip, good for the receipt of any funds his lightning staff would sell for. Smiling widely, the Tarutaru hastily accepted and gave Hellknight the light bag, which he quickly stuffed into his gobbie bag. Hellknight then ran out to catch up to the party.

After a quick walk through the residential district, the party stopped at the largest house in the zone. Hellknight knocked on the large oak double doors. Automatically opening, the party stepped inside the foyer, marveling at the amount of flags and battle standards hung on the walls inside. Arranged neatly around the room were mannequins displaying the various sets of rare and exclusive armor and weapons Sibe had amassed over the years. Everything else was encased in white bordered boxes off to the side.

Hellknight walked forward, his party following in tow. He was used to coming into this luxurious abode for officers’ meetings and the like. He was not impressed. Perhaps a little jealous would be a more accurate description. Reaching the front of the room, Hellknight stopped and sat on the ground. His party awed and pointed at a granite table, a large solid platinum seat that was behind it, and at the three special items mounted to the front wall.

One was a twin of Smac’s mighty Bravura on the right side of the wall. On the left was mounted an ornate sword, with a dark blue blade, etched with gold markings down the center, and attached to a golden hilt. In the center, above and behind the large platinum throne, there hung a large golden shield which was intricately smelted with smooth ridges. An ageless face protruded from the center of the shield. Hellknight looked lustfully at the shield, a hint of envy budding in his eyes. A string of saliva dripped down the corner of his mouth as he drooled. Soon after Hellknight had sat down, Sibe entered from a back door, waving excitedly to the party.

Sibe sat down on his metallic chair and said, “Hey guys, thanks for coming. I’ve reports that the notorious monster Dark Ixion has popped out in the past version of East Ronfaure. I’ve just sent...”

A bell rang three times out of the blue, interrupting Sibe, his large elvaan hands resting on the arms of his platinum seat. He smiled cheek to cheek and jotted down a note.

Curious, Jingex asked, “Hey Sibe what was that bell for?”

“Oh, I set it up so whenever I get enough gil for another run at sponsoring raids into that Dynamis netherrealm for another of the relic weapons of the Hydra Corp, that bell would ring. Hmm, I am running out of wall space. I’ll have to buy a second house soon at this rate,” Sibe explained, signaling for his moogle.

An obedient moogle flew out, dropping a small stack of papers into Sibe’s lap.

“Here are this week’s attendance reports, loot distribution reports, new applicant resumes, and the classified NoMoTOD report for your review, kupo! Also... hereee!” the moogle said as he struggled to lift a tall stack of maybe two thousand pages.

“In this stack are all the complaints and grievances submitted by the linkshell in the past week. By subject, 35% are complaints about current scheduling, 21% are personal quarrels that need your urgent attention, 13% are loot related issues including unfair distribution and lack of recent allotment, 12% are resignation letters in the event rules are fail amendment, 9% are death threats, 7% are attention seeking general complaints, and 3% other, kupo!”

“Ugh... the E.M.O. report. I hate this most,” Sibe said as he sighed.

“E.M.O.?” Elysia asked, perplexed.

“Everyone’s Motive Outlined. It’s our nickname for it, since we pretty much get a clear idea what everyone is after, when we finish going through the documents,” Hellknight explained.

“Thanks moogle, that will be all for now,” Sibe said as he dismissed the moogle. “Anyway, as I was saying. I sent out a scouting party to go check it out and hold it if necessary. I wanted you guys to join up with them and hunt Dark Ixion down.”

“What? You aren’t coming with?” Hellknight asked, shocked.

“I can’t man, I gotta stay here and go through these reports. You know this,” Sibe replied sternly.

Looking at the relics on the walls, Hellknight twisted his lips.

“That’s unacceptable! You haven’t been out with us on the field of battle for a while now, cooped up inside your house. Look at these relics on your walls. They are just wasting away in here! What is the point of getting them if you’re not going to maximize their potential and use!?” he proclaimed boldly, slamming his hands on Sibe’s granite table. A few papers shuffled off the tall stack of complaints.

“I gave my orders, *officer*. Carry them out,” Sibe said firmly.

He took out a pen and started signing forms, waving the party out of his home.

Hellknight, jaw dropped, frowned roughly and stampeded out. His confused party followed him.

Gathered outside Sibe's grand estate, Hellknight said, "What a waste. I'll have to file one of those E.M.O. reports next week. Anyway, we've got our orders, it's time to move out, even if I disagree with him."

"Ah so, you're basically his bitch," Jingex laughed.

"Your face is a bitch," Hellknight retorted, satisfied with himself.

"No you. Stop stealing my sweet material jerkoff, get your own," Jingex complained, then realizing what Hellknight's original material historically consisted of, recanted, "on second thought, don't."

A linkshell Black Mage came out of Sibe's house and ran over to the party.

Panting, the Tarutaru asked, "Ready for the Retrace?"



"Just a second," Hellknight said as he stopped the mage. "Let me change jobs guys, it'll just take a second this time, I swear. I don't have much luck with Maws, they send me to all sorts of weird places lately, so I don't want to miss out on this guy's Retrace. I'll be right back!"

"Do we look like idiots?" Smac barked as he grabbed Hellknight by the scruff of his neck. "We aren't waiting seven hours like last time you slow ass punk. You're going as you are. Go ahead, little guy."

In an instant, a whirring humming noise rung as six portals opened up and sent the party tumbling into the past.

Meanwhile, inside the great house, Sibe worked feverishly stamping pages of paper and affixing his seal to other documents, while preparing next week's schedule. As he heard the sound of the Retrace spells being cast, he stopped to think about Hellknight's words. They had cut deep. It was not that he did not desire to go out and play with the rest of his linkshell, he thought he could not due to the bureaucratic overhead that had to be processed.

"He was probably just jealous, another E.M.O.," Sibe thought to himself, "but.. maybe he does have a point."

Sibe glanced at the three living relics on his wall as a second bell rang.

"Whoa! Recession isn't keeping me down! Bank baby, bank!" he cheered, and then, finally deciding on what he wanted, called out, "Moogle, gather my things. I am going to go take a little stroll."

7



Hellknight tumbled through the void, his mind felt stretched and warped as his being was thrown back against time. A portal opened in a grassy meadow and from it Hellknight crashed through, headfirst onto the ground. His other party members looked over at the ruckus, Deity wondering aloud how only Hellknight managed not to land on his feet. Brushing off the dirt and grass from his legs, Hellknight stood up and scanned the area. Behind him to the north he could see San d’Oria’s gothic walls—imposing and impenetrable. To the south he could see the edge of the thick Jugner Forest.

“East Ronfaure during the Shadowreign?” Hellknight asked to confirm.

“It appears so, the spell should have sent us to San d’Oria, but the caster was young, perhaps that explains why we were dropped off here,” Khale said.

“Saves us the trouble of running back out. Sibe’s scouts reported seeing Dark Ixion here, so be on guard. We’re to join up with the advance team and then take it down,” Hellknight said as he instructed, his head looking to his west.

A clanging alarm rang repeatedly in the air, ordering an evacuation. Something was still in the region if the evacuation order had not yet been lifted. Suddenly to his left, Hellknight heard a rumbling echo. It was then that at the top of a hill, the beast revealed itself—Dark Ixion, the Black Horn of Thunder. Rearing on its hind legs, it neighed sharply. The large spiral horn on its head blotted out the sun for but a moment. Hellknight and his party assumed their battle stances. It slammed its legs down and charged into full gallop. Before he could blink, Ixion had sped well past Hellknight, in its wake an earsplitting pitch whistled.

“It ran? But why?” Jingex asked, bewildered.

“WARK!” A cry came from over the hill as the party focused their attention back.

Charging down the hill in pursuit of the black monoceros was the advance squadron, on chocobo-back of red, green, and black—a galka samurai, two taru black mages, a mithra black mage, and an elvaan monk. The cavalry rushed past Hellknight’s party as well, the galka turning his head around to shout at Hellknight.

“HK, move your ass or we’re going to lose it. You have to stop it from running. We’ll chase it back to you guys.”

“And how do you expect us to do that, Cloud?!” Hellknight carped as he casted Utsusemi, ripping another small piece of paper in two as he finished.

“I dun know, not my problem, lulz, we’re safe here on these chocos,” Cloudstah replied smiling sarcastically.

“Use that guys, we’ll circle back and force it to run past,” the mithra black mage beside Cloudstah suggested as she pointed to the southeast.

“Ravy! What is she doing here?! It’s dangerous!” Jingex grumbled, shocked.

But it was no use, the chocobo team was well out of earshot, forging ahead to catch up to Ixion. Hellknight’s team dashed southeast towards a small precipice. Jingex and Hellknight climbed to the top of the steep rock, while Khale took up his position at the foot of the rock face, Terra Staff in hand and gathering raw energy. Deity, Smac, and Elysia settled off to the side, hoping to cut off other paths of escape. From the top, Hellknight put his hand above his brow, peering into the distance. They would be coming soon.

He turned to Jingex and asked, “Hey Jing, about your songs, I have a request.”

“Listen here, punk. I’m the bard, and you’re my bitch. That’s how this relationship is. I don’t do requests. You get whatever songs I feel like performing, and today I feel like a mambo and a march. If you don’t like ‘em, tough, here’s a tissue,” Jingex yelled as he lashed out, visibly irritated at Hellknight’s comment.

“No no, I trust your judgment on which songs, but, you don’t really play different tunes when you switch songs right? They sound the same for every buff! Here,” Hellknight said as he handed Jingex a few pages of sheet music. “Just play those notes for me, it’ll pump me up. Ravy is out there you know...”

Jingex’s eyes widened and he reluctantly accepted Hellknight’s request. Taking out his lyre and looking down at the composition, he started playing the notes, only to glare vexingly at Hellknight who had closed his eyes and rocked his head, jamming to the revised arrangement. The sweet melody that Jingex usually played had been replaced by the harsh dissonant strains of My Chemical Romance. Jingex strummed on disgustedly. He could feel that somewhere, his minstrel mentor was rolling his eyes.

A faint neigh reached Hellknight’s ears. He opened his eyes and stepped up to the precipice edge. Ixion was coming back. Waving to Khale below to start the plan, Hellknight took out two lengths of kaginawa, spinning both hooks in his hands. Ixion sped on through.

Khale could see it clearly now, charging with demonic haste. He only had seconds before the steed would stampede through him. A circling wind gust about as a yellow circle drew itself in front of him. Ixion lowered its head, spiraling horn pointed at Khale's heart.

"Heavy spear of the war gods. Crack through the earth and pierce the clouds. Stone three!"

A slab of rock suddenly stabbed through the ground stopping Ixion in its tracks. Startled, it neighed frantically. Leaping down, Hellknight swung his twin chains of kaginawa around the horse, their hooks latching onto Ixion's tough hide. He mounted the raging beast, trying desperately to bind its movements. Ixion thrashed about, trying to whip Hellknight off its back. As it turned its head back, it spotted the pursuing chocobos closing in. Kick its hind legs, Ixion dashed forward once again, taking Hellknight with him.

The speed was unnatural. Hellknight could feel the wind screeching past, leaving small cuts in his face. Any faster and the air would burst into flames from the whipping friction. He gripping a katana from his waist and reached for Ixion's great mane, pulling it for support. He wrapped his legs around Ixion's thick neck, the horse still jerking wildly. Hellknight swung hard at the spiraling horn, leaving a small crack at its base.

A surge of lightning escaped, electrifying the space around as Ixion roared in pain, coming to a halt. Hellknight was tossed off from the abrupt stop, his body still sparked slightly. Ixion stared at Hellknight, murderous fury in its eyes. It would no longer run. Thundering wrath must be dealt to the one who dared to mar its magnificent horn.

The band of chocobos caught up to Hellknight, his own party had been picked up and rode along by them. Dismounting, the alliance surrounded the beast. Hellknight began to shout out the battle orders.

"Ely, Khale, Jing you guys are on back up, we're low on healing. I'll hold it in the front with Smac. Ravy, Ciermel, Kieffa, go off to the side and get ready to nuke it down when things start getting hairy. Cloud, Deity, and F.D., you have to attack it from behind. Its hide is too tough from its front, it should be easier to attack from there."

Once everyone had acknowledged the orders, Hellknight took out three slips of jusatsu paper and threw it at Ixion. Affixing themselves onto Ixion's hide, they vanished in small puffs of paralyzing smoke. Ixion stamped the ground hard with one foot and lowered its head, threateningly pointing its sharp horn at Hellknight. It jolted forward, but Hellknight parried with his katana blades, locking the two in a battle of force. Hellknight signaled Deity, Finaldeath, and Cloudstah with a shake of his head.

The three darted behind the monoceros, and prepared to attack in quick succession, hoping to link their skills' powers in a damaging chain. Cloud quickly signaled to the Black Mage crew that he would finish off the three step combo as Deity began. The mages started gathering massive amounts of energy in anticipation.

Deity held her Hagun out forward, blade edge on top and thrust low near the grassy ground and brought her great katana up in a strong graceful stroke, cutting deep into the beast. A rain of petals that were caught in her upward stroke fell as she backed out and away, running back out in front in a guarded position.

Ixion seized in sharp pain as Finaldeath and Cloudstah took up position readying their followup. Ixion suddenly sensed the cresting wave of black magic being gathered to its side by the black mages. It realized what was coming. Using its swift reflexes and speed, it tightened its hindlegs and furiously kicked back the monk and samurai with each hoof, knocking them back far. Ixion spun its head to unlock its horns from Hellknight's katanas and pointed the tip at the shocked black mages. The jagged horn started to spark and crackle, white flashes of light gathering at the tip. With a stamp of its leg and a boom of thunder, Ixion shot a large lightning spear at the mages, igniting with the magical air as it came into contact. Knocked out, the mages fell limp, bodies smoking from the blast.



Returning its attention to Hellknight, the great horse crushed the ground with its heavy hooves. It bolted forward and vanished from view, Hellknight and Smac shocked at the intense speed as it came in and out of view for but moments randomly around them. Hellknight heard a sudden thud at his left as he saw Smac get knocked back. He whipped his head right, he gasped as the last of his remaining shadows faded in a whiff of black. He could not see Ixion's movements. Ixion reappeared in front of Hellknight and charged, trampling him under its pounding legs.

Hellknight struggled to get back on his feet. He desperately pulled out another sheet of paper and casted Utsusemi: Ni, shadows twirling around him. He turned around to face the dark beast. Blood trickled down the side of his face as his eyes widened in dismay. Ixion had lowered its horn, pointing it straight at Hellknight, once again gathering chaotic sparking energy at its tip. His shadows would not protect him from one of those lightning spears. He had to dodge, but it was too late.

Ixion neighed arrogantly as it released the surge of crackling electricity, traveling near instantaneously. Instinctually, Hellknight fell to his knees and covered his eyes with his hands as he braced for the worst. His ears were deafened by the sound of a raging boom. But, he was not harmed. Curious, he cautiously put down his hands and looked up. A tall dark figure had eclipsed the sun, casting

a large shadow over Hellknight. Several yalms away, Smac's Bravura hummed softly, resonating with another fearsome force.

A booming voice spoke as a soul-shaking hum started to build, **"Do not be afraid. I am Aegis, the impervious shield of everlasting."**

Hellknight gasped in shock as he recognized the figure in front of him. Clad in pure white and crimson armor and an intricate blue-white blade at his side, Sibe had arrived, intercepting the bolt of lightning. Aegis's golden face lay unmarred and unscratched, as perfect as the day it was forged.

"Sorry, HK, you were right. My place is here on the battlefield. Thanks for reminding me where I belong. Now go rest, you've done more than enough for us all today. Let me atone for my sins," Sibe said as he lowered his living shield.

Ixion reeled back in berserker rage, pounding the earth with its feet. But Sibe stood steadfast, cool and calm. Ixion pointed its black horn again at Sibe, gathering together a crackling bolt for a third time. Sibe narrowed his eyes as he raised Aegis once more, slowly walking forward towards the dark beast. Ixion let go the electric lance once more, the spear racing through the air at Sibe.

Yet, Sibe stepped forward still. Aegis's ageless face opened its mouth, engulfing the magical energy and consuming it, silencing the crackling thunder. Ixion jerked about confusedly as Sibe walked up, its body tense.

Sibe knocked gently on Aegis's golden back. With its blue eyes widening, the shield shot forward a wall of invisible energy, bashing Ixion's grisly face. Sibe unsheathed his sword, the hum intensifying as the blade cut the cool morning air. Ixion panicked as it realized the formidable threat Sibe posed now. Calling forth all of its remaining power it arched it back, hoisting itself high up into the air on its hindlegs. The dark horse's horn drew a massive force at its tip, much large than before. A giant sphere of sparkling white energy coalesced high in the air. Thunder boomed and crashed, rivaling that of the intense hum of two living relics.

Still, Sibe stood his ground. The Black Horn of Thunder, crashed its legs down, the ball shattering in a ravenous storm of electricity, raining down on beast and elvaan both.



"Vile beast of shadows past, by what folly do you challenge me, the Eternal Guard?" Aegis boomed.

"Master, in just cause do you raise my golden face. And thusly set, invincible power, unto you, shall I lend. O, White Knight, to lofty Heavens or to dark abyss or pit against the face of Death, do not fear for I shall defend you until the End of Times. Raise on high the banner of Justice. Even the High Lord of the Burning Hells cowers before our will! Unyielding. Indomitable. Unconquerable. Immortal!"

As Sibe stood, forcing back the raining tempest, his sword glowed in his hand, declaring, “Wicked spirit of shadows past, by what madness do you challenge me, Excalibur, the Blessed Blade?”

“Master, in virtuous conviction do you raise my pointed edge. And thusly set, divine might, unto you, shall I grant. O, Holy Knight, against wyrm or demon or heretic gods, tremble not, for I shall cut through darkness deep, and alight the path for wayward sons of man. Plant the emblem of honor in your soul! Smite down those who should oppose our righteous will with sacred might! Dark beasts scatter in our wake, anathema to us!”

On one fell twist, Sibe swung the heavy sword, and cleanly cut through Ixion’s jagged horn. It dropped to the earth in a gentle clunk, dispelling the thunderous storm. Defeated, Dark Ixion gasped its last breaths as its spirit left its body, fleeing from Sibe’s impressive form.

Hellknight sat in amazement at the show of force. Looking at his bloodied hands, and grasping at his bruised chest and torso, he thought gravely about his current ability.

“If Sibe had not come... what would have happened to me... to us... to her...” he thought as he looked over at Elysia who was busy tending to the wounded. He stood and walked over to Smac, laying against a stone, still knocked out. *“Do I have the power, the right, to protect my friends? What is wrong with me... If Sibe had not come... buzzzzz buzzzz buzz...”* he thought further as a buzzing noise filled his mind once more.

Hellknight took out a small bag from his pockets and poured out the contents onto Smac’s sleeping face. He then sat contently at Smac’s side, watching and waiting.

Curious, Jingex walked over to Hellknight to ask, “Hey... what did you do, and what are you waiting for?”

“For Smac to wake up, moron. Just sit back and watch,” Hellknight snipped back with a confident smile.

“Your face is a moron. No seriously, what did you do?”

“Back in Jeuno, before we left for Sibe’s house, I found this in a bazaar and had to test it out. It’s phoenix down, it should bring him back instantly!” chirped Hellknight, preparing himself to be lavished by praise for his discovery.

“Phoenix down? That doesn’t exist in Vana’diel... move aside, let me see,” Jingex said as he pushed Hellknight out of the way. He picked up one of the orange-red feathers strewn about Smac’s sleeping face and examined it closely. Suddenly his face scrunched up and he punched Hellknight in the face, spitting, “This isn’t phoenix down you *idiot!* It’s orange-dyed chocobo feathers! You got pawned.”

“Oh...” Hellknight whispered as he plugged up his bleeding nose.

“Wait a minute...,” Jingex snarled as he turned back to give Hellknight an icy stare. “Where exactly did you find the money to buy something out of a random bazaar. Last I checked you had little to no gil.”

Slowly stepping back, Hellknight replied, “Well you see Jing... I sort of... gave the kid my auction house slip for that lightning staff I crafted for us...”

“You did *what?*” Jingex roared. “You mean you lost our money? *My* money? You mean to tell me we went down to Garlaige, practically came out half dead, and came away with *nothing* to show for it? You moron! Get over here!”

Jingex chased Hellknight around until Hellknight cowered behind Sibe and his Aegis. Sibe, wanting to diffuse the situation, reached into his gobbie bag and pulled out a large heavy pouch.

Throwing it at Jingex, Sibe said, “Here you go Jing, there’s one million gil in there for ya. How’s about we all make up and be happy eh?”

Happily, Jingex calmed down, but not before shooting Hellknight another death gaze.

“Yeah, what Sibe said, guys. I know it was a *shocking* turn of events, but I think it’s high time we stopped *horsing* around and returned back home,” Hellknight declared, a satisfied smile crossing his face.

Then there was silence. Even Aegis’ ageless face seemingly rolled its eyes in embarrassment.



That night, back in Jeuno, Hellknight sat on one of the tall pier ledges overlooking the airship docks. The crescent moon shone brightly overhead. The sound of gentle waves and departing airships created a calming rhythm, but it did nothing to soothe Hellknight’s chaotic mind. Now dressed in white armor akin to Sibe’s, he removed his right gauntlet and gently caressed a simple golden ring, capped with a bright yellow stone.

“It still bothers you huh, HK?” Khale spoke from behind him.

Startled, Hellknight looked back, smiled, and then turned around, slumping, looking back at the ring as it gently reflected the moonlight.

“You don’t have to have a smile on all the time you know.”

"I know... I know, it's just, well I have to. I have to be the goofy one, you know, to be at everyone else's level. That way, nothing bad will ever happen again."

"You've changed HK. I'm not sure it's been for the better. It's fine that you're the joker, you've always been that terribly lame. But in the big fights, it's like you're lost. Deity sees it too, she's worried about you, you know. You used to be so fearless, like nothing could ever stop you, and you backed up that confidence with actions. You never gave in and you always found a way to make things work out, by your own merit."

"Almost always..." Hellknight corrected. He thought back on his far past and the memories he had. He swore he could hear a faint buzzing noise as he pondered.

"This is about Uleguerand Range, isn't it? Before the Breaking?" Khale inquired, a worried tone in his voice.

"I always thought I could bury those memories if I ran far and away from how I used to be. I tried to bury everything. I started changing my looks, my clothes, I stopped organizing my house..."

Khale stared unconvinced at Hellknight, shaking his head.

"Ok Ok! You caught me, scratch that last one, geez! Heh..." Hellknight backtracked, waving his hands in front of him. "But yeah, I made new friends, and tried to start my life over. But no matter how far I run or how much deeper I try to bury these memories, they keep coming back, haunting me, tempting me to reach for that old power."

Hellknight looked again at his ring, scared and lost like a child.

"But... what happened wasn't your fault..." Khale said comfortingly before being stopped by Hellknight as he spoke up suddenly,

"No! Stop! It was all my fault. All mine. I thought I was king of the world, I thought that I could do anything, beat anything out there. I boasted as such. They believed me. They trusted in me. And on that icy mountain top I failed. It was an epic fail.

"Don't you remember how many of us died that day? How many Jormungand murdered and slaughtered in his frozen lair? I still see their bodies when I close my eyes. Their blood is on my hands and mine alone. After that... everyone started passing around the blame, some standing up for me, others blaming me, blaming each other. It all flared out of control and it Broke. The great machine we were just broke down.

"If I wasn't such an asshole then, obsessed and in love with my own power, then it might not have ever happened. It should not have happened. It will not ever again. I will never be that man again," Hellknight declared somberly, the buzz in his head was earsplitting now. He swatted his head quickly to muffle the noise."

“But this isn’t you HK. This person you are now... I don’t recognize you at all,” Khale said, trying to comfort his friend’s frayed mind.

Hellknight, upset, pushed Khale down in a fit of rage, mind buzzing loud.

*“Who is he to tell me who I am? I know who I am. If I want to be different than so be it. He has no right... no right!... *bzzzz buzzzzzzz!”* he thought before a quick moment of clarity made him see what he had just done.

“I’m sorry Khale... I didn’t mean...”

“It’s alright, HK,” Khale said as he brushed himself off. “I miss the old you, when you’re ready, let him come back, you don’t have to raze your past to build your future.”

“I... I... just can’t Khale. I’m sorry, but you just don’t understand.”

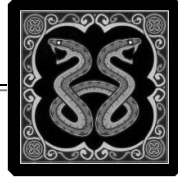
“It’s alright, all in due time. We’re just worried about you, you know. Listen, tomorrow we’re heading on the boat to Aht Urhgan. We can pick up where we left off with our other jobs there. Think of it as a vacation from these notorious monsters we’ve bumped into recently. Maybe that will help you relax your mind,” Khale said as he handed Hellknight his ferry ticket.

“Alright Khale. Thanks, for everything. I have to go now, please don’t worry about me, I’m fine, really!”

As Hellknight ran off to his Mog House, all he could think about were the screams that echoed from top that icy mountain range.

*“Never again... sorry Khale, but I just can’t risk it ever again.... *BUZZZZZZZZZ*”*

8



As dawn broke, the party gathered and on chocobo-back, raced their way to the port town of Mhaura along the Buburimu Peninsula shoreline. Before the Duchy of Jeuno was established and built shortly before the Great War, Mhaura served as a mecca of trade and tourism as it capitalized on the duopoly it shared with twin port city Selbina. As the quickest route between Windurst and both San d'Oria and Bastok, both Selbina and Mhaura thrived as daily, fleets of ferries shuttled goods, people, and gil through its sandy roads.

However, when Archduke Kam'lanaut introduced the marvelous airship and directly linked the four great capital cities, there was little sense in using the slow and dangerous sea routes. Mhaura's and Selbina's influence and prosperity began to wane and eventually, its only customers were those lowly citizens unable to afford a luxurious airship pass.

As Hellknight and party entered Mhaura's now sleepy gates, a large ferry docked. Its steam pipes blew hot puffs of gas as its motorized wheels slowed to a halt. A loud bell rang as the dockmaster announced the arrival of the boat to Al Zahbi. The party submitted their tickets and boarded the vessel and waited in the large oak cargo bay. Shortly after, the dockmaster closed the gate and the boat's large paddlewheels started to creek as they spun. And off they were to the Eastern Empire of Aht Urhgan.

Bored of waiting under the deck, Hellknight stepped outside. The sun was high overhead, its bright rays gleaming on the crystal blue water. The smell of salty sea air filled his lungs as he looked out over the side of the ship. He grimaced as he heard the tacky music played over the boat's loudspeaker. In the distance he would see the soaring towers of the Alzadaal Undersea Ruins.



He, along with much of the world, had made Aht Urhgan his new home, but it still felt unfamiliar to him, mysterious and secretive. They were close now. Perhaps he would find a brief respite from his

current troubles in this exotic land. As the boat docked in the southern Port Al Zahbi, Hellknight took a deep breath. In a great city such as this, its beige stone walls carved with serpents and ancient glyphs, surely he would be able to find something to distract him.

A loud siren rang from top the highest tower in the capital city of Whitegate, a desperate call to arms.

“Attention! All those within the Imperial Ward-city of Al Zahbi, take care! Al Zahbi is under attack! I repeat, Al Zahbi is under attack! The Undead Swarm has breached the Balrahn defense line!”

Khale and Deity looked to the west, watching as a stampede of warriors charged through the great Victory Gate.

“They are advancing on the Imperial capital! Martial law has been declared in Al Zahbi! Martial law has been declared! All non-combatants in the Commoner’s Ward are to evacuate immediately!” the siren alerted.

A loud boom reverberated through the city as the undead army of Arrapago Reef bust through the protective magicks and heavy West Gate, reaching even Hellknight’s ears on the other side of the capital. Led by the vicious Medusa, the undead army poured into the walled city, wrecking havoc and chaos in their path. An all out bloodbath erupted as the Beastmen forces clashed with the allied defenders of the Imperial Guards and the mercenaries of Salaheem’s Sentinels.

“It seems that we arrived at an opportune time,” Khale said as he analyzed the situation. “We seem to have been besieged by Medusa’s forces. It would be nice to get some extra experience on these jobs and retrain ourselves. We’ve been sort of lax lately.”

“I’m game. I could use the buffer on my black mage.” Smac agreed as he tipped the brim of his petasos. “I haven’t been on this job in a while, so I swapped back in Mhaura. Hopefully I’m not too rusty.”

“I’ll catch up guys, I want to do a little shopping on the auction house before I head over. It just started it seems, so there’s plenty of time.” Hellknight waved as he ran off towards the merchant’s plaza, his heavy white armor clinking as he jogged.

As the party stepped through Victory Gate, Elysia gasped at the ungodly scene. In the distance, on the outskirts of the martial zone, the hulking form of a purple khimaira. The Nemean Lion was rampaging through the city, crushing wall and bodies easily with its mammoth size. Aghast, the party split off and joined the fray of battle, but did not stray too far from each other. The zone was packed full, with hardly any room to maneuver freely.

Deity had just finished landing a killing blow on a bandaged qutrub when she sensed a sudden movement in the air to her left. Turning quickly and opening her third eye, she anticipated the attack, parrying the striking arrow with her Hagun. Before her Medusa appeared, aiming her golden bow at

Deity's head. Medusa was about to let go another piercing arrow when the whole city quaked violently. Even Medusa's slithering body was unable to keep her balance.

She signaled for her undead army to halt with a blow on her great horn as both sides stopped in speechless confusion. Suddenly a tremendous arc of red lightning split the sky, cracking the center of the plaza of Ulthalam Parade. A dense cloud of dust covered the spot where the bolt had struck, slowly settling. A dark form floated in the air.

Visibly shaken, Medusa dropped her bow and slithered over to the interloper. She bowed her serpentine head in deep reverence. Before anyone could react, a red clawed hand jutted out from the concealing cloud and grabbed Medusa's scaly head, crushing it in one simple squeeze.

"I did not grant you permission to approach me, child. But it seems you were not worthy in any case," a voice spoke as he flung the blue blood and bone from his clenched hands.

A cold chill ran down Deity's spine as she peered into the dusty cloud. Two red eyes glowed in the air. She retreated as the party gathered back. A crowd of curious warriors stepped forward, surrounding the spot where Medusa was so easily felled. Deity pushed the party back further still, all the way against Victory Gate.

Frantic, she took out her linkpearl and messaged Hellknight, "HK you have to get over here. Now! Hurry! Something is here... something is wrong. Terribly wrong!"

As the pearlsack vibrated in his pocket, Hellknight glanced at the message and replied, "Alright in a minute, I am just about done here. On my way!"

He perused the selection of elemental beads on sale in Aht Urhgan once more before closing the auction window. He then ran back to the west and almost stepped out through Victory Gate before he stopped and turned back. Talking to himself, he remembered, "Oh that's right, I need to get a guard's sanction or else I'd just be doing volunteer work."

Meanwhile, the dust had finally settled, revealing the form of the mysterious guest who had so easily dispatched of the Medusa. Was he friend or foe? There, sitting stately on top of a morbid, grotesque metallic pedestal. Four jagged, spiraling spikes jut out from the bottom of the pedestal seat, hovering eerily in the air. One hand firmly rested on a pedestal arm and another gently tapped the side of its tilted horned head. Its flesh tinted a dark blood red, it sneered its giant fangs at those who impudently stared at it. Two skulls floated in the air above his dark golden throne, above each shoulder.

"I am Death Incarnate. Before my presence, the blazing sun flees across the sky, hiding from my cruel gaze below the horizon of the Earth. Behold, mortals, my final form, the Pandemonium Warden. I come to you now to shatter your dreams and end your Age, tiring of your insolent defilement of my mossy den."

At that, a number of warriors pushed through the crowd, surrounding the demon, blades and staves pointed. Segun, that godly hume, stepped through the masses after his underlings trapped Pandemonium Warden, hands at his hips in a triumphant pose. He vainly adjusted a simple ring on his hand and pointed at the beast, his paladin armor shining.

“Pandemonium Warden! What luck it is to see you here! Saves me the trouble of stealing a set to call you with. Zulu shall defeat you on this day, the claim is ours. Guys, go use NASA before anyone else gets here! Don’t let it escape! Do so and I will toss you out along with the rest of Fenrir’s trash.” Segun ordered.

His henchmen tried to attack, with spell and charm and quick acting abilities, however, nothing occurred. No matter how many times they attempted to release their magicks and abilities, nothing came to light.

“What is going on here... Are we being hacked?” Segun exclaimed in surprise.

Pandemonium Warden, vexed, brought his hands together, hellishly clapping his hands a single time. A burst of invisible energy rippled through the air, painfully damaging all those around him. An unseen force weighed down all of Zulu’s vanguard, Segun down upon his knees before Pandemonium Warden’s throne. His body was broken, his armor pulverized into fine white dust, scattering on the wind. Segun heaved his bare, bloodied chest, trying to desperately catch his breath. “Foolish mortal...” Pandemonium Warden chafed as Segun looked up.

“I have not the time to teach an infant how to breathe. And you thought to stand before me? Kneel and grovel at my feet and I may yet spare your trivial life,” it said as it sat back on its chair. Segun fell unconscious at the Warden’s grim base. “Glorious Aht Urhgan, are there any truly worthy within your serpentine walls? How sad a welcome, forcing me to rummage through your trash, worthless refuse unfit for the belly of maggots,” it continued as it magically raised Segun’s broken body and flicked a single finger, sending the dominated hume flying clear across through Victory Gate.

A shrill laugh penetrated the grim air. Perplexed, Pandemonium Warden looked to the side where a lone mithra red mage stood, pointing in the direction where Segun had flown.

“Ha! See what you get for using bots and cheating. Karma’s a bitch isn’t it...,” the mithra mocked as he continued on a long tirade against the elite caste of guilds and adventurers who he had been shunned by.

Disgusted at the waste of air, Pandemonium Warden began to bring its hands together once more, but stopped suddenly. Merely raising one hand in the direction of the mithra Red Mage, it rubbed its crooked index finger and thumb together, grinning viciously. As the mithra continued blabbering on, magical fire burned through the simple blue and white cap that rested on the mithra’s head. It vanished in a rain of burning tatters. Shocked at the loss of his only claim to fame and his only

symbol of status, the mithra started bawling, screaming incoherently about how the world is against him as he ran through Victory Gate.

Pandemonium Warden laughed wickedly as it watched the mithra run off. Perhaps there was some merit after all in coming all the way here. It then gasped as it looked down and saw a strange glowing seal manifest itself upon its red chest. It wondered what the meaning of this was as the frozen masses looked on intently.

Taking out a crystalline orb, it peered deep inside as it invoked some unearthly magicks. Within the orb, the image of a middle aged man appeared, with black hair and eyes.

The Warden asked, "What is the meaning of this treachery, Sage Sundi? When you released me from my earthen den and allowed me passage to Whitegate's doorstep. This can only be your doing. Explain yourself."

"Wut? I don't know, I will ask the other Developers when I get back to Japan," the enigmatic man replied.

Angry at his dismissive statement, Pandemonium Warden pushed the orb against its chest, barking, "Look closer, fool!"

"Ohhh! Red like Ferrari, I like your skin! That is the Besieged Seal, placed on all those who enter Al Zahbi during these raids, on man and best both, allowing full and unrestricted combat. Everyone can play! Isn't it great! I must have forgotten about that tiny clause!"

Pandemonium Warden glowered at Sundi, flames raging in its eyes, "I will destroy you the next time we meet."

"Oh, Pandy, don't be such a worrywart! It's not like anyone can really beat you, even with most of your powers weakened by that seal, we made sure of that! Oh! And you're on Fenrir now as well, haha, definitely don't worry about a thing. There's always the contingency plan you know," Sage explained as he winked at the furious Warden and vanished.

The orb then vibrated suddenly as symbols began to appear in the orb, "^_^!"

Pandemonium Warden crushed the orb in its hand in a fit of rage and growled. "That despicable man...!"

It was then that the Warden looked around, realizing that everyone around had been listening in on its conversation. Understanding the consequences of the seal, the masses began to pile themselves onto the Warden's throne. In a corner of its red eye, it could see a large group of Blue Mages gathering arcane energy. It knew what they were attempting to do, it had seen it before. But it merely smiled menacingly and waited. As Zulu had tried before them, the Blue Mages were unable to release their

gathered magic. Something was impeding spells and magic to complete. They tried desperately in vain, over and over to activate their abilities.

Irritated, Pandemonium Warden snapped its tail, stunning the entire zone around it with a shocking surge, interrupting all attacks and rippling through waves of bodies. Broken and in turmoil, anyone that could move ran away, out through Victory Gate.

Hellknight, stepping through against the fleeing surge, wondered aloud, "Hmm what was that all about?" Seeing his party back against the left wall, he scurried over and apologized, "Sorry I'm late guys!"

His party groaned and shook their heads collectively, cursing Hellknight for once again showing up at the wrong time.

As people continually streamed out of the plaza, Khale explained, "We are being attacked by Pandemonium Warden, he just ripped through Zulu like nothing and everyone else in the city. Something strange is in the air. Something like a warp in time. Nothing can be cast or activated. A strange force is keeping everyone from firing off their casts."

"Really?! No way, I gotta see this!" Hellknight said in disbelief. He sat down, letting his large Koenig Shield rest on the ground and reached into his gobbie back, pulling out a piece of familiar paper. He ripped it in two, whispering, "Utsusemi: Ni!"

However the usual shadow images did indeed fail to surround him. Reaching again into his bag, he pulled out three slips and ripped each piece, whispering "Utsusemi: Ni" after each try to no avail.

Impatient, Jingex slammed his fist into Hellknight's face, scolding, "See you idiot?! It doesn't work, stop wasting our time!" Moments after Hellknight clutched his bruised face, the shadows appeared around him as the last few people vacated the plaza. Jingex remarked, "Oh looks like the lag has cleared up now."

Hellknight looked over at the floating demon. "Hmm, it doesn't look that bad. Let's take it. We're two for two so far, why not make it three for three? Just give me a second and let me change my subjob," he requested as he turned and stuck his hand into his gobbie bag.

"Hell no, you little weasel. You aren't wasting more of our time. We're going now," Smac yelled as he smacked Hellknight in the back of the head.

As the party stepped forward, Pandemonium Warden turned and looked at the brave souls approaching it. Its tail waved wildly in the air in anticipation. It would enjoy toying with these mortals. Clearly this is the best Aht Urhgan could muster, and the odds were appallingly lopsided in its favor. The Warden could afford a little play. Cackling devilishly, the devil welcomed the party's attempt with open arms.

9



Hellknight panted laboriously. After only a few fast clashes, he was already beginning to tire. The heavy Valor Surcoat weighed heavily on his broad shoulders. Smac was spent, his mana reserves empty. In a corner far in the back he was sitting, futilely trying to replenish his energy as he munched on Wizard Cookies. Even Jingex's whimsical music was beginning to sound frayed and tired. After only a few brief minutes, the party was already treading dangerously close to their limits. Elysia ran over to Hellknight's side, casting a quick high level cure to try to keep him from collapsing. A faint buzz whispered in his head.

Pandemonium Warden hovered on its twisted pedestal, shaking its head listlessly, the large bent horns on his head jerked sharply as its head swung. Surprisingly, this ragtag crew had managed to cut and nick his demonic body.

"Merely flesh wounds," it thought. Snarling and whipping its tail. It looked over a small glass hourglass sitting on its pedestal arm. Half full, the sand continued to race through the tiny funnel. *"Playtime is over; it is time to end this. What a pity, they were not even able to capture my interest for but two hours,"* it thought as it gathered together dark energy.

A blinding flash of crimson light burst forth. Hellknight pushed Elysia behind him, her frightened body clinging onto Hellknight's arm. He raised his shield in anticipation. Something bad was coming. He could feel it in his bones. He wanted to shake, fall on his knees, and pray for mercy. At least that's what a logical man would do. But he could not do such a thing. Impossible. He would endanger all his friends' lives if he did. He was their shield. If he were to fall, who would be able to defend them from this evil wrath? Was this bravery or foolishness? He couldn't tell. He hasn't been able to tell for a long time now.

In the back of his mind, the tiny fragments left of his sanity begged him to run, to take Elysia and run. But that voice was but a whisper now. Besides, he couldn't just abandon the rest, and it would not have sit well with Elysia to save themselves and to leave their party to rot. Hellknight glanced over to Deity, a worried look in her eyes, imploring him for something. He knew what she was hinting at, but he grit his teeth and turned away, tightly shutting his eyes. He could not do what Deity asked. It was too risky. As the red light subsided, all Hellknight could hear was a buzz in his mind, a listless cacophony of irritation.

A pillar of ice shot through the dimming light. Acting reflexively, Hellknight reinforced his shield with his shoulder as the ice spear shattered against his Koenig shield, slightly scratching the intricate engravings on its front. Hellknight looked up above. There was avatar there, a manifestation of the icy queen Shiva. He gasped in horror as her other elemental kin revealed themselves at the sides of eight seated Dvergr. Pandemonium Warden had summoned forth a nefarious army. In sync, the Pandemonium Lamps began to draw in baleful power.

A blank look gripped Hellknight's face as he realized what was about to occur. Hellknight dropped his heavy shield and with both hands, forcefully shoved Elysia out of the way. The shocked hume tumbled away several yalms, confused and speechless. Hellknight barely had enough time to turn his head back before a turbulent wave of astral energy swallowed him whole. His eyes consumed by multicolored light, his ears deafened by a raging buzz. His mind barely could register pain as it was overwhelmed by raw might. Falling to the ground, the world darkened to black around him, the buzz fading until all he could hear was a hint of Elysia's voice, screaming his name.



All around him, the only thing Hellknight could see was a ceaseless black, a dark abyss. He could not even feel the ground below his feet.

"Where am I?" he thought.

In the distance he could hear a whispering rumble. Then he suddenly felt as if he was falling, but to where he did not know. A long descent, some unknown force pulling him down against his will. The black around him slowly turned dark blue then a flash of light as he fell into a deep lake of water.

Swimming up towards the surface, at least he hoped it was the surface, Hellknight pushed his head above the water, gasping for air. The bright blue sky was above him now, not a cloud marring its cerulean face. A thunderous roar filled his ears, drowning out his thoughts and his voice. Behind him lay a majestic waterfall, water cascading down from high above, rumbling, rolling, ever moving.

The force of the torrential waters was intimidating. Hellknight tried desperately to swim away from the terrifying rapids, but the current was too strong, pulling him in towards the falls. He tried yelling out for help, but no voice left throat. Terror gripped him tight as he screamed for help in his weary mind.

He drifted by a small rock in the swirling current and grasped on for dear life, momentarily stopping his helplessness. On the rock a familiar pair of Combat Caster's shoes was planted at eye level.

Hellknight reached out for help, asking the Tarutaru for help, but all he could manage was to mouth the words to her, his voice still mute.

“Oh-hohohohoho!

My, my, my, look at you, Hellknight, all bruised and wet!
Just this once, I'll save you from this watery threat!
It's nothing for me to stop this small leak, this annoying trickle.
But really now, how *did* you get yourself into such a pickle?
Quake two is enough to stop this flowing surge.
Hopefully then I won't have to sing your dirge.

Oh-hohohohohoho!”

With a wave of her hands and a scoff of her voice, Shantotto ripped open the earth high above the waterfall and wrenched out a massive slab of thick obsidian, forming a dam that stopped the cascade. The calamitous waters calmed and settled and Hellknight was able to get up out of the water and onto a large flat rock. He gasped, trying to catch his breath and recover his strength.

Shantotto walked by, examining the base of the dry waterfall rockface. Up high above, the thick hard stone began to crack. All of a sudden, a black bolt pierced through the wall. As the rock dam crumbled under the force of the surging waters, Shantotto whipped her head up, frowning as a torrent of water crashed down and engulfed her. The thundering rumble returned. The black bolt whipped around and slowly settled on the large flat rock Hellknight had sought refuge on.

Hellknight backed away, lips wavering, to the opposite side of the rock, to the water's whirling edge. The black bolt took on a new humanoid form, a ghastly being, wispy and chaotic. It opened its white eyes and mouth, giving Hellknight a crooked smile. Its body was as black flame, edges flickering in the air. It started walking towards Hellknight who had nowhere to run. If he dived into the water, he would only drown in the swirling eddies. Eyes locked, the black figure whispered something to Hellknight, but he could not make out the mouthed words over the thunderous rumble of the waterfall.

Shantotto then reappeared in front of Hellknight, snarling at the black figure before them. She clung one small hand around Hellknight's left calf and gripped tight. Too tight. She drove her small fingers into Hellknight's flesh. The buzzing returned to Hellknight's head, cancelling out even the roaring waters. Hellknight held his head, covering his ears with his hands, but it was no use. He fell to his knees, Shantotto covering his torso and chest with her arms.

The black figure formed a jagged black javelin in its hand and rushed forward, driving the tip through Shantotto and Hellknight both. Yet, Hellknight did not feel pain as he looked back and saw the black tip gouged clear through his lower back. No blood, no pain, nothing at all. Shantotto however, started laughing maniacally as she gripped the black pole that had run through her.

“Oh-hohohohoho.... Oh-hohohahaha... Hahahahaha... Hahahaha. Haha... buzzzzzz buzzzz buzz. Buzzzz buzzzzzz buzzzz.”

Shantotto’s open mouth then only let out that strange buzzing noise that had been pestering Hellknight all along. The black figure broke off the other end of the javelin and impaled Shantotto in the skull. Her body faded in a cloud of black dust and dissolved in the crashing waters. Hellknight could not hear the buzzing anymore, in fact, everything sounded much clearer, crisper. He stood up and looked at the black figure who once again mouthed something incoherent, but this time Hellknight could almost hear it. Hellknight pulled out the black javelin that had been driven through him and as he did, the black wispy form in front of him clarified, revealing itself to be none other than Hellknight himself, clad in an Ares Cuirass set armor.

Confused, Hellknight thought, *“Who is that? That’s me, but it can’t be... !”*

He stopped when he realized that his thoughts were being spoken, coming from all directions and from none at the same time.

The Black Hellknight spoke and this time Hellknight could hear his words clearly, “That’s because we’re inside you. More specifically, we’re in your heart, the true master of your soul, mind, and body. Within this space you are safe, a sanctuary deep inside your troubled spirit. With your body and mind severed from the great link, you were thrown back here as you progress towards Death. All that you desire, all that you love, all that you are dwells inside here, waiting for you to call us forth when you need us.”

Hellknight, amazed, asked, “But Shantotto... why did you...?”

“She is nothing but an illusion. A trespasser, an interloper. She does not belong inside this pure space. You let her inside, tricked and deluded by base depression. She invaded the Temple of the Heart, taking on the form that you fear most. She is but an apparition of terror, doubt, and madness, clouding your thoughts and leading you astray, buzzing loudly in your mind,” the Black Hellknight explained.

“Tell me HK, why did you abandon me, imprisoned me deep inside, my words unable to reach your ears until now?”

Realizing who it was that spoke to him, Hellknight slouched his back, ashamed. It was the Man That He Once Was, the man that he had buried down with scarring memories—that he had vowed never to become again. The thunderous roar of the waterfall filled Hellknight’s ears again as he turned away from the Black Hellknight and conceded.

“I ran away from you, ran away from our fate, that damning power that gave way to the Breaking. I was scared. Perhaps that was when she defiled this place. I would only cause others more pain, your only use was to destroy. I did not want that burden on my shoulders any longer. I sealed you away, promised myself that I would never again call you forth, lest I succumb again to zealous pride and once again lose all that I hold dear.”

“HK, I see that you are still ever so blind, but in good cause,” the Black Hellknight started, chuckling quietly. “It is true that I am the source of your power, your unbreakable will, but my strength is not strictly for wanton destruction. Behold this grand waterfall, towering over us, a rushing deluge crashing down with unbridled force. Behold the earsplitting roar. This is a representation of your potential, of what you are, intrinsically. Your strength, in the form of water.”

Taking in a grand view, Hellknight took in the immense size and grandeur of the cascade. The force of the water crashing down was awe-inspiring. The Black Hellknight stepped out and walked onto the water stopping in front of the cascade, arms extended to each side.

“Our strength is pure power, nothing more and nothing less. The power to destroy and the power to preserve are one in the same. It is the Temple of the Heart that decides the path we take; it is the Heart that points us on the road to the Pearly Gates or that leads us down unto the World of Shades. Your desires dictate the direction we go, to chaos or to order.”

The Black Hellknight vanishes as he steps into the cataracts, his voice continuing as the waterfall surged and swelled, “I am as the water flows. Invoke my might and I can be as raging as this soaring waterfall, washing away all that resists us in a torrential downpour, our thunderous force overwhelming.”

Then in an instant the flood subsided, leaving behind a still lake, perfectly calm. A single droplet fell from atop the cliff face as the Black Hellknight reappeared at the center of the spreading ripple, “Speak the words and I can be as meek as the gentle rain, nourishing the life of the earth.”



The Black Hellknight leapt from the water's surface and back in front of Hellknight. "I am your servant, a simple piece of your great spirit. You control the faucet that caps my power. Madness sunk its fangs into your very bones, self-loathing desecrated the Temple of your Heart. Fear has made you weak and hollow. You who are destined to break through the dome of sky, blessed to reach beyond the limits of normal men. Following Doubt will only take you so far. What does your heart desire? To seal me tight or to let me run free?"

Hellknight stood in silence as he wrestled with his inner demons. The Black Hellknight opened a door of light behind him. The space around them began to quake and crumble, the blue sky dimming as giant cracks formed.

"Time is short, your life is fleeting. Soon even the Temple of the Heart shall fall into decay and darkness. Severed are your Mind and Body, but with the deepest desire from within the very foundations of this Shrine, your Heart can force them back anew. Our time is short, you must make the choice!" the Black Hellknight urged on.

Through the white door, Hellknight gasped as he heard Elysia's sorrowful scream. It was then that his heart had settled, that the quaking calmed and the path was set. The Black Hellknight stepped through the white door, shifting into a pulsating black crystal as it drifted beyond.

"Spirit, Heart, Mind, and Body. The Great Chain that gives you life, that filters down your fate and actions. What will you choose? To seal me tight forevermore, or to let me run, free and strong?"

Hellknight charged through towards the brilliant door. As he ran, wisps of black tendrils gathered in front of the doorway, merging into Shantotto's form, arms outstretched to block Hellknight's path. He did not slow, he did not stop, he ran clean through, Fear fading helplessly away. Hellknight did not look back, his eyes set forward towards the light, he reached out to grasp the black crystal that led him forward, ever forward.



Elysia looked on as the deadly wave engulfed Hellknight, his body falling onto the ground. She could not feel any signs of life. At least when Serket made its final stand, she could still feel a faint presence, feel a tiny warmth struggling to burn. But this time, there was none of that, flame extinguished. She could not heal that which did not exist. Distraught, she screamed.

Pandemonium Warden, delighted at this display of utter despair, signaled its abhorrent minions towards Elysia's sobbing body. The avatars and lamps once more in sync, drew deep on the magicks that bind the world and let loose another astral flow, its ferocious energy racing forward. The other party members saw the wave, but they were too far or too weak to do anything about it. Elysia lifted up her head as she sensed the blinding light hurtling towards her. She did not care any longer to defend herself, not that it would have done much good.

Suddenly she thought she heard a faint rustling, the sound of metal plates clashing together. She thought she felt a burst of life, but she could not ascertain from where, the astral light was too blinding.

An explosion ripped the air in front of her, the howling wind it created rushed through her hair. It was hard to breathe against that wind, hard to keep her eyes open. The dust settled. In front of her, crouched behind his Koenig shield, Hellknight stood steadfast. His Valor Surcoat was blown off, his inner clothes were in tatters, and his shield was fully cracked in two, each piece clashing on the ground in a metallic bang. But somehow, he was able to cover her.

Pandemonium Warden was shocked at this turn of events. There was something special about this child. It signaled to its minions to give pause. It wanted to watch for a few moments longer.

Hellknight stood up, seemingly unfazed and picked up Elysia, walking her over next to Jingex. He looked into her shocked face, her eyes still welling up with tears, and said comfortingly, "Sorry I'm late, this is the last time, I promise." He winked quickly and corrected himself, "...today."

Hellknight knelt down and gently placed Elysia next to Jingex. He removed his right gauntlet and took off his simple yellow ring. He placed it on her finger and smiled softly at her. She recognized it. She had read many stories and seen many photos of various legendary heroes who also had these rings. It was a symbol of the Untouchables, that fabled crew. She looked up to meet Hellknight's face, confused and lost.

Hellknight whispered softly in her ear, "As long as you wear that ring, I will protect you, nothing will ever touch you, hurt you, ever again as long as I live."

He stood up and faced the demonic beast once more. A fiery conviction burned in his eyes. He had found his path, he was no longer lost in the darkness. He was no longer running away from the Man That He Once Was. Meeting his gaze, Pandemonium Warden jerked in glee, cackling maniacally. Perhaps it *would* be entertained this day...

10



Deity and Khale leapt over down from their perches top the Al Zahbi wall to stand in front of Hellknight, sword and staff drawn at Pandemonium Warden.

“You’re back huh, HK?” Deity commented with a sly grin on her face.

“It’s good to see the real you again. Welcome back,” Khale said with a grin.

Elysia, suspecting that they too were part of the old vanguard, raised an eye brow at Khale, to which both he and Deity winked back, acknowledging her deduction skills. Jingex confused, just shrugged.

“Ely you rest here, we’ll need you on top form once we’re done. This won’t be an easy task, so stay safe. Jing, you guard her with your life, alright?” Hellknight instructed.

“Pfft as if you had to ask. I am the smart one here, jerk-off! Don’t you forget it!” Jingex scoffed as he threw and jabbed his dagger about wildly, demonstrating his skills.

“It appears that Paladin/Ninja won’t be enough for the job. But I have a trump card in my gobbie bag. Khale Deity, you guys think you can buy me just two minutes?” Hellknight asked of his friends as he rummaged around.

“Who the hell do you think we are?” Khale scolded. “We’ll give you ten.” Deity finished as both she and Khale took up battle positions, watching the stirring devilish force intently.

Hellknight finally found what he was looking for, a large wrapped ball, bound in a large pink ribbon. He carefully started unwrapping the item. As he did, Jingex’s curiosity got the best of him and he asked, “Hey HK, what is that?”

“Oh it’s a little doodad I picked up from the future,” he replied as he removed the pink ribbon.

“The future? Don’t be ridiculous, that’s impossible,” Jingex dismissed, eyes perplexed.

“But you can travel back twenty or so years right? That surely makes sense also,” Hellknight countered. He then continued, “One day while I was taking a Cavernous Maw back from the Shadowreign to present day, something strange happened and I was thrown forward. I flew forward through the void, images of the end of days and the Rapture flashed through my mind. Then I arrived at this strange yet familiar place. I talked to the first guard I saw who didn’t really understand me. He gave me this package and then warped me back. I’ve told you I had bad luck with those Maws.”

Hellknight finished unwrapping as he completed his backstory, revealing a small, yet detailed statuette of a Moogle. “This...,” Hellknight started as he picked up the Moogle figurine and stood up, “is what he called a Mooguru Portabaru. It lets me change jobs on the fly, as if I was in my Mog House, healing and all. Watch!”



In disbelief, Jingex and Elysia looked on as Hellknight pressed a button at the base of the statuette and a holographic projection appeared in the air.

“Moogle-kun! I want to change jobs, are you ready? Henge!” Hellknight commanded.

“Hai! Heirunaito-sama! Ikimashou!” the holographic moogle announced as it spun.

Hellknight was once again engulfed in light as the moogle worked its other-worldly magic. In his mind, he could hear the Black Hellknight speaking to him:

“Power originates in the Spirit, the channels it flows through set by the Heart. Its form chosen by the Mind, and its wrath wielded by the Body. Thus flows the cycle of the Great Chain of Life. What form shall you choose and how shall you wield it? Call forth my might to vanquish those who seek to chain us to the lowly earth and to protect all that your Heart holds dear!”

In his mind, Hellknight saw the black crystal calling for him. He reached out and grasped it, forming the image that he wanted to take. A black light burst out, startling even Pandemonium Warden. It signaled its minions to unleash another astral flow. Khale and Deity stepped forward, seeking to block the attack from going off.

The Warden scowled, “I am not interested in your antics, fools.”

It opened its fanged mouth and let out a terrible scream, a thundris shriek, freezing Khale and Deity in absolute terror. They stood there, powerless and bound. Within moments, the astral flow was released, rippling through the air at the black light.

But in response, from the source of the black light, a single horizontal slash cut the air, deflecting the wave. Pandemonium Warden looked in shock as it turned its head, seeing that its minions had been cleaved in two, their avatars fading into wisps of light. It narrowed its eyes in a deathly visage. The black linked winked out and vanished, leaving behind Hellknight's new form.

There he stood, head tilted in a slight bow. He was clad in his black Ares Cuirass, and wielding an ornate red-shafted scythe. The curved blade seemed to sing as it sliced through the air, humming gently. Hellknight slowly walked towards Pandemonium Warden.

Its clawed hands gripping its hovering pedestal arm tight, it realized that in the previous attack that Hellknight had actually managed to scratch and mar its grotesque throne.

Gazing analytically at the approaching hume dark knight, Pandemonium Warden whispered to itself, "Is this the power of a living relic weapon? No... this is not the same but it is very close. He is calling forth this well of strength by his own merit alone, from the depths of his great soul. Had this been decades ago, perhaps those hapless mortals would have bound his soul to the living metal also. This is a very rare spirit indeed. How exhilarating!"



As Hellknight came close, Pandemonium Warden stopped him, raising its hand in the air.

“Worthy child, I see your strength is admirable. I shall propose to you a treatise. Having so easily vanquished my minions, you have proven yourself capable of standing at my right hand. Kneel but once and I shall grant you sovereign authority. I shall anoint you King of the Earth, all lands and seas under the blazing sun would be under your domain, my supreme vassal. Together we shall usher in a new Age upon History’s weave. Tell me your name, child, and I will deliver you from the mortal coil and lift you up onto the realm of the gods.”

Hellknight laughed and slashed his scythe once, slicing off the lower half of the Warden’s metallic throne, replying, “I serve no master, I bow to no king, I pray to no god. And you are far from any of those. To me, you are lower than the wretched snake, who slithers on his belly upon the clay, slinking away from the light’s embrace. To you, I am but the Reaper of Ruin.”

Insulted at his confident and arrogant boasts, Pandemonium Warden slammed its clawed hands on its floating throne, shouting, “Impudent insect! You dare to scorn my generous offer. If not by volition then by *force*! By my own hands, I shall harvest your soul and make its power my own. Prepare yourself for the perpetual Twilight, your fate sealed the moment you dared to raise your blade against me!”

Pandemonium Warden whipped its tail upon the ground, leaving a small crater where it struck. It stepped down from its throne and grew larger, assuming a horrid form, standing a full head taller than Hellknight. It grasped one of its large curved horns and snapped it off, the blood red tip was razor sharp. It picked up one of the spiraling feet that Hellknight had cut from its hovering pedestal and thrust it into the broken end of its horn. It now wielded a morbid spear.

On top of Al Zahbi’s walls, the entirety of Whitegate had poured in to watch the scene, captivated and still. Hellknight was calm, his mind and heart at peace. Somehow, fear had not gripped him yet. His will had been tempered. He was a changed man... no a restored man. His resolve would not be broken, not even by Pandemonium Warden. He had a promise to keep, after all.

The demon whipped its tail again and roared. “Now we dance, so-called Reaper. Do not break your concentration, child, and you may let live through the first strike.” It suddenly instantaneously appeared behind Hellknight. He was unable to catch the demon’s movement. “Do not relax your grip for but an instant or you may lose your limbs,” it taunted as the Warden vanished from behind Hellknight and appeared to his left.

“Let me tell you what your future holds, boy. Your skin and flesh were ripped to shreds, torn asunder like rotting cloth. Your bones were ground into fine dust. In my hand lies your heart as I feast upon your lifeblood. Blink and you will die. Breathe and you will die. Think and you will *die*. Before your heart beats twice, this will have been long over, your skull under my heel of my foot as I strip you of your soul.”

The crimson devil vanished again. Hellknight scanned all around him, but could not see. He was effectively blind, open to attack at any time, from any angle. Where would the vile beast strike? Before Hellknight could even think about his next move, Pandemonium Warden's horned spear gouged into Hellknight's left leg. The demon phased out of view once more, zipping about with unholy speed, cackling as it moved.

Hellknight stood calm. He closed his eyes as they were useless anyway, and focused his mind, drawing on the chaotic powers of the Dark Knight. He opened his Diabolic Eye, hoping to sense and trace the demon's movements. As the Diabolic Eye gazed out, all that Hellknight could see plunged into a jet-black void, growing darker than even the deepest black.

In the total pitch darkness, he could feel a whipping shadow slightly lighter than the background dart about around him. There it was, Pandemonium Warden; Hellknight could see. As the demon closed in for a second strike, Hellknight countered with a mighty swing. The scythe blade sung a high pitched hum as it sliced through the air, landing against flesh and bone.

Pandemonium Warden screamed, falling out of its invisible veil as it fell back. Its tail was severed, writhing on the ground. A massive gash spurting dark blood on its left side. Hellknight opened his eyes and turned to the beast. This was his chance. He had to go all out while the Warden was paralyzed in pain. He drew deeply once again upon the chaotic powers of the Dark Knight. This would be his last resort. Hellknight could feel the dark energies eating away at his very soul, but it was a price that he had to pay.

He lifted his weapon high into the air as it glowed with an eerie crimson red light. Pandemonium Warden's dark blood dripped from the curved blade as if the scythe was salivating, hungry for more. In his mind, Hellknight could hear the thundering roar of the waterfall. He smiled and drew deep on his spirit's raw power. The buzz was no longer there, he was no longer afraid. And then he swung the blade down.

And swung again. And again. And again in a frenzied rage. A dozen deep blows in the span of a minute. The howls and shrieks of the horned demon shook the very souls of all those watching, unnatural and blood-curdling. As Hellknight lowered his scythe, the demon dropped to the ground in an exhausted thud, panting heavily.

Smac could not tear his eyes away from the carnage before him, he thought to himself,
"It must be at less than 1% now, it has to be!"

Hellknight planted his foot on the back of Pandemonium Warden's horned head, crushing it down onto the stone pavement. He reveled in the irony of the scene. As Hellknight prepared to bring down his scythe for the final deathblow, Pandemonium Warden caught sight of his twisted throne and the hourglass resting on its golden arm. The last few grains of sand were passing through the tiny funnel marking the two hour limit. Laughing maniacally, the Warden faded, vanishing into a puff of fine red dust.

Across the entire city, a wave of gasps and murmurs spread. Hellknight, shocked, yet somehow gratefully relieved, dropped his scythe and fell to his knees. His dark armor and scythe vanished as dispersed in coarse bits of light, returning Hellknight to his prior form of tattered clothes and half-broken white armor.

Elysia and Jingex ran over to Hellknight and started treating his wounds. Elysia was deeply relieved that the fight was over as she infused Hellknight's body with divine magic. Jingex was also, but not enough for him not to question Hellknight as Khale, Deity, and Smac gathered.

"So tell me HK, if you've had this thing this entire time..." Jingex asked, pointing at the moogle figurine on the ground beside Hellknight, "why the hell didn't you use it earlier when we needed it?!! You know, saving us a few hours before Serket for example? Or, hell, even when you first arrived here in this damned zone. If you used it any earlier you would have won and we would have gotten all sorts of weird crap and spoils from that demon-thing! What the hell, man!?"

"Well I tried! Multiple times! But you or Smac stopped me from changing, even though I said it would just take a second!" Hellknight countered. Jingex and Smac shot Hellknight a grave look realizing the instances he spoke of, their blood beginning to boil over.

"And then at Serket..." Hellknight continued, "well for him, you see, I kind of lost track of where I put the thing in my Mog House. You see, I accidentally hit my head on my delivery box and all sorts of items fell out like my Malfrost Ring, and my Crude Sword, my Kaiser sword, too, and this thing! You see I didn't have it on me until I checked my house out before Serket. Lucky thing that I took so long eh???"

A nervous smile cracked Hellknight's face as he rubbed the back of his head anxiously. A twitch began to tick on Jingex's face. Smac, confused, asked, "Wait, why the hell do you have a Malfrost Ring and a Kaiser Sword in your Mog House, let alone your delivery box...?"

Khale and Deity facepalmed and shook their heads in shame, as Elysia groaned, "Ugh, don't ask Smac, you really don't want to hear his explanation for all the useless items he keeps in that mess of a house."

Smac began to also develop a twitching tic as he stood there agape, shocked at Hellknight's seeping incompetence. Suddenly, the sound of frantically fleeing people rumbled Al Zahbi as a shrill laugh pierced the air.

"Oh-hohohohohohoho!"

Before anyone could speak, Khale panicked, used his Chainspell ability and casted warp on himself, vanishing in a puff of green sparkles. Quickly following, Deity desperately searched in her gobbie bag before pulling out her last warp scroll, ripping it into shreds and vanishing in a similar puff of green light.

Shantotto appeared on top of a ledge, looking down at the scene of havoc and devastation in the wake of the epic battle, declaring,

“By boat I crossed the Gugru Blue, to find myself a scurvy rat.
To think that the Empress would lay out such a bloody welcome mat!
A crude carpenter’s in my sights and a million ways to maim.
Burst two... no that’d by too quick, too easy, and that’d be quite a shame.
I’ve got Comet, Meteor, or Ultima Two.
With vigilante justice, there’s no need to sue!

Oh-hohohohohohoho!”

Hellknight’s face paled to a ghostly white, his blood fleeing from his head in deathly fear. It had been two days since last he met with the crazed Witch of Windurst and he did not have any time in between to work up a plan to complete his contract with the Orastery. He grabbed onto Elysia and implored her to teleport them away and quickly at that.

Jingex bent over and whispered in Elysia’s ear while Hellknight chattered on too quickly for anyone to understand, “Go to Vahlz, trust me it’s for the best.” He nodded over to Smac as Elysia casted the spell, sending the four instantaneously away from Aht Urhgan to rematerialize in the icy Northlands of the main continent.

Releasing a gigantic sigh of relief, Hellknight fell back into the snow.

“Now that we’re here, Smac and I just wanted to show you a token of our appreciation and gratitude HK, for all the fun times we’ve had these past few days,” Jingex said smiling widely. He whipped a finger at Elysia and casted Silence, muting her voice temporarily. Nodding to Smac, Jingex directed, “Smac, now!”

Smac drew in dark black magic and casted Warp Two on Elysia, sending her helplessly back home, and with her silenced, she would be unable to come back immediately. Grinning wryly, he casted Warp on himself as well, disappearing instantly. Jingex then kicked Hellknight in the head and ripped a warp scroll in two, also vanishing into thin air.

Hellknight sat up, alone, in the vast barren wasteland. A cold wind blew at his back and he shivered. Looking to the west, he could see that the Valdeaulnia was controlled by the beastmen.

“Well there goes that idea,” Hellknight commented to himself.

He then remembered that he had his own Mooguru Portabaru and could use it to change himself to black mage and send himself home from there, in the icy wastes. He pushed the large button at the figurine’s base to activate the holographic Nomad Mooglee.

However, he was greeted with a recorded message, “Gomen nasai Heirunaito-sama!
Battery low! Recharge onegai shimasu, kupo! Raito-ning, kupo!”

Unfortunately Hellknight had no appropriate lightning spells or abilities to use to recharge the figurine. Defeated, he laid back in the snow, deep in thought.

“Well, I’ve had a *devil* of a time today, so I guess it’s nice to have some time to myself. Heh... heh.... Hahahhahahaaha!” he cracked as he laughed wholeheartedly and exhaustively at his own joke.

The absurdity of it all echoed throughout the empty Northlands...



And there you have it, the epic of a man who was once lost, but found himself; the tale of a man who fought great beasts and who wrestled with heavy handed decisions of fate and destiny. You've been enlightened now through the story of a man who danced with the devil and rode on the lightning, who was destined to break through the sky and grasp the stars of the night in his hand. Remarkably brave, remarkably strong, remarkably lame—these are the qualities and the drawbacks of living the life of Hellknight. What grand tales that follow past here are known only to those who were so ill-fated to share his acquaintance, but perhaps that is, indeed, a blessing for you.

Fin

