

Pre-Terra: Kiel's Legacy



A Novel by Jonathan Greco

Prologue

The War between Life & Pain

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Following the birth of the Guardians of Creation, stood five nations that existed in harmony. The nations possessed each an element that has been passed down by the Guardians of Creation, elements that were said to construct the perfect entity: Life, Death, Consciousness, Divinity and Pain. Peace was at large across the land, until Hyperbia, the nation of Pain, craved the power to consume the living among the land. Hyperbia began devouring the nation bearing the essential element of the perfect being; Ursprung, the nation of Life. As the carnage roared through the streets of Ursprung, the elite fighters of the village stood up to the fight. The militia was guided by the former Guardian of Life, thus, strategically fended off the flesh devouring creatures. No matter how many beasts were slain, Hyperbia's advantage in the war was their profession in overwhelming their enemy. In the endless struggle, most of Ursprung had fallen. In their last dying hope, the Guardian of Life fled the battle in search for the source of Hyperbia's army; he found the gates of Pain. In his rage, he was prepared to kill Pain at the heart of its existence, though he vanished as he entered the world of the dammed, never to be seen again. As Ursprung's hope seemed at bane, the nations of Death, Consciousness and Divinity discovered the disturbance in the peace. They collected their strength to conceal Hyperbia beneath the crust of the earth, condemning them from the union and their lust for absolute power. Up until the middle years of the United Four, Hyperbia has been kept sealed underground by a dimensional totem created by the Union. All seemed good for a while, but their ignorance blinded them from Hyperbia's hunger for power.

The Origin of the Guardians of Creation

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In the beginning, the planet of Pre-Terra was nothing more than rubble floating in empty space. The fate of Pre-Terra changed when gifted consciousness was given to the universe and began manifesting itself. The consciousness of the universe evolved into beings that were known as the Guardians of Creation. The Guardians all had a purpose in the creation of a perfect world, a world with complete balance. With their great ambitions came great betrayals and tension, thus, the Guardians declared war against each other on the plains of Pre-Terra; this began the First Act of Selfishness. The Guardians all wanted to claim the world for their own, but this obviously could not have happened, thus, Pre-Terra was divided into five nations. Bestowed upon them were the elements possessed by each Guardian. Ursprung was guided by the Guardian of Life, the Muerte Yermo was guided by the Guardian of Death, Maho no Sekai was guided by the Guardian of Consciousness, Ouranos Asylo was guided by the Guardian of Divinity and Hyperbia was guided by the Guardian of Pain. Each Guardian created beings in their own image to populate their nations. The beings were influenced to kill all that was unknown to them, and so, due to the variety of nations, the world war of Pre-Terra had begun. The Guardians' failure in creating perfection, laid in their pride as individual entities, all fighting for the same purpose against each other. The war wiped out Pre-Terra's population; by death in battle, developed illness or psychological trauma, every single creature was laid to rest. In despair, the Guardians bestowed upon them mortal forms to, once again, take into their hands, the destiny of their selfish existence.

The Role of a Guardian

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Passed down from the prophets of ancient texts, the Guardians were chosen strategists that lead the nations and maintained peace within them. When conflict arose, it was the Guardian's duty to resolve them. They too were the ones to lead the militia into war when distant conflict stirred. The Guardians endured intensive training to develop their hidden skills of strategizing, influencing, strength and their connection with the Divine. The Guardians often lived in solitude, away from the rest of the nation, spending their lives meditating and learning what they can from the Divine. They also took up the role of mentors to followers of the nation, whenever in disarray, the Guardians helped shine light to the paths of the lost. Their meditating sessions were prohibited to all for that it is said that the Guardians contacted the Divine during that time and encounter the spirits of the original Guardians. The role of a Guardian is passed down to the kin of the last Guardian who processed its power. However, there were moments in history where a Guardian chose another who seemed worthy to carry the duty of a Guardian. The Guardians' abilities vary differently amongst them, for that each nation has their own form of training and each nation offers their own path to achieving such rank. The studies and guidelines are stored within the Sacred Books which are kept sealed in the Forbidden Libraries situated in the heart of each nation. The Sacred Books are sealed far from reach of ordinary hands, and it is but the hands of a Guardian that can break the seal. However, the legend of old has told that one unique individual can acquire the knowledge of every path to becoming a Guardian. In effect, this grants the individual the rank and power of the Guardian of Creation. Legend states that this Guardian will be the bane of evil and bring balance to the world; a balance long awaited since the beginning of time.

Chapter I

Suspicious

I have been bleeding out a pool of red since the attack, laying helplessly on my side in the middle of some foreign field that should be familiar to me. I admit it, I have lost complete will to live. Blood is purging from the side of my mouth and the grass feels like blades against the side of my face as I stare deep into the abyssal eyes of a hell spawn demon. All around, I hear the cries of the helpless burst into the blood tainted sky, I watch as mangled civilians struggle to call out to their loved ones; brothers, mothers, friends, all being torn apart by monsters. Monsters are what they are, they want nothing but the end to our homes, the end to our lives, the beginning of their vengeance. I believe that I have tried, yet I dwindle beneath the rise of the gates of Hyperbia, struggling under the weight of evil that we swore to conquer. The demon circles my undying corpse, licking its lips to the droplets of blood pouring from me. Just like all the others, I am ready to accept this fate. The creature pounces in a split second, soaring through the air with jowls ready to embrace me, but ever so suddenly, all went dark. I have lost.

...

“Hey Kiel, wake up! Come on brother, you’ll be late for work again!”

I wake to the rapid beating of my heart, the cold sweat contouring my skin and the vague sound of my brother’s voice coming from downstairs. This event happened every morning for as long as I can remember.

“Did you hear me? Get up already, you’ve got twenty minutes to get yourself to the farm!”

Waking up late was always the least of my concerns after the visions I endured. The real feat was settling my uncontrollable heart rate before it killed me.

“Just give me a second!”

I rolled out of bed and landed on the wooden floorboards embracing them with my face.

“Aaaaaaouw!”

It seemed that my legs and all other limbs were still shot from the shock. Something of that dream scared the very connection my corporeal body has to reality, making it very difficult for my body to believe that I was still alive. Every morning, for as long as I can remember. Though over a few seconds, I manage to drag my lifeless limbs toward the ladder, at the far corner of my bedroom, and down into the kitchen of my home, where Alexander stood, frustratingly cutting some vegetables. The kitchen smelled like soup.

“You know, you should feel grateful for having me around brother.”

He said to me as my face was kissing the ground.

“Tsk, you can’t even use your two legs the way God bestowed them upon you. Why can’t you set yourself a sleeping plan?”

Alexander is my older brother and head of the sword combat academy here in our village of Ursprung. He has been taking care of me since our parents died during some foreign excursion near Muerte Yermo, the Nation of the Dead. He is my guardian, and I can never do enough to repay him for his deeds.

“Sorry brother”, is all I was able to reciprocate. I preferred keeping these dark matters to my own secrecy than spreading myth throughout the village’s ears, especially avoiding those of my brother.

“Well, no matter, you better eat up and get going. You know how Travis gets when the milk isn’t ready by eight o’clock.”

Travis is the farmer that owned the barn just east from our home. He granted me the opportunity to work when he saw I was old enough to take on a few responsibilities. He said work ‘would help me grow into a man of wisdom.’ I swallowed the scalding soup in less than a minute and regretted every second of it. At this point, my body was functional again. I ran to the fireplace, where my pants and sweater laid near, then scurried out back to feed Paco, my wolf of course, some leftover Shry, then to conserve time, jumped the backyard fence with my seed pouch around my shoulder and ran to Travis’s barn as fast as I can.

“See ya later Alex!” My voice echoed back to my brother who poked his head out the kitchen window.

“Have a great day, make it count!”

He told me this every day, for as long as I can remember.

...

Down the cobblestone path, I ran. The morning hum of the honey-rabbits kissed the sound of the morning air. Just west from here, I could see Sheila forking the scarecrows into the soil at the archery, preparing for morning target practice. Sheila is the ace archer of the town and taught the citizens of Ursprung everything there was to know in becoming an archer worth its title. Although I hate spreading rumors, I still believe that her and Alex have an interest in each other; observing that they take long excursions to the outskirts of town alone.

“Morning Leila!”

My voice traveled pass the town’s water well and brushed through Mr. Jones ‘garden.

“Top to ya Kiel”, she replies, just like every other morning. I turn left between Harry’s and the tavern to cut my tardiness to a minimum and meet facing the fence that contours the farm.

“Travis! Travis! I’m here, I’ve arrived!”

“By God, you are”, he says unsatisfied, in response to my gasping expression.

I lobbed myself over the steel fence and the cows moaned in shock as I land into their ben. I readied myself to prepare the milk before Travis made his way out back. The sound of rustling tools and plates resonated from inside the farm. Then, the back door leading to the ben opens; Travis moved through the doorway ever so slow as he chewed on his tobacco even slower. As he approached me, I sternly milk his proudest cow he called Henry, though I saw in his eyes that he is stricken with disappointment. Even performing the noblest act of his expectations, his eyes stared at me with disappointment.

“In a rush, I see.”

Travis answers when the silence became too much to bear.

“I was delayed by a Shry.”

He looked at me with one eye tightly shut.

“I see”, he replied, silence rained down upon the ben once again. He chuckled underneath his breath.

“That happened to me every time I went out by the falls situated South-West from the Magic Realm.” I was not able to configure his sarcasm. Another evil silence consumed the connection I had with Travis. I milked the cow with guilt on my face, masking it with complete focus of my duty.

“You know, your excuse would have worked if you were aware that Shry rarely wonder about in dry, populated areas”.

Travis knew the geography of Pre-Terra better than anyone. Passing a fast one by him was an impossible task, but any attempt was a better solution than spreading the truth of my nightmares.

“So why y’all not telling me the truth, eh? From what I hear, Alexander has been awoken every night by your terrified screams for as long as he could remember. Does this have anything to do with your uncontrollable tardiness?”

The cow moans in discomfort to the tightening of my grasp on its utter. The truth is no longer a discretion; damn you Alex.

“I’ve just been having bad dreams lately”, obviously an understatement.

Travis held his chewing to a halt, his neck creaked with his glance shifting in my direction. I felt his stare burn into the side of my head, but I kept my focus on the ground, hoping that his curiosity became only as good as the dirt I was looking at.

“What-kind-of-dreams-lass?”

I did not respond, instead, I continued milking the cow until the bucket underneath was full, then handed it to Travis.

“So, what’s next on our list today sir?”

Chapter II

The Sun May Never Rise

For the next five hours I fed the rest of the animals and hoed the garden. I carried tons of wood to Bill's blacksmith and in exchange, he gave me a couple of nifty looking tools for Travis, but my gaze was fixated on the variety of swords displayed all over the walls. There were some that were bronze and some that were silver. Some short for close combat and some long for power at a distance. Some had leather hilts and others were covered in dragon skin. There were also a few that were layered in some fleshy material that I couldn't determine. Along with the swords, Bill's blacksmith was an armory's dream, where anything from various armors to staffs and bows could be purchased, repaired, and built. Bill is a large man and has no hair, which was understandable, since he held around molten lava most of his days and shaved his hair to avoid an unpleasant scene. I almost never saw him without his mighty hammer, and he always bared the look of a man on a mission. The only words I ever heard leave his lips were;

“What can I get ya'today” and “thanks boy, you know where to leave that” and “that ain't right, put them by the fire”.

It was as if he never appreciated the deeds done in his name, but by only the deed he serves to serve others. I look around the smithy and can strangely apply this routine to everyone that lingered and entered the shop. It was like staring at empty eyes in empty places, but what did I know, I was but a farm boy. So, I carried out my own duty and placed the wood by the fire, just like I did every second day of the weekly cycle. In a hurry, I slipped through the stern smithy and the ignorant laughter bursting from the tavern, to resign back to the farm where Travis awaited me at the front door.

“Aigh, it's time for some feeding Kiel!”

Probably my favorite reoccurring line of the day.

I entered the farm, and the smell of cooked wheat and coffee beans filled my being. I pulled up the wooden chair by the oak table and took a seat. Travis slid a plate of oats and honey in my direction and immediately began to quietly eat his offering. Travis sits himself on the far end of the table and began his meal as well. He slurps loudly as the food fountains from the side of his mouth and onto his clothes and table. He licked his lips and looked up from his plate.

“Kiel”, he calls for my attention, “have you ever heard the Pre-Terra legend of the Guardians? The eyes that guided and protected each nation that came to be on the plains of Pre-Terra?”

The words struck me deep in my veins, deep in my heart. They immobilized me, as if something had taken control of me. I looked up from my plate and tried to speak.

“I know of it. Legend has it that a man will rise from the dark and bring light to the world that suffers under the reign of destruction.”

I swallowed the rest of the muck in my throat before continuing.

“A man that will bring the long-lost balance to the plains that connect our world together.”

My heart was jumping out of my chest, but I didn’t understand why I was feeling so anxious. It may be well to do with what I expected him to say next.

“And it all starts with a dream, son.”

Time in that moment stood very still and I questioned if Travis was referring to the dreams I been having, or if he was referring to some ambition of changing this dying world.

In the end, there was no difference, the target for his statement was me.

“Travis, I don’t understand where you’re going with this”.

“I’m talking about your malefic dreams, boy!”

He said impatiently, knowing that I knew exactly what he meant.

“They’re speaking to you. They aren’t just some reoccurring nightmares, but glimpses of your destiny”.

I wished to not understand this.

“Kiel, it is only a matter of time until Pre-Terra suffers the same fate as in your visions. To be honest, you may be the only one who can salvage hope in Hyperbia’s vengeance”.

I wondered if he really was hinting to my destiny as the Guardian of this village. I couldn’t comprehend how I can be responsible of saving my people from extinction, when I couldn’t even save myself from my own nightmares.

“What can I do? This is all crazy, how can you ever consider dropping the fate of our people in my hands? I can’t even arrive to work on time!”

I furiously got up from my seat, not wanting to hear anything more to do with this madness. I stomped my way to the door when a loud, “Kiel!”, cracked from Travis’s voice. I immediately stopped, with one hand on the door hinge and my face fixed on the exit.

“I would reconsider and speak to Hamon before it’s too late”.

A brief pause, then I left the farm with the door wide open, going nowhere and somewhere all at once. Travis dashes to the doorway,

“The sun may not shine tomorrow”.

He mumbled a plea under his breath, but I was too far ahead to hear the whispers of despair leave his lips.

Chapter III

A Prophetic Happening

It was dark out now, the humming of the honey-rabbits no longer existed, but the laughter of the tavern never seized. Tears blinded my sight as I stumbled about, reaching the waterway streaming east from the farm. It was my place of peace; a peace that I couldn't find anywhere else in this stubborn village, but Travis's voice still echoed in my head.

“It is only a matter of time until Pre-Terra suffers the same fate”.

My tears begin to flow into the waterway, the droplets stumbling along the rocky plain, trying to find harmony in the chaos of the currents. A harmony that may no longer be there tomorrow.

“I would reconsider and speak to Hamon before it's too late”.

His voice lingered in my head.

“I can at least try”.

...

The torches were burning bright in the midnight air around Hamon's Dojo. I slowly pattered my way to the front entrance and took in a plentiful of air before I entered the door that would determine my fate. Gaining the courage, I entered the Dojo. Inside, Hamon sat meditating on nothing more than a colorful tarp placed on the ground. On the walls around him, ancient and exotic weapons were decoratively hung, and torches were set at every corner. The smell of burning sage filled the misty pose of the humble room.

“So, I see that you have finally risen from your slumber Kiel”.

His eyes opened slow and tamed, as the words lost themselves in the smoke.

“I guess you can say that”.

“If you are still in a phase of guessing, then you have no business here”.

I was tempted to turn away, but Travis still lived in my head.

“The sun may not shine tomorrow”.

I repeated my thoughts back to Hamon.

“That’s why I’m here, to make sure that it does”.

Hamon stared into my soul.

“Does your brother know of your whereabouts?”

“No one does but you and Travis”.

A grin rose on Hamon’s figure.

“Then, there is no time to waste”.

In a split second, his hand reached into a pocket in his purple vest and tossed a hidden blade lying beneath. The blade hurled at me at full velocity. I flinched just in time for the blade to sink six inches deep into the wall behind me other than skewing the left side of my face.

“What in Gods?! Are you trying to kill me?!”

My heart raced as fast as it did in my nightmares.

“No, I was simply testing the ways of fate. Considering the thick smoke and your lack of basic motor skills, it is safe to say that you, surviving that blow, may just make you an ally to the fate of Pre-Terra. Or maybe even the one to save it from its demise”.

Could this man be anymore psychotic... and insulting?

He rose to his feet.

“I never want you to forget that feeling inside you”, he demanded.

“You mean that feeling of complete terror?!”

“No”.

He continues,

“That sensation you endured of feeling so alive at the closest encounter to Death”.

Hamon suddenly disappeared in the smoke and reappeared behind me, whispering down my neck.

“Tame this sensation and no opponent can ever stand in your way”.

He disappeared once more in the grey haze of sage.

“So, I believe Travis engaged you with talk about destiny?”.

His voice was the only thing of him that was apparent.

“He was hinting out that I may just be the hero of legends, but he was never direct about it”.

“Well let me tell you the truth”, he replied.

A water tribe staff that was mounted on the wall began to rattle and viciously lunged in my direction; that sensation surged beneath my skin once again. I instinctively evaded the attack and fell to the ground.

“The truth is that you are the balance that we have longed for during years of chaos”.

Hamon appeared right above my fetal body and reached out his arm to pull me back to my feet. He turned around, walking towards the far end of the dojo. At the clap of his hands, the smoke in the room scurried out of every nook and cranny of the infrastructure.

“How can you determine who I am by lobbing pointy objects at me?”

I know, I was a moron then.

“I wish I can test you further, but evading attacks will be the only thing that will keep you alive tonight”.

His gaze shrunk and dropped to the ground.

“Are you saying that there will be an attack tonight?”

My heart dropped into the pit of my stomach. I lost track of my breathing.

“I am afraid so Kiel, this is quite a bit to process for someone of your age, but tonight you will have to be quick and vigilant”.

I was certain to fail.

“With hope and fate in the legend of old, you shall emerge from the ashes that burn from the vengeance of Pain and rise again to learn the ways of Life at the beckoning of the sun”.

The weapons on the walls rattled, the ground shook ferociously. The room was suddenly swallowed by darkness, as the torches’ flames extinguished all at once. Outside, the screams of our people pierced through the walls. The shrieks of Pain filled my head with insanity and once more, I felt Life emerge within me. Hamon trembled.

“They have finally arrived”.

He approached the armory at the back of the dojo and opened the wooden doors at the hull of two golden hinges. The armory revealed a single silver sword surrounded by wilted flowers and the Ursprung Crest carved in both doors. There were ancient encryptions along the fuller of the blade and baring an elegant golden grip. The ancient weapon dazzled in the dark. Its magnificence deafened me from the carnage roaring outside.

“This belongs to you Kiel”.

I was astonished.

“But I have never- “, he cut me off.

“You will in time”.

He pulls the blade off its hinges and layed it flat in both hands. He turned to face me and approaches me with the blade.

“You very well know it is too late to think. We must act. For the sake of our world”.

With trembling hands, I grabbed the grip of the sword. My body instantaneously surged with an energy I have never felt before. My nerves stood on end and an electric sensation coated my flesh. Everything around me became silent and bright, but my grip remained strong on the mystical blade. The room around me spun, faster and faster and faster until a loud, vibrating tone filled my head. The blade was the only balance keeping me afloat in the cyclone of confusion. I held it tight with eyes tightly shut. I began losing grip of the sword to the spinning of this gravitational velocity. Suddenly, all became silently still.

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I slowly opened my eyes as white and golden rays of light began pouring into my vision. The environment had changed. I woke, standing on divine marble floor beneath a colossal glass dome. The hall was aligned with marble columns and went on for as long as the eye could see. The dojo no longer existed in this alternate dimension. I was breathing heavy, and, in the distance, I saw a man consumed by silver armor and bared the same sword as I. Who was he? This very question did not concern him as he engaged to approach me. He began to speed walk, then light jog, to running with the blade above his head. He rushed towards me and by God it only looked like he was going to strike. My blade was heavy and weary in my arms, but with all the strength in my body, I raised the sword skyward as the juggernaut lunged in for his attack. I blocked the hulk blow. All the bones in my body break at once as the world quaked around me. We were face to face with both swords in a clash of strength; he bared a helmet that burned fear into my soul, and I bared a face so fragile and small. His strength surmounted my own tenfold. With a savage downward swoop, he broke the clash, launching me backwards with feet grinding against

the marble and his sword submerged in the crater on the ground. He shifted his glance to me and rose to a perfect posture.

“You have arrived my boy. The time must be near”.

His voice bounced off the marble columns and shook the hall.

“Are you the Guardian-”, he interrupts me.

“Of Life and all of Ursprung? He is I”.

He looked prestigious in the beaming light descending from the dome.

“For you to have entered the Realm of Life, it must mean that the legend is unfolding”.

I stared at him without speaking a word.

“Hyperbia must have finally broken the seal that kept them beneath the surface. It is up to you, my young apprentice, to carry out my duty as the protector of our people”.

I was numb to the touch.

“What is your name son?”

“My name is Kiel”.

“Kiel. are you to accept the power and duty as the Guardian of Life?”

For a long moment, I rethought this bargain, this offering that could never be given back. I thought of the farm most of all, the waterside, Alexander, home. I thought of what I was not and who I can become, I thought of comfort, but also adventure. I stared at the legendary sword in my hand and could do nothing but chuckle at the power I held. It was a power that I have never had before. I gained back my tongue.

“My divine Guardian of Ursprung, I am forever in debt of my people. I shall carry the torch of your existence and become the light in the dark. I shall be the hope for Ursprung”.

The Guardian began floating off the ground.

“Then, my young Kiel, you shall bare my power and duty for as long as your spirit lives”.

The room began to rattle, and the Guardian was swallowed by an imploding mass of white light. The shine hurdled towards me too fast to evade. It filled my body, my mind, my vision. Suddenly, all stood peacefully still.

Chapter IV

Under Siege

“Kiel! Kiel! Kiel! Kiel!”

I woke to Hamon’s vigorous shaking that rattled my bones. My unconscious body finally responded; the blade still tight in my grip. Hamon’s voice cracked the air again, screaming my name.

“Kiel! Kiel! Kiel! Wake up! They’re at the door son!”

I snapped out of my daze and, once again, everything became clear. I picked up the sound of clawing and screeching beasts, quarreling outside the dojo walls.

“I’m here Hamon, I’m awake”.

He lifted me to my feet.

“Oh Kiel, thank the Gods. So, you saw him and have returned? You must be ready”.

He picked up his spear, leading us headlong towards the door.

“Kiel, just be quick”,

He whispered behind me as we lunged through the door and out into the streets. We stumbled into a sight of misery and Pain. For the first time in my life, I was living the horror predicted by the legends of my people. I beheld the sight of dismembered bodies; arms, legs, heads, all missing or twitching in the grass. Women, men, children, animals, all torn apart without mercy. I heard battle cries of the remaining survivors and monstrous screams bursting beneath the moon. Hamon clenched his fingers into my shoulder; sensing his fear and dismay transmit into my body. I couldn’t bare the slaughter, but it was too late to turn back. The sound of thick, heavy wings cut the air above us and down came crashing a beast I never imagined existing. The dreams were true. A beast of seven feet in height came down from the sky on wings of the same size. The soul in its eyes were drained by blackness. It had short, clawed arms and long muscular legs attached to a strange

rectangular body, coated in silky purple flesh. It looked at us with vengeance in its snarl and hunger in its fangs. Its disgust was petrifying; it was constricting. The beast screeched and pounce forward. I plead.

“By the Gods- “.

When hope seemed lost, Hamon countered the attack with a jab of his spear. The spearhead entered the beast’s eye and out came pouring heaps of blood; thick, warm red covered my figure.

“Kiel, get out of here”,

he yelled, struggling to keep the Hyperbian at bay.

“Go find your brother, fight by his side. Go! Now!”

The Hyberbian forced the spear out of its eye socket and tumbled backwards to the ground.

“Now is your chance Kiel, go! I can handle this one”.

Like a terrified child, I did nothing but stare at the monster as it rose up again.

“KIEL!”

These monsters were the chosen demons to consume our world.

“KIEL!”

These were the leeches that drained our village from peace.

“KIEL!”

This will not be. I swung the legendary blade skyward and stroke it down through the creature’s face. The blade shone bright on impact. Its power surged through me and exerted into the demon. The divine focus, the light, the blade, the surging energy, it flourished with Life, bursting through every pore of the Hyperbian, right before my eyes. It burned away

from existence, never to be seen again. I breathed in the exhilarating moment, trying to understand the power I contained and feeling Hamon's wild stare behind me.

"You have quickly channeled the power hidden within that blade".

I turned to look him in the eyes; screeches swarmed in the darkness around us.

"Prepare yourself".

Hamon and I stood back-to-back, scanning the abyssal noire vigilantly. The growls of demons grew intense around us, and the glistening of dark pupils swarmed the blackness.

"There's too many of them".

There was a sudden plea, the sound of a cracking spine and arrows entering flesh. Hamon and I looked at each other in uncertainty, but from the smog, a Hyperbian's dismembered face rolled out of the dark and landed by our feet. Out of the shade came Alex and Leila, the greatest fighters of Ursprung; also known as my brother and his girlfriend... maybe. Close behind them, Paco emerges as well, pleasantly chewing on a Hyperbian's limb.

"Alex!"

I yelled at the top of my lungs.

"Kiel! You're alright! Thank the Gods!"

Hamon and Leila, along with Paco, kept watch during my discussion with Alex.

"Where were you at sundown? I was worried sick! Up until the attack, I thought you were dead".

Worry filled his eyes.

"I've awakened Alex, I know what needs to be done now".

I respectively placed him aside and joined the others on the watch.

"Everyone, we have to end this tonight. For the sake of Ursprung".

Everyone nodded, Paco barked along in agreeance. Alex placed a hand on my shoulder.

“Are you sure you’re ready for this Kiel?”

I lifted the blade in my possession.

“This is my fate”.

Along with the greatest fighters at my back, I lead the assault through the dark. We were on our way back to the farm.

“I’m coming for you Travis”.

...

Through the bludgeoned streets of Ursprung, our fury blazed as we ran towards the farm. At every crossroad, a Hyperbian creature, far different from the last, came pouncing forward, but we were quick and varied in our performances on the battlefield. Alex wielded a silver long blade with a hilt layered in Fire Dragon skin; an excellent weapon for heavy thrusts and keeping distance between the wielder and its enemy. Leila held a hybrid bow made of finely crafted Junglerium and iron; made to sling her specialized steel tipped arrows. The Master Archer was also covered in thin plated iron armor and had holsters on her hips that carried along two silver daggers. On the other hand, Hamon wore nothing more than his typical purple robe and controlled a twelve-inch, iron spear head at point of a solid, wooden staff, crafted from Lunen Vulk Forest trees. I was unarmored and physically vulnerable, but I also bared the only hope for my people, the Leben Sword. Forged from some divine metal, the blade’s power reacts to the essence of Life that surges through the wielder. Lastly, there’s Paco; Paco was simply a wolf. But, together, nothing seemed to stop us, until something did. Behind me, I felt someone’s body meet the earth.

“Aaagh!”.

It was the sound of Hamon's voice. My feet dug into the ground, shifting in his direction, simultaneously swooping the blade into the face of a nearby Hyperbian; the creature burned away into a frenzy of dazzling dust. Hamon was in the dirt, fighting for his leg back between the jaws of a Hyperbian. There was no doubt this creature caught up to him; this one was built with four muscular legs that galloped faster than any average Ursprungian. Hamon struggled to knock off the beast's jaws. Leila quickly pulls an arrow out of her quiver and shot it perfectly between the creature's eyes. We all ran to Hamon's rescue as he pointed in the distance.

"Everyone! Look over there!".

There was a rage of bloodthirsty Hyperbians stomping our way; and fast. Alex and I picked up Hamon's body, but he resisted.

"My body will slow you all down, go on without me. I have done my duty".

No.

He directed his attention to my brother,

"Alex, take care of the dojo during my absence. It is yours now".

Hamon did not want a rescue, he never thought twice in his life. Hamon always knew what was best. The heard of flesh eaters roared near, Alex accepted Hamon's request. He let go of the man's hand and signaled us to continue to the farm. I looked over my shoulder and watched as he shrunk into the ever-growing darkness. I looked forward once more fighting myself to not turn back. He taught me a noble lesson that day. Pain shall keep us still, lingering in a moment of agony, but Life, shall forever move forward.

...

As we approached the farm, despair took form of smoke and flames, swallowing the farm whole. Out on the front grass, burning beasts struggled to survive through the blazing of their flesh. We arrived at the door in search for Travis, but nothing remained but foreign corpses and ashes. Paco barked loudly at the farm as us warriors put an end to the lives of the struggling ambassadors of Pain. I directed to Alex,

“Do you think he senses Travis in there?”

He did not respond. Instead, he nodded to Sheila and kicked down the burning door to the ground. I followed behind until he shoved me back.

“Kiel! Stay here with Paco. Sheila and I will go in and find Travis”.

Alexander was always a bold idiot.

“But that’s Travis in there, what if he’s-”,
he cut me off.

“Kiel, there may be something in there that you do not want to see”.

I painfully held myself back from following them in. Next to me, Paco growled and whimpered. His fear and doubt filled my mind. I couldn’t resist going in; my friend needed my help. I raged into the building and all I saw was blinding clouds of black and grey toxins and fumes; Life burned inside of me. Alex and Sheila were nowhere to be seen, and there was no lead on Travis. I called out for someone, no response. I marched my way through the ashes and fallen wooden beams; the flames blinding and the crumbling roof deafening. I eventually evacuate through the back door leading me to the ben, where most of the animals were gone; either eaten or burned alive. There was still no sign of Travis or the others out there. I turned to enter the blaze once more and down came crashing the rest of

the wreckage. The combustion threw me off my feet and flung me helplessly into the air; my skin being eaten away by flames. My landing burned the grass around me, and I flopped like a fish out of water to seize the burning. My sight swelled; my skin no longer existed. Though the Pain was unbearable, nothing seemed to stop me from finding my friends. Life at this point, was coursing through me, empowering me, allowing me to move on. I limped my way around the bend, back to what once was the entrance to the farm. Through the clouds of smoke, I saw two human figures and one of a wolf.

They're safe, thank the Gods.

As the distorted figures grew clear, Paco ran towards me; Sheila in relief and Alex carrying Travis over his shoulder. I fell to my knees; Paco held my body upright and the others rushed over to salvage me. They were all worried, but my worry was on Travis's condition.

“Oh Gods, Kiel, your body, what happ-”,

“Travis! How's Travis?”

Sheila took a few steps back as Alex looked to the ground.

“Dammit Alex, how is he?”

Tears contoured the swells on my face. He dropped the unconscious body to the earth. Travis's foreside is undeterminable under the bodysuit of battle scars and flesh burns.

“No! Oh Gods, no”,

was my only willing reply.

After all he had offered, he couldn't even leave this world with a proper goodbye. His voice lived inside of me,

“The sun may not shine tomorrow”,

is what he said.

“May the sun be with you wherever you are, my friend.”

We moved past Travis’s body, peacefully lying in the tall grass. Paco whimpered and tucked his snout under Travis’s chin, but the moment shattered when they found us. A remaining onslaught of Hyperbians surrounded us. Alex was raging for a fight and Sheila was not holding back her vengeance. Something profound ignited inside of me, something personal; some power that was too colossal to contain. The surge in my veins and in my chest emerged from my being and reignited the light in my blade. I was shaking, quaking the earth, trying to control this wildfire rising to the surface. My vision was swallowed by white, and the world became unfamiliar for a moment. Then, I woke in my own bed, surrounded by familiar faces in awe that I was still alive.

Chapter V

Awakening

“What’s going on? How did I get here?”

I didn’t comprehend this sudden new reality. I couldn’t help but wonder if it all was some dream; just like the others, too much for my friends to bare. It seemed logical for why they gathered around me, filling up the space in my room. Maybe my nightmarish screams were once again too much to avoid. Yes, that seemed logical. Guardian of Life? How pathetic of a dream.

“Kiel, do you not remember anything of last night?”

Alex asked me.

“You mean the attack?” my heart raced.

“Was that actually real?”

I was clouded with doubt.

“Kiel, you really did save us all last night”.

Sheila grinned uncontrollably,

“You showed them what Pain was, alright!”

I did not remember anything of the sort from last night, all that came clear in my mind was,

“TRAVIS!”

My heart jumped out of my chest. Paco barked a tune to my painful worry while Sheila held me down.

“Kiel, please try to calm yourself, there was nothing you could have done for him.

He was dead before we arrived”.

I was a raging Massu under Sheila’s grasp, I wasn’t ready to believe that I lost Travis to this monstrosity. Alex passed by the others and firmly placed his palm onto my chest, his strength and intimidation suddenly calmed me.

“You rescued what was left of the village last night Kiel”.

“I-don’t-Remember-A Thing- After-Travis...”

Alex and Sheila looked at each other, sharing an awfully strange grin.

“What? Come on guys, what shenanigans did I pull on those creatures last night?”

Alex chuckled.

“Well at first, we were a little concerned as to what was happening to you”.

Sheila intervened.

“With your eyes rolling back and turning completely white as your body convulsed, we thought we lost you to some inner demon”.

“Then the ground began to shake, and your blade began to shine”.

Alex added.

“Then your body began floating off the ground, so we decided to step back a few feet to get out of your way, but Paco didn’t get the hint”.

“So, I had to carry the big lug out of the way”.

Paco barked.

“Any who”, Alex continued.

“Eventually, you were completely consumed by this brilliant ray of light and came plummeting down to the earth, destroying absolutely every Hyperbian around you, while others fled the battle”.

I didn’t know what to say; this phenomenon must explain the whiteout I had during all of it.

“After the explosion, you were lying unconscious in the grass. I decided it would be best to bring you back to your room under deep surveillance by Reego”.

Reego appeared in the far corner of the room, making it impossible to know that he was there all this time. Due to his short stubby body, there was no way I could have spotted him from my bed.

Reego approached the bed.

“Good to see that you’re well my boy”.

Reego was the village librarian, he knew every book and piece of insight involving the Ursprungian anatomy. He was also the shaman of our people; he was the true heir to the Guardian of Life in my eyes. I dreamt to be of his stature someday. He wore the same mosaic patterned robe and carried on his face a pair of filthy round glasses that were too big for his own good; though no one dared to tell him to dress otherwise. I knew that his presence in my room was no mere coincidence, for he too was the keeper of the Sacred Book of Life, and it would be soon time for my teachings to commence. He placed his hand on my forehead and brought his face close to mine.

“All looks well, blood pressure is back to normal, your eyes are no longer dilated, and your breathing is fine”.

He brought his lips to me ear.

“So, you are the infamous heir to the Guardian, eh?”

I swallowed heavily.

“Well, if that is so, I propose that you pass by the library as soon as you are settled enough to move”, he says to me, walking out of the room, waving one hand freely in the air.

“Yes sir, Mister Reego”, I responded in accordance with him.

I began unsheathing myself and looked down at my body. Where I was expecting wounds, I found not one apparent scar on my skin. I touched my face where I was expecting to find burns and swells, but not one existed. How was this so? Getting back to my feet, I was also able to walk with ease.

“You guys’ sure that last night actually happened?”

I asked.

Sheila responded.

“If you don’t believe us, wait till’ you see the mess you made outside”.

I made my way to the ladder that led to the first floor of the house, finally using it the way a ladder should be used. I opened the front door revealing the mess that was once my town. My home, along with the blacksmith, the shop and the library are amongst the only establishments left standing. Wondering around the streets, I watched my people try to recollect the remains of the village, to reconstruct what once was. I did not hesitate to approach those in need of help; I approached two elders attempting to lift wooden beams off the lawn.

Alex joined me, pulling the debris out of my hands.

“Don’t worry Kiel, Sheila and I will do our part for the village”.

He lifted the wooden beam with one arm and threw it over his shoulder.

“You on the other hand should head to the library right away, direct orders from Reego”.

I looked at him, amazed by his strength.

“Right, sure thing. I’ll see you guys later then”.

I responded well, though inside, I was frustrated, for that helping my village was my priority to pursue; I guessed in good time, it will be. Without further delay, I made my way to the library situated west from town. It was impossible to miss, due to its sky rising bell tower and its red roof. The four exterior walls were mostly made up of large mosaic windowpanes, framed with a wooden and tone foundation. A short walk north from the library was the local shop owned by Florentine; she sold everything from material goods, to food, to various miscellaneous supplies. Both the library and shop were damaged from the exterior, but they still stood strong; they were both backed up by interior stone walls, allowing them to withstand situations such as attacks or harsh weathers. The village could not afford losing the necessity of the library's knowledge and the utility of the shop, so priorities went into building them much sturdier than the rest of the homes in the village. Knowledge and essential goods were key to our survival, for as the followers of Life, we must consume to carry on.

...

I entered the library passing through its tall, narrow doors, exposing ten-foot bookshelves that filled the room. Books overflowed the shelves, stacked on the ground and took up most of the table space as well. At the end of the corridor, there was a simple wooden desk that was free of any material; nothing but a single book and a lit candle. Behind the only neat table in the room, was a humongous iron vault; though I already had a clear understanding of what laid beyond it. Walking between the large bookshelves, I glanced upon book titles that caught my attention; *Dobutsu Dreamland*, next to, *A Fisher's Guide to the Reel Catch*, next to, *Body Art & Reason*. There was no genre orientation in this place.

“How does Reego find anything in this mess?”

I murmured underneath my breath, drawing my finger across the shelves. I stopped on a book title that was too wild to avoid, *The Monster Hunter's Encyclopedia*. I took a few minutes to skim through the pages.

The Monster Hunter's Encyclopedia

<https://www.geisttheory.com/pre-terra?pgid=ks9sd5zt-32a81e09-e0cf-4f21-b97b-f30b34e34426>

I slid the book in my pant pocket as I approached the candlelit desk. I leaned over onto the desk, scanning the room for someone to come to my attention, but the library was empty. Wide open on the desk, was a large leather book with gold lining the pages; Reego was probably doing a little reading. I focused my sight on the writing and the scribbles and realized that this is no fishing book, it looked a lot like spellcasting. I turn the book upside right to read it clearly; inside were lengthy formulas and strange ancient hieroglyphs.

“You really shouldn't mess with what does not belong to you”.

Reego appeared to my right side, startling me.

“Especially when you do not want to discover something you will regret knowing”.

He slammed the book shut; I pivoted my hand out of the way just in time.

“You came much sooner than expected, I thought you may take a while longer with assisting the villagers with the deeds happening outside”.

Are you serious?

“No matter, you're here now. So, let us enter the vault, shall we?”

My heart swallowed itself from anticipation. Reego turned to the vault and pressed his hand against the ancient encryptions engraved onto it. The encryptions glowed a bright green as the room began to shake to the opening of the colossal doors. As the door slid open, an endless staircase was revealed, leading downwards into darkness. Reego lead the way down, I followed behind.

“This is the Sacred Hall of the Library”.

His voice echoed throughout the narrow room.

“Only a selected few like yourself are allowed down this path”.

We finally came faced with a large glass cube constricted by chains at the bottom of the staircase. Within the glass, a stone pedestal held a beautifully crafted book that shimmered a miraculous ray of white and was held together by silver book corners. It too was locked shut with iron chains.

“Kiel, within this glass dome lies the Book of Life. It is without further delay that you discover the very truth about yourself”.

He directed me to the dome.

“Place your hand on the shackles that bind your teachings”.

I approached the glass with my arm stretched forward. I took a deep breath and placed my hand on the chain; nothing happened. I waited a few moments; still nothing.

“Huh...”

I sighed and turned away from the dome. The chime of chains suddenly meet the ground, and an avalanche of dust filled my sight. The glass cube dissipated in thin air and the book lied in the center of the room unrestrained. The book was swiftly in my hands, as the chains around unhinged; the sacred knowledge was now mine to know.

“My young Guardian, you shall stay in this sacred room and emerge from your studies as the sole individual that will carry the torch of Life in its entirety”.

Reego left the room and the vault door slid shut from atop the staircase. I sat myself down in the center of the room and opened the book.

Chapter VI

The Book of Life

Geschichte

Since the beginning, our kind has come to be by the balance of struggle. In fact, we are one of two key essences in forming this balance, giving struggle a dimension to manifest upon. Within the chaos of struggle, there is balance, for that balance cannot exist if there is no tension between opposing sides. As we are the manifestation of the living, we take place on one peripheral side of the scale, standing for all that lives, whereas our counterpart holds the other side; this counterpart, is Death. Death is no enemy of ours, it is our ally and key to the balance of struggle, for if no tension provoked by Death existed, then Life would have no reason to be. It gives us form and power and ambition and strength, for that Death is nothing like us, and thus, is the balance in our universe.

Spiritualität

The universe is our living force, our mother, our maker and higher being, for that our power is drawn by all that is living within the natural world. We follow the strict unchangeable laws of the universe; we are bound by its embrace and cannot escape it. Our passing simply makes us whole with the origin that once brought us to be, it does not plunge us into a different realm of existing. Therefore, it is important to know that nothing is lost, nor can this God be cheated on. We are bound by a force so solid that with each choice that is made, there is an equivalent sacrifice for each of these actions; I speak of the harnessing of our power. By giving part of our focus and part of our spirit to the Life force, it returns us the privilege to have a piece of control over it, allowing us to manipulate the realm of the living that surrounds us. With enough spiritual exercises, one can harness this power by sacrificing another individual or object that lives; but this is unjust and so, the universe shall know of it. Thus is our connection with the divine origin of Life, but there are only few of us that may be capable of mediating passed the sliver of manipulation over this force. Once the mind extends to a further grasp of the Life force, one can become it and feel its wholeness, allowing for extraordinary control and power. But, if not controlled, the power of Life can consume you for that you have decided to cheat Life itself for intruding upon this power; lack of control is unwelcoming to the universe.

Kräfte

As manipulators of the Life force, we can harness its energy to contribute more Life to our universe at an exponential rate. If existence is lacking forestry, it can be grown consciously, if an ally is injured, one may instantly heal the wound. In combat, the Life force allows us to bend every element found in nature, therefore, it allows us to manipulate anything that is within the boundaries of nature itself. However, one must be weary of this power, for that our vulnerability derives from our dependency on the tangible world. We simply do not have the capability of expecting anything that does not belong to the natural world; therefore, Divinity and Consciousness are unpredictable and very dangerous. In situations of thus vulnerability, the importance of control is radiant, for that nothing can be solved before first understanding its roots. To conquer the opponent is to understand the opponent.

Heilen

The Heilen ability is our healer and up to this point, no other method from any healing power, has proven more efficient and liable than thee. The user of this remedy can cure either the self or a living target. Heilen can repair all body tissues and stabilizes normal body functions. By tapping into the Life force, the user must carefully redirect its energy into the body to target the damage done at the precise location of where it emits. Healing others is a similar concept; however, the user instead redirects the Life force into another body, making the procedure slightly more difficult since the user does not control the targets body.

Brandstelle, Wasser, Erdboden, Äther

These are all elemental abilities, giving us Life ambassador's full control over the elements. The ability to control the elements makes it the offensive and tactical ability we possess. Control over the elements allows for great adaptation to the user's surrounding, allowing for full tactical maneuvering both in combat and within nature itself. The user must first form a bond through the Life force with the element they have targeted. By contributing focus on its being, the user can then manipulate that element and use it to their advantage. Once the user discovers full control over these elemental powers, they can be used together in harmony, making the user an overwhelming foe to counter.

Werden

Werden is a very tactical ability we possess, allowing it to be almost of a spiritual healer. This ability allows the user to grow in spirit, strengthening the mind and body when the journey has exhausted us. Werden also applies to everything that lives around us, where we can produce Life and energy for the living world. The ability is placed in effect by demanding the Life force to expand into more of itself. This takes no sacrifice, for that the user is expanding the branches of the Life force into a larger being, within us and without.

Lebensphäre

This sacred ability is yet the most dangerous and most difficult to control. In most of the Life ambassadors that begin their training, this power is unleashed from them uncontrollably and unknowingly, making it very dangerous both for the self and the environment. This outburst of energy usually occurs out of rage or helplessness, but the key is to recognize this power and control it. Lebensphäre is a spherical veil of light that surrounds the user, allowing for incredible power and protection. Nothing that I have encountered could penetrate this veil nor can any attack that emits from it have been evaded. Lebensphäre is a pure manifestation of Life force energy that is harnessed and flows through the user, some could say it is invincibility. Since so much energy is being stripped from the Life force during this ability, full control is the primary objective, for if the user can harness the force, the force shall grant itself to them. In many cases of energy outbursts do to Lebensphäre, the sphere around the user explodes, destroying everything in the vicinity and leaves the user in terrible condition. Control the self before you can control the Lebensphäre.

Leben Sword

The Leben Sword is the weapon casted down from generations of Guardians, originating and built by the first Guardian of Life. The weapon was imbued with the Life force itself making it the closest physical form of such force. Though it takes form of a violent weapon, and may be used as such, the Leben Sword was engineered to purify an enemy's soul, casting them off to the Life force rather than disappearing from the world. The act of striking is done in good will, for that erasing a living being would create imbalance in the universe. The Leben Sword gleams with light, and that light, can be projected from the sword with enough strength upon strikes. This weapon has been the sole protector of our kind and was casted on us to carry the torch of our existence.

Ziel

In the conclusion of my understanding of the Life force, one must understand balance and strive for it, for too much or too little of any substance will tip the scale of existence and will cause great harm to all that surrounds it. I do not believe in perfection, in fact, it will happen that one's scale will tip, and it must, because if it never does, then we shall never learn from the mistakes we make.

- Lidian

Chapter VII

Preparations

The vault slid open once again, where Reego expected me on the other side of the colossal door. It felt like days since I entered the chamber, though determining night from day in that sanctuary, was impossible.

“Good day Kiel”.

Reego said with content. I assumed at that point that it was daytime.

“Reego, I’m ready to fulfill the prophecy once and for all”.

My sudden energy for adventure seemed to startle him. I followed him as he trotted to his candle lit desk, where the library was occupied by the quaint shuffling of books. He brushed his hand on a leather back book with no title.

“According to these scriptures”, he began, “Hyperbia, the nation of Pain, will begin a frenzy of destruction on every one of the nations that occupy the plains of Pre-Terra”.

He looked up at me.

“That said, we were not the only ones attacked that night Kiel”.

He looked back down at the book.

“Your goal here is to assure that these nations do not become conquered by evil if they have not already been. It won’t be a simple journey, nor will it be an easy task to persuade those that have been blinded by Pain, but doing so, is the only way to put Hyperbia in its place”.

He closed the book and placed it atop a stack of books that mount on the floor.

“Make sure to be prepared for long days and longer nights; long struggles and the complexities of foreign mentality”.

We were strolling towards the library’s entrance when he told me this.

“Foreign mentality?”

I asked.

“Not all intellectual beings of Pre-Terra follow the ways of Life, Kiel”.

He opened the door.

“You will encounter Divinity, Consciousness, Death and may the Gods be with you when you are faced with Pain”.

I must admit, what Reego told me made me very anxious, but I have seen too much to turn my back on my destiny; I bowed to Reego as I left the library.

“Thank you for the insight my friend, may you and all of Ursprung stay safe while I’m away”.

He grinned back at me.

“We have the best of the best fighters here in Ursprung son, simply occupy your mind with what needs to be done as preparations for your journey”.

I nodded in agreeance and began my long-awaited destiny at Florentine’s shop.

...

I walked two blocks north from the library, on the path, the village children were all occupied, either playing obliviously or following daily routines, as if nothing has happened, as if nothing had changed. They all seemed to be at peace with the chaos, unaware of the destruction yet so happy. The welcome bell rang as I entered Florentine’s shop.

“The place is still perfectly intact”.

I whispered as I wandered in.

“It’s an amazing structure isn’t it, Kiel?”.

Florentine entered the room from the back store.

“Whoever built this place definitely expected a need for the support”,

She said as she placed a tray of fresh loafs of bread on the countertop. The smell reminded me of how famished I was. She giggled to the sound of my echoing stomach as she offered me a loaf of bread.

“Poor thing, you’re drooling on yourself”,

“Oh, I can’t take that from you”,

“So modest”.

Though I refused her offering, she wrapped my hands around the warm crust of the bread.

“May I remind you of what you’ve done for us Kiel?”

The night of judgment came back into my mind.

“The least I can do is repay you with bread”,

She said through offsets of giggling.

Florentine was always so giving. She never asked for anything and when it was time to give, she approached everyone with open arms.

“Well now, let us not keep you any longer. How can I be of service to you today my little Guardian?”

I blushed in wondering how far has this “Guardian” rumor has gone on for?

“I could definitely use some essentials before I leave the village. I’m not sure how long I’ll be away for”.

She bent down, out of sight, behind the counter.

“I think you may need much more than essentials dear”.

She shuffled through some miscellaneous items before coming back up in sight.

“Now where did I leave that? Oh yes, here we are”.

She pulled a leather strapped bag over the countertop; it looked very easy to carry around, considering that it was worn around the shoulder and is compact with many pockets.

“Here are also a couple of more straps to hold extra equipment”.

They would be great for holding my pouches and holster in place; it also gave me just enough space to equip a quiver and bow.

“Here are some pouches of nutritious food; you’ll find Meadow mushrooms, Forest water, some Shry meat, Volcano pudding and sweet Desert cactus”.

My stomach was already desiring the food.

“Here is a holster that straps to the side of your leg. You can keep anything in it, from a hidden blade to precious metals; maybe even sticks and stones to make fires”.

She knew too much about survival for a shop owner it seemed.

“And now for a sturdier outfit”.

Boo Yeah!

She finally took me to the back store of the shop, where all the imported goods were stacked neatly on shelves.

“You should really teach Reego a thing or two about organization”.

I said sarcastically as she giggled.

We reached a part of the shop that was set up specifically for wardrobe fitting and quilting.

There were pieces of flannel material hanging everywhere in the room.

“I had something made just for you”.

Something just for me? She opened a small drawer and picked out a slim, sleeveless, dark green shirt. She entered the closet and brought back a pair of sturdy, slim, brown pants, along with slim, knee high brown boots.

The first thing that came to mind was, “Savage”.

“I was intending to have you looking like a one-man army. A man so powerful that he needs nothing more than the bare skin on his back”.

She winked at me as she tosses me the clothing.

“Well, put it on”,
she demanded,

“You can change behind that curtain”.

I quickly changed into the “one man army” outfit, anticipating in excitement to see how I looked in it. Everything fitted perfectly; She immediately blushed as I demonstrated the outfit to her.

“You look just perfect dear”.

Now that’s a first...

“Thank you! I’m flattered”,
I responded through her senseless giggles.

...

We entered the shop once more, where I picked up the supplies Florentine left for me on the counter, thanked her once more for her generosity, slipped a few coins into her pocket and left.

“Oh Kiel, you may want to bring this along with you”.

She handed me a full-scale map of Pre-Terra; bless you Florentine.

“Best of luck to you, my Guardian!”,

She said, as she entered back into the shop while I moved away gazing at the size of the map.

Without further delay, I ran back home. My new clothing, so flexible and light, I practically flew through the streets of Ursprung, making it home in seconds. I picked up the Leben sword, placing it into the new hilt on my back and fed Paco one last time before departing.

“You take care of everyone while I’m gone alright?”

As I pet him, he seemed to feel that I was no longer staying for long. He whimpered and jumped into my arms, pressing me down to the earth.

“Sorry buddy, there’s not much choice”.

He didn’t give in; meanwhile, Alex came up against the backyard fence.

“Looks like the big lug is going to miss you Kiel”.

I tried to keep my composure as Paco pressed his weight down on my chest.

“Yeah, he’s a dear. Letting go isn’t his strongest value”.

In response, Paco nipped at my shoulder.

“Ow! Dammit Paco!”

Alex began to laugh hysterically.

“Why don’t you bring him along? I’m sure you’ll need some company”.

Paco’s mood suddenly changed; his tongue unraveled from his open jaw and onto my face, drenching me in pooch saliva.

“Ack! Ok, Ok, you can come”.

In total excitement, he began running wildly in circles. I got up from the ground and jump the fence; Paco followed behind me with a single leap.

“Kiel”,

Alex drew my attention.

“Keep yourself safe out there. It’s a different world outside the village. We don’t need any more premature deaths in the family”.

I look him seriously in the eyes, approached him and embraced him in a hug.

“Alexander, there is no way I won’t return. Everything depends on me”.

He pulled me back and looked me in the eyes.

“You can do this my brother. You have the spirit of a warrior”.

I nodded to him and smiled as I walked away heading East with the map wide open across my arm and Paco by my side.

“You feed the lug properly you hear?”.

I sent back a smirk.

“Better than you ever will!”.

I heard Alex chuckle in the distance and ahead, I saw nothing but miles of grassland, lit by the rising sun.

“Well Paco, our first stop is the nation of Death, Muerte Yermo”.

He looked at me with a wide smile as he shuffled along the rising blades of grass.

“Hope you don’t mind sand on your paws. There’s a lot of it where we’re heading”.

He suddenly coughed up an unpleasant growl.

“Hey, this was your choice buddy”.

Paco bumped into my leg and jetted off through the fields.

“That big lug”.

So, I race behind him, running together amongst the fields of green into a land of undeterminable wonders.

Quest I

Harenam's Desert

Choose your path

Begin on Page 59 or page 65

Kkyie the Sand Custodian

Marching east of Ursprung towards Muerte Yermo, the luscious, lively grass became desert, and the sky lost its sunburst glow behind the enormous sand dunes.

The wind finally began to blow grains of sand that clashed against my skin, which only meant that we were getting very close to the wastelands and making very good time too. It was only then that I realized that in every direction, there was nothing but sand and no civilization. I shuffled through the dense sand in every which direction for at least five minutes at a time, finding myself in the same predicament; lost. Along the desert dunes, toxic Bemara's lashed at me, only nipping at my skin, causing my flesh to go numb. And if my luck was any better, a sandstorm wouldn't have picked up, but it did, and not only did it blind me, but it misguided me. Paco nervously fought off the Bemara's biting at his hide, whimpering in desperation. If he had a voice, I'm sure he would have bad mouthed me for being so incapable of directions. I gave myself a short minute to look at my map. By embarking in the density of this desert, I presumed that we were deep in its eastern ridge, situated south from Muerte Yermo.

We continued north, or rather, in the direction that I presumed was north, and stumbled upon hordes of four legged creatures in the distance. Clarity caught a view of the creatures through the dense air, uncovering hordes of Tabemono Mules. The mules are little mammals used by merchants to carry large amounts of supply through the desert to foreign lands; because of their rugged hide and slow metabolisms, the creatures were built for long, enduring journeys without need of resources.

“This could be our way out of here Paco!”

I said in relief.

Surely, these creatures must be passing through the desert heading either west or north towards civilization; following them was a chance I was willing to take. I took a swig from my water canister and passed one to Paco before heading towards the Mules. As we approached, the Mules ran in our opposite direction, startled by our presence. One attempt after another, but the damned things just kept sprinting off; they were rather quick for little round creatures carrying loads of supplies. In the midst of chasing one of the Mules down, a low rustling came from beneath the sand, dwelling right underneath my feet. I suddenly froze in place, shocked to what may be lurking below, and no less, lurking for me. Out from behind me, a human figure drilled out of the ground and lunged into the air, pulsing a wave of sand in every direction, knocking me off my feet. I scurried to a defensive position with the man in plain sight; a man with a hard structured body, shaggy hair that ran down his forehead, and large axes latched to his fists and back. I should have known that the desert was also occupied by other living beings. He simply stood in place, cold and stoic.

“Excuse me, I’m looking for a route to the south, do you think you can guide me there?”,

I asked.

He said nothing. I slowly approached him to speak, assuming he couldn’t hear me over the desert winds.

“My name is Kiel, I was hoping to maybe get a bit of advice about direc-”,
without any mercy, the man flung one of the axes from his hand towards me, while slamming the axe on his back into the desert floor that lashed out an explosion of sand in my direction. I lurked myself out of harm’s way, landing face first into the sharp sand.

Pushing my weight up right, I lunged back onto my feet and released the Leben sword from its hilt.

The custodian finally spoke in a low, violent voice.

“You have no business soiling my ground stranger, go back from where you came. This is a warning”.

I was insulted for not being treated of my stature, but for a man that lived beneath the ground, I shouldn't have expected anything more than incompetence.

“Let me explain myself, I am the Guardian of Life and I need to find my way north from here towards Muerte Yermo!”.

I said, trying to make sense of the awkward introduction. He spoke once more.

“I've never heard of it and none of it concerns me. All I know is that you are stepping on my territory, and I want you out. I don't need your petty explanations, you lost fool, I want your kind away from here”.

My kind? Did he know where I was from? Who I was? Has this man lived beneath the sand all his life? From the sense I was getting from him, he had no orientation, no knowledge of anything beyond the desert and he surely did not get along with outsiders. His mind, body and spirit were a direct reflection of his environment. He was distant from the world, isolated from his emotions, dry and hot-tempered. I turned my back from him to make seem as though I knew where I was going.

“You truly are a pathetic recluse.”,

Were words I probably should have kept to myself. I felt his patience snap as the sand beneath me began to tremble. It rose into the sky, ascending me up high with the curb of the dune. A sandstorm crackled and swirled around me, and the custodian surfed the

catastrophe up to my height. He threw the axes into the turbulence of the storm with the swing of an arm. The razor-sharp blades circled me at a dangerous speed, in such, I felt as though I cannot provoke any rash movement; I had to be vigilant.

“Kiel, I am Kkyie, the Custodian of the Earth! And I am your unfortunate end!”.

I never really thought the world outside of my village can turn ever so chaotic, but it can only explain the true dangers the planet was enduring. I didn't want to kill, in fact, I would have surrendered, but putting my guard down wasn't an option; I had to choose to fight and live or surrender and die. I threw my blade into the storm as it sucked it in instantly to join the whirling sands. At the attempt of what could have been a strategy, Kkyie launched an axe back at me. Evading the whopping metal, it carved into the dune below my feet, causing it to shatter and leaving me to free fall from way up high. To my left, a sudden wave of sand swallowed me whole and explodes on the impact of me hitting the desert floor. I choked and cussed out sand, gasping for air as the custodian approached me. Guided by his controlled storm, the axes swiftly placed themselves back onto his body. In that very movement upon which he conducted; a crease of hope shone through. The man may have been built tough, but he was in no capacity to hold the heavy axes on his own. Kkyie was harnessing the sand to strengthen the grip he had on the weapons. So, without the sand, he must have been powerless. However, if the desert is made up of sand which is made up dead rock, then bringing living matter into the desert may give me an advantage. He stood atop my laying body and through one of the axes to the ground beside me, close enough to my face that it skinned my cheek. With the force of the sand, he lifted me into the air with his free hand and stared me in the eyes through his long hair. As he clutched his axed fist, I opened my water canister and poured the water down his back. As soon as

the moisture was applied to the sand on Kkyie's back, the axes gravitated to the ground, thumping hard into the sand. My deduction was right, cutting off his connection to the sand by blinding it with water rendered him vulnerable, but I had to make a move fast before it dried out.

Still caught in his choking grasp, I delivered a kick to the side of his head that led a trail of blood through the air to his landing mark. He snarled at me as I ran towards my shining blade in the distance. Reclaiming my weapon, I rushed back to Kkyie, who was now standing defensively. I took my attack to the sky and aimed for his head, a simple duck to the side made him evade the slash as he counter punched me square in the jaw. The punch was so strong that my center of gravity shifted to my head plummeting to the sand. My face gushed with blood on impact, leaving me lying half-conscious beside my blade. Kkyie picked up my blade arming it for an attack. He did not realize the dimming of the sword as he swung his elbow back for a jab. As the blade approached my body, it began to recede into nothing; in that moment, I realized the sword was my ally, it cannot kill me. The custodian was stunned by the mystical happening that laid before him, so much so, it caused yet another opportunity. With what little strength I had in me I grabbed the hilt. As though the blade was conscious, it recognized my energy and since it cannot kill me then the blade did not enter my flesh. Instead, the sword itself inverted and turned the blade into Kkyie's direction. With a slight nudge, the blade entered his body, sending him stumbling backwards in shock. Kkyie finally began to speak as I rose from the ground and hovered above his helplessness.

“What is this?”,

He wondered, choking on his own blood.

“It’s the world you decided to refuse Kkyie”.

Feeling humiliated, he reached out his arm sending the fallen axes flying towards me in every direction. I ducked down with my hand on the hilt of my blade, lunging it deeper into Kkyie’s chest as above my head, the axes ricocheted off each other. With the death of their owner, the axes faded into sand and Kkyie became one with the desert. In the pile of which was his body, laid a curious glimmer. I slid the sand aside to find a golden-brown gemstone in its wake. I picked it up from the bed of dust and studied its gleam.

“So Unusual”.

Harenam, Keeper of the Wastelands

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I said in relief.

Surely, these creatures must be passing through the desert heading either west or north towards civilization; following them was a chance I was willing to take. I took a swig from my water canister and passed one to Paco before heading towards the Mules. As we approached, the Mules ran in our opposite direction, startled by our presence. One attempt after another, but the damned things just kept sprinting off; they were rather quick for little round creatures carrying loads of supplies. I finally got Paco's help on rounding one of the Mules and as he startled the mammal into a direction, I caught it before it was able to flee. I lobbed myself onto its back and tried to get it to calm its nerves. With a few tugs on its reins, I managed to tame the creature and took it on for a steady ride through the desert. Having the mule made the ride a lot quicker and much more resourceful. With the pouches latched to its saddle, Paco and I were stocked with food and water for a good while.

A few kilometers into our journey, the storm became much denser, the journey became more difficult, and our destination had become much more disoriented; I simply hoped that the mule knew where it was going. I watched Paco at my side treading weakly through the sand, suddenly giving up and joining me for a rest on the mules back.

“Don't worry buddy, we'll make it there soon, I'm sure of it.”,

I tried reassuring him and myself.

He sent out a brisk, hopeless cough. I replied sarcastically,

“Not what we expected for our first mission out of the village huh?”

Grumpily, he growled.

Paco wasn't one to play the fool, especially when he was stressed out. In the forward distance, sand flowed like waves in a circular motion, oriented in just one spot of the desert, looking like some cyclone in the desert. I tried avoiding the danger it may pose on us and

tugged on the mule's reins to avoid it. As the mule turned right, away from the moving sand, it caught us in its suction. The sand carried us against the movement of the mule's direction and closer to the flow of the oceanic sand. I quickly jumped off the mule's back and with feet struggling to plant into the sand, I pulled on the reins to save it from being consumed by the whirling catastrophe. It was no use; the mule was drawn into the current of the sand and disappeared once it reached the center of the cyclone. A tremble rose from underneath the surface and like a cannon, the mule was shot out and into oblivion. I watched the mule fade into the sky and drew my attention back to the whirlpool where an explosion of sand revealed a being of at least twenty feet in height. The hairless giant wore a large brown robe and tattooed with sharp rectangular columns along his head and chest. On the man's back, rested a twenty-foot mallet and sword crossed against each other. His black beaded eyes stared at me, as he hovered above the waves of sand. I stood paralyzed in astonishment to my first real fear beyond the walls of my village; and there was no escape. Thinking was no longer a leisure I had, as his mallet dropped to the sand and forced me into action. The longevity of the hammer reached a few meters in front of me, lashing out an exploding impact of sand, sending winds and creatures and I through the sky in every which direction. My body aimlessly skipped along the surface of the sand, cutting through my flesh on every impact. I wanted to run, but the momentum of the cyclone always drew me in reach of the giant. He had beastly power, but I also had what I've learnt and now was the time to use it more than ever.

I called out to the Life force to give me strength, and a sudden rush of energy flowed through me; I had partial control. What I needed was a way to mount to the creature's level, to be as big as it, as massive as it, as physically powerful as it. For the first time in my life,

I called out to the power of Werden to assist me. I felt the power take form inside of me as it grew, feeling as if it was trying to tear out of me, making me feel bigger than I was. My spirit was taking form outside of my physical body, it was extraordinary. I was relatively close to the creature now as he drew his sword, and I drew mine; we were toe to toe against each other and we both sensed the tension. He sent a slow horizontal slash along the skyline; I quickly sprang into the air and felt the tug of the sword's momentum throw me off balance as I dropped to the moving sand. The giant's hammer then dropped when he felt he had a chance to crush me when I was down. My spirit felt so large, so powerful, I held my sword up against the whopping mallet and blocked the weight of it coming down on me. The sound scattered around the attack, brushing the sand off the surface of the desert for miles. I felt him push down on the weapon and I thwarted back, freeing me from the hold. He stopped attacking and watched me.

“You are a powerful little insect.”,

His voice echoed in four different tones that sounded divine.

“I wouldn't be out here if I couldn't handle a threat.”,

I replied.

“My little one, you're the trespasser, you're the threat. These sands have belonged to me since the beginning of time, and you believe that you can simply take advantage of this territory. Riding the mules, stumbling lost, striking me, you are truly undisciplined!”.

I was feeling larger in spirit than ever.

“I was profiting from what the land has to offer without harm. You hurt your mule, aggressed a traveler and tried to murder the Guardian of Life”.

He let out a heavy laugh,

“My, so you’re the one who has been chosen to lead the ambassadors of Life. What a pity”.

I replied,

“You are not much of a ruler yourself; you simply fear losing the little you have and the little you have is truly nothing; you’re the ruler of the sands, such a pity”.

The bestial man was no longer in a joking mood, he was truly insulted.

“I am Harenam, Keeper of the Wastelands. Prepare to die worm!”.

Before he could strike, I revamped the power of Werden to prepare myself for a quick fight. Harenam swirled in circles, creating a ferocious cyclone of sandy waves all around me. Both of his weapons swung aimlessly in both arms as he spun, hoping to land a hit. I timed the momentum of the sand and used its trajectory to launch me into the air. With an aerial swoop I struck down through his wrist; the sword along with his hand dropped to the ground. Harenam yelled out to the dry air as a vengeance lurked in his eyes. He casted walls of sandstone that closed in on each other, spawning them on each side of me. I acted suddenly and called upon the power of Erdboden, to manipulate the sand underneath me. A gaping hole through the desert floor opened and I fell through as the sandstone walls clamped above my head. However hidden, Harenam sensed my presence as I lingered within his territory. He dropped blows from his weapons into the sand, attempting to stop me. Not one attack as punctured my skin and I felt rather lucky to be alive. I burrowed back to the surface and watched the mallet come down on me once again. I leaped out of the way and landed on my feet as the heavy weight slammed behind me. Strengthening my stance with the power of the sand, I held my ground and shifted my focus on the grounded mallet; I had an opportunity.

Once the impact of the mallet stopped lashing out ferocious forces of air, I jumped onto the large weapon before he brought it back off the ground. I ran up the handle and onto Harenam's arm, jumping off halfway up his bicep and steaked my sword across his ear and down his neck. Harenam shook and yelled in agony, I held on to the loose end of his sleeve and carried my way up to the back of his head. I reached his shoulders and thrust my sword into his neck. He suddenly stopped yelling and moving. Everything went quiet and the battle ended. The cyclone that was the ground consumed Harenam and closed, returning to flat desert. On the surface, deep trails began to form, making like a map through the uncharted wastelands. They marked every direction towards civilization.

I walked the northern route appearing before me only to believe that it was given to me in trust that I was accepted by Harenam. Truthfully, I didn't believe he had died or that he intended to kill me, I believed that it was a rite of passage, a test to know who I truly was. In acceptance, he gave me access to the map of his desert. I felt honored, I felt respected, and I respected him. I realized he was no monster, no villain, he was just doing his role as the Guardian of his own territory. As I must redeem peace in the world, I have accepted the desert to be by my side.

“Thank you Harenam”.

Chapter VIII

Muerte Yermo

The sun settled on the horizon, as the dunes that began appearing had deep entrances all over their exterior, seeming like hives, homing massive populations of beings. As I walked through the town of sand, I spotted a humongous hive south down the sandy ruins. There was no one to be found in the vicinity, however. The air was silent, the wind breathed sand, the sun was a shadowy eclipse. In the suspicious loneliness in what was supposed to be a fruitful nation, the emptiness felt much more frightening than the presence of foreigners. From the images found in traveler's guides and Pre-Terra scriptures, Muerte Yermo was home to tall beings sowed about with weary cloth and flesh that capsulated their life support which was, for some unknown reason, gelatinous in nature. The civilians here were said to move and think because of this goopy lifeforce and bared all extraordinary characteristics of their own. However, Muerte Yermo was nothing like it was in the brochures, it was an eerie ghost town.

“Do you think the Hypebians had anything to do with this?”,

I asked Paco, as if he can return an answer; speaking to him kept me at ease. I approached one of the common hives noticing that even the smallest of them are three times larger than the average Ursprung housing for humanoids. I did not dare enter the empty darkness of the catacomb made from mud and tissue, but Paco had other plans in mind. Staring in the direction of the giant hive, Paco broke out into an aggressive growl, his fur stood on end and his limbs stiffen. My confused attention was lured into his frightening snare.

“What is it boy?”

In the distance, at the opening of the giant hive, a crippled creature observed us. It idled in place, balancing itself atop a pile of murky ooze. Paco's growls grew into loud, ear-piercing barks.

“Paco! Shut up!”

I petted him in hopes that it would calm him down, but he was oblivious of my presence.

He suddenly shook about viciously and dashed towards the creature.

“Paco! No!”

The eerie foreigner entered the depths of the hive at the galloping of Paco’s four legs following it inside. Gods, this wasn’t good. His barking echoed through the entrance of the hive and faded deeper until no sound was left.

“Paco!”

I ran to his rescue, but in the intensifying heat of the moment, I was held back by the sound of chiming metal bursting from the hives around me. All around, the hives bared infested sounds of crawling and moaning gurgles. All at once, endless streams of Muerte Yermo civilians poured out of the sand dunes. They were there all along, dwelling us into an ambush. Each civilian came in a different form and a different size; they were undead beings covered in decaying rags that bared long, sharp blades as limbs. Some had four arms, some were spider like, moving around on all fours, others had three heads sewed together, but not one of them had a soul in their eyes. Along with these fearsome creatures, conscious piles of ooze lingered about on the desert floor. I was surrounded by hundreds, maybe even thousands of these armed creatures, all slowly making their way around me. Along with the fear of Death, came the fury of Life igniting inside me. The blade I held brightened as the civilians’ charges; one slash, two slashes, three slashes and the surface of the hoard tumbled to the ground as heads rolled in the sand. The knifed limbs of the creatures hauled towards me in every direction; only two jabs did enter my shoulders, the rest of them lost their arms. The moment the blades entered my flesh, I shifted my blade

behind me and twirl into the air, dispatching their grasp on my skin. My blood spewed in a frenzy that flowed in every which way and I land back onto the earth, taking a few of my enemies with me. The civilians were infinite, each one of them reaching for the thrill to kill, but the pressure was rejuvenating; it was bringing rise to an uncontrollable power I possessed. The surge became very soon overwhelming, and as I attempted to control it with all my might, it took me away from reality once more.

...

White, all I woke up to was white, and to the opening of my eyes, the rising sun soon reclaimed my focus, as I was faced down in the dust and surrounded by murdered, lifeless creatures. I rose to my feet, Paco still nowhere to be found, foreign corpses piled across the sand. Looking around, some of the hives have been relinquished and others were empty and on the verge of destruction. Have I killed them all? An entire race, vanquished from the face of the planet? A heavy rain of thought came over me; how can an ambassador of Life create so much Death? Is there no control over this power? So many things were yet unresolved, and I stood alone in some foreign land with Death at every step of the way. My concern for Paco became a sudden priority in my mind full of confusion; I lost him over ten hours ago and he is yet to be found, alive.

Eerie hissing evaporated into thin air as I stepped closer towards the giant hive. As it grew rather suspicious, I turned around to be confronted by the rising of the dead civilians; they stood upright and came back to life, one by one. It came clear to me then that the dead cannot die and the only way to escape this was to run; and so I did, head bound to Paco's rescue. I kept my sword in clear arms distance, taking out what I can of

the undead that passed me by. The hissing roared and it seemed as though it was such sound that was reviving the dead. I quickly glanced in every direction of where the hissing came from, to soon discover that it was coming from an extraordinary individual. It wielded a scythe and wore a large straw hat, in western boots and overalls that appeared and vanished out of the plains of our third dimension. I caught a glimpse of it spell casting the civilians back to life. Running from the carnage that chased behind me, I trailed the reaper with quick and vigilant steps as it shifted in and out of dimensions. It was not long until I realized its method of dimension jumping, and so, as the hissing of its magic hissed for the thousandth time, I reached out and grasped onto its feeble shoulder. It instantly flinched and disappeared into nothingness, taking me along with it.

Chapter IX

Death

The realm I entered was cold and blinded by darkness, wrapped in an eternal veil of void. I was plunged into the realm of the dead and none of it made sense to me. The light from Leben Sword also became dim, mirroring the state of its beholder. Taking steps in any which direction was no use to finding myself within nothingness. However, my entity was radiating an array of orange and as I studied it, I realized that there was nothing more to me than this orange light consciously wielding a blade. Three gashes suddenly entered my back and I swing my blade blindly behind me in response. The reaper with the scythe was still here, lingering out of sight while he clearly saw me. A gash then entered my left leg, rendering me helpless, vulnerable for Death to take me. It took me until now to finally realize the means of all this violence; the nation of the Dead had already been consumed by Pain. In any other case, Death would be rather keen to negotiate, but this was complete mutilation. Death is not blind, that is for certain, it is a reasonable race. Death creeps up for a purpose, and the only purpose that it may follow is the purpose it gives to itself. Hyperbia had taken this nation by force and by the Gods, I shall put an end to this oppression.

The power inside of me uncontrollably fueled to the beating of my heart, but it must be tamed. I calmed my breath and centered my spirit, and in doing so, it allowed me to harness the power of Life consciously. A sudden ray of light waves pulsed from my body and echoed through the darkness. In the distance, an orange life force beamed just like my own. Was it just an illusion, or was that another breathing being of Life? Has this control allowed me to sense others like myself? My body was weary and in terrible condition, but my spirit still burned bright. It numbed the wounds, numbed the constraints, numbed the concern of being consumed by the sworn enemy of this planet. I got back to my feet and

as the scythe touched the edge of my skin, I swung the blade against the snath, snapping it in two. I caught the scythe's blade and bolted towards the beaming orange light. The closer I moved towards it, the more the distorted figure took shape. In the form of a four-legged canine, I knew it was Paco in the alternate world of the living, curled up and shivering alone in terror. I reached for his back to show him he was safe, but my hand passed right through his radiant body. Between the two dimensions of Life and Death, there was no way to interact; I needed to get back to him in the world of the living. With the scythe in hand, I attempted an act that would presumably allow me to warp as per the reaper does. I swung the scythe at the emptiness as it successfully tore a wound between the world of the dead and the living. I jumped through the dimensional wound and land face first on the dirt in front of Paco. Scared beyond recognition, he barked until recognizing that it was me.

“Paco! Thank the Gods!”

He jumped happily onto my chest and slobbered on my face.

“I hope you learnt your lesson for running off, you big lug.”

I investigated the surroundings and realized that Paco's escapade brought us inside the hive kingdom, within the large, hollow agora of the biggest muddy sand dune in the nation. It also dawned on me that the scythe was the key to escaping the hoard of creatures and continuing the search unnoticed. If all the civilians here can see life energy through their empty eyes as I have in the Realm of the Dead, then making haste was our priority.

“Now, where can I get answers?”,

I asked myself out loud.

The goal of this journey was to gain acceptance of the people and their ruler, but to do so, I had to find the power in charge. Suddenly, a striking rumble began to quake above our

heads. Piles of flesh and tissue fell from the ceiling, the ground shook beyond my understanding of balance. The sudden sound of beating wings resonated through the matter that constructs the hive. The answer I was looking for came to me within the activeness of this nation; whatever may be causing this disturbance, must be entitled to great power. The routes laid before us to reach the top of the hive were inevitably through tunnelways in the walls, created by the inhabitants. And so, I lunged myself into a hole in the wall, Paco following behind, and crawled my way through the tight thresh upwards. I heard the struggle of Paco's claws grinding along the walls as he slipped and tried regaining his grip. The tunnels were suspiciously empty, which brought me worry that they may still be occupied by-

“Muhhgrrr!”

A Muerte Yermo civilian jumped me from a passage hidden in the shadows, its blades constricting my arms against the belly of the tunnel, facing me with its sown up, mangled face. It began to unclasp its mouth through its shrieks, the stitching of the mouth coming apart and exposing venomous. Paco rushed to the rescue, sinking his teeth into the creature's neck. The creature lost its grip on me and slid forty-five degrees down to the bottom from where we began.

“Well, that was unexpected.”

Paco mumbled a growl in response.

We moved forward. A couple of left turns, a few to the right, an ascension and two descents, finally arriving atop the hive where the wind blew heavy, and the air became thick with the smell of Death. I exited the chamber and stumbled onto a refine plain under the clouds. Up to this point, the ground was smooth, spherical, like an arena, but littered in

bones and black ooze. Nothing of Life, nothing of Death, there was no presence, but only for a second. The thumping of wingbeats engulfed the air above me. Crash landing, the ground shatters, the wind sliced, the view disappeared and all I am left to behold, is a twenty-foot dragon consuming everything I saw. The massive beast rose its long sown up neck to the sky, waving about its soulless eyes and killer horns. Its wings spread out on both sides, its arms armed with three blades that are larger than I, its legs, oozing gunk that kept it planted to the ground. The dragon lunged its long neck, dragging its head just a few feet in front of me, starring me in the eyes with an empty skull. Paco was silent, petrified, the space between the dragon and us hissed with the cutting wind. My heart sunk as well, bewildered in fear, plunging deep into a darkness I once called light. In the quietest of moments, the stitching upon the creature's lips became undone as it shrieked a massive wave that engaged me to instinctively strike. Pouncing forward, I sunk the blade between its eyes. The dragon yielded its head back to the sky, soaring me high up as I grasped tightly to the hilt. It surely felt the Pain of the blade dragging back and forth in its skull as it tried to pry me off. The force of its movements became unbearably intense, so strong that I lost grip of the sunken blade and flung aimlessly through the thick, musky air. I scurried my hands to the holster at the backside of my hip and sheath the scythe of Death, slashing the sky before plundering to the ground. I tore through the dimension of the living and landed safely once more, in the realm of black. Once more, I stumbled blind in the dark, but guided by Paco's life force on the other side. I returned to his position when the dimension suddenly shattered before me, unleashing the dragon's three bladed arm in motion to attack. In that instant, I slashed through the realm and jump out of the wound before being divided into three. I plummeted to the ground, roll about, spitting and cussing blood on impact,

before looking up to the beast with one arm completely vanished from sight. It too seemed to have the ability to pass through dimensions with a simple blow of its arm. The dragon crashed its head against the intangible air and split the sky. The dimension tore right in front of me and out came the dragon's head, shrieking and charging for me; its jaw wide enough to consume me in a bite. I jumped high enough to avoid my end, bringing myself back atop the dragon's head and the hilt of my sword, this time, succeeding in prying it loose as the beast reentered the tear between realms with its entire body. We plunged aimlessly in the solace of Death, but no good came from being lost alone with this creature in the dark. I sprinted along the dragon's backside heading for the scrape in the sky, dragging my ignited blade through its tissue. The gash split most of its bindings on the surface, then reaching its wings, I spiraled towards one and sliced it off, still making my way down to its tail, swiftly chopping it off too and leaping through the thresh that returned to the third dimension; this time landing respectably on both feet as the pass way closed behind me. Paco ran to my side, I opened my eyes slowly, trying to absorb the impact in my legs, and rose, brushing off the slime that collected on my shoulders from the slashing.

“That wasn't so bad now, was it?”

Always jinxing my fate, the sky broke apart and the half-mangled dragon came crashing down. I dodged to the right, evading its massive body from pulping my skin down to ashes. It laid pathetically incapable of movement with its missing limbs on the jagged, dusty plains. It isn't much like me to strike an opponent when it was helpless, but I did so without hesitation, ending its life before it could have time to harness the malice it was well capable of. I dragged the blade through the dragon's neck up to where it met its head, splitting the giant in two. Toxic black ooze spewed from the wound in every which

direction. The poison kissed my skin, my clothes, my supplies, burning holes through the tissue. I cried out in agony as the ooze quickly burrowed its way to my bones; I twitched, cringed, cursed, and tapped at my skin in instinctual activeness that it may ease the Pain, but it did nothing to sooth the corrosion of my tissues. I dropped to the ground, laying aside the dragon, for this battle has soon been realized to have amounted to nothing.

Long enduring moments have gone by as the scourge of anguish seized my consciousness from existence. In the midst of my demies, the hazy, uncertain sound of distant thumping emerged from the dragon's body, along with rattling bone and tissue as if something was trying to pierce through the flesh. The sounds that came through from the corpse echoed off into the background of my mind as they were overcome by a rising fever. I vomited blood and drowned helplessly in my vile, gurgling on it, choking on it. I pulled myself to my side and in all goodness, the blood escaped my lungs and drizzled slowly out of the side of my mouth. As the Pain quieted, as my body became stone, I simply wondered what in Gods can I do to save myself from letting go of Life. I began to lose grasp of my vision, my touch, my entire physical existence, being erased. In the moment of struggle, we seem to forget all we have been taught. All that we know vanishes underneath the pressure of some instinctual force that rises dominantly within us, blinding us; but it is in those moments that we must overcome the wretched blindness of our instincts. And so, before the poison took over and laid me to rest on some foreign, blood-stained earth, I had to think and bring myself back to the roots of what I was.

I calmed myself and soon regained control of my body, saving myself from the Pain tempting my thoughts. Harnessing the energy from all that which lived around me, I set the flow of energy to control the moving toxins that endangered my body. In the sensational

form of a warm surge, I absorbed the offerings of the world in my fingertips, my toes, atop my head, as it soon covered me whole like a cloak. The ooze rose back to the surface of my skin, suddenly, I became invulnerable to it, as I watched it drip off my body and burnt holes through the ground around me. As I tap even deeper into the Life force, the flow of energy clamped the wounds shut, replenishing my depletion of energy. My senses returned to me, the sound of Paco's barking dove into my ears, the colors and shapes returned to the world, the taste of wasteland dried my tongue; unpleasant but reassuring.

I lunged myself back to my feet, when the dragon carved open, unleashing a monster I never hoped to see in the midst of enduring such torture. I was dumbstruck, feeling so small, dropping my sword and gazed upon the thing that should never be. The true feat of Pain was yet to begin.

Chapter X

Hyperbia's Geminae

Outstanding in height, the weight of its spiritual energy was surrealistic, dwindling me with a simple stare. Its cries collided with the soundscape in my head, triggering a sincere rise of fear upon the hairs on my skin. The gargantuan ambassador of Pain, that falsely controlled these lands under its oppressive reign, stood before me. Because of this Hyperbian beast, so many innocent beings have been slain by my blade; all because of their greed. I quickly shuffled my sympathy to the corner of my mind, simply to overcome the scarce reality of the sacrifices that must be made in the deed of war.

The Hyperbian marched out of the dragon's corpse, revealing its dangerous figure. Its head had two faces, one of which was up right and the other was upside down, creating its lower jaw. It balanced itself upon two elongated horns and the top of its head seemed tender, where two fleshy flabs hung on both sides. Its maw bared enormous, jagged teeth, its eyes were shrunk down to size and contoured by an iris of noire. The creature flapped the folds atop its head and fleshy, tissue swung from it like wings. They began to flap and sling the abomination into the sky. The horns that it stood on as legs, twisted and turned, extending its reach through the air towards me. One of them pierced through my shoulder, a stab that juked my sensations. A frenzy of burning Pain tremored throughout my body and took a large tole on my spiritual entity. My movement was stunned, stars began scrolling horizontally through my vision, wiping away the colors and details of the world. In the few moments upon impact, the blaze never ceased across my body and a whisper came about in my head, speaking in a horrific language that I couldn't understand. The tongue spoke in hiss and click, raw and dry, nimble, and macabre. It awoken a horror, a fear of which I was incapable of fleeing, a torturous imbueement of what came from the ruthlessness of Pain. I was feeling it, an emptiness that had no choice but to be filled by

sorrow, a hunger that never dies and only satisfied by devouring grief. And maybe, in some way, the hissing tongue that repeated itself in my head, was telling me just that; in some way, it was sharing this sensation to show me just what it is like to hurt. In some way, I felt that the voice wanted to be set free from this Pain and who was I to deny its freedom? With my wielding arm free from grip, I swung my blade through the horn planted in my flesh. The mystique of the weapon deteriorated the Hyperbian's dismemberment into thin air. The Leben Sword was of a nature that cleansed the mal. And so, the entire beast soon went to a place where it can be freed from itself. The beast stumbled backwards hopping on one good limb, suddenly shifting its body upside down, where the flabs of flesh flapped wildly underneath, and the one horn held above. It charged with its one violent horn ready to strike, likewise, I charged and slid underneath it, cutting through its fleshy wings, taking the beast to the earth, spilling its guts all over the sandy wastes. The Hyberbian was taken down to the ground, slowly dissipating into thin air, with its skin scattering into shards of broken black glass along the wastelands. The sword glowed and diminished as I breathe in the calm of silence, savoring the peace from post-calamity. Paco shuffled his way beside me, signaling me to pet him atop his head; he always seemed to sense relief.

“Well, that takes care of the oppression over this land, eh buddy?”

I looked about the empty wastelands, wondering what could possibly be left for me next. The threat was gone, what was left of the people here seemed to have gained back their thoughts yet, there was no one in charge? I was curious to pursue the arts and knowledge of what Death had to offer, but to earn such privilege, one needed authority and guidance to the sacred library, if such a library existed in such a dry and rotting place.

Chapter XI

Acceptance

“What’s done is done I guess. Let’s turn back and get on with our travels”.

At the entrance back into the hive, a few locals exited and in an organized fashion, filled the circumference of the arena I stood in. All the Dolls hummed some foreign tune that brought the earth to Life. It shook underneath my feet as purple light rose from the cracks that were taking form on the ground. I dashed to the edge of the breaking circle in time to turn around and watch it crumble inward. From inside the endless abyss rose a Muerte Yermo civilian that was mightier and bigger than the others. It emerged slowly from its confinement, revealing its five heads as it ascended from the depths. The creature stood tall and stoic, its five gazes targeting me. The humming roared until it was completely free from what seemed like its prison, possibly confined inside by Hyperbian force. As the local’s silenced, the Greater civilian began a humming call that sounded like some form of discussion in a language that I did not understand, though I wanted to.

“Your Majesty, I want to do my best in this moment to understand your voice!”.

I said to it, as formal as I possibly can.

The giant stopped its screeching in mid-sentence. It then reached over with one of its sharp claws and gently placed the point of one of the blades against my forehead. I cringed a little and tightened the shutting grip of my eyes.

“You must be the chosen one, are you not? The savior of our demise?”

I suddenly was able to understand it.

“I am Kiel, the one known as the ambassador of Life. The legendary blood of the Guardian flows deep within me.”

“I sense much more potential in your spirit than just Life, young one”.

What he meant; I did not know until much, much later in my Life.

“I must thank you with my humblest gratitude for your selfless deed, Guardian Kiel. You have saved what little we had left of our nation; I am sincerely in your debt”.

“Your Majesty, may I have the honor of calling you by your given name”.

He paused for a second and responded.

“My given Yermo name is Nak’marra, I am the heir of the son of our first given Guardian of Death, Dariius”.

“Your Majesty Nak’marra, I am honored to have earned your gratitude. I must ask you to guide me through the path of Death if I am to save Pre-Terra from the wrath of Hyperbia”.

The five heads all glared at each other in contemplation.

“I knew you had more potential in your spirit than what met your words, Guardian Kiel. You seek vast knowledge, knowledge that but only one can behold. The true Guardian of Creation”.

I have heard this saying many times before, but I have never quite felt any adequate potential to the title.

“I do believe you may be right your Majesty. I must learn your ways, the words of your people, the power that enchants you.”.

Nak’marra turned his gaze to the ledge that overlooked all of Muerte Yermo, pointing at a vacant spot centered between the local hives. A sudden sand pour split the desert in two, revealing a descending staircase below the surface of the desert. It could have only led to one place in my mind.

“The steps will lead you to our Sacred Library, Guardian Kiel. If you are the chosen one, then the shackles that protect our knowledge shall surrender its grasp to you.”

A chill of anticipation drew within me.

“Nak’marra, you have my trust and my loyalty.”.

Nak’marra turned back to me.

“And so, you have my acceptance to follow you in the fight against Hyperbia. Now go.”.

I made my way back down to the surface, walking to the sublevel staircase as all the locals gazed upon my approach. They just watched, but in their soulless eyes, I saw hope and gratitude, for a savior was born.

...

The chamber beneath the sand was rather cold for a place that always stewed in the sun. The sand above my head reconstructed into solid desert floor, confining me under its feeble matter in pitch darkness. My only sense of direction was the distance between each step upon the staircase, leading me deeper into the earth. At last, light shone from the glass chamber at the bottom of the staircase, where the Book of Death laid waiting. Thoughts began racing through me at sonic speed, filling my mind with anticipation and excitement and confusion and if a paradigm shift of knowledge is what I truly needed to grow now. To learn something that was a complete opposition to the way of Life still scared me after what I have endured; but it seemed so vital to the fate of this world to do so. I reached the glass dome where the Book of Death awaited me. An instant rush of intimidation coursed through me, fueling me, and without further hesitation, I placed my hand on the chains of the dome, releasing their grasp and shattering the glass chamber. I approached the book on the pedestal, analyzing its obscure appearance. It was a shade of dark brown, decaying all over with its bindings giving out. I delicately picked up the worn book and placed it on my

lap as I sat cross legged on the ground. I opened the book and began my first lesson into the knowledge of the unknown; the knowledge of Death.

Chapter XII

The Book of Death

Historia

Since the beginning, our kind has come to be by the balance of struggle. In fact, we are one of two key essences in forming this balance, giving struggle a dimension to manifest upon. Within the chaos of struggle, there is balance, for that balance cannot exist if there is no tension between opposing sides. We as the manifestation of Death have come to be to give purpose to all that is. For that everything that is, fears the untimely, unexpected end of itself. Therefore, we thrive upon the world of the undeterminable. As the ambassadors of Death, we harness most of our power by a world that is unbound by the tangible one, giving us also an edge in many ways against our oppositions. We are intimidation and confusion, the unpredictable and most of all, the end.

Espiritualidad

As much as this all may seem morbid and violent, we do not in any way provoke premature violence. In my studies as a Guardian, I do not believe any being's purpose is solely built on the destruction of others, but all is built on equal exchanges for a greater gain, which in some cases, leads to the destruction of something else. As much as it is efficient to intimidate our oppositions with the idea of the end, we as the end, know that it is much more than just being erased from existence. In fact, when one may open their mind to the concept of Death, Death becomes an ally both in mind and spirit. By our beliefs, Death is a gateway to an existence without purpose; a way of being without having to be, giving way to being whatever you want. With our capability to surf through the world of the living and the world of the dead, we can be wherever we want to be, as whoever we want, in any way we want, because the world of the dead is unbound, and it is up to the beholder to open their mind to the opportunities that lie within a dimension of freedom.

Poder

As mentioned before, everything that is, or can ever be, is balanced through sharing a piece of itself to acquire a piece of something else. This is a form of universal exchange that governs existence. However, we as Death, have discovered a way to receive without giving back. By harnessing the power from the world of the living, we can redirect its energy into the world of the dead, allowing us to gain with no charge; we came to call this power, Desmoronamiento. Desmoronamiento is a form of conversion where living energy is converted into dead energy, then allowing us to use this energy in our home realm. I have attempted to experiment this power on a living being to transport it to the world of the dead, but the outcome was a disaster never to be spoken about. We searched for many ways to have beings from other races to visit the world of the dead, but the only alternative we came across are the claws of our people. The blades seem to be enchanted by a veil so fine that it gives the Muerto Yermo civilians the power to slice dimensions between the living and the dead. No other method has been discovered to do so without consequence.

Desmoronamiento

Desmoronamiento is our offensive and most sacred ability that we possess. The ability is something we are simply raised with; it is in our soul and in our touch. The user of this ability decays their target with the touch of their enchanted weapons. The target afflicted by this ability begins to plunge into the realm of the dead with no return. This ability does not kill the target, it simply redirects its being into our realm, and therefore, the user will encounter their target still alive on the other side; or in the state that they have left them last.

Regenerado

This ability is our healing mechanic, it is a slow process, but it is very efficient when the user has a moment to themselves to regain their energy. The user of this power regenerates the body by harvesting pure dead energy along with anything wondering around in the realm of the dead. In fact, the user can consume the energy of the enemies that have been transferred into the realm of the dead by decay or any other form; this allows for a faster healing process.

Cruce

Cruce is a very tactical and evasive ability as well as an essential reconnection to our home realm. This ability allows us to move in and out between the living dimension and the realm of the dead. Since there is an immense time-lapse between both realms, it allows long travels to shorten and allows to sense living energy from afar. The user simply must gash a sliver between the realms using an enchanted weapon and enter it.

The so-called portal lasts up to five seconds and then closes once more.

Miedo

Miedo is a very dark and intimidating ability to use. It will strike a target at its fears and bring it to the surface of their consciousness. This ability allows for a tactical battle strategy, as the opponent is struggling with their fears, the user of Miedo can plot. This ability is very manipulative, where the user of Miedo can control their opponents simply by the illusion of fear, making it an efficient form of control.

Muerte Sword

The Muerte Sword is the weapon casted down from generations of Guardians, originating and built by the first Guardian of Death. The weapon was imbued with dead energy and equipped with the tools needed to move in and out of the realm of the dead. The offensive side of the weapon is armed with a sawtooth finish, making it extremely lethal and optimizes vulnerability upon enemies being transferred into the realm of the dead. This weapon was built to willingly plunge living energy into the realm and harvesting it into the wailers power as dead energy. This weapon has been the sole protector of our kind and was casted on us to carry the torch of our existence.

Meta

It is believed by us that Death is peace, and peace comes from a certain sense of nothingness, a purposelessness, and an end. Through the eyes of others, this will surely not make sense, but we in term believe that if nothing stands then nothing can fail, therefore, Death is peace and peace is a result of nothingness. The word we pass down to our followers are tales of the miraculous sub-existence and with that, we conclude to all, that existence is chaos and to separate from chaos is to not exist.

- Dedian

Chapter XIII

Departure

The ground opened above me, the sand reigned down upon my face and the light of the sun shined through the crevasse in the sand. I ascended the staircase feeling like a different man, a different being with a different point of view. As I reached the top of the desert floor, all around me, the Yermo civilians carried on with their day. For the first time, not one of them felt like a threat anymore. It was as though I could understand them at last.

In the seclusion of the library, I have learnt that we as individuals are not alone in this world, yet we live in unison with different perspectives, different traits, and different minds; or in theory rather, this should be so. I may have not agreed to the ways of others at first, but now that I begin to, as I watch the civilians reestablish their homeland, I find myself questioning how I can ever settle to understand the ways of Pain; how can Hyperbia have reason to create so much chaos?

Paco came running to my side, who seemed eagerly waiting for my return. The civilians caught attention of me, watching me walk along the dusty plains, knowing exactly who I was. They chanted in unison, which would have sounded like a low humming sound to the average ear; but I heard them. They called out to the sky, the sound rung all around me, fueling my spirit.

“Peace, Peace, Peace at last!”

Far north, atop the Hive, Nak’marra called out to me, feeling his voice in my head.

“Make this land part of your home”,

he said in all sincereness,

“don’t allow oppositions to be an enemy, but an ally in the balance of all that is”.

He was a proud and humble individual, and I couldn't imagine any other ambassador of Death to be running the nation than he. I bowed to him in the distance, knowing he felt my gratitude through my energy, I through my arms into the air and chanted along with the air.

“There will be peace at last!”.

...

Before departing, I brought myself to the stand that looked like a convenience shop, browsing for anything that may be of use for my travels. Primarily on my shopping list was water and foreign materials, but all this dingy shop sold was some mucky goop in jars and their own flesh and blades.

“Pardon me sir, would you happen to have anything... hydrating?”

The civilian behind the counter skimmed through the jars of goop and then underneath the counter, looking rather surprised as to what he found; maybe water was so precious that they keep it concealed in their markets. But no. The merchant simply held out a larger jar of the slime, convinced that it was what I was looking for.

“No slime please but thank you”.

I wondered how these beings ever managed to survive without the essentials, always forgetting that they are already dead and need none of this Life force stuff that I need to consume. Ursprung was minimum two days away with almost no chance of there being water on the travel back through the desert; there was no chance of making it alive. However, maybe I can make it there dead?

The readings from the Book of Death inspired me to attempt a new solution. I made my way to where Muerte Yermo meet the eastern desert sand and drew the scythe from my

belt to preform Cruce. The blackened, timeless void opened in front of me. I entered the lifeless space and made my way through a dimension where nothing existed but my senses as guidance towards the heat of Life to the west. With my destination in sight, with no hunger or perspiration, Paco and began our way back to the beginning.

Quest II

Realm of the Dead

Choose your path

Begin on page 104 or page 110

Follk, the Shadow Custodian

“Such an efficient way to travel. Too bad there’s nothing here to see, hey bud?”

Paco was galloping at my side, looking a bit tense due to the blindness within the Realm of the Dead. Unlike me, he couldn’t see Life energy, whereas I, was guided by the heat of its energy, pulling closer at an exponential speed. But then, deep down in my gut, I felt Paco’s doubt. The last thing that interested me was to assume that something bad dwelled near; but it was very possible. I was an outsider to a home that never belonged to me, and there I was, trespassing in foreign territory. Even if I was granted acceptance by Muerte Yermo, there was no proof that I belonged to the world of the Dead. I shook off the thought and focused on getting to Ursprung as fast as I could.

We were moving at a timely pace, keeping our eyes on our destination ahead. With the sweat in my eye and the lack of air in my lungs, I could have sworn that the blackened realm looked awfully different, as though the shadows began to follow me. It was as though they had eyes on me and legs chasing from behind. I held to a halt to regain my energy, breathing in deep and letting go of the paranoia. My eyes wandered in the dark trying to catch a glimpse of the obscure bleakness; but everything was just as black and empty as it was when I entered. Paco stared at me with a questioned figure.

“Sorry buddy, my head was getting to me. Just give me a second”.

But as the second became ten and ten became sixty, the shadows around me became evermore suspicious. They were clearly moving somehow, and Paco seemed to see them too, as he grew wary of the happening. I took a step backwards and my leg plunged into a hole formed by shadows as Paco was swallowed by a wall of darkness. The hole in which my leg was in tightened, as silhouette arms wrapped themselves around my torso, clenching

me against the wall of shadow. I struggled and squirmed in attempt to release the grip, but the harder I tried, the tighter the trap became. I finally stood still to the low chuckling of some mad, twisted being lurking about. The laughter echoed off in every direction; I couldn't orient where this creature was nor where Paco was taken to. In the midst of my struggle, a mischievous figure appeared, consumed by the darkness around him. The only exposure was the large afro above his head, held together by a bandana and his huge, glowing white eyes hovering over a wide, twisted smile. This man looked like some animated figure out of an ulkig book. His luminescent eyes half blinded me as they gazed upon my flesh. He finally spoke through his comical, glowing teeth.

“Well, well, well, a living being is not something we see around here every day”.

I yelled back at him, as I began once more to struggle in place.

“Where's my wolf?!”.

“Oh, I wouldn't fight that shadow lock if I where you. Besides-”,

He tightened the grip around me with his mind,

“- if you have ever met a custodian, you would know that we control our surroundings”.

He squeezed the intangible shadows together, crushing me underneath its unfathomable wait.

“Which means, I control you”.

I managed to get my arm to the hilt of the Leben sword during the being's little threat speech. My touch ignited its light and as it grew strong with my energy, it instantly breached the constricting darkness. I fell limp to the ground and quickly picked up a posture.

“So, you’re a custodian, I’ve met your kind before, and it wasn’t pleasant”. I said, circling aimlessly in the dark.

“It usually isn’t. We are quite... stubborn believers in our pursuit for things”. He spoke with arrogance to his firm belief.

“Nonetheless...we know what we’re fighting for, that much is certain. We know what we have to protect the things that brought us to be”.

His voice passed to and from every direction; tracking him was impossible. However, I tried to listen, trying to understand why the custodians seemed to be so hostile over rational.

“I believe you too are brought out to these far regions for the same purpose, no?” I paused in my tracks and allowed him to continue, always wary of where he may be.

“Are you not a strong believer in something great? Is there not something here you need to protect?”

It took me awhile to finally speak, mostly because of the pondering of his words, and partly why such a creature even cares about my response. Though his intentions were uncertain, I responded, nonetheless.

“I have been chosen to protect Pre-Terra, to bring balance back to this world and but an end to the evil that controls it”.

The shadow lurker began laughing hysterically, as if mocking my ambitions, mocking the importance of my journey.

“Protector of whom? Protector of me? A no-good mortal child was entrusted with such a hefty task? I surely don’t think so”.

His laughter juggled once more in the darkness, and though frustrated in not getting my hands around his puny skull, some part of me tried rejecting his words. Though he did not cease.

“No, I can read you like a book boy. In fact, you have spent all your life with your face in the dirt trying to become something to be proud of. Though all your life, you were denied that satisfaction because you were never able to amount to anything. Therefore, performing this impossible feat is protecting but one thing... your mortal pride”.

The dark words bound tighter than the shadow trap he casted upon me. Without laying a single finger, the malicious man destroyed all ambition and I found myself paralyzed in regret.

“And that is why, you will lose”.

Out from the center of my chest, the blade of a katana came breaking through. It was all a scheme to make me falter.

“You will never win with a spirit so weak. But count yourself lucky that you got the chance to see your resting place with mortal eyes”.

As he slowly sheathed the sword from my chest, all my worries dissipated, all that has ever failed for me no longer had weight and my long struggle just became easier. Not because I was dying, no, no. If that was true, I wouldn't be here to write to you this tale. The reason why everything became simpler, was because I knew that couldn't have gotten closer to him then in this moment.

I grabbed the sheathing blade with both hand and tugged it forward, lunging the shadow custodian against my back and in arms reach. Though it was enticingly painful, it was the only way. I then reached my arms behind me, grabbing him from his afro and

called upon Werden to grow twice my size and swung him to the ground in front of me. Reaching for the Leben sword, I attempted to plunge it into his chest, though he vanished within the shadowy ground. His crazed laughter began once more to fill the empty space.

“Well, you are indeed not the pathetic worm I thought you were”.

“I am Kiel, Guardian of Life and Death, and I will put you in your place”.

“I am Follk, the Shadow Custodian, and you shall never be such”.

Follk was not only strong in the manipulation of shadows, but also the manipulation of the dark side of mortals. Follk knew that shadows are inferior to their beholder but bringing them to be as reflections of the owner can destroy a being from the inside.

“What you need is a little light”.

I reached for the scythe of Death to penetrate the line between the world of the living and the dead. With a slash of the weapon, sunlight from our world poured into the realm, shedding sight on everything that lurked in the shadows, including Follk, who was already flying with his katana ready to strike. In an instant, I raised the Leben sword and parried his attack with a fearsome strike, directing his trajectory into the realm of the living.

...

His aura didn't seem so strong out in broad daylight, and neither did his spirit. He knew that he was at a disadvantage, and with every second passing by, the gash between worlds was closing, with no way back to the shadows. I took advantage of the opportunity to damage Follk in his state of readjustment, lashing out elemental strikes of air and earth, and bashing down on his defensive with my blade. Once he claimed balance on his feet, he dodged backwards and poked the katana forward to my face. I dodged in an instant and

went for the finishing blow, but my body suddenly froze in time, every action nullified by a force that held me back. Follk began laughing once more.

“Where’s your shadow, Guardian Kiel?”.

I looked down to where it should be, but it was no longer part of me. Instead, struggling to look behind me, I caught a peripheral glimpse of my shadow restraining me in tangible space. The weight of its intangible matter was so strong that even giving out limply was not more of an option than fighting the tension.

“So, this is how the precious Guardian falls”,

He said, while he approached me with his darkened sword absorbing some hazy energy. Once the power surging from his blade came to an exceptional climax, and it rose for a strike, Paco rabidly jerked out of Follk’s shadowy chest and gnawed at his face. My shadow freed its grip and I charged for the finishing blow, dismembering Follk head clean off the throat, with not a single word left to spend.

“Paco, you are one crazy dog”.

He was gasping for air, but still looked up to me with a grin that spoke to me as,

“I got your back you wimp”.

As the rest of the custodian’s body dissipated into some black dust, that I presumed was caused by shadows when they are made tangible and lose conscious control, a blackened-purple gemstone landed in the pile. I picked it up from the remains and studied its gleam.

“Very Unusual”.

The End Keeper Har Megiddô

“Such an efficient way to travel. Too bad there’s nothing here to see, hey bud?”

Paco was galloping at my side, looking a bit tense due to the blindness within the Realm of the Dead. Unlike me, he couldn’t see Life energy, whereas I, was guided by the heat of its energy, pulling closer at an exponential speed. But then, deep down in my gut, I felt Paco’s doubt. The last thing that interested me was to assume that something bad dwelled near; but it was very possible. I was an outsider to a home that never belonged to me, and there I was, trespassing in foreign territory. Even if I was granted acceptance by Muerte Yermo, there was no proof that I belonged to the world of the Dead. I shook off the thought and focused on getting to Ursprung as fast as I could.

We were moving at a timely pace, keeping our eyes on our destination ahead. With the sweat in my eye and the lack of air in my lungs, I could have sworn that the blackened realm looked awfully different, as though the shadows began to follow me. It was as though they had eyes on me and legs chasing from behind. I held to a halt to regain my energy, breathing in deep and letting go of the paranoia. My eyes wandered in the dark trying to catch a glimpse of the obscure bleakness; but everything was just as black and empty as it was when I entered. Paco stared at me with a questioned figure.

“Sorry buddy, my head was getting to me. Just give me a second”.

But as the second became ten and ten became sixty, the shadows around me became evermore suspicious. They were clearly moving somehow, and Paco seemed to see them too, as he grew wary of the happening. Did I listen to him? No. I subconsciously believed that human intellect was superior to animals, but in that hasty moment, his instincts were right.

Out of range of my own senses, an enormous sword from the shadows lashed out towards me, cutting clean through my shoulder, rendering me armless. Yet again, if I may add, the impact of the strike plunged me helplessly to the ground and shackled my gaze to a large, armored warrior that could have been the maker of Death itself. The abomination stood triple my height, garbed in impenetrable armor, leaving nothing in sight but its treacherous, beaming eyes. Even though I was equipped with the tongue to speak to Death, my ears did not understand the warrior's treacherous wake. All that I understood in that moment was the repetitive use of the word Har Megiddô, and nothing brought more contemplation than the fact that he meant the end.

I began calling upon the power of Heilen to mend my dismembered arm, though in the wake of redemption, the warrior of Armageddon quickened his pace and swung at me with his colossal sword. The blade rung through my torso and decapitated my legs from the rest. The event was so quick and sudden that I had no anticipation of feeling any Pain nor react to my impending doom. Instead of indulging in these primal instincts, I watched my hope slip away before my eyes and could not accept it to happen. Instead, as Har Megiddô came lunging through the sky with a striking fury, time stood still, as it always did in a moment's reflection. In the journey to this point I have learnt a different way to heal the body, and what better time than to use Regenerado in a realm of Death itself. Effectively, I call upon its power, concealed within my one scheming hand, and drew in energy from the realm. Time returned to normal, and the once furious blade of Har Megiddô, suddenly dropped to my side.

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I couldn't believe my luck, nor do I today, to have been possessed with such scheming power at that given moment. The healing power of Regenerado worked off absorbing living energy within the realm of the dead, and so, for it to work, it needed a target to absorb. Through dark tinted auras like string, my legs began sowing themselves to my body, and in exchange, Har Megiddo's body slowly tore apart. He realized that he would wash away into dust if he remained too close to me, so before I was able to mend back my arm as well, Har Megiddô lashed out a mighty stomp that sent destruction across the shadowy grounds of the realm. The earth shattered into a frenzy of isles, rocketing Paco and armless me into the darkened air, as volcanic eruptions scurried up and through the crevasses of the wastes.

Paco and I were vulnerably airborne, twirling and wailing aimlessly through the sky, trying to take back control of our footing. As gravity slowed our velocity upwards, we inevitably began to drop downwards towards the hellish pit of lava that was once solid ground. As the drop accelerated, we arrived closer to a merciful isle of debris, falling at the same speed as us, and landed on it to our safety, though safety was only momentary. Har Megiddô was already pouncing effortlessly amongst the floating isles towards me, and upon arrival, lashed his sword again to finish what he had started. I drew the Leben Sword and parried the attack, but the power that unleashed for his blade knocked me off my feet, projecting me through the floating debris and orbiting quicker to the lava below. Forced to look sky bound during my plunge again, I watched as Har Megiddô fueled his mighty blade with a surge of power, and with all his might, launched it at me, its dark aura tracing its trajectory. With the lava creeping ever closer under me, I called upon the power of Brandstalle, and flung the sword off course by manipulating the isles floating about. The

sword ricocheted off the debris and dove into the molten lava below, boiling down to nothing. I quickly channeled the debris around me to reconstruct solid ground underneath my falling body. Then, with the mighty force of Ather, I launched a gust of wind to slow my fall and landed me and the isle safely atop the scorching lava.

The next unfortunate abomination that fell from the sky was Har Megiddô himself, landing with a thud onto another piece of wrecked earth a distance away, molten streams of lava jetting all around him. His stare was furious and enraged, promising a grueling end. However intimidating Har Megiddô was, I was not willing to lose to a being that provoked suffering to Life. Before he had time to think, I pounced off the floating isle with my one good arm calling upon Regenerado face to face with Har Megiddô. The monstrous warrior succumbed to the energy devouring power, just enough for me to regenerate my second arm. As the regeneration complete, he desperately swatted me away from his dissipating body with his decaying arm. I skipped off his swatting arm and casted Cruce upon the air above his head, tearing through the realm of the dead, back into the realm of the living where I hopped out from. Then, from behind Har Megiddô, I tore back into the realm of the dead with a mighty kick, imbued with the power of Werden. The weight and strength of the kick was so massive that it overcame the size of the End Keeper, launching him at last into the pit of lava in which he created. The End Keeper was finally one with his envy for Armageddon.

I waited for Paco to safely land next to me and we then returned into the realm of the living. After a long-awaited trek of disaster and Death, we finally got to see the light of day. We looked at each other with relief and the kind of walk that speculated for itself that we were brave heroes.

“Hey Paco”,

He looked up at me to in response.

“Come to think of it, we should have just travelled in this realm from the get-go”.

With his usual arrogance, he made no sound and a smile that faded to disbelief and continued walking forward. He was probably looking forward to being back home in bed, as far away from me as possible.