

In the thousand-or-so years since the fall of the false god and his empire, the various civilizations had struggled to redefine themselves outside of their common servitude to Facod. Those that had been the most powerful before the sinister mage's rise, while they'd been the most thoroughly crushed, had reaped the benefits of devoted patriots. Historical and cultural records were hidden away, copied and scattered all across the lands in the hopes that future generations, free of Mekhish tyranny, would rediscover their heritage.

So it was that the four great world powers were reborn upon the cradle of human civilization: the Gothic Empire to the west, the Hunnic Hegemony to the east, the Nation of Rivers to the south, and the Byzantine Protectorate in the center. These four giants, from the moment they came into existence, had clashed against one another. Each believed that it deserved total dominance in the wake of Mekh's dissolution, but none could fully commit to war against a single opponent lest the other two take advantage of a weakened flank.

While Byzantium was surrounded by its rivals, the superpower actually counted itself lucky: the other great nations obeyed the long-established customs of warfare. The three outer empires, unfortunately, faced upstart rebel nations and city-states that scoffed at tradition and fought with brutal efficiency. The Huns were endlessly beset by seafaring pirate clans, each tribe prodding for weakness and ambitious enough to try taking whole cities if the opportunity presented itself. The Gothic Empire had to deal with its own castoffs, who had migrated north and formed a diametrically opposed nation called Libertalia: none of the gothic political leaders could quite understand how a country that rejected government managed to exist, let alone function, but apparently near-rabid hatred for the empire's juggernaut status was enough to hold Libertalia together. Below the Rivers, as the southern power was colloquially known, was Timbuktu. The remnants of countless shattered tribes had gathered in the ancient city like some sort of impromptu pilgrimage and had somehow established a fast-growing geopolitical power. With access to numerous ports and the ability to restrict convenient sea trade routes, Timbuktu was beginning to assert itself as a thorn in the side of all four continental powers.

Of course, some smaller nations were content to simply live and let live, such as the Celtic Isles and Shambhala, which wielded immense magical power. Still others sought an escape from the endless conflict and had begun to colonize Fortune, the isolated continent that Facod had dismissed as being too sparsely populated to bother conquering. The native tribes did not take kindly to squatters, so the supposedly peaceful countries were now fighting wars of their own.

All of this, the colonization, the uncultured sabotage, the mercantile and sociopolitical posturing, had to be taken into account. When one deals in black-market arms to both sides of a conflict, every day is a delicate balancing act. When one deals in every type of trade – even slaves – to every side of *every* conflict, this balancing act is on a fishing line across the mouth of a volcano during an earthquake and a hurricane.

“...That metaphor got away from me a bit,” Cirgo Mevan muttered to himself and shifted on his throne. As a glorified merchant, Doge Mevan did not actually make use of his fort's throne room as an audience chamber: rather, it functioned as an isolated space for him to collect his thoughts. While Cirgo would gladly trumpet his prowess in managing so many deals at once – and indeed, he oversaw every single merchant guild in Venice while his mercantile police, the playfully named Lenders, ensured that documentation was accurate – this came with an attention span that his nanny had deemed shorter than a caffeinated squirrel's. If Cirgo didn't make time to let the world fall away and immerse himself in absolute nothingness, his mind would continue to grab onto new concepts, new potential deals, new angles of political maneuvering until his skull burst.

In this case, the doge was emptying his mind for a very specific reason: news had come of the Vigil mobilizing, and his spies had picked up scattered reports of something that could be very troubling, but perhaps immensely profitable. He shifted again, some of the scale digging into the flesh just above the ribs on his right side. As such a fixture in trade, and being known to do business with everyone, Cirgo was a prime target for assassination. He always wore his armor, covered in the best enchantments the Celts would trade, in addition to the typical 'monarch package,' as the array of protective rings and amulets were known among the aristocracy. To be seen wearing such defensive baubles was a sign of privilege, not only that one could afford them, but that the wearer was important enough to risk assassination.

*Ugh, my mind's wandering again...* Cirgo rubbed his temples. He was awaiting an audience with his cabinet, but before they could meet to discuss the information they'd acquired, they had to actually acquire the information. And the damn message still hadn't reached them! It was November; warfare was called off for the winter months, so there shouldn't be any major blockades. Venetian informants were all equipped with full papers in the event of a stop or, gods forbid, interrogation. None of the major players would risk shooting themselves in the political foot by pressing a Venetian for information. To do so would almost guarantee a cessation of trade and, since Venice was arguably a bigger trade hub than every minor power or independent player put together, none of the 'Big Four' could afford to lose that mercantile muscle.

It was good to run Venice. While the nation had little in the way of actual military strength or political pull, it was protected from attack by any power large enough to crush it and could buy mercenary aid in the case of a smaller power trying to gut it.

Safety and security. All that was needed was a love of finance and an absolute lack of morals or respect for the human condition.

One of the side entrances creaked open and a bespectacled aide, utterly swimming in his coat and uniform, poked his head in. "Your Presence? We've received and cataloged the report."

Doge Mevan stood and almost skipped down the steps from his throne. He held out his hand, an expectant look on his face. "Give me the arrow-points," he commanded while thumbing through the file folder.

The aide fell in step beside him. "Several days ago, the Vigil began mobilizing in mass. Eventually their activity centered in Byzantium. While the Vigil and the Byzantine government itself steered people away, one of our spies got a glimpse. Er, I think it's on page...fifteen?"

Cirgo flipped to that page, the entire sheet of paper made up of a photograph. Had he seen it anywhere else, he would've dismissed it as a prank: the film manipulated or the photo staged. But his agents had to be reliable. There, in the picture, was a rip in the air. It looked like someone had taken a knife through gelatin, though the cut wasn't smooth. Maybe if an old someone with shaky hands had cut through the gelatin? *Nevermind*, he scolded himself, *the simile's not important*. "This...this is magic on a scale I've never seen. Teleportation is costly but possible, but this...were they establishing some sort of fixed transport gateway?"

"Worse, my doge. We believe it to be a dimensional rif-urk!" The scrawny man's voice strangled to a halt as Cirgo took him by the throat and pushed him against the wall.

“I told you to give me the arrow-points, you scum! Most important comes *first!* A dimensional rift? As in, to the other world that Facod supposedly entered in order to stop the Haunt?” The aide twitched and Cirgo drew a knife from his greave, holding the blade in front of his servant's face and letting the light twinkle, glinting between the smaller man's glasses and his polished weapon. “You flinched. You *flinched* when I said 'the Haunt'! The Haunt is back, isn't it? ISN'T IT!? It's the end of the world and you didn't think to LEAD WITH THAT!?” He let the rail-thin man slump to the floor, hacking and coughing as he gasped for air. “You are so, so very lucky that my devotion prevents me from doing direct harm to my subjects,” Cirgo spat while sheathing his knife. “Report back to the bureau for reassignment.”

The doge turned on his heel and stalked down the hallway, leaving his servant choking on his own spit and tears. He tore through the file, actually ripping some pages in his rabid need to understand the degree of danger they faced. Well, really, with the Haunt it was less 'what degree of danger' and more 'how long until extinction', but perhaps that could be prevented. While the Vigil strove to be entirely self-sufficient and therefore was somewhat of a rival to the monster that was the Venetian trade network, Cirgo would be a fool not to acknowledge that they were likely the best chance the world had at stopping the apocalypse.

So now he needed to meet with his advisors. He needed to plan, to connect with his clients, and to scheme in private. This wasn't just about stopping extinction; it was about coming out on top once the dust settled.

Susan Walters groaned from the clinic bed. “News flash, folks: your magic healing doesn't make me any less sore.” By the time Koru had called their 'training session' (she considered it a no-holds-barred beatdown) to a close, Suz had felt like a living bruise. And considering how much of her had been black-and-blue at the end, it was a pretty accurate feeling.

To be honest with herself, Suz had been worried that Koru was going to beat her to death, even by accident, or at the very least leave her crippled for life. That's when she was introduced to the menders. In the brief overview she'd been given, Susan understood the menders to be magical super-doctors able to stave off infections and reverse some of the most catastrophic injuries. Unfortunately, menders were incredibly rare: in a world population estimated at around one billion, there were probably less than five hundred menders currently alive. The reason for this was simple – in addition to needing to be very magically powerful, menders also had to take their version of the hippocratic oath, which swore them to utter pacifism and the stewardship of lives. It was easy to see why that would be a difficult decision; in a world faced with so many dangers, having the magical mojo to toss around fireballs but being sworn against doing so, even to protect your home and loved ones, was a burden few could bear.

Regardless of their scarcity, menders did amazing work. In little more than an hour, Susan's body was fully healed of its injuries. Unfortunately, the body didn't quite respond to magical healing the way it did to natural recuperation, so her nerves were still screaming at her even though she was in perfect health. The only solution was to rest for another hour or two until her nervous system realized she was fine.

Koru stepped through the doors and pulled up a stool beside her bed. The clinic itself was divided into several sections, with the recovery room as far from the others as possible. No reason to risk further infection on the patients' part, after all. “You did well today,” he said with a little smile.

“Really?” Susan coughed, her ribs telling her they were broken despite having been fixed up. “Because you kinda beat my ass.”

“Of course I did. I've been training for over a decade. But for someone with no former combat experience, after you got over your initial pains you fought with determination and a careful fury. You'll be a strong, self-sufficient fighter soon enough.” He patted her arm, causing her to flinch. “I'm proud of you.”

“So, I'm not gonna have to fight the Haunt one-on-one or anything, right?” she chuckled. “I mean, you guys've been playing this really close to the vest.”

Koru just ignored the unfamiliar term, making a guess as to what it meant. “No, this is purely for your safety. You'll have an escort, of course, to keep you out of harm's way. But we can't anticipate everything and there's always the chance that you'll be separated from your protectors. The world is a dangerous place and, especially with the Haunt after you, you'll be facing a lot of threats.” He rolled his shoulders. “No, the ritual itself will be simple, with minimal risk to you. The only issue is that there're very few places with the ambient magic to make it work, and only one we can trust: Shambala.”

Suz blinked. “Shamb...wait, Shangri-la!”

“Um, maybe? You tell me what you're thinking.”

The blonde chuckled, remembering that Koru knew almost nothing of her home. “Shangri-la is a

mythical place of purity and enlightenment. It's..." She waved herself off. "No, there's a crapton of religious shit I'll have to explain but I don't know religion very well, so let's just say it's a legendary city of goodness."

Koru smirked at her self-caused confusion. "Well, Shambala sounds similar. Except our place is real. Shambala is a haven of purity. The people who live there are completely free from corruption, existing according to a series of rules that are supposed to keep them pure. Unfortunately, they're also utter pacifists who've refused to share their secrets with the Vigil or anyone else, because they cannot be responsible in any way for loss of life. Kind of like the Menders' Oath, they really *can't* break their word. However, they have offered the Vigil aid whenever it was something nonviolent in nature. And a purification ritual to rid the world of corruption made manifest is exactly the kind of thing they'd be willing to help with.

"Only problem, of course, is we'll have to cross Hegemony land to get there..."