

Though Tribulation Falls

"Who holds the sword?"

-Words Spoken by the Descender Willaim Wei before the Scouring of Jupiter

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Reactivation

Attention all subjects! Attention all subjects!

A dimension merger is in progress!

Please seek shelter while hostilities are in progress

Any harm incurred upon your person during the engagements between Outsider powers will be regarded as acts of divinity, and thus beyond legal reproach or recompense.

Again: all harm inflicted by an Outsider to a subject will be considered an act of divinity. Shelter in place. Be responsible for your own safety.

The System's psi-cast earned a derisive snort from Nusha. The aged floorboards answered with their customary cracks as they struggled to bear the stomping mass of the near-ton ogress barmaid making her rounds from table to table. Scenes related to the newest apocalypse played across the beads of reflective onyx that were her eyes. "Hell arisen. Again? Again! Fourth time this year. Four bloody times and a new bloody master. I swear, there's something broken with these Takers. They lose worlds like Tetkin here loses at dice."

Pockets of stray laughter sounded from across the inn, a brief halt to the lingering tension. But the grunts of mirth passed as fast as they came, and an uneasy silence settled as the crackling hisses of the fireplace resumed its reign over the ambiance.

All eyes were locked on one of the four psi-crystals hovering across the ground floor, enshrouding bodies with oscillations of radiance. Countless perspectives capturing the invasion in progress span like a wheel. Each was parceled into its own menu, and should one focus deeply on a specific interface, the System would respond thusly and link mind to moment.

More than a few customers were already immersed, their eyes coming alight as the infomorphic spirits residing with the System's network reached out and tethered their minds. Most were ordering another round of drinks. The hard stuff. Liquor to go with hushed conversations and bitter anticipations.

Behind the bartop, Ed Vargan looked at his regulars and gave a little sigh. Misthome was a fringe town on the outskirts of the Fyweren Diarchy's borders. Most of the residents were whalers. Harvesters of sea beasts and especially the crude-laced blood of the pyrowhales. What remained were destitute. Drug-taken or of more vulnerable trades. Peddlers of filth or flesh, not unlike the desperate many in the other great cities.

As a whole, they shouldn't be overly affected by the Outsiders. The invaders always targeted the capital—trying to capture the dimensional anchor keeping them bridged to Upstreamer worlds and higher dimensions. And such was as the broadcast displayed. The skies came alight with constant fire, spells and missiles slitting the dark of night open in a mesh of exchanged fire. Nary a cloud could be seen for the sheer mass of demons flooding into their realities, spilling over through dimensional breaches spreading like cracks across the face of existence.

In numbers uncountable, they clashed, frenzied swarms engulfing the world, each trying to devour the other using all they had at their disposal.

Ed often wondered why the invaders were so desperate to possess a Shallow World like Vendenhal. From all the psi-casts he'd experienced, the Outsiders possessed countless worlds like theirs and more that were far richer in sourcery and technology. He even heard rumors that they could weave life into stars, turning balls of gas into self-aware *Sidereals* to haul their bounty of worlds across the cold expanse of the phlogiston.

It all seemed rather overwhelming to him. To have so much. To have to govern so much. To be displeased still despite possessing so much.

But that was why folks called them the *Takers*. Because they took and took, and kept taking for as long as they could.

He just hoped they'd leave enough of this world left after they were done this time. With each apocalypse came plagues, abandoned weapons, rogue demons, and the most unwelcome intruders of all: *Descenders*.

He scanned the inn again, searching for any unfamiliar faces as a knot in his stomach tightened. How well did he truly know his customers? How could he even trust his regulars?

The lot of Misthome's little people weren't of clashing powers and empire-rending struggles. No. It was the hounds and jackals that came with them. The Outsider warriors and mercenaries operating against each other in the dark, some hidden among populations for years, others roaming the land in warbands, pillaging more than giving, raiding more than aiding, indulging more than providing.

Taking.

Always taking.

A thunderous impact echoed in near-distance, and a shiver passed through the room. Ed, as well as several of his patrons, looked beyond the window staring off into the cold fingers of swirling fog caressing the painted glass, watching the lanterns sway.

Then, at a table upstairs, a head looked over the railing. Tetkin was a short auburn-haired man with gills along his neck and webbed fingers to facilitate his swimming. His rubbery diving suit was stained permanently black with crude and the burns on his face told of more than one near-end encounter with a pyrowhale. But still, the deeper had an easy smile about him—especially when he was on a winning streak. “Did Miss Nusha just stand up or sit down? I felt the building shake!”

Another smattering of laughter. The ogress snorted and muttered a curse under her breath. Handing off the last of the orders from the man-sized silver plate she held on her shoulders, she switched to holding the tray under her arm as she stomped back over to the bartop. She made eye contact with Ed as she approached, indicating her desire for a private conversation with a tilt of her neck.

He gave her a brief nod and made for the wide doors leading into his office. He gave a quick look to his bartender, Neltzen. “Be gone for a bit? You be good here?”

“Ye,” Neltzen said, the words coming out as a drone. The long-limbed man often had a vacant look in his eyes—had been this way since a whaling accident left a pike buried in his skull. Didn’t stop him from mixing a mean drink or handing them out to customers. “I’ll—I’ll be fine.”

“Sure you will,” Ed said.

The bright colors of the ground floor vanished as Ed stumbled into the gloom of his unlit office. That lasted until he lifted a lever jutting from his wall. Brightness settled on his spacious chamber. Suits of damaged armor stood flanking him as he walked past. Each was a memento from his past. An item collected from the life he lived before this one. The ceiling was a vast map charting the nine continents and the eighty-eight island chains that connected them. Beneath the looming portrait of the Highdeep Maelstrom was his old chair and gnarled table. Nicks and pieces were missing from the wood, but he couldn’t bear to get rid of them.

Maybe it was because he felt like them most days.

Maybe it was because it reminded him how little time he truly had left.

At the end of the room was a photo. In it, he saw himself and couldn’t recognize the man. A dark mane of hair. A frame that was more muscle than fat, capable of bearing the heavy armor he wore. And the gold-haired woman close by his side, draped in an archeologist’s garb and holding a hovering atlas.

Flashes from the past assailed him. Memories of walking the dungeons with her. Guarding her as she opened vault after vault. Conversations held hushed in the dark as she babbled to him about her theories on extradimensional civilizations. He just nodded along, then. Too lost in her features to absorb anything.

Anferi.

It was good that she passed when she did those twenty years ago. It would have broken her to actually meet the Takers. To see all the hopes she had of kinder, greater worlds undone in the face of invasive greed and unsated gluttony.

After a painful moment, Ed turned away to settle in his seat but found Nusha already towering behind him.

"I still think of mine someday," she said, squinting her eyes at Anferi's picture. "Bit o' a bastard, that Raga was. But he did 'is best for me and the young 'uns. All the way till the end."

"I guess that's all we ask for in love," Ed muttered. He caught himself rubbing the rusted band on his finger. A ring made from a gear they found—her effortlessly charming gift to him. "Our best for their best." He let his words linger for a moment as she shuffled uncomfortably. She mentioned her children. Not a good sign. He had a good guess about what she wanted. There wasn't that much to guess at, frankly. "Is it Gren?"

Her face cracked with discomfort. She nodded, and the rolls of her neck bounced with the motion. Ogres were proud folk. Proud. Violent. Vicious. Independent. If not for the Outsiders, most of their like would have never settled in strongholds or cities, preferring their own small tribes or townships.

Preferences change when, at any moment, some stray mercenary degenerate imbued with enough sourcerous power to cleave a mountain in half might break into your home, kill everyone you love, steal everything you have, and burn when they can take.

And those were the reasonable psychopaths.

Ed heard tales of far worse.

"I need... to take some time," Nusha said, forcing her words out through her wedge-thick teeth. The begging was actively painful for her, and Ed wasn't a cruel man. He waved her off.

"Alright. Fine. How much do you need."

The ogress' brow furrowed with unease. "Maybe... a week? Fourteen days?"

Ed scoffed. “*Shroudings*, Nusha. I’m talking about money. How much money do you need?”

Her face broke apart into shame. “You can’t give me that?”

“Why the Deep Hell not? I’m your boss, I can give you whatever I want.”

“It’s charity.”

“It’s a *bonus*. For your hard work.”

Her gaze fell from his face. She was glaring at his table. Glaring at nothing in particular. “It’s not hard work. I just carry things to idiots. Or throw them out when they don’t listen.”

“Yeah,” Ed said, pretending not to hear her. “Just like I said: hard work. You think Neltzen can do what you do?”

The ogress sneered. “You can. Even the *boy* can.”

Ed rolled his eyes. “I could. Maybe a few years ago. Now? I’m just an old broken thing that forgot to die in his prime.” He ran his palm across his scratched and dented desk. Battleworn and weathered. Battleworn, weathered, but still here. Still here.

He tried not to think about Anferi. He failed.

“Nusha,” Ed said, trying to make use of his wife’s memories, trying to find the words that she might say, that she might give. “You’re the best I could have hoped for here. You are. You might be... ashamed that you cannot fulfill your ancestral traditions or—I’m not going to pretend I give a shit about your culture.” Especially since he spent half his squirehood killing her kind. “But you are. The best. If you weren’t here, it would be some poor girl being leered at, or some idiot boy who’s piss flows up to his brain every time a demur gets thrown his way. Your service is valued. And I don’t want to lose you. So you get what you need to done for your boy.”

Ogre expressions aren’t like human ones. The fact that they physically can’t cry makes it hard to tell whether they’re violently angry, constipated, or on the verge of heartbreak. Even years of working with this one gave Ed no sense, but the body always betrayed before the face did.

Such was true in war.

So was true in life.

“I’ll have Vogo in my place,” Nusha said, speaking the closest thing she had to gratitude.

“No need for that. Me, Neltzen, and the boy will be enough.”

But Nusha wasn't going to take no for an answer. "You will accept her. She will help you. She's ten winters. Old enough to make. A large girl. Larger than a man; she'll be larger than me. And she'll respect you. She'll heed your sense. And she'll learn to be a..." she let out a miserable breath. "Responsible subject."

Ah. The ogres were still sour about signing away their self-determinacy to the diarchy. Understandable. But everyone made sacrifices to survive.

"Your son," Ed said, unsure how he was going to start the topic. "Gren. What kind of trouble is he in? If it's with the Orders, I can—"

"No," Nusha said, her breath barely more than a whisper. "The boy's... *simple*. Like his da. He wants to take back the old lands. Take back the old ways. Started talking about these people—a cult, I think. They call themselves Pendulum. Mad group. Trying to cast out the Outsiders." The snort she ended with told Ed how possible she thought that was.

"Pendulum," Ed said, speaking more to himself than to Nusha. "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. You know where he is?"

"I know where he's going."

And somehow, so did Ed. "The capital?"

"Aye. I'm going to catch him halfway. Going to hire a steam coach and ride."

"No," Ed said, shaking his head.

Nusha blinked, uncertain how to respond. "No?"

Groaning, he reached into his lower right drawer and pulled it open. Instead, he produced a key. "Here." He flung it at her, and the ogress caught it in her meaty paw. "Take mine. Runs off source instead of crude. Better for fuel. The spellforms should still be alive. I haven't used them in the past year. They'll get you around fast. Just don't let it get stolen."

Again, the ogress' face contorted into a grimace. "I—I might be—"

"You're not too big. It's made for space. Take it. Take. Take the day off. Go get your boy."

And this time, something did break in the ogress' face. A dropping her of jowls. "You are a *stone*, Sir Edward Vargan. A stone. A good man."

He chuckled at that. If she could only see the things he did in his youth. The lives he took. The people he killed.

Anferi.

He probably would be dead without her. Dead during some siege instead of having adventures with her in the dungeons. Dead, or a bastard like all the other squires-come-knights.

Just as he was about to start gathering Nusha's coins, he heard the front doors to his inn slam open, heard someone smash through, the wind declaring their arrival. Hurried footsteps thumped across the wood and a rising clamour consumed his patrons.

"Ser Vargan!" It was the boy. His newest assistant. Benwick.

Nusha groaned. "What's that idiot done now?"

Ed grunted as he forced his old bones to move. "Probably something stupidly decent. Come on. Let's go—"

"Ser Vargan!"

"--help him."

They hurried out of his backdoor into the inn proper, and Ed smelled the coppery scent of blood before he even saw the carnage. The scene hit him like a lead ball to the gut. There, just a few steps beyond the open door leading out to a misted drizzle was Benwick Lamuer. He was an ox of a boy, standing just north of two meters at sixteen-half a head taller than Ed himself.

His white shirt was drenched and unbuttoned, exposing a body built by a lifetime of rougher labor. The trollhide longcoat he usually wore was wrapped around the slight figure of a half-conscious woman, and with each step they took, more of her blood splattered from her opened stomach, painting the ground with her ichor.

"Hell arisen," someone muttered.

Ed ignored them as he crossed the room, accessing the woman's wound as best he could. Strangely, what caught his attention first was her attire. Bodysuits were not a common thing in the diarchy, being more the fashion of eccentric nobles trying to ape their Outsider betters. The woman, however, wasn't wearing something pointless gauche or strangely colorful. Honestly, Ed couldn't even tell its material make. It was colored in orange and white where not stained by blood, and there was a missing patch on her right shoulder—a place Ed felt missing as a symbol.

The simplicity of the design but the pointedness of the coloring scheme worried him. This was the look of a woman tied to a governing authority. One kind of order or another. And as he finally took in her features—the uncommon paleness of her skin and those double-lidded eyes—suspicious rose inside him.

Suspicions he didn't want to be true.

"I found her, Ser," Benwick said, eyes wide, breath coming fast. "I found her outside. Lying in a burning crater. She's cut. Cut bad."

Ed growled and looked up, searching for the one he wanted. "Tetkin! Go get your brother. Tell him to come fast—and bring the sheriff too!"

Tetkin being related to one of the few good doctors in town was half the reason why Ed let him rack up a tab sometimes. The other was the general cheer he brought. And reliability, so long as matters of gambling weren't involved.

In seconds, the meter-and-a-half-tall deeper leaped the rails, rolled, and was on the way out, calling for no one to touch his drink or die. While he was in motion, so were Ed and Benwick, dragging the stranger away before a horde of onlookers.

"My room," Ed said. They didn't have an unoccupied guest chamber and with how her innards tumbled behind the wound he was clamping shut, the stairs weren't a viable option. They needed to get her horizontal. Have her held firm and stable on a bed before her disembowelment resolved itself all over his nice floor.

"Nusha!" he called. "Door!"

But the ogress was already ahead of him, flinging the entrance on the far right corner of the room open before they were even halfway there. Fire and destruction splashed overhead as the psi-crystal continued to play footage of the war.

A tightness gathered in Ed's gut. A cold portent kissed the nape of his neck.

Something was terribly wrong. And he had let her into his inn.

As Nusha flung the lights on, Ed grimaced at his clean-pressed sheets before laying the woman on his bed. Red-soaked white in seconds. A weak, wet gasp sounded from the stranger. A gurgling in her lungs.

"Dead god, her lungs are punctured," Ed said. He wasn't even sure the doctor could fix that. Not fast enough anyway. More memories came to him. Moments from his flash. Of friends lost and enemies are slain, all struggling as they drowned in her own blood.

Of Anferi, losing to pneumonia.

"Ser?" Benwick said, still holding the woman's wound shut as best he could. The boy was an idiot sometimes, but damned if he wasn't brave. Damned if he wasn't good. This world would

not be kind to him.

“Keep her steady,” Ed said, spinning to see if he still had a poultice somewhere. Something to soothe her hurt at least.

He was mid-turn when he heard her cry out. Her words left broken moan, and he wasn't sure if he heard her right. “Ed—Edward Vargan.” He went stiff and faced her again. Benwick was looking at him confusion now. So was Nusha. The stranger's gaze was locked on him, staring at him through half-open eyes. “Edward... Vargan.”

He heard her that time. He wish he hadn't. He swallowed. “Yes. I am. Do I know you? Are you with the Orders?”

She shook her head and for a moment, her green eyes traced his ceiling, the blood loss stripping her of focus as well. “Edward. Need to... came to find you... sorry. So... sorry.”

“It's alright,” he said, leaning in close and putting a hand on her shoulder. His ring glinted in the light. Another time, another place, another woman.

Anferi. The same words.

The same outcome soon to be.

“Came to... to extract...” he coughed. Speckles of red dotted Benwick's face. To the boy's credit, he didn't move. “Was tasked with... not yourself... sister.”

“Stop,” Ed said, looking down at the woman. “Stop talking. Focus. Focus on me. The doctor's coming. He'll fix you. He'll fix you—”

“Ed!” Nusha said, throwing a red-tinted potion at him. Almost dropped it, but muscle memory prevailed where his reflexes waned. In a practiced motion, he popped the cork and poured the contents down her throat.

The stranger gagged, choking on the healing essence. Every drop was worth more than what most people in town could earn in a month. She coughed half of it out on his pillow. He didn't care. He kept pouring. Until she struck it from his hands.

The poultice of health went sailing across the room, shattering against the stone wall just below another portrait of Anferi. Before Ed could react, he suddenly felt an impossible pressure grip him, pulling him down close to the stranger.

This time, Benwick did stumble back in shock. Nusha came striding forward, but an unseen ripple pinned her to the ceiling. The ogress thrashed. Benwick sat there frozen. And Ed found

himself a prison in the clutches of an invisible hand, forcing him down to face the stranger, whose eyes were suddenly full open, full focus.

One last surge of strength before the end.

“Sorry, Wei,” she said, wrapping her blood-slick fingers around his face. “Sorry. Wish I could’ve... said goodbye properly. But... this’ll do.”

And then he saw something flash behind her eyes as a translucence entity peeled away from her form, flowing through the air in luminous rivers as they flooded his eyes, his ears, his every orifice, even his pores.

Something hardened inside him. Something burrowed deep. Flashing words and information splashed over his eyes like details from a psi-cast and the core of his skull swelled, a piercing pain drilling deeper and deeper, until he found himself convulsing next to the stranger.

The force gripping him vanished. Nusha fell, and this time the inn did shake.

On his side, Ed stared into the eyes of the woman as she labored her final breaths. “You’re... gonna remember,” she managed, blinking slowly. “It’s gonna be okay... you’re just gonna be... a little pissed...”

She laid her bloodied palm on the side of his cheek as the light went out behind her eyes.

Another spike of pain broke Ed’s focus. Nusha’s form blurred.

Benwick pulled the woman away, shoving her off the bed.

But by now the world was losing coherence. The sensation of drowning overtaking his senses, as another layer of memories began to surface. Other lives. Other worlds.

SYSTEM TRANSFER IN PROGRESS...
INSTALLING ORACLE COGNITIVE ENHANCER
INSTALLING RESONANCE CORE
REMOVING PERSONA LOCK
RECOGNIZING NEW USER

WELCOME BACK, DESCENDER WEI