Gods among men

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Gods Among Men

by

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Abstract

*Gods Among Men* is a creative text that functions critically to dissect the genre of superhero fiction and bring forth critiques of our culture of worshipping celebrities and political figures. I cite Woody Evans’ work in my critical introduction as being central to my project. Evans puts forth the idea that superheroes are inherently conservative because they are reactive agents that do not proactively change anything. They instead maintain the status quo. Villains, on the other hand, try to effect change for a different end, one they deem better for society. Through the use of characters, this text demonstrates that principle and reflects certain aspects of our culture around celebrities. It employs a large cast of characters to reflect a variety of phenomena related to celebrities and social issues. I hope that this project allows us to reconsider how we view celebrities and political figures so that we can reframe that view. I think by reframing that, we can then push for these figures to be held accountable and use their influence to proactively effect positive societal change.
Introduction

For my graduate thesis, I crafted a creative piece titled “Gods Among Men.” This project aims to dissect the genre of superhero fiction, as it occupies a unique place in culture. These types of stories, which have grown in popularity since the 20th century, are rich with tropes and themes that resonate with audiences, such as the reluctant hero, the hero’s journey, the superhero alias, and the resolution of every conflict through some sort of duel or battle. Oftentimes within the genre, certain characters act like metaphors & reflect bigger issues within society. In Marvel comics, the X-men (and mutants as a whole) represent a variety of othered groups because of how they are rejected by society. I use the characters in my text to comment on various social issues as they relate to the elevated status of celebrities and politicians. Our society’s worship of celebrities can be conversely dissected through the analysis of superheroes. The text also explores the different types of support these figures (celebrities and superheroes) obtain, which can become almost cult-like to outside observers.

In his work, “Why they won’t save us: Political dispositions in the conflicts of superheroes,” Woody Evans posits that superheroes are conservative figures, not in the sense of how they skew on a liberal-conservative political spectrum but in their approach to issues & society as a whole (1). This concept is central to my text as it is central to the genre. Generally, the heroes all want what is good and best for society, but they aren’t proactive enough to decisively make any large, systemic changes. The superhero genre requires them to be reactive agents because they need conflict in order to exist as they are (as celebrities to be worshipped). Evans writes, “Indeed, the fact of his [superman’s] failure to use his godlike powers to make a structurally or permanently better world suggests such a deep and aberrant conservatism that we are forced into the
permanent remembrance of his essential alienness.” (1) In this excerpt, Evans highlights that even the most powerful heroes, who are able to effect the most change, don’t take the initiative to be proactive and make those changes. They force us to rely on them. In a similar sense, many celebrities have the resources and influence to effect significant change. But what they do for us, whether it’s act, create music, or play sports, is provide us with an escape from the problems our society faces. If those resources were pooled, they would be able to help effect large, systemic changes that would help many.

In his work, Evans also notes that villains are often the progressive types, wanting to radically change society and make it better; though as Evans suggests, better is subjective in this sense (1). This notion stood out to me and influenced how I wrote certain characters. Surely villains also want what’s best for the world. However, Evans notes that this can be skewed and vary by individual, and then the ends become the focus over the means to get there. My text presents a group of big-name heroes (read A-list celebrities) “The Masters” as representative of groups like the Avengers or the Justice League; they are the most revered and powerful beings in their shared universe, yet they don’t effect any structural change. When one hero does, he immediately transitions from hero to villain, becoming an antagonist to a traditional super protagonist. The Masters are representative of the biggest celebrities with the most power, influence, and wealth. Following the notion presented by Evans, they do not take any preemptive action, they only react to dire situations & problems.

Some strong examples of this that already exist are the comic book heroes Batman & Iron Man. Both are heroes without any actual superpowers; instead, they use their wealth to fund the technology they use to fight crime. While this might seem impressive and inspire the notion that you do not need a special “gift” to make a positive difference as they have no powers, one can
note that they’re better off using that wealth to make larger structural changes that would prevent crime in the first place. Batman is an egregious version of this archetype because he also funds and contributes to the “Arkham Asylum,” which is an institution/prison for supervillains. He invests in a punitive system that punishes and keeps people locked up (and which ultimately fails). Instead, he could invest in programs that prevent these villains from taking these destructive paths and rehabilitating those who do. Similarly, Iron Man has access to technology that could end disparities in medicine, education, and other fields. This archetype of the powerless hero is one I comment on in my text through a character known as the Crimson Cloak. He takes the billionaire superhero who is tied to the institution of prisons a step further by running one & profiting off it, reflecting the abuse in the prison industrial complex. He is a hero to society because he is a superhero who puts the bad guys away, but he also benefits from the problem of villains; thus, he doesn’t want to change the status quo by putting those resources towards something actually meaningful and eliminating that problem. He chooses not to do anything that would proactively deal with the issues of villains because like any superhero or celebrity, he is against change and wants to be needed.

Other characters within the text take on certain meanings as well. There are celebrities and political figures who take on active roles advocating for big changes regarding specific issues like climate change. In my text, I crafted a hero to represent the unfortunate position of these “icons.” They unfortunately cannot always effect as much change as is needed because they are not in the positions of power to do so. Through the character Ursarane, I also tackle the issues of spirituality, scandal, and controversy influencing our idea of these icons. For some, hearing that a celebrity has substance abuse issues brings them down to our level & we reject them. For others though, it makes them more relatable, but we still give them their “god status.” This character
embodies some of the more complex dynamics of celebrities within society. This character proves to have faults & despite wanting to make change for a better world, he cannot because of a combination of his own unwillingness and his inability to do so.

Going back to the notion of heroes being conservative and villains being progressive, the main antagonist, Flare, is a character who at the start of the story is part of the Masters. He is representative of the more powerful superheroes like Superman. He is untouchable because of his seemingly unlimited power. He is part of the institution of superheroes & government that only maintains society. Together, these institutions don’t change anything. Something sparks for him early in the story and changes his perspective; ultimately, he decides to take an aggressive approach to changing society structurally. His ultimate goal is to rebuild the world in his image, which is an idyllic one in his eyes of course, but the means to that end make him a villain. He describes it as a potential empire. Thus, we come to another trope of the genre, the hero who becomes a villain. The demonization certain celebrities face on standing up for issues or wanting to effect structural change is represented by this as well. They are not inherently bad & they do not want to effect change in ways that harms others (like supervillains often do). Instead, they are vilified for wanting to effect change in the first place. Some strong real-life examples of this include Colin Kaepernick advocating for racial issues and Greta Thunberg advocating for climate change. While they do obtain support, they are still viewed negatively by many. The many who vilify these figures are those who do not want to change but would rather keep things as they are because they believe there is still good and making structural changes could jeopardize that.

Then there are the protagonists. They are not heroes who are very well known and established. They found their strength after the collapse of society. Their smaller status in comparison to heroes like the Masters signifies a shift in the growing number of smaller, lesser-
known celebrities on social media and other entertainment platforms or smaller political arenas. In a way, their newness to the superhero dynamics make them a proxy for the audience as well. They are still learning how their new world works and how they can interact with it.

The main protagonist, Kit, is a character who has had one foot in both worlds, so to speak. He had a life fighting crime before the apocalyptic changes and continued to do so after, but he never reached the same status as the Masters. Having retired since then, he has found himself having to take an active role again while taking in the other protagonist, Mick, as his sidekick. Throughout the text, he reveals that he is burnt out and does not want to do any more superhero-ing because “the world is dead.” He takes on a completely different and cynical view, making him the reluctant hero as this role is thrust upon him. Rounding out their team is “Dollface,” a character who plays on a different superhero trope. She mirrors a popular hero/antihero “The Punisher,” whose main characteristic is his mercilessness. Characters like these within the genre are meant to spark conflict & debate about the ethics of things like the death penalty, as these characters have one goal: to kill those who do wrong. They take the role of hero to a darker place as they see the role not as bringing about something positive but as taking out all the negativity. These heroes are stand-ins for opinions on controversial ideas, like the death penalty & what society is supposed to do with the worst criminals. Oftentimes with these particular subjects and areas of society, certain people, especially celebrities, present their own opinions which may be deemed as controversial but even those have merit. Most recently there have been calls to “defund the police” and to many this notion seems dangerous but if we take a more analytical approach to what these calls are for, we might find that there is some merit to them.

This project is aimed at commenting on the culture our society has around celebrities and how that relates to the superhero genre. One text I referenced and looked to as a guideline for my
project is The Boys, a comic & TV series centered on more “realistic superheroes.” This makes it a perfect model for commenting on both the superhero genre’s formulaic nature and tropes as well as our society’s culture of worshiping celebrities. This text presents a world where superheroes aren’t necessarily the good guys, but individuals with their own agendas. My text reaches a point where the idea of the superhero is no more. Instead, there are factions led by individuals who used to be superheroes. They become the political figures, trying to navigate the world in a way that is best for them and their followers.
Prologue

Flare rested his head on his hand at the table while his colleagues droned on about crime rates and repairing infrastructure. He thought about how he and other powerful superheroes form the group called the Masters; they formed a larger, less exclusive council focused on tackling society’s issues with crime. But that was months ago. Ever since whole governments had fallen due to corruption, crime became more and more rampant. Despite recruiting more and more heroes, the council had made little to no progress. Flare pondered on the problem and was overcome with a strange feeling he’d never experienced before in his career as a hero. He wondered if it was all for nothing. He wondered if his existence and powers were meaningless.

“Flare. Flare!”

One of the many voices broke him out of his trance and silenced the rest. All the heroes turned to Flare. Many waited, watching him with awe as they knew he was the most powerful hero in the room. Because of that, he was considered a leader within the Masters and the council. Flare stood, pondering his response as he was lost in his thoughts.

“Flare,” repeated Spellcaster. Her stern voice echoed through the room as she continued, “Do you have anything to contribute to this meeting? Surely we can do more than increase global patrols and surveillance.”

Darker thoughts began to swirl through his mind as the existential dread set in again. He clenched his fists as he began his response.

“Yes, I think there is something we can do differently.”

“Please enlighten us.”

“We’ve been at this for months, saving people and trying to make life easier for everyone. No one said that would be easy but we have no progress to show for it. We’ve been doing the same
thing over and over as heroes, catching crime but not stopping it in its tracks. Something’s got to change.”

The room fell silent with his pause. The anticipation was becoming overwhelming as all the heroes wanted to know what solution their idol would propose. Spellcaster felt an unease as the golden titan went to a window and looked out towards the city.

Looking off in the distance, Flare only said, “We stop.”

Everyone felt the same chill as they processed the two words from their leader. The anxious muttering between heroes filled the room and slowly evolved into louder chaos. Flare hadn’t moved, maintaining his distant gaze out the window. Spellcaster approached him and turned him towards her.

“How could you say that? What are we supposed to do if we don’t save them?” she gestured towards the city as she chided the towering blonde man.

“It’s simple really, we tear it down and rebuild it.”

Spellcaster stood back, heart dropping as his words hit her. Her eyes glowed in anticipation.

“You don’t mean…”

“Yes,” he interrupted, grabbing her by the throat.

The room fell silent as everyone now watched the two Masters at the front of the room. As Flare’s powers activated and his body began to ignite, there were cries and yells for him to stop. The light became blinding as the room was enveloped in heat. There were screams and cries of pain as the room exploded. Many ran, escaping the blaze of fire that swept through the room. Some stayed only because they were able to withstand the heat. Now in the middle of the room, Flare stood surrounded by vaguely familiar individuals who had a range of emotions coursing through them. None of the other Masters remained.
“Time to rebuild,” declared Flare.
Chapter 1

“Tell me the story about how the world ended, Kit.” The world is dead.


“I wanna hear it again and I like how you tell it.”

Kit looked at the wide-eyed boy following his every move through the woods. Even through the faint moonlight he could see the boy’s pouty expression, as if the denial of hearing his favorite story would set him off into a tantrum. Despite that, the boy managed this while holding 45lbs of supplies. Although he was only seven years old, Mick was starting to develop his powers; because of that, he not only wanted to contribute, but he was encouraged to by their fellow villagers. The two had traveled some distance from their village in search of food and supplies. Mick’s increasing strength made him useful for carrying all the goods they found. He held a few sacks full of fruits they had foraged and a few backpacks from fallen travelers. The boy learned to test his powers by carrying and throwing logs in front of the other villagers. Everyone recognized his gifts and the potential he had to become a powerful protector for the village. Some even said that one day, he would make a great leader. Even through all the attention and praise, he still looked up to Kit, whose enhanced senses had always managed to impress him.

Kit sighed, resigning to tell the story again. Hunting will be easier while trying to tell the story than while listening to him beg.

“Please, Kit?” the boy persisted.

“Alright. But if I stop…”

“’It’s for a reason.’ I know, we’ve been hunting before.”
Kit shook his head, looked at the path ahead and continued, “Alright. Well, it all started with the Masters, the six heroes who used to stop all the world-ending threats. There was a warrior from another planet who was indestructible. There was a goddess who could harness the cold and freeze anything. Glacia was almost indestructible but still a fierce warrior.”

Kit took a moment to pause, take in his surroundings, and then gauge Mick’s excitement in hearing this story again. He smiled and then continued.

“There was also a nature spirit who could control plants and animals.”

“Ursarane,” the boy excitedly whispered.

“There was the Crimson Cloak, who used some of the most advanced technology to fight crime. He was a real warrior who didn’t rely on powers but skills instead. There was the Spellcaster, a talented witch who used her magic to take down lots of villains. She was one of the strongest. But Flare, he was the strongest superhero we had. He had the power of the sun. He could summon the hottest flames and emit bright lights. He led the Masters. They and a bunch of other heroes made up the Council, which led society when normal governments failed. One day, the Council was...destroyed. There was an explosion at their headquarters that killed the Masters, or at least got rid of them since none of them have been seen since. With the council gone, all organized government as we knew it collapsed. Some tried to pick up the pieces, but failed.”

“And then the villains came, right?”

“Don’t interrupt,” Kit whispered. “But you’re right. There were always villains, but more started appearing and taking advantage of the disorder. That led to a rise of smaller heroes and vigilantes.”

“Like the Sense!” Mick excitedly whispered.
Kit shook his head at his old moniker. For a moment, he remembered all the training he put into being able to fight crime and the blue costume he donned. He was flooded with the memories of his early fights and exploits. The costume, now a ragged undershirt, aged with the warrior.

“Yes. We tried our best to keep all the villains at bay. Sometimes there were bigger heroes that would show up. No one as big or powerful as the masters, but still able to help. Even if they barely helped, they were praised just for showing up. But even they couldn’t… they wouldn’t stop the great catastrophes. There were Tsunamis that towered over skyscrapers and earthquakes that swallowed whole cities. Then there were wars on top of that from whoever was left. Any old government or authority that could have tried to keep the peace turned their backs on the people to hide out in their bunkers once their regimes fell. The people chose to look to the only ones left that could lead them, the heroes. Some of the less popular heroes became leaders, but they act like warlords. Others chose to take groups of people and protect them, with the help of other heroes.”

“Like what we have with Zed, where he protects and leads the village,” the boy piped up.

Kit felt a chill at the mention of his leader’s name. They clashed when Kit first came to the village, nearly resulting in his death. They called a truce, but he held a certain distrust of the telekinetic since then.

Leaves rustled. *Something’s ahead of us.* He put an open hand out towards Mick, signaling to stay put. Kit took a few steps forward, quietly pulling his bow off of his shoulder and readying it to shoot. He focused on his target, a wild boar in the distance. He pulled an arrow from the quiver on his leg as quietly as he could and attached it to the bow’s string. He pulled the string back, building tension in the bow. He held his breath, steadied himself, and saw the pig’s ears
twitch. *There.* His fingertips straightened, releasing the string and sending the arrow flying. It sailed through the air and made contact. Kit finally exhaled. A small pang of guilt struck him as he saw and heard the arrow hit its target. *I’m sorry, but it’s kill or starve.* He heard the small steps behind him. *And all we can do is survive.*

“No, not like what we have,” Kit continued the story. “We have a village. What they have is far greater, at least from what I’ve heard as a wanderer.” *They can’t be real. The world is dead. All we can do is survive.*

As they made their way to the clearing with the boar, Kit looked around in all directions. He wanted to make sure they were the only ones after the boar. He even listened and went so far as to smell the air around them. All he could detect was Mick following close behind him and the dead boar. Upon realizing that they were alone, Kit pulled his arrow from the head and pushed it into the ground. He pulled it out of the ground and gave it a quick wipe with a rag before sheathing it back in its quiver. They took a tarp from one of their packs and wrapped the prize up. Mick backed away and stood his distance, feeling nausea at the sight of the corpse.

“How did you even see that from back there in the dark?”

Kit only pointed to his eyes as a response and then went back to the task of wrapping the boar. He decided to carry the boar because he didn’t want to torture Mick with that burden. The boy stepped forward and Kit shook his head, grabbing the tied end of the tarp and hoisting it over his shoulder. He gave the boy a smile and a nod, then a loud clang rang out somewhere near them. Kit dropped the boar immediately, crouching to the ground and pulling Mick to his level. He drew his bow and an arrow, pointing it in the direction he heard the clang. The silence felt like it lasted hours until there was another clang, not as loud as the first. *What the hell?*
“Stay here,” Kit whispered. “If you hear me yell ‘run’ you run back to the village, understand?”

Mick only nodded in response.

Kit began to walk in the direction of the noise, keeping himself low and making sure his steps weren’t too loud. He held the arrow back, keeping the tension in his bow high. He only saw leaves and trees as he moved towards the source of the sound, until there was something in his peripheral vision. Aiming the arrow to his right, he turned to see an old car. Its doors were open and its windows were smashed. That might be worth a quick look.

He quickly made his way to the vehicle and peered inside. The glove compartment looked like it had been emptied. The aisles and seats were empty. Kit almost left the car but noticed something catching the light under one of the seats. He reached under it and grabbed a handle. It was a small, sheathed hunter’s knife. Another clang rang out, this one closer. This might be useful. He slipped the knife into his pocket and readied his bow again.

Soon the volume of the clangs grew and Kit knew he was close. Then there were footsteps. Rustling leaves. He aimed the bow towards the footsteps and waited. They moved closer. They were slow and cautious. As they grew closer, Kit could tell they were small. Damnit. From behind a tree, he saw Mick emerge.

“I told you to stay and guard the boar.”

“I thought you needed help because there were more clangs.”

Another clang caused them to turn. This one was feet from where they were. Kit silently darted towards the source and found a small hill. Upon walking around it, he found a metal door that seemed to swing back and forth. He found the clanging. It was dark in there, but Mick could
make out the legs of a person around a corner & a puddle of blood. Mick caught up and then turned to the door. *This world is dead.*

“Are we going in there?”

“No. It’s been looted already.”

“But what if they didn’t grab everything.”

“No. It might even be a trap.”

Kit heard the boy’s heart begin racing at his words and knelt to face him.

“Hey, we need to be careful,” he whispered. “We need to make sure we’re smart, so we survive. We’ve already got a great catch and some supplies. We need to head back now before it starts getting light out.”

The boy only nodded in response.

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“Wait until everyone sees what you’ve caught us,” the boy exclaimed excitedly.

“I can’t wait to see what Bubba whips up with this.” Kit lifted the wrapped up boar. *I may have to share it, but at least I’m getting something good out of it.*

“So did you see it or hear it first?”

Kit shook his head. “I saw it. I can see in the dark, remember?”

“Well yeah, but I know your other senses are super too.”

“Yeah, but I usually have to concentrate on those.”

“Zed says your powers aren’t that great and that you’re jealous of us. I think he’s wrong and your powers are great.”

“Thanks, Mick.”

“Why do you and Zed hate each other?”
How do I talk to a kid about this?

“Well,” Kit began. “Zed isn’t that great of a leader and we fought when we met.”

“Okay, but you’re both heroes with powers who protect the village.”

“The “Great Fling.” He’s really flashy with his powers, moving everything with his mind, even when he doesn’t have to. He’s just all about showing off his powers.”

“And?”

“Everyone is wowed by it, but when was the last time he used them to do something good?”

Kit noticed the pensive look on Mick’s face. This was followed by some gratifying silence.

“He only uses his powers for himself, and on very rare occasions to protect the village. But he just wants to take advantage and make other people do all the work because he can,” Kit continued.

“Why?”

“Because that’s the world we live in right now.”

“Kit, will things ever go back to normal? Like before the end of the world?”

“Probably not.” Kit swallowed, hating the feeling of having to answer all the boy’s questions.

“Will things at least get better?”

“They could,” he lied.

“Do you think…”

“Wait,” Kit interrupted.

He dropped the boar and then looked to the skies where he could see the faint outlines of smoke. He closed his eyes and smelled the air. The acrid smoke and bitter smells of burning began to overwhelm him. He knew something was wrong and began to cover his face with a cloth. Mick noticed his urgency and began to smell the smoke too.
“Can I come? I want to help,” Mick piped up.

“I want you to stay here, hide the stuff then hide in the treetops. Don’t follow me again. I’ll come get you. If I don’t come back, get as much as you can and run away."

Mick was about to interrupt but was cut off by a loud boom and the flash of flames. An orange glow lit up the forest for a brief moment and the boy could see his mentor’s grave expression. He then dropped the food and backpacks he was carrying. He looked back to where Kit was and saw that he was already gone.

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Kit ran through the dark woods, ducking beneath low hanging branches. He followed the screams and cries that were growing closer. As he approached, the orange glow of flames grew in intensity as well. He gripped his bow tightly so that he wouldn’t drop it if he collided with anyone and so he could quickly whip it into position to fire an arrow. Upon reaching the treeline, he began to climb up so that he wouldn’t easily be seen. He saw small huts, people’s homes ablaze. *What the hell is going on?*
Chapter 2

Kit shook his head as he witnessed some of his fellow villagers running into their homes only to be followed and dragged out by warriors in ornately armored suits. He used the leaves as cover as he observed these intruders attacking his people. One could tell by watching the scene that they were great in number and skill, putting the protectors of the village at a severe disadvantage. He noticed one of the village elders being dragged by two of the intruders and his body take action. Before he could fathom what he was doing, he had the cord of his bow pulled back, ready to launch an arrow at one of the warriors. He knew he had to intervene to save her. He released the string. The cry of pain from his target masked the sounds of him jumping out of the tree and readying another arrow. Kit was able to launch it at the next warrior, landing a shot right in between the eyes as the figure turned to see where the initial arrow came from. The first one turned, still groaning in pain; those groans were silenced with a strike from the bow that brought him to his knees and a kick to the head.

“Elder Magna,” Kit cried. He grabbed her arms and helped her to her feet. He looked into the eyes of the woman who had let him in the village and raised Mick.

“Kit, where’s Mick?” The elder turned, searching around the village frantically.

“He’s safe in the woods. What’s happening?” He grabbed her and held her to face him.

“It’s the sun-guard. They’re followers of Flare, enforcing his will.”

“Flare? As in one of the Masters? I thought he died with the rest of the Council!”

He helped her walk and tried walking her to the trees from where he emerged.

“Yes. He leads an army of followers and they’re attacking our village. It might have something to do with Zed being our leader.”
As he helped her lean against a tree, he noticed a figure coming closer from his peripheral vision. He turned quickly and launched a series of strikes, landing two solid hits on a sun-guard. The stunned warrior stumbled backward as Kit swung his bow for another hit and then grabbed an arrow from his quiver, using it as a stabbing weapon instead of a projectile. This caused the warrior to fall. Kit returned to his elder, who cupped his face with her hands.

“I want you to take Mick and run away. Flare and his followers will decimate everything”

“We can’t leave you like this.” He interrupted.

“You two need to find another village. Find their leader and tell them what is happening.”

“We can’t.”

“You need to go!” She yelled, causing him to stop interrupting.

“Okay.”

“Go find my son,” she whispered, pulling him close and kissing his head before looking into his eyes with glowing pupils. “I will try to distract them. Warn others and get help. Maybe someone else can stop this. If Flare is alive, the other Masters could be too.”

Kit could only nod as he processed what he had agreed to do. They began to go their separate ways, exchanging one more look before Kit disappeared behind the trees. His eyes adjusted back to the darkness and he sprinted through the trees. His heart and mind raced as he ran to where he remembered leaving Mick. He closed his eyes and smelled for the boar, finding it a few feet off his path. He called for the boy and listened, hearing no response. He called again and again, wondering why the boy wouldn’t respond. Another explosion in the distance made him realize that Mick’s loyalty to his loved ones probably led him back to the village. With that, he steadied his breathing and made his way through the forest yet again. He had to keep his promise and keep Mick out of harm’s way.
Kit broke the treeline and saw flames engulf most of the village. It was a sight that struck him to his core. He wondered if any of the villagers managed to escape. He slowly made his way through the village, being careful not to be seen. He eventually came to the village square, where all the villagers were gathered by the sun-guard. He stayed hidden behind one of the few remaining huts. He watched as a few more villagers were dragged out by the warriors and put with the others. He noticed one individual towering over the other warriors. The large warrior tossed an apple he likely stole from one of the villagers. The leader of the unfamiliar warriors seemed as wide as he was tall. The black suit he wore stretched over his muscles and sported a large, yellow “F” on the front and a white cape behind one shoulder. He waved one hand around, sparking flames from his fingertips. Kit realized that the imposing leader was in fact Flare. Kit also realized that he was speaking but couldn’t make out what he was saying. He focused his hearing and listened in on the titan’s words.

“Well, Zed, looks like you have quite the setup here.”

*Magna was right.* Kit then scanned the group of villagers. It was composed of mostly familiar faces, but the ones he was looking for weren’t there; he only sought Mick and Magna. As he continued his search, the village leader, Zed stepped forth. He seemed stern in his approach to the unfamiliar and intimidating figure. Kit watched as others backed away, clearing the space for the two. He realized that they were about to battle. This was typical when two individuals wanted to settle disputes. Kit knew that very well. When a sufficient space was cleared for them, they stood and faced each other with about ten feet between them. Kit could only watch on quietly as the leader he mildly resented began to approach his larger opponent cautiously. Zed seemed to
know his opponent well enough to approach with a great deal of caution. He thought that the leader’s telekinetic powers would give him an edge in the battle.

“Flare, we don’t have to do this.” Zed raised his arms, readying himself for battle.

Hearing Zed call his opponent Flare confirmed to Kit that the former Master was alive and leading this onslaught.

“Like I said, I want to unite everyone under one rule. If you’re not with me, you’re against me. If you’re against me, I have to stop you.”

“You’re the one who needs to be stopped,” Zed yelled as he launched dozens of stones toward his foe and began to move along the edge of the arena they’d been given.

Flare jumped high over the barrage of stones, leaving a trail of light embers behind him as he soared in the air. He landed into a roll and raised his arms towards Zed, shooting forth a large ball of fire. Zed was quick to react and pulled a chunk of earth up in front of him to absorb the hit. He then launched the scorched earth forward and continued to move along the edge of the arena. Flare jumped, flipped, and dodged all his opponent’s projectiles. The fire began to flare out from his body as he charged up another attack. He raised one arm, creating a pillar of fire. He thrust his other arm forward to launch another fireball. Zed was caught off guard and suffered burns on his arm. Flare then brought his arm down, causing the pillar to come down towards Zed, who shielded himself as quickly as he could.

Kit gasped as he saw the flames engulf the ground his leader used to protect himself. Zed emerged from the flames and dirt, now limping away. He now had to be more defensive because he was injured. The crowd at his end parted and he backed up as his opponent continued a relentless assault. Kit watched in horror as Zed backed himself into a corner and raised his arms in vain to be met with a stream of fire.
Flare released a continuous stream of fire from his hands that engulfed the leader until nothing remained but ashes. Kit realized that he had just witnessed the death of the leader and their people would need a new figure to follow. He then saw two guards dragging someone into the circle, in front of the crowd of his other villagers. They revealed that it was elder Magna. Kit felt his heart race as he then saw Mick behind a nearby hut as he grabbed a fist-sized rock. He burst into a stealthy sprint, trying to stop the boy from blowing both their positions. Mick readied himself to throw the stone as he watched the man who killed Zed approach his adoptive mother. He wound up his arm and threw the rock with as much force as he could towards Flare. For a split second, his eyes met with Magna and she had a pained expression on her face. Mick then felt a hand over his mouth as he was lifted up and pulled behind the hut. Kit kneeled to face his sidekick.

“Don’t. We have to go.” He recognized the whisper as Kit’s.

“We have to do something,” Mick angrily whispered.

“Where did that come from?” an alarmed voice yelled.

Kit brought the boy close to him and whispered, “We are doing something. We’re running away.”

Mick was about to put up a fight when Kit gestured to be quiet and then pointed towards two guards several huts down. They were likely searching for the source of the rock. Before Mick could react, Kit readied two arrows and shot them both at the guards at once. One hit its target directly in the head; the other struck below the throat. A bloody gurgling noise emanated from her direction as the two crumpled to the ground. They heard the guard begin to groan out in pain as she grabbed at the arrow in her neck.

“Where did that come from?”
Kit hoped that that guard in the distance would buy them at least a few more seconds, so he slung Mick over his shoulder and began running towards the woods. He weaved through huts and burning piles of wood, hoping that the smoke provided decent cover. Before he knew it, he reached trees and had to weave more carefully between them as he circled around the village and brought Mick to the spot where they had left the boar. He knew they wouldn’t carry the whole thing, but he wanted to grab some of their bags and supplies. He knew that whatever he was feeling was worse for Mick.

They reached the tree and dug up their boar. Mick began grabbing some of the sacks of fruit as Kit sectioned off part of the boar and packed it up. He surveyed the area around them to make sure that they weren’t being followed. He saw some movement in the distance back towards the village. With a swift pull, he had his bow and arrow ready. He fired off a shot and saw the arrow hit. He heard a scream, confirming that he hit his target; he was disappointed that he hadn’t hit his exact target, the head. He didn’t want to waste any more time with another shot, so he grabbed Mick’s hand and they took off in the direction of their hunt. Kit hoped that the path would eventually take them to another village, or at least to people who could help.
Chapter 3

Flare rose from the ground, his head throbbing from a stone that hit him out of nowhere. He scanned the area and saw his guards searching. He saw the small crowd of villagers watching him and a woman being held by two of his own. He rubbed his head and his eyes, looking at the woman again. There was something familiar in her face; he recognized her, but he didn’t know how. He made his way over to get a better look and hear what she had to say.

“I know you,” he began. “We met before I joined the Masters, but your name escapes me.”

“You really haven’t changed, Cyrus.”

His heart raced a bit at the sound of his given name. “We really knew each other then,” he remarked.

“You killed our leader. You’ve burned our huts. What do you want?” She questioned, reluctantly taking on the role of leader for her village.

“I know this looks bad. I’m coming in hot, bringing everyone out here and fighting Zed the way I did. Remember, he challenged me, but he’s not why i’m here.” Flare adjusted his sleeves, cleared his throat, and continued, “I see an opportunity here. I want to fix the world. To do that, we all need to be united under one rule.”

“Your rule?” Magna scoffed.

“Yes. I believe I have the power and influence to bring everyone together. After doing that, we can rebuild and gain some semblance of society as it was before the apocalypse. In fact, we can make it better than it was before. Imagine no crime, no disasters, just peace.”

“You mean to be a dictator.”

“I can see how you might think that. I mean to be a benevolent leader. Previous attempts to unite certain parties have been met with all kinds of resistance. So unfortunately, I’ve had to take
more… direct means to ensure that the right ends are achieved. Just ask my people what they
think of their leader.” He raised an arm and gestured to his guard.

“We thank the son of the sun,” numerous voices chanted. “We worship the son of the sun. We
submit to the son of the sun.”

“I mean to spread enlightenment. I want to take us out of these dark ages and lead the world
to a bright new future, previously unimaginable!” his voice boomed.

“You’re a mad man.” Magna shook her head and then looked up to one of her captors.

Two blue beams shot from her bright eyes and burned into the guard’s head. She turned to the
other with a fist to the throat and then fired again, this time at Flare. He grabbed her face with
one hand and pointed her gaze away. His fingertips sizzled and caused smoke to rise from her
flesh. She groaned in pain as he squeezed.

“I should kill you for that attempt at my life, but you’re far too valuable to waste.”

Flare let her go and gestured to one of his greatest warriors, saying, “Elayna, work your
magic.”

A woman in a red, flowing gown emerged from the crowd and cupped the elder’s face. Both
their eyes glowed a bright purple hue as one of them mumbled a chant over and over until the
other woman repeated the chant. Any sense of identity disappeared in Magna. Flare left the two
so he could see if his other guards had figured out who threw the stones. After a quick sweep
with a few guards, he found two dead, one with an arrow in his head and one with an arrow in
her throat. Their expressions were empty. Another guard beckoned them to the trees outside the
village. They followed and found another guard, not dead but injured.

“I was following some people who were running off. I was hot on their trail and caught an
arrow to the chest.”
“You did well.”

“Thank you, my lord.”

“Please, you can just call me Flare.”

“Thank you… Flare.”

“We’re going to have to make sure they don’t become a problem.”

The injured warrior stood, holding his chest. “I’ll keep pursuing them and if I have to give my life for the cause, so be it.”

“You’ll need this taken care of,” Flare stated, putting his hand on the guard’s wound. He began to heat his hand. In no time, it was blistering, and the man stifled screams. The leader kept his flaming hand on the wound until it was cauterized, and the guard fell back, sweating.

“Thank you… Flare. I will not let you down again.”

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“Thank you, Elayna. Your spells are miraculous and integral to the cause.”

“Thank you, Flare,” the woman replied. “Does any of this weigh heavily on you?”

Flare’s smile dropped and he responded solemnly, “Yes. This isn’t actually easy for me. It pains me to see so many people resistant to this change that I… we have to ‘correct.’ I just want to bring our world to a better place.”

Elayna forced a smile and said, “Your way is most likely the right way. I will continue to help how I can.”
Chapter 4

Despite having put several miles between themselves and the village, Kit and Mick still tried to keep a good pace as they ran away from their home. They panted as they both began to succumb to fatigue, forcing them to slow to a halt. They both collapsed, laying on the leaves that crunched underneath them. They gasped for air, catching their breath.

“I think we’ve earned this break,” Kit offered. They both chuckled a bit before falling into a somber silence.

Mick broke the silence. “Kit, they killed Zed.”

“I know. I saw while I was looking for you.”

“I’m worried they killed Magna, and the others,” he said as tears welled up in his eyes.

Kit swallowed, wondering how to approach the morbid issue with Mick before trying to reply to the boy, “I…”

“What if we’re next?”

“We’re not going to be next,” he assured the boy, rising to his feet.

He looked around, taking his time to look through the forest for anyone potentially tracking them. He saw nothing as the sky began to light up with a pink hue from the rising sun. He knew that they wouldn’t be able to rely on the cover of night much longer, but that also meant it would be easier to see anyone coming their direction. Pondering their next move, Kit took out a tarp and slathered mud on it. Mick watched on, puzzled by the young man’s actions. He then began sprinkling and pressing leaves onto the muddy, giving the appearance of something like a bush.

“I don’t think that’ll work how you want it to.”

“Well, you’re wearing it cause your clothes stick out more in this forest,” Kit said, picking it up and draping it over the boy.
“It’s kind of heavy.”

“You’re strong, remember?”

“This is a different kind of heavy,” Mick piped up.

“Well, take it easy. We need to keep moving so we don’t get caught. We’re still going to have to find another village and hope that they can help us.” Kit fetched an apple from his bag and gave it to the boy, adding, “Eat up.”

The two continued along their path. Kit kept a watchful eye and ear out for others. He held onto his bow and kept another hand on his dwindling supply of arrows. He hadn’t thought about it earlier, but he should have tried to grab more arrows before leaving the village. He thought about trying to make more, but it would take too much time and leave them vulnerable. Still, he thought the five in his quiver would suffice for some time if he used them sparingly. His thoughts were interrupted by a pillar of smoke in the distance. He gestured for Mick to stop and then tried to look ahead. Finding nothing from his current viewpoint, he began guiding the boy right. They were still heading away from their village, but he didn’t want to get too close to the source of the smoke.

“Alright, Mick. I’m going to need you to stay put and stay low. Don’t move. I’ll be back.”

“But I can help.”

“I don’t want to have to run back and find you again.” Kit gave a stern look before dropping his bags. The boy sat next to a tree, leaning against it. Kit nodded and said, “I’ll be back.”

***

Kit cautiously approached a clearing that had a few tents pitched. A flame died away in the middle of the tents. Obviously, that was the source of the smoke they had steered clear of until it was time to investigate. Kit noticed a few people standing by the fire, their clothes ragged. At
least they’re not with that sun-guard. He took a closer look and noticed that their outfits seemed mismatched, and the clothing on the largest one, who stood at least seven feet tall, seemed ill-fitting. Bandits.

Some screams interrupted his thoughts. A man’s screams came from one of the tents. Kit took extra care at that moment to make sure he was hidden behind the trees. He then took another look at the campsite and saw someone else emerge from one of the tents, the largest tent. This individual wasn’t particularly huge, but something about him was more sinister. Kit realized what that was when he saw the man raise a severed leg, waving it to his fellow bandits. This is much worse than I thought.

“Alright, time to eat,” one of them yelled.

Kit felt his heart in his throat as he heard the cry and the smells of flesh and blood hit him. He felt the contents of his stomach hit his throat too and began retching. He tuned everything else out to get the vomit out of his system. He heaved and gagged until he felt he couldn’t. Then a realization hit. How long was I puking? How loud was I?

“Over here!” Kit heard a voice closer to him than he felt comfortable.

“More meat?” Another yell came from the distance.

Kit peered around the tree and saw the tall one on the other side, looking back towards the campsite.

“Here, weak man puke,” the tall bandit yelled back.

Kit grabbed an arrow from his quiver and lodged it into the giant’s leg. After a quick twist, he pulled the arrow back out and ran. The pained groans grew faint as Kit ran and he thought about the cries of the man in the tent. There was nothing I could do for him. He then thought about how his own heightened senses betrayed him and made him vomit. He thought about it again and felt
the muscles in his stomach tense. He had been able to ignore the pain, but his adrenaline was beginning to wear off, causing the cramping to return.

Kit then looked back, checking to see if he was being followed and saw some movement in the distance. He knew he couldn’t take however many of them were following him. *I have to separate them.* He also realized he didn’t want them following him back to Mick. *I have to lead them away.* This caused him to turn slightly so he wouldn’t go directly to where he had left the boy. He stopped several more yards in his new direction and leaned into a tree. He caught his breath and waited. It didn’t take too long before two of the smaller bandits could be heard shuffling nearby.

“I think he went this way,” one gasped for air.

“Just admit we lost him.”

Kit picked up a stone, careful not to make any noise as he did so. He looked at the two of them, bent over with their hands on their knees. *Now’s my chance.* He tossed the stone over them, waiting for it to land and distract them. It hit a tree and then rustled a few leaves on the ground.

Both bandits turned, screaming “there!”

Kit quietly snuck up behind them and pulled the same arrow from his quiver. He kicked one of the bandits in the leg, forcing him down and then stabbed the other with the arrow. The arrow lodged in his neck broke off as the bandit turned and fell to the ground, grabbing at his neck. *Shit.* Kit turned his attention to the one he had kicked who was now lunging for him. They both fell to the ground, grabbing at each other, trying to get the upper hand. Kit used his broken arrow, stabbing the bandit’s arm but losing his only weapon in the process. This earned him a punch to the temple, disorienting him. The bandit, now on top of Kit, began showering him with
punches. Kit tried to block with one hand but still caught several blows to his face. Pain welled up inside him with each blow, causing his eyes to tear up and blur his vision. The bandit, now desperate, grabbed at the arrow and pulled it out of his arm. He gripped it with both hands and brought his arms down. Kit grabbed his wrists and tried to resist. The two struggled, Kit slowly losing the battle. *I need to do something.* Kit turned his body and let the bandit push the arrow into his shoulder. A sharp, searing pain enveloped him for a moment, before he pulled the bandit in close. He wrapped his arms around his foe to trap him, grabbed his chin and pulled with all the force he could muster. The resulting crack echoed in his skull. He pushed the corpse off of him, stood, and began to slowly make his way back towards Mick, mentally making a note of his injuries.

Kit grabbed the broken arrow, feeling that sharp pain again as it moved in his wound with his touch. With a swift pull, it came out covered in blood and fell to the ground as he let it slip from his fingers. He stifled a groan as more pain shot through him. He ripped part of his sleeve and wrapped it around his shoulder to dress the wound as best as he could under the circumstances. He would have to treat it later. *Maybe I’ll teach Mick how to treat wounds.*

***

“What do you mean you got stabbed?” The boy sounded indignant.

“Just come here and I’ll show you how to treat a wound like this. In case you get stabbed while superhero-ing.”

The boy reluctantly walked over to Kit, who had removed his shirt and was already ripping a whole sleeve off to use as a bandage. He grabbed one of the bags and pulled a bottle half full of clear liquid.

“What’s that?”
“It’s vodka.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s alcohol,” Kit said, shaking his head

“What’s that?”

“It can keep a wound from getting infected, and help you feel good.” Kit took a small swig, shaking his head and groaning as he took in its taste and the liquid burned his throat. He then took the bottle and poured some of its contents on his shoulder, covering the stab wound. He flinched as he now felt the burning sensation of his wound being “cleaned.”

The boy came closer, looking at the wound. “Can I try some of your vodka?”

Kit rolled his eyes and handed him the bottle, whispering, “one small sip. I’ve been saving that since before the world ended.”

The boy raised the bottle to his lips and tilted it back until the liquid touched his lips. He then recoiled and swung the bottle away from himself, spitting as he did so. Kit only laughed as he grabbed the bottle back and sealed the cap.

“Why would you save that?” Mick continued to spit and cried out, “it’s so gross.”

Kit slipped the bottle back into his pack and picked up a few more bags. He looked at the boy and then cocked his head toward the remaining bags. The boy understood and picked them up easily.

“Alright, we need to be quiet and fast when we move,” Kit whispered. “There were bandits by that smoke. We’re going to take the long way around them and hope that we don’t run into them again.”

“Okay, Kit. But you know I can fight too, right?”

“I know, Mick. Not everything is about winning fights.”
The two began to walk back towards the smoke, taking care not to head directly to the campsite or make too much noise. Kit led the way and focused his senses on their surroundings. The pain in his shoulder occasionally shifted his focus from their surroundings. Luckily, the path ahead was clear enough.

They kept moving along the path, putting some distance between themselves and the campsite. Kit didn’t think to tell Mick about what he saw, only that there were bad people. *Those people I had to kill.* He thought about their deaths and how he felt afterwards. His head began to spin. The path before him became a bit blurry. He began to stumble. *Shit.*

“Are you alright?” Mick’s words were distorted as they met his ears.

“My drink. I think… my powers…” Kit tried to force the words out. “My senses, they’re…”

“Kit! Look.” Mick panicked, pointing ahead.

Kit was able to steady himself and focus his vision on the figure that stood a few yards away from them. The tall one he recognized and had stabbed earlier stood in their path with a sledgehammer resting on his shoulder. He lifted it off his shoulder and brought it to his other palm and began limping towards them.

“I kill little man and child,” the giant finally spoke.

Kit dropped his bags and kneeled, turning to Mick. “Run, I’ll find you,” he whispered.

Mick shed his bags and took off disappearing behind the trees. He went away from the two and away from the campsite. Kit turned back to his opponent, who was now limping towards him faster. Kit readied his bow, pulled an arrow from his quiver, and tried to fire but ended up fumbling with the two. He tried again, firing the arrow into the shin of the giant. This got a roar out of him. *Screw it.*
The giant raised his hammer overhead, readying it for a powerful swing downward. Even inebriated, Kit saw this coming and sidestepped it. He swung the bow at the giant, landing a blow to the face. He swung it back around, landing another hit on the jaw. The two hits barely made him flinch. Kit ducked under a wild swing of the hammer and thrust the bow up, connecting with the giant’s face before landing a kick to his gut.

“You are too small to hurt Strong!”

Another swing came, so Kit rolled out of the way, kicked the giant in the stabbed leg, and watched him fall to his knee. At this height, the tall bandit’s head was much more accessible. Kit jumped up and brought an elbow to his opponent’s face. Streaks of red painted the leaves on the ground. A quick punch connected. Then a heavy swing from the giant’s arm pushed Kit several feet before he fell over. He was disoriented and had the wind knocked out of him. So he struggled to get to his feet as the giant stood and limped toward him, raising the hammer again. A downward swing was dodged with a simple roll. This was followed by a kick that connected with Kit’s face. The impact pulsed through his skull and sent him rolling onto his back.

“Ha!” The giant began to laugh as he approached Kit, who held his face and tried to crawl away.

The giant, a slow learner, thrust his sledgehammer forward, grazing Kit’s leg but still knocking him down to the ground. The giant managed another kick, this one connecting with his target’s ribs. Damn. Kit coughed up blood and used his bow to block an incoming strike. A loud crack filled the air as Kit’s bow snapped upon its impact with the sledgehammer. The warrior only looked at the broken pieces in his hand for a moment, mourning their loss, until a grunt brought him back to the task at hand, dodging another attack. He rolled backwards, managing to
get up to his feet and threw the pieces of his bow at the giant. He pulled the hunter’s knife out of
his back pocket, assumed a low crouch, and waited for his target to approach.

The giant lifted his weapon above his head for a final downward swing and charged. Kit saw
his opponent’s error and sprang forward into a sprint. The distance between them closed in an
instant and the nimbler of the two fighters leaped in the air. Kit was now closing in on the giant’s
face, watching the hammer come down in slow motion. There was nothing the bandit could do as
Kit latched onto his face and began stabbing from every angle, spraying them both with blood.
After a quick barrage, the giant toppled over, landing on top of the warrior’s lower body.

“Bastard,” Kit whispered as he began pushing the giant’s body off of his own as best as he
could. He thought about Mick for a second when his senses were invaded by a familiar smell.

*Blood.*

A sharp pain in his neck caused him to flinch and look up. The last of the bandits he had seen
stood above him holding a syringe and a cleaver.

“You killed them all. More meat for me,” he laughed, though it was muffled through the mask
that he wore.

“Let me go. You can keep your friends.”

“Friends? No, just meat. They didn’t know it yet.”

Kit tried to talk, but his vision began blurring again and his words came out jumbled.

“Serum works. I’ll need to make more.”

Kit’s vision worsened as the bandit was now spinning, as was everything around him. He
tried to throw a punch but only swung his arms at nothing. A kick to his wounded shoulder
brought the pain flooding right back into him. He screamed as loud as he could.

Everything started fading as he heard another scream. *I didn’t scream though.* And then black.
Kit’s eyes opened, the bright sun overhead beamed in his face, forcing him to turn his head and shut his eyes tightly. He took a second to recover from the light and then realized he was being dragged through the woods. He tried to turn to look at his surroundings, but the sunlight was too bright for his eyes. He focused his hearing and only heard the shuffling of feet through the leaves. He focused his sense of smell and could no longer smell blood, but the smells of the forest seemed stronger. *Maybe a side effect of whatever he drugged me with.* He hoped his movement hadn’t been noticeable and devised a plan to escape. He tested the movement in his limbs before rolling to the side and standing up to his feet. He pulled an arrow from his quiver and reached for the bandit only to grab Mick.

“Mick?”

“Kit! You’re alive,” The young boy beamed.

“What happened to the bandit?”

“Bandit?”

“The bad man.”

“My friend took care of him.” Mick pointed from the direction they came. “Meet Ursarane!”

Kit turned and dropped his jaw. Meeting his gaze was a bear. Upon catching up to them, the bear stood on its hind legs, making the tall bandit seem small in comparison. The bear’s eyes glowed a bright, emerald green. It also dawned on him that the bear had antlers rooted on top of its head. Like a stag, it had antlers that were thick at the base but split into many sharp points.

“Mick…” was all Kit could whisper.

“I’m Ursarane.” The bear spoke.
Chapter 5

Kit and Mick carried what bags they had left as Ursarane trailed behind them. Kit realized what luck had just bestowed upon them. The younger hero was just happy to be friends with a giant bear. After Kit had explained that he knew of many of the bear’s exploits, and that he was a fan, their conversation turned serious.

“Our village,” Kit began. “It was burned down. We have no home now.”

“I’m terribly sorry,” the bear growled. “I can offer shelter. We have more than enough room and food.”

“Can we stay with him, Kit?”

Kit nodded, then turned back to the bear. “That’s not all. Our village was burned down by Flare.”

They all stopped in their tracks.

“Flare…” The bear seemed lost for words.

“Yes. Black suit, cape, and all.”

“He always was one for theatrics,” the bear muttered.

“Why would he burn down our village? Why would he kill our people?” Kit’s voice grew more indignant.

“I… I don’t know. But we can figure that out later.” The bear began to pick up the pace before continuing, “Come, we’re not very far.”

Kit only gave Mick a look and then cocked his head in the direction the bear was moving. They both shrugged and then followed, although the subject of Flare never left Kit’s mind. The image of the former superhero burned in his mind even as they walked into the wide clearing that was Ursarane’s village. It seemed to stretch much farther than their own camp had, and it was
littered with more huts that were also larger and seemed sturdier. Kit and Mick noticed a variety of people, animals, and beings in-between stare at them as they walked behind the bear. A cat-human hybrid eyed them both while licking her lips. *This can’t be real.* Kit thought about the whole situation and then remembered that he had just had a whole conversation with a talking bear.

“My hut is ahead,” the bear growled. “You can take the hut next to it until we get you situated. Come find me when you’ve settled in enough to talk more about everything.”

“We will,” Kit replied, watching the bear disappear into the largest hut.

They pushed their way into the smaller hut, dropping their bags as they entered and noticing two small cots. Kit noticed a bowl of fruit on a table in the corner of the room and went for it. He grabbed two peaches and tossed one to Mick.

“I’ve never eaten this before.”

“It’s a peach. Just eat it like you would an apple.”

The two ate their peaches, and several more each. Kit couldn’t believe their luck, coming across a former Master and being invited to be part of his village. The more he thought about Ursarane, the more he began to ruminate on Flare; the images of his burning village flashed and seared themselves in his head again. He took a deep breath and then stood up to ready himself. He splashed water on his face in an attempt to wipe away the blood and make himself more presentable. Parts of his face had swollen up and his shoulder was still really tender. He was halfway out the door when he heard giggles from the bear’s tent and noticed Mick right by his side.

“Listen,” Kit began, kneeling to face Mick. “Why don’t you stay in the hut and get some rest. We’ve been up for a long time trying to make it here. I’ll handle the bear.”
“But I can help you talk to him,” Mick argued.

“How about this? You stay here, lie down, and try to get some rest. If he doesn’t listen to me, I’ll come back and get you, and you can help me convince him we need help.”

Mick nodded with a smile. That seemed to suffice. With that, the boy went into their cot and Kit readied himself to face the bear. He inhaled, no longer smelling the woods, but something much different and more potent. The giggles he heard inside grew louder.

He tried to cough to announce his presence and called for the bear. No response.

“Ursarane, I’m coming in.”

Kit stepped into the large hut and felt regret burn up inside of him. He was met with powerful aromas that made him dizzy. Once he could see through the clouds of smoke, he saw three half human, half animal hybrids laying in a large bed, covered by sheets and garments. They looked back at him and smiled. Their eyes were glassy but alluring and inviting. Kit then turned to the corner, where he saw a man, tall, muscular, hairy, and, luckily for Kit, robed. Another man stood near him holding various vials and herbs. An apothecary maybe. The half-cat he had seen earlier was there as well, rubbing the man’s back and gazing back at Kit. She seemed to whisper something to him. The man then turned, blowing smoke from his lips and meeting Kit’s stare with the same green eyes he had seen earlier.

Before Kit could say anything, he was rushed by the man who held him up with both hands. There was a hush among the women as the two men were locked. The larger man’s eyes were fierce and angry.

“Who are you and what are you doing in my hut?”

“Ursarane? It’s Kit! Kit, who you saved earlier today.”
The man pondered for a moment and then realization spread across his face, making him drop Kit to the ground.

“Kit! Brother, I’m terribly sorry. You’ll have to forgive me. I, uh, indulge myself sometimes in elixirs and I happened to forget about today’s events.” He looked at himself for a moment and continued, “Apologies for my indecency as well. I have many forms, you see.”

“We have to talk about my village, and Flare.”

The whole hut was silenced and the tension in the air grew thick again at the mention of his name. Kit looked up to the man, seeing the pained expression on his face.

“Would you leave us, please?”

The rest of the hut clothed themselves and filed out of the hut, each caressing the man as they did. Kit watched the last of them leave and then turned to Ursarane, who was now a bear again.

“Sorry, I figured you prefer this form.”

“Yeah. I guess that makes this easier.”

They both paused for a moment and then the bear laughed, breaking the silence between them.

“Speak your mind.”

“Ursarane, I don’t know why, but Flare attacked my village. He had his own followers, his warriors, drag villagers out into the square to watch him kill our leader, Zed, in combat. After that, I was discovered and had to escape with Mick.”

“I’m sorry this day brings you so much loss,” the bear said, lowering his head.

“Before we had to run, I heard him say something about uniting everyone under one rule.”

“I don’t know exactly what that could mean, but I have an idea on what he means.”

“What is it then?”
“Flare sounds like he thinks he’s trying to save the world. He’s trying to undo what he did to end the world.”

“What do you mean he ended the world?”

“Well, back when we were the Masters, he led our group and the Council.”

“I remember that.”

“He was different then, but he was a good leader. And then one day… the day of the explosion, he told us to stop involving ourselves. He wanted to do something radically different to solve the problems we were facing. When he was met with resistance…”

“He destroyed the council?”

“Well, mostly. The other Masters like myself survived, but we went our separate ways, bracing for the inevitable.”

“But he’s one being. The rest of you could easily take him.”

“He harnesses the power of the sun. He’s unmatched. The only other thing he channels support from is his followers. But there’s no shaking that support when he’s the most powerful being.”

“I still don’t understand why he would just stop saving and start destroying.”

“I don’t know. Maybe he harbors some kind of grudge against humanity. He never explained beyond saying that he was going to do something different to save the world. I wish we hadn’t backed down, but now it looks like he’s trying to fix his own mistakes which led to the end.”

Kit turned back to the bear, gazing angrily at him. He yelled, “You don’t get to defend your… YOUR inaction. Especially now when Flare is going around killing people.”

“I didn’t say what he was doing was right. From some twisted perspective, I think Flare thinks he’s doing what’s right and what will fix everything.”
“‘Uniting everyone under one rule,’ his rule. He sounds like a dictator, but his followers make him sound like a cult leader,” spat Kit.

“That’s dangerous.”

“Will you help us? Will you stop him?”

“I… I don’t know if I can, Kit.”

“Why not?”

“Walk with me, I have to show you something.”

Kit followed as the bear led the way out of the hut. He peeked into his hut quickly to see Mick asleep in his cot. He returned by the bear’s side as they walked further into the camp, passing more and more survivors that Kit hadn’t seen when they entered earlier. Not too far from the other edge of the village, was a large tree that had a certain glow about it. The light as well as the tree itself, pulsed and faded, like it was breathing.

“This is where most of my power is now. This is what gives this forest life. I call it the life tree.”

“It looks pretty,” Kit turned back to the bear. “But how does this help us stop Flare?”

“It doesn’t. This is why I cannot fight him. If this tree is destroyed, the forest dies. Slowly, it is revitalizing more land, bringing more life. I must protect it. I must remain at peace to protect my people. I must-”

“Indulge?” Kit interrupted.

The bear sighed before replying, “I probably deserve that, but we cope in different ways.”

Kit huffed, “You can stop him. But what you’re telling me is that you won’t.”

With that, Kit turned and left the bear by the tree. He ignored all the stares he got walking back to his hut. After returning, he sat on his cot and fiddled with his knife. Images of himself
killing the bandits flashed in his mind. He thought about the sun guards he killed. Then, the pile of ashes Flare had turned Zed to clouded his mind. He gripped the knife tighter and laid in his cot. His grip never went easy until he drifted into sleep.
Chapter 6

Flare twirled a ball of fire in his fingers as he looked at the smoldering huts that were now the only remnants of the village. He had missed using his powers to that extent. A voice took him away from his thoughts and the flame wisped away, leaving smoke from his fingertips.

“No trace of the runaways.”

“That’s disappointing.” Flare’s hand clenched into fist that was enveloped in flames.

“I’m sorry, master. We will continue to work on finding them.”

The flames dissipated again and a smile began to grow on the leader’s face.

“That’s what I like to hear. What about the villagers? Have they been properly educated and shown the way?”

“Mostly. Elayna is almost finished. A few have been difficult.”

“Stronger minds are the ones most worth turning.”

“Start preparing the transport vehicles. We’ll get them back to base. We can take a smaller squad out to continue assimilating more to our cause.”

A tone rang out from the device on Flare’s belt. He grabbed it and viewed the message on its display.

“Sir… Flare, your belt.”

“I know. It seems the two have made their way to Ursarane’s camp.”

“Isn’t he… a bear? And some kind of nature freak.”

“He’s delusional,” the titan chuckled. “But I think we need to pay my old friend a visit.”

***

“Elayna, I have good news. We’ve managed to track the fugitives,” the former Master gloated.
“That’s excellent. Where are they?”

“Ursarane’s little camp.”

“So our agents have actually come to serve their purpose?”

“Indeed they have,” he grinned.

He was about to say more when he paused to take in more chanting from the newly indoctrinated
Chapter 7

Kit heaved as he swung an axe down and split a log in two. He looked at the growing pile of wood that he and a few others added to and sighed. There was still a lot he felt he should do if he was going to stay in the former master’s village, even if his own view of the hero was now tainted. *I can’t believe that’s all he does now.*

“Kit, come on. You’ve gotta chop more wood.”

Mick’s voice brought him back to reality as the boy put another log in front of him.

“I’ve got it,” Kit breathed before heaving and swinging the axe down onto the next log.

A burly man approached them slowly and examined their pile. He looked at the other individuals chopping wood and cocked his head toward the village. They each dropped their axes and began loading the chopped wood onto wheelbarrows.

“We haven’t met yet. I’m Garrick. I help Ursarane run the camp and distribute tasks.”

“I’m Mick, and this is Kit!” Mick’s excitement was evident in his voice.

“I heard you just grabbed an axe and started hacking. This should suffice for the evening. You can probably relax for the rest of the day.”

“I don’t feel like relaxing,” Kit grumbled. “How else can we help?”

“Well, we don’t normally ask new arrivals to help until a week or so after they’ve joined the camp, so they have time to get situated.”

Mick piped up, “but we want to help. We did at our old camp.”

“I see. What happened there?”

“It got burned down. It was Flare.”

“Wait, you mean from the Masters? With Ursarane?”

Kit nodded.
“I see. Would you like to help me set up some defenses for the village?”

“Of course. We’d be happy to help with that,” Kit said, wiping the sweat from his brow.

Garrick gestured for them to follow and began leading them through the woods on the edge of camp. The man’s steps seemed to shake the earth underneath him as Kit and Mick followed. They watched this huge figure lumber through the trees in front of them until they reached a clearing with branches, shovels, and knives.

“What is all this?”

“It’s very primitive, but it’s something that would protect us from anyone who would try to sneak into camp to steal or attack. We’re going to sharpen these and use them to fill trenches.”

“I don’t see any trenches,” Kit remarked.

“Well, you can dig those first or sharpen the branches. Your choice.”

Kit watched Mick go for a knife and then shook his head. The boy reluctantly put the knife back and then grabbed a shovel to start digging. Kit then grabbed the knife and began sharpening one of the branches.

“Why hasn’t this been done already?”

“Ursarane doesn’t think this is necessary. He says this is a waste of time, labor, and lumber.”

“He has to know the village can’t remain defenseless, especially now.”

“He believes he is our best defense. He is right, to an extent. He is a nature spirit and a Master, so he is one of the strongest beings there is. But he’s lost his way. He used to be more involved in helping people and maintaining this camp.”

“And now he spends most of his days numbing himself to everything,” Kit continued.

“I worry that you’re right and there might be a big threat out there now.”

“You mean Flare.”
“Yes. At his prime, Ursarane might have struggled, but he could protect us from his former teammate. But now…” Garrick couldn’t finish his sentence and looked off into the distance.

“These traps aren’t gonna stop Flare, or his army.”

“I know, but they’re a start, and they’re bound to stop something.”

Kit nodded and continued to whittle the end of his branch to a sharp point. Garrick began to do the same as Kit grabbed another branch to begin sharpening. Mick kept digging, using his strength to move large mounds of dirt. The two weary travellers embraced the tedium of the labor; it was a close enough return to normalcy after the eventful day and a half they had. They were able to settle into roles and do something that kept them at ease, even with the danger of a fiery death in the back of their minds.

Funny enough, Kit was able to focus on the mindlessness of the activity, and that kept his mind from going into overload thinking about the potential dangers of their path. Before they knew it, the glow of the sunset washed over them as they whittled some of the last branches. The boy climbed out of the trench he had dug, admiring the work he had managed in the hours they spent in that clearing. They laughed after a few exchanged jokes but silenced when they heard the familiar rustling of leaves. They all turned in the direction of the noise and the village to see the silhouette of the leader, made unmistakable by his antlers. Though he was on all-fours, he still had a large and imposing presence, which was made even more intimidating by the size of the antlers atop his swinging head. He was followed by two men carrying backpacks. The bear yawned then looked at the sharpened branches.

“Fawn told me you would probably be here, Garrick.”

“You know there’s a threat out there,” the burly man yelled back as he stood, clenching a fist.
The bear stood and snarled, “No one knows that more than I do.” The bear turned his head to
Kit and Mick, “You two need to leave. I have your stuff and gave you extra food.”

“You’re kicking us out? IS it because you don’t want us scaring the other villagers?” Kit’s
voice grew indignant.

“Ursarane, they’ve already begun to help with the lumber and trench spikes. To throw them
out now would be…”

“Those spikes will have to do as spears. The danger approaches as we speak.”

Everyone fell silent as the words echoed in their minds. Garrick was the first to find his
words.

“You mean?”

“Yes. The winds have spoken to me. Flare is on his way here.”

Kit held Mick close, trying in vain to quell the fear he sensed in the boy.

“What do you want us to do?”

“Leave. Get help from someone who can actually help you,” the bear’s voice was now a low
growl.

“Who?”

“You have to go to Van city. Go to the prison and find the Crimson Cloak.”

“How do we know he’ll even be there? Or that he’ll even help?” Kit began pacing, thinking
about the master that the bear had just told them to find.

“The cloak took refuge in the city after the world ended. He decided to fortify the prison to
make sure none of the villains there would escape and cause even more damage.”

“That doesn’t answer my second question.”
“He’ll at least be more equipped to help you than I can,” the bear said solemnly before turning away. The others watched as he listened.

“What is it?”

“You need to hurry, they’re near.”

The two men with bags stepped forward and gave them to Kit and Mick. As they were suiting up and getting everything they needed to go, the bear gave out a low roar. Everyone looked at the tall figure and waited for a response. From the woods came a blur of orange. Kit and Mick turned as a fox with glowing green eyes approached them. They turned back to the bear.

“A guide for your journey,” the bear offered.

Kit looked at the fox for a moment, then back to Ursarane before responding, “Thank you.”

“It’s all the help I can offer right now. I must protect my people, and the tree.”

A pyre of flames rose in the distance, illuminating everything in an orange glow. This light was familiar to Kit and Mick. He grabbed the boy’s arm and bowed his head to the former Master once more before following the fox into the woods. He felt wrong not trying to help but knew that he couldn’t stop Flare.

The bear turned back to the village and growled, “Grab the spears and arm the men. I’m going to hold him off for as long as I can. Take the women and children to safety.”

“Yes, Master.”

Ursarane got back on all fours and charged back towards the village with a roar.
Chapter 8

Flare turned and flipped his cape as he readied another fireball. He aimed at the closest hut and released the flaming projectile at its target. The hut went up in flames with a boom and filled the air with the smell of charred wood. A smile began to creep on the former Master’s face.

He watched as his guards gathered the villagers to one of the clearings in the village. He lit another hut and the glow of the flames illuminated their faces. It was then that he heard a familiar roar. He saw the large silhouette emerge from the smoke, antlers as large as he remembered them. Ursarane.

“Flare! Flare, what are you doing to my village?” The bear roared again, snarling after to reveal his fangs.

“Ursarane, old friend, I’ve come to see you. You have some guests I’m interested in meeting.”

“They’ve left. Now leave my village. We only want peace.”

“You think I don’t want that? I want a peaceful world in which everyone is united. Why can’t everyone see that I’m trying to bring us all together under one rule so we can rebuild the world in our image, so that-”

“In YOUR image! Your image which is tainted with narcissism and self-righteousness,” the bear interrupted.

The caped warrior turned to the bear, clenching both his fists.

“Don’t interrupt me. I’m taking action, while you sit around getting high and wasting your gifts. All you ever did was ‘inspire’ others to be good and protect the environment, but you never took any action yourself. You are not worthy of being part of the new world.”

“Flare, don’t do this. You’re a mortal who let fame and power go to your head.”
Flare’s fists clenched even harder. His followers raised fists and weapons in response to the bear’s words.

“He is the son of the sun,” they began to chant.

“Enough,” Flare yelled, raising a hand, resulting in more flames dancing in the air. “I am a god, like you. Ursarane, if you want to live, you must follow me. You must serve me and take me to the fugitives.”

The bear roared in response, causing the ground to shake. Flare held his gaze and remained unphased by the sound. The ground began to crack underneath him. Roots shot up from the ground and wrapped around his legs and wrists. They began to pull him into the fissure. He resisted the roots. His arms and legs tensed as he stood his ground. A smile crept across his face again.

“Very well,” Flare said in a low voice.

Flames engulfed his body in flames to burn the roots and free himself. He raised his arms, manifesting a pillar of fire. All watched in awe as the pillar grew into the sky. Its heat was felt everywhere as he moved his hands to bring the pillar down towards his enemy.

The bear stood on his hind legs. Roots again emerged from the ground. Although now they shielded the nature god from the flames. The pillar crashed into the wooden mass, dissipating and sending small embers everywhere. Another roar came and everything shook as gusts of wind filled the village. The wind seemed to carry Ursarane’s roar as it blew out all the embers, extinguished the larger flames, and sent Flare flying backwards.

“Coward!” Flare yelled as he fell to the ground. “Come fight me and stop hiding behind your powers.”
Ursarane snarled and charged. The earth shook beneath his heavy paws as he gained speed. He lowered his head as he got closer to lead with his antlers. Flare got to his feet, dug his heel into the ground and reached his arms toward the charging foe. He grabbed the antlers and was pushed back. The two met and came to a standstill as Ursarane tried to impale Flare. The latter held the bear in place by his antlers. The two struggled against each other.

Flare then engulfed himself in flames once again, raising the heat and slowly burning the bear. Ursarane held his ground and kept trying to push forward. The two were still locked in what looked like an even match. They moved only slightly as they resisted each other.

A wicked, twisted grin crept across Flare’s face as he then began to pull the antlers sideways, away from the locked combatants. Ursarane sensed this and used this as an opportunity to push forward and impale his foe. It was too late.

A loud crack rang out and silenced all those watching the two. Ursarane lurched forward and headbutted Flare, pushing him back several feet. The bear felt blood drip down the sides of his head. The realization then dawned on him that his antlers had been broken. He looked to his opponent to see them raised in the air like trophies.

“You’ll get these back, when I put your head on my wall,” the flaming warrior taunted.

Ursarane groaned, trying to fight the pain he now felt searing through his head. He growled and began to circle his opponent. Flare walked in the opposite direction, keeping his eyes on his foe. The two gazed focused on each other’s movements, calculating their next moves. Ursarane charged forward and stood on his hind legs again, swinging his front paws. Claws raked Flare’s side as he moved in for an attack, stabbing the bear with his own antlers. He lodged one of the antlers in the bear’s side and then rolled away, keeping a firm grasp on the other antler.

“Gaah, damn you,” the bear groaned as he returned to all fours.
Flare twisted the remaining antler in his hands, taunting Ursarane again. “I may keep this one.”

Ursarane roared again. Flare charged again, but the wind picked up and slowed him. The ground opened up again and roots sprang from the cracks. They formed one large limb, which swung and struck Flare. He then flew across the camp, over huts, and towards the life tree. Flare crashed into the tree, dropping the antler. He grabbed it, trying to recover from the shock and then looked at the tree. It’s green glow and pulse mesmerized him, until he heard the growling bear approach. Flare raised a hand towards the tree and embers danced from his fingertips.

“Flare, don’t,” Ursarane yelled.

“This is the source of your power, isn’t it?”

“It is what keeps this forest alive. I have poured my energy into that for the sake of the world. Do not destroy it to spite me.”

Flare held his gaze on the bear and a single flame now grew in his hand. He thought for a moment and then threw it at the tree, letting the flames climb slowly up its branches.

“Noo,” the bear roared, charging again.

Flare felt the shaking ground and knew his plan had worked. He crouched, readying himself, and then he jumped away from the tree. He flew over Ursarane, looking down on him with a scowl. Upon landing behind the bear, he raised the antler in the air and brought it down into the bear’s back. Ursarane groaned and then collapsed onto the ground. Flare moved closer to the head to whisper to his dying opponent.

“I’m sorry, old friend; I truly am. But I must do this. And even if this forest dies, I will simply reshape it all in my own image when we rebuild. This whole world will be mine because I am the one who has the drive to change it for the better.”
Ursarane only groaned, feeling his life slipping away slowly.

“No!”

Flare turned to the cry and grabbed a spear being thrust at him. He incinerated it, turning it to ash and faced a large, burly man whose face showed shock.

“Are you one of the bear’s little freedom fighters? Hmm one of his fervent supporters?”

He now grabbed the man’s throat and raised him off the ground. His fingertips singed the flesh. Garrick grabbed at his arm but couldn’t free himself.

“Your men are dead,” Garrick sputtered.

“What?”

Upon Flare releasing the grip on his throat, Garrick continued, “My men and I took out your sun guard and let the villagers go. They’re running away now and will tell others about your crimes. No one will want to serve under your rule after what they hear.”

Flare tightened his grip again, squeezing Garrick’s throat and burning his flesh. The burly man now realizing his fate, tried to fight, punching and kicking the superpowered being. Flare gave the man a look of contempt and then brought his other hand to the man’s face. He lit a flame and watched the man reduce to a pile of ashes.

Turning back to the tree, he watched the flames and embers light up the sky. He lit them brighter and hotter with the raising of his hand. As the tree began to collapse within the flames, Flare took off. He ignited flames from both his hands and aimed them at the ground, using the force to propel himself into the air. He looked back at the burning tree and dying bear for a moment and then continued to sail through the air back towards his own fortress.
Ursarane lay dying on the ground, feet from the life tree. The grass and leaves around him began to decay and fade to a dark gray. He crawled closer to the tree, dragging his bleeding body. His fur, matted with blood, began to glow green.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered.

Ursarane closed his eyes and he took his last breath. The ground beneath him fissured open, allowing for his body to sink into the earth. Roots and grass pulled him below and his fur turned to grass. The antlers lodged in his body began to merge and morph into roots, with the larger parts sprouting upward into a tree. This tree did not reach the height of its predecessor, but still grew tall and wide. It glowed green and pulsed like the life tree, breathing life back into the forest. That which faded to gray now turned a vibrant green. The bear had given his life to return life to the forest.

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“You killed Ursarane?”

“Yes, Elayna. He wouldn’t join and submit to the cause, so I had to get rid of him.”

“Are you okay?”

“Well yeah, just a few minor injuries,” he replied.

“I mean you killed someone you fought side by side with; you two had history. Are you okay after doing that?”

He lowered his head and thought for a moment before answering, “I think so. I know I said this wasn’t easy, but I wasn’t expecting things to go like this. The loss this movement has brought is great, but I think the potential far outweighs that. In moments like this, we need to push through.”

Elayna felt a chill and nodded, replying, “Yes, Flare.”
Chapter 9

Kit held Mick’s hand as he guided the boy through the forest, keeping his eye on the flashing orange fur ahead of them. The fox weaved through the trees, stopping every now and then to look back at them and make sure they were following. As the hours passed and it got darker, Kit’s eyes adjusted. He navigated the woods with ease and helped Mick follow. When he looked ahead for their guide, he saw two glowing green eyes staring back at him. The emerald glow reminded him of Ursarane’s eyes and brought his thoughts back to the bear.

He thought about the bear’s decision to stay behind and fight Flare. Kit knew that he probably didn’t stand a chance against the fire-based being, but that he stood a better chance than anyone else. His thoughts then trailed to the revelations about their complicity in the disasters that led to the end of the world. He said they did nothing. The world is truly gone then.

“Kit, can we stop soon?”

“Mick, I don’t think that’s a good idea. We’ve got Flare after us because of what we know. If we stop…”

“Kit, one night can’t hurt. A few hours? I just want to rest.”

Kit sighed and then remembered that the boy had been working and digging the trench back at camp for hours before they left. He took pity on him for a moment before weighing out his options. We can’t really risk resting too long, but he’ll be no help tired.

“Alright. We’ll set up a small camp and rest for a few hours.”

Kit and Mick dropped their bags and the fox returned from its spot ahead of them to observe them as they set up camp. It sat out of the way and watched with its head cocked to one side. Its eyes pierced the dark of the night. Mick kept looking back at the fox as he helped set up a tarp and gathered wood for the fire.
“Kit, can we name him?”

“What?”

“What, can we name him?”

Kit glanced at the fox and shook his head, replying, “Mick, it’s just supposed to help us get through these woods and then…”

“But we can keep him,” Mick interrupted.

Kit rubbed two sticks together and began to get a fire going when he sighed again, replying, “maybe.”

The fox then went over to Mick and rubbed its head against the boy’s leg. He bent down to rub the fox and looked at Kit. Kit tried to ignore the look but knew that getting the boy to forget about keeping the fox was going to be a losing battle.

Kit climbed a tree and stood guard as Mick and the fox lay by the fire and slept. They were peaceful. Kit envied them. We can only survive.

Kit stared into the fire and his thoughts began to race back to the burning village. He remembered the people running from their burning huts. He remembered Flare tossing fireballs everywhere like it was nothing. He remembered the look on the former hero’s face when he took Mick and ran from the village. He thought about how their life would be on the run because they could never stop running from Flare. They couldn’t kill him because the man was untouchable.

His thoughts were interrupted when he noticed the leaves around him fade and wither slowly. The fox sat up quickly and looked around at all the fading life. It stood and began whimpering. Mick remained asleep and Kit watched the withering pass through the forest. He swallowed as he realized that it meant that the tree and Ursarane were dead. He rubbed his head and then turned back to the direction of camp.
He thought he heard something and then noticed a green glow from that same direction. That glow spread and the plants and leaves that had withered grew back to life. They became enveloped in the glow that surged through the forest and followed the path of the decay. Kit watched and thought for a moment about what it could have meant and knew that despite his death, Ursarane chose to give all that he could.

***

As the sun began to light up the sky, Kit fiddled with the knife in his hand. He looked over to Mick, who held the fox in his arms as he slept. Kit felt a warmth inside him, then turned to assess their progress. They had traveled a few miles under the cover of night. Their stop lasted into the morning, which Kit reasoned was enough time. He didn’t want to end Mick’s few hours of sleep, but knew they had more ground to cover. His steps woke the fox. It yawned and emerged from the boy’s arms to circle a tree. Right, that’s where we’re heading.

“Kit?”

Kit knelt to the ground upon hearing Mick’s weak voice.

“Kit, do we have to get up and go?”

“Yes, Mick. I don’t know if we’re being followed but we can’t take that chance.”

“Okay, just give me a minute.”

Kit stood back up and followed the fox to the tree. Upon reaching the fox, Kit reached forward with his hand. It was met with a soft muzzle. Kit felt that warmth again. Maybe we can keep it.

***

They were walking through the dense woods again with the fox leading the way. Kit began to wonder how they could stop Flare’s assault on the rest of the world. He thought of the rest of the
Masters and who had the potential to beat him. Out of all of them, Ursarane was probably the closest to him in strength and power; if he failed, it was unlikely that anyone else could stop him. From a combat standpoint, all the other Masters knew him and were powerful in their own right, so someone else had to stand some kind of chance.

“Wait,” he whispered.

Then it struck him. No ONE can take on Flare, but if we got more than one of the Masters to fight him, then that could work. That must be why Ursarane sent us to find the Crimson Cloak.

A renewed sense of hope washed over Kit, filling him with a confidence he hadn’t felt in years. We might be able to stop this.

As he came back to reality, he noticed that the rustling of leaves and grass turned to the crunch of gravel then concrete under their feet. The trees around them became sparse and then nonexistent. They were leaving the safety of the woods and heading into dangerous territory. Civilization. That’s what this used to be anyway.

Kit marveled at the dilapidated skyscrapers that taunted them from the horizon. Their goal was that much closer, but so was the danger that lurked within what was once a hub of society.

Kit turned to Mick & the fox who could only stare straight ahead at the buildings.

“We’re going to find the Cloak & he’s going to help us stop Flare.”

“Because that’s what heroes do right?” Mick’s voice trembled with fear and excitement.

Kit nodded and took a step forward. A sign that was turned over had “turn back” written in blood on it. Kit knew they couldn’t, so he trudged on. The fox went between him and Mick, a sense of loyalty to them driving it against its instincts to run. Mick followed, wanting to meet the heroes he’d heard about and become one of them.
Chapter 10

Kit surveyed the area around them as they walked between two buildings. He couldn’t see the eyes that may have been watching them from within the rundown buildings, but he thought he heard whispers and breathing. He held his weapon with a firm grasp, ready to swing at a moment’s notice. Mick followed close behind him with their fox, Vix in his backpack. He carried her so she wouldn’t be an easy target to be picked off by scavengers.

“We need to be quiet but ready to move, okay?” Kit whispered to Mick.

“Okay.”

Not a moment sooner, a car exploded several yards in front of them. **Damn it, not a trap.**

“Like now,” Kit yelled, grabbing Mick and taking off with a sprint away from the burning wreck.

The two weaved their way through cars. They dodged one that went airborne. Kit spotted an alleyway and pulled Mick towards it. They heard yelling coming from the buildings around them and tried to quicken their pace. Amidst the yelling and chaos, Kit heard footsteps behind them growing louder. He heard their rapid breathing too. Then there was Mick’s heart; it beat faster than he’d heard it before.

He pulled Mick behind a dumpster and brought his finger to his lips, signaling the boy to remain silent. They caught their breath and waited as the frantic steps grew closer and louder. Finally, they saw some figures pass their hiding spot. They stopped a few feet away and gasped.

“They had to have gone this way, there’s no other way to escape.”

“Krag’s right, they’re gonna hit the dead end and then we can kill them for food.”

Kit swallowed and tried to keep Mick and the fox quiet.
After a few moments that felt like hours, they heard the steps move away and they emerged. Kit began to pull Mick back in the direction from which they came. They quickly but quietly made their way through the alley when Kit noticed something he’d initially missed.

“A sewer grate.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s our way out.” He began to pull on the metal bars, which barely budged, then turned to the boy, pleading. “Help me with this.”

Mick stepped up and pulled the grate out of its hole and set it next to them. Kit began to climb down then guided Mick into the hole with him. They pulled the grate back into place and climbed the rest of the way down. They watched more figures pass above the grate and then took in their surroundings. Kit’s eyes adjusted quickly to the darkness, allowing him to see all the corroded and rusted pipes that sprayed surprisingly clear water into the stream in which they were standing. No one was around them, but he could tell they weren’t alone in the sewers.

“Come on, we have to go.”

“Where?”

Kit grabbed the child and started running. Their splashing echoed in the subterranean labyrinth. Kit tried his best to work his way back to where he thought the main street was. From there, they went against the stream, reasoning that doing so would lead them to the heart of the city. The path they took seemed to stretch for miles, forcing them to stay on their guard in the darkness. Kit’s eyes strained to scan their path for any obstacles. He stopped every now and then to listen to their surroundings, only hearing Mick’s pounding heart.
Eventually they both stopped as Kit spotted a pillar of light coming down from another grate. His eyes needed time to adjust. He couldn’t see beyond the light. Before he could do anything, Mick began to walk ahead of him towards the light.

“Kit, we could go back up here.”

“Mick, get back.”

Kit rushed to catch up to the boy and stood in the light with him. He looked up to see how high up the grate was and then heard light splashing around them. Upon turning back to their surroundings, he saw a silhouette, a blur, move past them. His eyes adjusted back to the darkness and he saw a smaller individual, though not too much smaller than him, circling the both of them. Kit readied himself, holding the axe that had been gifted to him. He had Mick behind him and widened his stance so the figure couldn’t attack the boy.

Before he knew it, there was the flash of a blade and he narrowly avoided a slash to the face. Kit backed away, forcing his foe to step into the light after missing the attack. Kit recognized the mask of his attacker. Hers was a mask he had encountered both before and after the fall of society. It was a mask that resembled a porcelain doll, with the exception of black paint around the eyes and mouth, giving it an unsettling quality. Kit knew her; he knew she was a ruthless killer and he feared that, witnessing firsthand some of the violent acts she was capable of.

“Dollface.”

“That voice… Sense.”

“We don’t want any trouble. We’re trying to find the Cloak, we need his help.”

“He’s holed up in his fortress and you’ve wandered onto my turf,” she taunted. “You’ll have to settle for me in the meantime.”
With that she lunged again, swinging her blades swiftly. Kit took the defensive approach of blocking and dodging, focusing on the shimmer of her blades so he could avoid them. That led to him being knocked over by a kick to his chest. Dollface was about to close the distance for a kill.

“Enough!” An older, raspy voice bellowed.

Kit felt at ease as she paused and sheathed her weapons. Mick looked towards the direction of the call and saw a tall silhouette. This was a surprisingly tall man to be living in the sewers. As he came into the light, Kit saw the white hair and a long beard that covered his face.

“She’s right, you are trespassing. But you,” the voice paused as a long, wrinkly finger pointed at Kit. “You are familiar. I remember you.”

“What? I’ve never been down here before?”

“No, not from down here. I remember you from up there.”

The tall elderly man then pointed up towards the grate and tilted his head.

***

Kit heard the cries of someone in an alley and turned the corner to see a group of three kicking a limp body on the ground. Kit rushed towards the group, swinging his elbow into the closest assailant’s head. The blow caused the large man to crumple, drawing the attention of the other two. They shifted their attacks to Kit, who deftly dodged their strikes until he had an opportunity to punch one of the attackers in the jaw. He followed his punch with a kick and focused on the final attacker, readying another strike. The last man ran straight for him and into a punch. Before he knew it the fight was over, and Kit rushed to the injured person, helping him up and bringing him into a nearby building where he gave the survivor food and water. Kit noticed that despite his stature, the survivor was fragile. He treated the survivor’s injuries & stayed with
him as he recovered. Kit then took the initiative to teach the tall, elderly man some self defense basics that he could apply to those situations.

***

The memories came flooding back to Kit.

“You… You remember me?”

“Yes. You saved me up there. Then I come down here and survive.”

“You remember how I helped you?”

“Yes.”

“We need your help now,” he said, looking back to Dollface before continuing, “We need you too.”
Chapter 11

Flare swirled an orange liquid in his chalice around, taking in the aroma before tilting his head back and swallowing the elixir. He set the chalice down and turned to one of his guards.

“Tell me, my follower, do you have something for me?”

“According to one of the survivors we captured after you burned down the rebel village, the fugitives are heading to Van City. As for why, we’re not-”

“It makes sense. They’re heading to the prison, most likely.”

“The prison? Isn’t that where the cloak resides?”

“Yes. They’re either seeking his help… or they’re releasing prisoners.”

“But if the Crimson Cloak still manages the prison, what is there to fear?”

Flare clenched his fist, causing it to glow a bright orange, and slowly softened his grip when he realized his guard was now trembling.

“I’m sorry, my lord. I didn’t mean to question your judgement.”

“It’s okay, follower.” Flare flashed a toothy grin and continued, “We want to ensure that whatever they go to the prison for, they don’t succeed. It is instrumental to us, in our mission to bring about the necessary change for the world. Any obstacles that stand in our way must be dealt with”

“Yes, my lord. Like Ursarane?”

Flare clenched his fist again and swallowed. The thoughts of his former friend came flooding back and he torrents of rage swirling within him. He was lost in the rage until he saw the guard’s face and shook himself free of the emotions. He tried to bury that and then changed the subject. Flare began to fill his chalice with more of the elixir.

“Do you know why I drink this elixir?”
“Because you are a god, my lord?”

Flare smiled at the hint of fear in the guard’s voice then said, “Well yes, but no. This is something that the gods brought down to your world, similar to a lot of alcoholic drinks. It unfortunately kills non-gods. Because of my benevolence, I drink this so that it doesn’t pose any harm to you or anyone else.”

“You truly are benevolent, my lord.”

“Thank you, guard. Find Elayna and send her to me. We have to plan a visit to our old crimson friend.”

“Yes, Lord Flare.”

***

“I don’t know Flare. I’ve been a bit uneasy about our path since you killed Ursarane,” his advisor whispered.

“Are you choosing him over me? Are you choosing a lost cause over our ultimate goal?”

“No, it’s not that, Flare. But is all this killing what you’ve intended for all along?”

“You know that’s not what I intended, especially having you by my side to show them the way. Unfortunately, so many are resistant to the type of change we need. If they will not willingly see the truth, we make them. If they won’t, then they must be-”

“Dealt with,” she interrupted.

“Yes. This is for the greater good.”

“I hope so,” she whispered, unable to hide the concern in her voice.
Chapter 12

Kit sat at the makeshift table with Mick by his side, Vix still in his bag. Across from them was Gideon, the tall elder, with Dollface by his side. The most surprising thing was that she was unmasked. *Something about seeing her without the mask and normal looking is more unsettling than the mask itself.*

“You think all the Masters are on the war path to destroy us?”

“No,” Kit replied. “It seems like only Flare is going out and killing. Ursarane said the others fled and hid but didn’t say where. It makes sense that Cloak would retreat to his prison though”

Mick blurted out, “Ursarane was nice!”

Everyone else just looked at him and then shook their heads.

The boy continued, “He actually sent us here to get help from the Crimson Cloak.”

Gideon lowered his head and grumbled, “Cloak does nothing to help, only hide.”

“What do you mean?”

“Crimson Cloak used to protect this city. He even protected some of the monsters, like us. Ever since the world ended, people have been killing other people while he hides in the prison.”

“So we’ll have to get into the prison. Can you help us?”

“ Hmm don’t think so. There are big gates and big guns that kill anyone too close. No one comes out, no one goes in... except one, she did both,” Gideon said turning to Dollface. “Well, Tali?”

“Don’t give them my real name.”

“I’m sorry, it’s just more comfortable and easier than ‘Dollface.’”

“Okay, well I don’t plan on going back. The last trip almost killed me and Gideon here had to nurse me back to health.”
“Tali… Dollface… whichever you prefer, we need to at least try to reach out to Cloak because he’s the only person within reach who can potentially stop Flare.”

“I don’t know if I can do it, especially with you. It’d be a suicide mission.”

“It’ll be the end of us all if we let Flare continue his attack on the world.”

Dollface stood and walked away. Kit watched, dumbfounded. He gave Gideon a look and then got up quickly to follow his former nemesis. He followed the sound of her footsteps until she stopped in a room or hallway some distance away from the others.

“Why won’t you help us? I know you don’t have the best relationship with the Cloak but I imagine it can’t be as bad as the one with Flare.”

She turned to him and rushed him, grabbing him and manipulating his arms into a headlock.

“I’ve been against those bastards all this time, trying to expose them for the corruption of the Masters but I’ve been painted as the villain. Now you want me to take you to one of them to ask for help against the other. What part of this plan sounds like it’s going to work?”

“Cloak’s going to want to save his own ass right?” Kit choked out the words before kicking a wall and pushing them both to the ground so he could escape her grip.

She rolled over to recover and added, “Maybe. I still don’t feel right working with you.”

Instead of preparing an attack or getting ready to defend, he stood up and stretched his hand out to her.

“Look, I didn’t know you were against the Masters in that way. I thought you were just another villain. I’m sorry.”

She stood, no longer seeming hostile but turned away from him.

“I understand not wanting to work with people you’ve fought against. But if it gets you to work with me, we can figure out how to take down Cloak after Flare.”
She turned her head. “Do you mean that?”

“I do. If we don’t, you can kill me yourself,” he said, keeping his hand outstretched.

“Very well. I’ll take you to him, but we take him down after Flare.”

They shook on it and looked at each other for confirmation of their agreement. She looked down and away from him before speaking.

“When I got my… ‘gifts,’ I wanted to use them to help people. You know how I did that? I killed the scientists who experimented on me, tortured me, and abused me. Then I went and did that to people who were like them. That’s one way to be a hero, even if you don’t believe in that type of justice.”

“I’m sorry that happened. No powers are worth the torture and torment you went through. You at least use your gifts for good now.” He paused, pondering his next statement before continuing, “We’re going to save a lot more people by teaming up.”

“I hope so,” she whispered.
Chapter 13

“So, he’s trying to build an empire,” she scoffed as they began planning their infiltration of the prison.

“That’s what it seems like. We’re going to need more help, which is why we have to convince Cloak to help us.”

“Ursarane said we should get Crimson Cloak’s help,” Mick piped up.

Kit resisted his urge to shoot him a glare and then realized that this was the boy’s mission as much as it was his. He realized he should actually let him be more involved in other aspects of their quest but still felt protective over him.

“Well lucky for you, it’s easier to get in the prison than it is to get out. We just have to get through the electric fence that surrounds it.”

“How do we do that?” Mick’s voice quivered.

“You shouldn’t worry too much about that,” Gideon muttered.

“I blew a hole in that fence, so we just need to go there and let the Cloak ‘capture’ us and bring us into the prison.”

“Sounds easy,” Kit mused.

“We’ll just need to hope that he doesn’t kill us on the spot,” she replied.

“Great, let’s get going then.”

“I’m afraid I cannot go,” the elder said solemnly as the others around him got up to get ready for their mission. “I’m afraid I would only slow you down.”

Tali went over to him and put a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

“It’s better this way, I wouldn’t want to put you in danger.”

Kit readied his axe and joined his former nemesis by the elder.
“Thank you for your kindness, Gideon and Tali. We do have a favor to ask you though.

Mick,” he said with a turn of his head.

Mick came up to the table and lowered his head. He took the bag off of his back, opened the top, allowing Vix to crawl out and onto the table. She stretched and then sat up, staring at Kit and Mick.

“Please watch our friend here, Ursarane was kind enough to give her to us.”

Tali pet the furry creature and smiled. Kit noticed and a smile spread across his face as well. He once again felt something warm inside him.

***

Kit and Mick followed Dollface as she slinked through the alleyways and streets above ground, guiding them to the next point in their quest. She gracefully maneuvered through and over cars. Kit thought about the story he always told Mick about the Masters and what he knew about them. The fact that they disappeared and seemed to give up on saving people enraged him. Now more than ever they needed at least one of them to shake off the dust from their capes to do the right thing.

Their new guide brought them to the fence of the prison she had mentioned earlier. The towering structure that loomed over them from behind several gates was daunting. Kit wondered if the Crimson Cloak was watching them from behind a set of monitors as they approached a missing patch of fence. They snuck through the gate and their guide began to look through a pile of junk near the next gate.

“What are you doing?”

“I stashed something when I escaped in case I ever had to come back. I don’t want to face the cloak without a weapon.”
“You’ve got the strength to beat him though,” Kit said before pausing for a moment.

“Wouldn’t anything extra be overkill?”

She looked up from her task for a moment and then went back to it before answering, “No.”

“I’ve got super strength too!” Mick excitedly exclaimed while lifting a heavy piece of scrap metal.

Dollface smiled and then quickly returned to the task at hand, throwing junk out of her way to make finding her weapon easier. “We need firepower. Raw strength won’t be enough against Cloak. It won’t be enough for Flare either. Cloak doesn’t have powers but he knows the weaknesses of all his opponents, and his allies.”

“Now we just need to convince him that Flare is his next big villain.”

She slipped a knife into her pocket then grabbed a spherical device that clicked and then beeped. Kit and Mick looked to her with alarm as she tossed the device at the wall, which caused a small explosion.

“What are you doing?”

“Knocking on the front door. Now get ready to hide.”

“What?”

Kit suddenly heard more clicks and the whirring of machinery coming from the gate as sections of it opened up. Two turrets emerged and began targeting them. Kit grabbed Mick, lifted him over his shoulder and began running towards another pile of junk. The turrets fired and he tried to shield Mick.

“Damn it, Dollface.”
The turrets stopped and Kit heard the distinct clanging of metal hitting the ground. He turned and saw their new ally dismantling the turrets and dropping them. She climbed down and began picking them apart.

“These have some useful parts,” she mused as she gestured.

Kit wished he could see her expressions instead of the facade that was her mask. There was still a coldness to her, almost like an aura that shrouded her. She picked blades out of the machinery and pocketed them.

“He should be here soon.”

“And we’ll be ready.”

“Kit, if he doesn’t listen and tries to kill us, run. I can hold him off long enough for you to get away and then give him the slip.”

“It won’t come to that.”

“I hope you’re right, here he comes.”

Kit turned to see a large platform floating towards them. The Crimson Cloak stood on that platform, surrounded by several guards armed with shields and guns. The platform slowly lowered to their level and Kit could tell there wouldn’t be much of a fight if they couldn’t convince the cloak to join them.

“You’re trespassing. As the owner of this property and the Van City prison, I’m taking you into custody,” the former Master bellowed.

“We have to talk,” Kit yelled, trying to sound authoritative.

The guards raised their guns before the cloak raised a hand, telling them to hold their fire, and then spoke again.

“Talk.”
Chapter 14

Kit crashed into the wall behind him. The force from the Crimson Cloak’s fist sent him stumbling back. He shook his head and saw another punch coming. He managed to block it and roll away from the wall and his opponent. How is this “trial by combat” supposed to work anyway? Kit turned to face his attacker, who slowly walked towards him.

“How am I supposed to believe that you fought Flare and lived if you can hardly beat me?”

The cloak’s taunt made Kit clench his fists and ready an attack.

“I told you, we escaped while he burned down our village.”

“This is Flare we’re talking about. I know him, he’s the world’s golden boy. Why would he start frying nobodies like you?”

“Something changed in him. Ursarane told us he changed and forced the rest of you to stop saving people when he burned down the Council.”

The cloak’s expression changed and he stood feet from Kit.

“Ursarane told us because he believed us and now he’s dead because of Flare. If you don’t think Flare will come here next, burning down your fortress, you don’t realize how much trouble you’re actually in.”

Kit turned for a moment to look back at Mick and Dollface who were off to the side but held at gunpoint by the cloak’s guards.

“He was a fool, high out of his mind!” Cloak spat with malice.

Crimson Cloak closed the distance and led with a high kick.

Kit felt the air rushing toward him from the incoming attack before dodging and uttering, “He helped us and we need you to help us now.” He punched and then shoved his opponent as he landed, yelling “We need you to save the world again.”
The Cloak recovered and a pensive look passed over his face, but his countenance returned to anger and he continued his barrage. Kit leaned back to dodge and returned a few hits. Cloak was fast and kept him on his toes. Their fight continued for several minutes before the cloak halted his assault and stood still.

Kit tilted his head & looked at the former master before him. *What’s he doing? This wouldn’t just stop, would it?* A small smile crept across the cloak’s face as he pressed a button on his wrist. Suddenly, blinding lights flashed from his suit, causing Kit to cover his face. He felt a hard blow to the gut, sending him flying back.

“Now tell me why you brought this villainess to my prison.”

“She helped me get here, and with a strong enough team we can beat Flare.”

“How do I know she hasn’t manipulated you?”

The cloak’s voice grew closer and Kit used that to judge the distance for an attack. He launched himself forward, feigning a left punch before turning and swinging his leg for a kick. The kick was blocked and he felt another punch to his chest. He stood his ground, grabbed the arm, and then threw a quick counter punch. He felt it connect and then kicked forward, sending him and his opponent stumbling in opposite directions.

“I watched my people die,” Kit growled, thinking for a moment about how at one point he thought he would never again have people.

The lights stopped and Kit’s eyes slowly readjusted. His vision cleared in time to see guns pointed at his face.

“Take them to cells CZ03 and CZ04. I’m going to summon Flare so he can take them off our hands.”
Kit tried to stand and fight but was quickly met with the butt of a gun and knocked out cold. Mick and Dollface watched as two guards picked him up and began to carry him in their direction. Mick fought back tears.

Dollface noticed this and whispered to him, “Don’t worry kid, I’ll get us out, I’ve done it before.”
Chapter 15

Kit awoke in a cold sweat. He sat up from the floor and looked around. He was in a cell with Mick sitting on a concrete slab that was supposed to be a bed. His face lit up as Kit shook himself to his senses.

“Kit, you’re alive!”

“Yeah. What happened?”

“Cloak put us in these cells and he’s going to hand us over to Flare. But Tali has a plan.”

“What’s the plan?”

“Well, her plan was—“ he was cut off by a clicking and clanging.

The metal door of the cell opened up and two guards entered, pointing guns at them. Kit raised his hands and signaled for Mick to do the same.

“You’re coming with us. Flare should be here soon, so we’re taking you to him.”

“Out you go, right in front of us.”

The guards poked Kit and Mick’s backs with their guns’ and told them to move down the dimly lit hallway. With their backs to the guard, Mick began to whisper quietly, too quietly for the guards to hear. Kit focused on his comrade’s words.

“We’ve got to move quickly. You’ve got to distract the guards so I can let Tali out.”

Kit only looked at Mick for a moment and then began focusing on the guards behind them. Great, no weapons. Kit thought about how he could disarm them to even the odds. He began looking for potential weapons and anything that could be used as cover. He almost lost hope until he noticed a particularly dark stretch of hallway.

“This is it,” whispered Mick. “This is where she is.”
Kit readied himself and focused his perception. He focused on the guards behind them and their movements. From what he could gather by listening to them, they were almost robotic in their movements. Kit felt his whole body tense as a whistle cut through the silence. He heard the guards stop to turn and then kicked one of the guards behind him. He shot his hand out to grab the weapon of the guard he kicked, pulling it out of his hands. Kit swung the weapon to strike the other guard and disorient him before turning the weapon around and firing it at both guards.

The firing of the gun rang in his ears as he processed what he’d done. In less than a minute he had disarmed and killed two individuals. That sharp whistle cut through the air again and Kit turned to a cell door.

“Can we hurry along now?” The quiet voice inside was familiar.

“Coming,” Mick responded.

The boy ran up to the door, looked it up and down for a minute before digging his fingers into the side of the doorframe, grabbing the door by the edges. He pressed his fingers into the door itself, denting it, and pulled it to one side. As it began to slide open, Kit saw more fingers emerge from the other side and pull the door open.

The door slammed open loudly. Kit thought the whole prison might have heard that. Then she emerged with a slightly different mask that showed the lower half of her face.

“Where’d you get that?”

“I had this one hidden for when Cloak took mine.”

“It looks… good?”

She shook her head and began, “Alright, if what Cloak said is true & Flare is coming, we might be able to escape by turning them on each other.”

“We need to make sure someone stops Flare,” Kit growled.
“We need to escape with our lives and just survive from here on out.”

Kit’s words began to play in his head. *The world is dead. All we can do is survive.*

“No,” he whispered in response to her and himself.

“With threats like Flare, all we can hope to do is survive. But if we stop him from destroying everything, maybe we can be heroes again. Maybe we’ll actually be able to fix everything.”

“Kit, Flare and Cloak are in a whole other league.”

“So we do what you said. We turn them against each other.”

Mick chimed in, “and then?”

“We hope for the best,” muttered Kit.
Chapter 16

The group ran through the halls, trying their best to avoid guards. Dollface dispatched the ones they couldn’t avoid with ease and guided them towards a large hallway. She spotted a camera in the corner and shot at it with one of the weapons they “confiscated” from the guards.

“Destruction of property carries a heavy sentence in this district,” Crimson Cloak’s voice came from around the corner.

“Cloak, it’s not too late to join us and stop Flare,” Kit offered.

“Ah, ‘the Sense.’ I did a little research and found out you used to be a small-time vigilante in the area, before the Fall, of course.”

He came down the hallway alone, spinning a staff with prongs on the end.

“Yeah, I was a hero.”

“You keep strange company for a hero. Let me put this killer in a cell and you can walk free. I’ll even put you on my guard if you’d like.”

Kit glanced at Dollface for a moment. He could tell the expression on her face changed and her heartbeat spiked. He tried to give her a reassuring nod and then faced the cloak again.

“Flare is the real threat and you know it. He’s trying to create an empire, and pretty soon he’ll start taking down the larger groups that pose a threat to that, meaning you.”

Cloak tilted his head then said, “Don’t be rude. Flare is a guest here.”

The silhouette that emerged from the corner sent a chill down Kit’s spine. He tensed up and began to ready himself for a fight. Flare played with embers in his hands that grew to flames and illuminated the crooked smile on his face.

“I see you found the fugitives I’ve been hunting. We can take them out, just like the old days,” Flare mused.
Kit could hear the flames from the Master’s hands begin to crackle. From across the hall, he could begin to feel the heat emanating from his opponent. The intensity of the flames grew with each step. *We’ve only got one shot.*

“All right, Cloak. Great job luring him into the trap,” Kit lied.

“What?” Flare’s voice was indignant.

“They’re lying, trying to get us to turn on each other,” Cloak growled angrily.

“All of us should be able to take him. Use your secret weapon now,” Kit again antagonized.

Flare’s eyes shifted and he turned to the other master. He thrusted his arms forward into an attack that Cloak blocked.

“Get over yourself, Flare. They’re trying to trick you.”

“I knew I should have come for you first,” he roared.

“What!” Cloak screamed, trying to evade the barrage of flaming punches.

“You tried to trick me, you fool.”

Their fight became more intense with both Masters resorting to bigger attacks. Kit gripped his gun tighter as he watched them battle on the other end of the hallway. *It might actually work.* Kit looked back to Dollface. Her focus remained on the battle. He returned to the two combatants and saw that surprisingly the Cloak had the upper hand. He knocked Flare to the ground and turned back to the group. Suddenly, he began charging towards them.

“Kit,” whispered Mick.

“I know.”

Kit pointed the gun and fired. Dollface followed suit. The Crimson Cloak blocked the shots with his seemingly indestructible and continued to charge until he collided with Kit. The two fell to the ground and began to trade blows. Dollface was about to intervene when she noticed Flare
getting up and launching a fireball towards them all. She tried to block it using her weapon and watched it melt out of her hands. She shook off her hands to ease the burns and looked back towards her opponent for any more attacks. She ran down the hall towards him and somersaulted over another projectile. As she came back up, she kicked a flaming arm away from her.

Mick watched their ally take on Flare and then returned his attention to Kit, who was on the ground, blocking punches from Cloak. Cloak managed to do some damage before Mick lifted him in the air off of Kit and threw him back towards Flare. The two collided and fell to the ground. Dollface took advantage of this, kicking Flare while he was down. Cloak immediately got up and pushed Dollface away from them. He grabbed Flare by the collar and pulled him close.

“Listen, you fool, you’re letting them make us weak. Help me finish them and then we’ll settle this after,” the Cloak hissed.

“Alright, after you.”

Flare got up and launched another fireball towards the three. Dollface dodged it with ease while Kit shielded Mick, burning his back. He could smell his own flash burning and the pain pulsed through his body. He cried out, falling to the ground. As the Cloak was about to lunge for an attack, he was pulled back. Flare pushed him against the wall and then brought a handful of fire to his back.

“I can take them all fine on my own. But you, I can’t let you live.”

The flames grew more intense as a faint chanting could be heard from outside.

“You hear that Cloak? My followers have this place surrounded. In no time at all, your prison and everyone in it will be destroyed and a new world order will come into fruition.”
“They won’t live long and neither will you,” the dying Master said, raising a device in his hand. He continued, “This whole structure is rigged to implode.”

“It doesn’t matter then. As long as I can escape, I’ll rebuild.”

The flames intensified and the cloak winced.

“So you don’t care about your followers’ lives?”

Flare chuckled then said, “They were only a means to an end. I alone can rebuild this world. If they all need to die then so be it.”

Crimson Cloak grinned then responded, “Perfect. I’ve also been broadcasting the whole time.”

The realization that he could no longer hear the chanting struck Flare. A rage burnt through him that caused him to kill his old ally. He dropped the body to the ground and cursed. He then realized that Kit, Mick, and Dollface were gone.

“I will burn it all down!”

***

Dollface directed Mick to lead the way out as she helped Kit walk. The pain that surged through Kit gave way to numbness. He knew Dollface was holding him and that his legs were moving, but these sensations were beginning to fade. Her voice cut through his haze.

“This should be the last door. Mick, you’re going to have to break through it.”

Flare’s angered cries echoed through the halls, alerting them that their time was short. A panicked Mick began pushing on the weaker side of the door as Dollface directed him to, but it barely budged. She set Kit down on the ground and pushed with Mick, forcing it open. Slowly but surely, the door opened enough for them to slip through. As they pulled Kit through the door, they saw Flare emerge from around the corner and pushed the door shut behind them. When the
door closed, they no longer heard his taunts and kept moving. They burst out of the final doors and saw Sun guards at the gates, waiting for them. *Damn it, we're trapped.*

They turned to see the building behind them begin to collapse onto itself. It appeared as if something from the building’s core was absorbing and pulling everything in it. Flames burst from this series of implosions and also got sucked into the void. A large pillar of flames emerged and erupted causing the implosion to stop. Instead, a force so heavy and hot launched them at the gate and knocked most of the sun guards to their feet.
Chapter 17

A pile of rubble lay before Kit, Mick, and Dollface as they struggled to get to their feet. There was a peaceful silence. Is it over? Did Flare die?

A tall figure emerged from the fallen building, covered in dust and stone. He limped forward, moving slowly and clumsily. Flare again manifested flames in the palms of his hands and aimed at Kit, Dollface, and Mick. Seeing that his allies were still recovering from the explosion, Kit jumped to his feet and ran towards his opponent. Flare fired both his projectiles at the incoming attacker. Kit jumped and sailed over the two fireballs. He threw a weak punch that barely connected with Flare’s chest. The former Master laughed and picked up Kit, bringing them face to face.

“You’ve come a long way. Now I can finish what I started.”

As Flare was about to strike, Dollface kicked him in the ribs with all her might, sending him stumbling back. Kit fell to the ground as Dollface continued her attacks. Mick rushed to him and picked him up off the ground, standing him up to help him stand.

“Mick, we have to help her.”

“How?”

Kit looked back and saw Dollface struggling against the man who now held her in the air. He thought about how he saw embers and smoke in Flare’s other hand. Embers? Smoke? Didn’t Ursarane say he relied on the support of his followers? With that, Kit looked around and saw the onlookers watching in silence as their leader fought them. He made eye contact with a few of them, realizing that they had perhaps heard his words with the Cloak.

“No,” whispered Kit. “Now’s our chance.”
He used Mick to get to his feet and ran back into the fight. He tackled Flare, leaning in to hit him with his shoulder, and knocked Dollface loose. Flare grabbed him once again and gave a guttural roar before bringing his fist to Kit’s face. The punch was hard, but Flare’s heat was fading. He looked at the fallen Kit and at his own fist in confusion. He tried to muster up the energy to make fire but couldn’t. Kit grunted and coughed blood, but grinned. For as wounded and numbed as he was from his previous burns, he could tell that Flare was slowly losing his power.

“How? What did you do to me?”

“I didn’t do anything, you did that to yourself,” the injured Kit managed to grunt.

“What?”

“I don’t know if it’s your followers no longer chanting for you, if it was the explosion, or if you’re just burnt out, so to speak. But you don’t have your powers anymore. You can’t hurt anyone anymore.”

Flare looked out into the crowd and saw the angry faces of his followers. Elayna’s face stood out from the crowd and was the most disappointed. Her eyes glowed and pierced his soul. He then saw that the people she had brainwashed for him were lucid. They no longer were mindlessly chanting for him.

Flare clenched his fists and charged. Kit saw his attacks coming and was able to maneuver around them. Everything around them slowed. Kit deflected an attack and grabbed Flare’s arm. He pulled with his body and flipped the larger man over and onto the ground. Kit locked his arm out and used his weight to keep Flare from getting back up. He struggled against Flare’s strength until Mick came to help him restrain the master.
“My guards! Join me in defeating these fugitives and we can rebuild the world, solve its problems, and prosper in peace. We will rebuild it in our image.”

“Your image,” someone in the crowd replied.

“But I am a god,” whispered the fallen Master.

“Not anymore,” replied Dollface as she approached, grabbed his head and twisted with all her might.

An eerie silence followed and everyone stared at her. Kit felt a chill. This was the first thing he had really felt since being numbed from his burns. He stared at her, then at the body they held. He finally let go. The rough mix of emotions swirled through Kit until he settled on acceptance. He knew Flare had to be stopped, and killing him was the most permanent way of doing that. With all that tension now gone and the adrenaline fading, pain burned through him again. Kit actually began to lose consciousness, hearing Mick and Tali’s voices fade away as he slipped into the darkness.

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Birds chirped and the gentle breeze rustled leaves. Kit began to shake his head, opening his eyes slowly to adjust to the sunlight that entered the hut he was in. He realized that he was in a sling and soreness coursed through his body. He groaned in pain.

“You shouldn’t try to move, you took quite the beating.” a soothing voice cooed.

Kit turned to see Tali in a chair at the foot of his cot, watching him with a small grin across her face.

“What happened?”

“Well, after we killed Flare, you passed out. Luckily a few people there knew some basic first aid. You’ve been asleep for a day. We’re back in Ursarane’s camp.”
“Ursarane,” Kit groaned, trying to get up only to sink back in pain.

“He is still dead, but his progress wasn’t lost. The forests are starting to grow back.”

“Okay, what about everything else?”

“I don’t know. Flare’s minions kind of just scattered. Some came with us, wanting to make up for the atrocities. Some came because they were brainwashed. I think in a way Flare was right though. If we want to fix the world and un-end it, we have to unite everyone under some kind of organization.”

“Okay, so another Council then?”

“Yes, but we need to be different because the last one failed.”

“Then we’ll be different. We’ll try to make change, together,” he said, reaching out his hand.

Tali got up and walked over to his side of the bed to hold his hand. *We’ll figure it out as we go. But the world isn’t dead.*
Works Cited