



NEOEXODUS

LEGENDARY TALES



Grit for Hire

BY ERIK SCOTT DE BIE



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by Erik Scott de Bie



A Louis Porter Jr. Design Inc eBook

NEOEXODUS LEGENDARY TALES: Grit for Hire

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Part One: Shoot for Coin

The gunslinger made a face as she unbuttoned her leather jerkin. “No self-respecting gunslinger would ever dress like this on the job.”

“Not like that. Here.” Milka Bronislaw shook back her unbound crimson hair and leaned in to button the top of Freja’s jerkin whilst leaving the middle one undone, revealing a generous stretch of sandy bosom. “Don’t move—hold that pose. Remember you’re selling a fantasy, not reality.”

“Hrm.” Freja Ilyanovka tried to ignore the machinesmith as she fiddled with two of her buttons. She adjusted Freja’s grip on the pistols she held out wide, then raised her right leg high enough that her skirt slipped, revealing a hint of lace. “You’re the pretty one,” Freja said. “I just carry the guns.”

Ignoring that, Milka stepped back to look her over. She pulled Freja’s hat lower over her face, then returned to the crackling apparatus at the edge of the workshop.

“So this does—what?” Freja asked, decidedly uncomfortable. “Paints a portrait of me?”

“Something like that.” Milka turned a dial on the device, making it whirl to life. “Hold still.”

“Hrm.” Freja eyed the crackling energies dubiously. “But if this lightnings me, I’m blaming you.”

Milka placed her hand on the device, and the machine uttered a rising hum that grew loud enough to make Freja wince. She bit her lip, trying not to break her pose. If she didn't need the coin, she never would have agreed to this, old friendships notwithstanding.

Sudden dazzling light like an explosion made Freja leap aside out of pure instinct. Heart hammering, she leaped for cover behind a massive vat of some viscous liquid.

"Ooh, an action pose!" Milka cranked a dial on the machine, and the whining hum died away. She looked at Freja with a nonplussed expression. "Jumpy, are you?"

"Oh, very nice." The gunslinger slid her weapons back into their holsters. "Did it work?"

"Let's see." Steam erupted from the device, and Milka removed her hand daintily. In her palm was a square of metal about the size of a Protectorate crown. "Exceptional."

"That's it?" Freja asked. "I hope?" She didn't relish another of Milka's experiments.

"Not hardly!"

Milka turned the raised edge of the object ninety degrees, creating an eight-pointed star. Orange light shimmered above her hand and formed into an image of Freja leaping, her two guns held out wide, her half-buttoned shirt straining. She looked fantastic.

Milka beamed. "Who wouldn't want to hire that?"

"That..." Freja's eyes widened. "I don't even know what to say."

"Say you'll buy it." With her too-perfect teeth, the machinestmith's smile was almost as dazzling as the machine when it operated. "Leave one of these at every inn, and you'll have dozens of commissions in no time." She cranked the dial once more, and out of the machine slid another chit, identical to the first. "Once the device has captured an image, it can duplicate it as much as I want. Provided the proper materials, of course." Her eyes lit up. "A few hundred crowns each should suffice."

"Hrm." Freja felt at her hollow coin pouch. "I thought you were paying me to test this."

"Oh." Milka's face fell. "Well, coin's a bit tight at the moment..."

"Of course it is." Freja sighed.

#

A few drinks later at the Raider's Bounty, the tension had evaporated, and they were laughing like the old friends they were. "Will you forgive me?" Milka sounded tipsy. "I'll get the next round?"

"I will," Freja said. "If you keep 'em coming."

The machinestmith levered herself to her feet and staggered toward the bar, leaving Freja shaking her head with a bemused smile on her face. Milka had paid Freja with one of the chits produced, keeping the other for demonstration purposes. Of course, at a few hundred

crowns each for all the reagents, they were too expensive to distribute as Milka had planned. She'd laughed off the financial setback, saying she would rethink some things. The woman moved from project to project, never seeming to worry about the failures. She was a legitimately good person, if given to naiveté and not always thinking things through. Freja envied that sense of security—she'd known from an early age that her own life would never be so simple.

The two red-haired women looked a bit odd in an Arman Protectorate tavern. With her fair skin, Milka at least looked similar to an Arman at a distance, but her bright green eyes and burning desire for order and structure gave her away as a Nasian émigré. Freja remembered Milka with straw-colored hair, but she'd dyed it crimson to—ironically—make herself less distinctive. For Freja's part, her mother had been quite the traveler, bequeathing a mixed heritage to her firstborn daughter. A khymer father had gifted Freja with reddish eyes and sandy skin, and of course her own fiery red hair. Her half-brother Oleg was a full-blooded Arman, and their little sister was...something else. Freja didn't feel like parsing that particular drama just now.

Freja was toying with the chit, turning it over and over on the table, when her neck prickled, the way it did when things were about to go bad. She might have had a few drinks, but she still had her wits, and she knew not to put her back to the door. Thus she watched as the big, red-skinned prymidian came in. Naked to the waist, he had a wiry, muscular build and a long silver beard, and he boasted a contemptuous smirk to match the reputation of his race. He wore a sword at his waist and a bow strung across his back and he fixed his eyes on her. Wonderful.

After surveying it all with a dismissive sniff, the prymidian made his way to Freja's table and plopped down in the chair across from her. He spoke in the Common tongue without a hint of accent. Damn prymidians and their mastery of language. "You are the gunslinger Freja Ilyanovka, yes?"

"Depends." Over his shoulder, Milka was looking at her with wide eyes and two tankards in her hands. Freja shook her head slightly. She had this. "Who's asking?"

"I am Chenoa Gryn," he said. "I wish to hire you for a job."

"That was bloody quick." Freja tapped the machinist chit on the table and glanced around.

Gryn's arrival had not gone unnoticed, as Freja expected he had intended. Prymidians were as likely to hail from the Dominion to the west as the southern parts of the Protectorate, and the two countries were always at war to some extent. As more prymidians appeared in recent decades in the south, it created rising tensions with nationalists who saw the crimson-skinned creatures as uncomfortable new neighbors at best, or agitators and spies at worst. Several of the tavern's patrons were tossing him the dirty eye: cultural prejudices never really slept, especially in an out-of-the-way town like Mavra. Freja was automatically suspicious, but honestly, she needed coin more.

"What kind of job?" she asked at length.

Gryn narrowed his eyes. “The kind for which my employer thinks you will be suited.”

“Your employer,” Freja said. “Not you.”

“I reserve judgment.” Gryn crossed his arms over his broad chest. “Should you wish to prove yourself, do so now.”

Smoothly, Freja drew her guns and laid them on the table. The first was a simple starter pistol—useful, nothing special—but the second she loved. She’d gotten it from a machinist in Mureath for four hundred crowns and a roll in the hay (though that was for her own satisfaction). The Last Word she’d had engraved along the barrel, which was what this pistol always gave her.

Gryn nodded in mute approval. “I knew you had those.”

She touched the Last Word’s barrel. “Did you know I had this one pointed at your groin from the moment you walked through those doors?”

“I might have advised aiming for my head.” Gryn’s mouth quirked up at the end. “Weapons alone are not enough. Tell me about yourself.”

“Maybe I’d rather talk about you,” Freja said. “For instance, why you came to me unarmored, wearing a sword you obviously rarely draw, and slung with a bow you don’t have the calluses for. You have the build of a laborer but the skin of a dandy.”

“How perceptive,” he said. “Can you hazard a guess on what it all means?”

“You’re certainly not a warrior,” she said. “Perhaps you’re a...scholar of some kind?”

That made Gryn smile wide. “Worse,” he said. “I know a little about everything, and I talk about it in great detail. I tell sweeping epics of the vast, forgotten history of Exodus, the conclusion of which leaves my audience weeping tears of joy and sorrow.”

“So you’re a bard. Wonderful.” Freja shook her head. “You’re here alone, so you’re either extremely brave or foolhardy. Both, perhaps.” She nodded at the purse attached to his belt. “You don’t have nearly enough coin to afford me, unless you’re paying in something more valuable than crowns.”

He opened the pouch and poured the contents on the tabletop between them: a collection of small, sparkling gemstones. Rubies, fire agates, pale sapphires—even an amethyst. Freja would hardly call herself an expert, but she estimated the stones to be worth much more than their weight in silver.

“So the coin is there, the job is solid,” Freja said. “Is there something else?”

Gryn adopted a contemplative expression. “But even the greatest, most noble of women and men have been undone by greed and their own desire for showmanship,” he said. “Witness.”

Not philosophical at all, but practical. Other eyes had fallen upon their interaction, and when the gemstones appeared, that scrutiny became action. There were four of them: two rough-and-tumble Arman fellows who looked one empty belly away from becoming vagabonds; a twitchy-looking, knife-wielding tiefling—or gevet, as they called themselves—who licked his lips as he slinked toward them; and a wide-eyed woman holding a crossbow in one unsettlingly steady hand.

“Consider this another test!” Gryn announced in a boisterous voice, right before he plucked up a tankard and hurled it at the woman. Ale and ceramic shards exploded in the face of the killer with the crossbow. It spoiled her aim, but she didn’t lose the bolt in surprise. A professional, then. Wonderful.

Freja leaped out of her chair up onto the table, even as one of the lumbering hulks lurched for her from behind. She rolled over the table, scooping up her pistols as she went—too bad she didn’t have a third hand to grab those stones too—and came up with a full-force whip to the tiefling’s face. The wiry creature managed to twist with the attack to catch only a glancing blow on the cheek, but it was still enough to send him staggering back.

She heard the smack of flesh on flesh and saw Gryn elbowing one of the men in the throat. He was reciting some epic poem in a language she didn’t know, but First Ones be Burned if she didn’t feel oddly inspired. The oddity of it all was just too much, and she felt a laugh bubbling up inside her.

The big brute she’d dodged before came lumbering around the table, but Freja danced out of his grasp, the skirt of her duster fluttering through his fingers. She trained her favorite gun on his face, and his dark eyes went wide. She saw glinting metal past his shoulder, however: the crossbow-wielder lining up a shot. Diving aside, Freja fired the Last Word with a thunderous report just as the woman loosed. A quarrel slashed past her face, and she heard it rip through the trailing edge of her leather coat. The woman’s aim was off because she’d flinched behind cover as Freja’s own shot broke a piece out from one of the common room’s support pillars.

Unfortunately, in the distraction the big man got hold of Freja’s feet and held her flat on the table. The tiefling loomed over her with some sort of scythe-bladed axe.

It wasn’t just a brawl any more—it was kill or die. Her kind of fight.

Freja trained her starter pistol down along her trapped leg and fired blind, making blood spatter her legs and hand. The man roared in pain and the pressure on her feet vanished, letting her roll aside just in time to avoid the axe head that buried itself in the table. If either of her pistols had been loaded, she might have shot the tiefling in his face as he sneered down at her. Instead, she whipped him again, this time splattering his nose across his cheek. He sagged backward, blood trailing, and hit the floor with a groan.

This bought Freja a moment, and she looked past her feet to see Chenoa Gryn pounding the blood from the face of the other big Arman. The prymidian wore a dazzling red smile as he told of a mighty fray, punctuating each punch with the name of a great hero of Exodus legend. Freja caught only bits and pieces of the tale, but it was a stirring one.

Her two opponents dealt with, Freja rolled right and dropped her pistols in favor of another pair in her sleeves, which she fired in quick succession at the crossbow-wielder, who had just peeked out from behind cover. Splinters exploded from the common-room pillar, along with a string of curses from the woman behind it. Things had not gone as she'd planned.

"What's a matter, lovely?" Crouching, Freja set down her pistols on the table and drew the third pair slung across the small of her back. "Outgunned?"

"Burn you, you—uuuutttt!" The woman's words cut off in a teeth-chattering shock, and her body went taut as a wire. She fell sideways out from behind the pillar, her crossbow clattering to the floorboards. Freja covered her for a breath, then drew a bead on the pillar she'd used for cover.

Milka Bronislaw stepped out from behind the pillar, energies crackling around the mechanical device on her left arm. "By the Blood," she said, "I didn't know it'd do that, exactly."

"Hrm." Freja glanced around the tavern, but no one else seemed inclined to test them just now. She slid the guns back into their holsters and set to reloading her discarded weapons.

Meanwhile, Gryn had finally finished pummeling the single attacker. He looked around, and saw that Freja had dispatched two on her own and a third with help. He smiled, an expression made grotesque considering the gore on his face. "Not bad," the prymidian said. "For a human."

Freja slid a fresh cartridge into the Last Word. "When and where do I meet you?" she asked.

"Dawn tomorrow. Pack for a long journey." He nodded to her guns. "Bring all of those."

"Always," Freja said.

The prymidian left, and Freja sat down, the Last Word set on the table before her, and waved for another drink. She waved for Milka to join her. The groans of the wounded serenaded them.

"I have a bad feeling about this," Milka said. "You'll be careful, right?"

Her hand wrapped around the reassuring weight of her gun, Freja drew her hat down low over her eyes.

"Always."



Part Two: Keep It Cool

Freja knew guns, leather, and violence—not horses. She would be the first to admit as much.

She and her stallion had gotten to know each other fairly well over the last fortnight’s travel, and they didn’t like each other one bit. As the sun dipped into the horizon behind them, casting long shadows from the mountain peaks at their back, the little party called a halt to set up camp. Freja blew out a sigh of profound relief.

As the others climbed down with practiced ease from their mounts, Freja’s stallion tried again to shake off its cold, hungry, and grumpy rider. Freja clutched hard to the reins and cursed the day she was born, the day this beast was born, and every day in between. Fortunately, Targas—her newfound employer and the dashing leader of their little venturing party—hurried over to grab the bridle and keep the cursed animal from hurling her into the gully to a crushing death on the rocks below.

“Whoa,” he said, hands raised to calm the horse. “He is this way all day?”

“Just about.” The gunslinger glared down at the stallion’s eye. He was skittish about something—the strange striations of brownish orange on the rock wall she had noticed a few paces back, maybe? Or else he just disliked her as much as she disliked him. “Spiteful bastard.”

Targas smiled wryly up at her. “I doubt he means harm.”

Freja scowled at the horse. “Oh certainly, take his side.”

They’d traveled several days, on foot and by boat on the Abaddon River, to the far corner of the Protectorate, where the Broken Cliffs of the eastern coastline met with the mountains of the Highlands to the south. Few could say what lay much farther, and Freja had to admit that being in the unexplored frontier gave her a little tingle of excitement in her belly. That sense of danger just unrevealed, lurking in every shadow—it made her feel alive in a way she rarely felt outside of a gun battle.

The difficult horse had almost ruined the whole experience, though at least she could look at her employer. The fading sunlight caught the man’s amber eyes, making them sparkle. The dark-skinned Targa Voshtet was an explorer of Dominion heritage, which explained why he hadn’t come into town to recruit Freja himself. A vital and energetic man, Targa was nonetheless inclined to reserve, letting others take the lead most of the time. For instance, he’d spent every night by the fire taking notes while Chenoa Gryn regaled the little group with tales. The prymidian had spoken of the Protectorate’s past, its various wars, and the Sorcerer-Kings of old. Freja had hardly listened, spending most of her time imagining Targa warming her bedroll. It hadn’t happened yet, but Freja was ever optimistic despite the hurdles. Even now, as their hands touched briefly on the reins, Freja could feel the little shock where he went from confident to a little uneasy. He felt it too, she suspected.

Their shared gaze lingered a little too long, prompting Gryn’s bemused snort. Always watching, the damn prymidian proved as much a barrier to getting what she wanted as Targa’s shyness. “Work up any more magic there, you two,” he said, “and you’re apt to summon the shade of Sineath Abadas or perhaps Ruon Dondun.”

Targa’s cheeks flushed red and he hastened back toward the fire, leaving Freja fuming.

“Now you’re just making up names,” she said as she climbed down from her horse, refusing his proffered hand. Dismounting was an awkward thing, but Freja had the trick of it now, and she was a graceful woman anyway. “Besides. I’ve never seen a Sorcerer-King. Have you?”

“Twas seven centuries and forty years before Unification that the last of the Sorcerer-Kings reigned over this place, but yet does their power linger,” Gryn said. “Be wary.”

“Right you are, red man.” Freja gave him a mock salute. Her other hand gripped the handle of the Last Word quite hard. “Right you are.”

They’d ventured the treacherous passes of the mountains for the last day, and finally made camp near an old cave on a rocky plateau, which overlooked a canyon between steep mountain slopes. A trail sign—three rocks mounted atop each other—pointed the place out, and Targa explained to Freja that this meant explorers had scouted out the location. No doubt she could have convinced him to follow her into the cave for a bit, but the call came for the evening meal, ruining their moment.

The camp was small and crowded. Ten had set out from Mavra, though only eight remained after one of the porters took sick and turned back, and another slipped down a rocky slope and broke his neck. Freja couldn't remember all their names: faceless sword-swingers or beasts of burden, the lot of them. At least the two cat-like p'tan hunters Targa had recruited displayed some use: they shot rabbit or deer with their keen arrows and fed the party quite well along the journey. They looked so alike that at first she had thought them brother and sister—littermates? That lasted until she had chanced to see them in the woods, engaged in rather amorous activities. She supposed it was better not to know.

For her part, Freja had proven herself many times, with flawless marksmanship and sharp eyes; they hadn't lost a single porter to beasts or bandits. She rather wished Chenoa Gryn had met an accident on the road, if only to spare her the sight of his smirk or his ridiculously long beard.

"Tomorrow," Targa said over the sizzling meat on the spit, "I will lead a small party down the mountain. Our ranks will consist of me, wise Chenoa, bold Freja, and—" He pointed at the male p'tan.

"The name you...gave me...is Garrull," he said in halting Common. He sounded very serious.

"Yes. Garrull." Targa smiled. "Rest well, for tomorrow we unlock the secrets of the ancients!"

In an hour, when their small party bedded down for the night, Freja found herself lying awake, gazing at Targa and Gryn conversing softly by the fire. She'd almost convinced herself to make another attempt on the expedition leader, but then her bedroll finally became comfortable. She drew out Milka's projector and looked at her tiny, ridiculous image. She smiled.

As she drifted off, she thought of those markings she'd seen on the stone. Like clawmarks leaving trails of old blood...

#

She came awake smoothly—the beneficiary of many such awakenings over a career spent sleeping where she shouldn't—with a hand over her mouth. A pair of yellow green eyes burned at her, like fire caught within green amber, the pupils slits like those of a cat. The p'tan blended so well into the darkness, Freja would have doubted her own eyes were it not for the catwoman's body pressed over hers to keep her still. The hand moved when the p'tan was certain Freja wouldn't cry out.

"You're the female scout," Freja said. "The one whose name I don't know."

The eyes narrowed. "It's—"

"I didn't ask." The gunslinger tapped her pistol against the p'tan's ribs. "Explain what you're doing, or I rip you in two."

The p'tan looked briefly irritated, then grimaced in something like respect. When she spoke, her Common was far smoother than Garrull's had been. "Many foes approach," she said. "We rouse the camp slowly—do not alert our foes too early."

"Right. Sensible." She looked toward the campfire, where Garrull was perched over Targa's sleeping form. Gryn's crimson bulk still snored contentedly near the coals. "You said many. How many?"

The p'tan's eyes glittered in the firelight. "Many."

Then she was gone, bounding through the darkness to rouse one of the porters, or else secure a defensible spot. Freja attuned her ears to the whistle of the night wind. No birdsong—only the faint rustling of the spindly trees and brush that grew in the wilds deep in the Highlands. She stared at one moonshadow in particular, not entirely sure why it attracted her attention, until it moved against the wind. A hunter.

Freja suppressed the urge to draw a bead immediately. If she fired, that would be loud, and it would steal precious time the others might need to prepare. Instead, she crept out from under her long leather coat, leaving it where she had draped it over herself for warmth, and slipped around the withered log she'd used as a pillow. She moved as quietly as she could, following a rocky slope around to the rise where she'd seen the shadow. The night wind chilled her exposed skin. Thank the Sanguine Lord the moonlight didn't catch her: in the desert, she'd have blended in, but in the mountains her flesh might as well have been glowing. Perhaps it was the rest of the camp that distracted their stalker, for she got close enough to see it without alerting it. The creature had a bow in its thick gray hands, drawn back and pointed at the camp—at Freja's empty coat, in fact.

It was a man of some sort—she could see that—all gray-white skin stretched over rippling muscles and more than a few old, scarred-over wounds. His individual parts seemed of decent form, but the total was hideous: a bulbous, bestial thing in the vague shape of a man. A caliban, she thought. She'd met kalisans before, and this creature reminded her of them, albeit wilder and much more vicious.

From behind him, Freja aimed at the spot where heavily muscled neck met distended skull.

A commotion in the camp took them both by surprise. All of a sudden, Chenoa Gryn leaped to his feet, entirely naked, sword in hand, and intoned what Freja thought at first was a warcry.

"Arms!" he said, voice echoing. "Arms, the women and men of whom I speak, who set forth from cursed Ablis—"

That was enough. Freja squeezed the trigger, and a bloody crater appeared in the back of the caliban's head. Its arrow flew harmlessly into the sky and its huge body tumbled off the rocky perch.

As the thunder of her shot faded, angry roars filled the hollow where they had set up camp. Three calibans rushed out of the night, hefting jagged axes and spears, but the explorers were ready for them. A p'tan arrow took one of the brutes in the throat, turning his charge into a stumbling fall.

A second caliban pounced on one of the porters, driving its spear deep into the man's gut. The hapless man shrieked and fell to the ground, blood spouting from his mouth. Freja shot that caliban in the back of the head, and it collapsed over its victim, quivering down into death.

The third caliban locked steel with Chenoa Gryn, staggering him with its ferocious strength. Targa put his warpick in its leg, but the creature backhanded him away.

She reached for a third pistol when someone hurtled out of the darkness at her back. She spun, her reflexes putting the pistol in line with the charging caliban's torso. She squeezed off a shot that blasted blood out of the creature's side from a hand's width outside its heart. Close but not enough. The creature tackled her to the ground with enough force to knock her world out of alignment. More from luck than skill, Freja twisted her head just in time to avoid the creature's slavering jaws. Teeth snapped next to her cheek and spittle slaked her face. That settled any illusions she might have held about the calibans' intentions. These things meant to eat them.

The creature wrestled her onto the ground and scrabbled for her neck, choking off air. Freja's head felt hot and her limbs started to tremble. She discarded her empty, palmed the pistol in her left wrist holster, and fired. At that range, she shouldn't have missed, but the caliban smashed her in the face and her whole body jerked to the side, so the shot just grazed the creature's muscular side. She tried for another gun, but couldn't reach any of them. Her vision grayed around the edges.

Panic set in.

Freja smashed the Last Word into the caliban's ear. The swing felt weak, but she did it again and the creature shook its head, startled. Then she managed to grab something from its belt—a dagger—and sink it into the gray-white flesh. The caliban gurgled in surprise, but Freja just kept stabbing. With every thrust, the caliban's fingers lost a little of their strength, until she could finally breathe again. Eventually, the corpse sagged atop her, and she wriggled free, panting and smeared in gore.

There was one caliban still up, at the center of the camp. It was on one knee, howling in pain, and Targa finished it with a brutal rising chop to the chin that made Freja cringe despite herself.

That was all, then: five calibans dead, one porter screaming in agony. The other two porters knelt beside him, one trying to soothe him and the other scrambling to bandage the wound. Gryn joined them, speaking in soothing words about the bravery of Arman barbarians who faced far worse wounds at the hands of decadent Sorcerer-Kings. As he spoke, power flowed through him into the man, slowing the bleeding and rejoining the torn skin.

“That’s some good speechifying,” Freja said to the pyrmidian.

“Bard.” Gryn had no smile for her just then. “You look afright. You need healing?”

She shook her head. “Mostly they bled all over me,” she said.

“These will bruise.” Gryn touched her cheek and neck, making her wince. “See to Voshtet.”

Freja might have objected, but Gryn was already reciting another soothing speech to channel more healing. She noticed three reddish hash marks painted across the nearest caliban corpse’s face, and realized she’d seen the same thing the day before. This was their territory.

She joined the leader of their party where he stood at the edge of the little cliff, gazing down into the gap between the mountains. The sun was just creeping over the horizon, making his deep brown skin glow a kind of russet gold. He was distractingly beautiful just then.

“Targa,” she said. “Are you hurt? What’s wrong?”

“Am I hurt? You’re the one covered in blood.”

Freja shrugged. “Didn’t get any on my coat.”

“Well, get cleaned up.” He nodded. “It’s time.”

Freja frowned. “Time for what?”

He turned a dazzling smile on her. “To press on,” he said. “Right when our blood is up.”

Freja cleared her throat. “One of the men is badly injured, we’re in caliban territory, and we don’t know what could be waiting down there.”

“I know. Terribly exciting, isn’t it?” Targa looked at the others clustered around the wounded man. “I won’t have our expedition ended because of this. We’ll get him home, yes, but not before we give the crypt at least one attempt. That’s what I’m paying for, isn’t it?”

Freja wanted to argue, but the fire in his eyes burned too hot. Finally she nodded. “As you will,” she said, despite the unsettled feeling in her gut. “You’re the boss.”



Part Three: Trust Your Gut

“Ai!”

Targa slipped on a loose stone, but Freja caught him before he could slide off the little path.

“My gratitude.” He dusted himself off. “We’ll rest a moment, then press on.”

“Fine by me.”

Freja scratched at the blood itching her neck. With dirt and water she’d managed to get the worst of it off her face and hands, but the remainder demanded a vigorous scrub in a soapy bath. Until then, it would stick around to remind her—the blood, and also the dagger she’d taken off the caliban who attacked her. It was good steel—stolen from some long dead adventurer, probably—and if the ambush had taught her nothing else, it was that her guns weren’t always the solution.

Against Freja’s judgment and Gryn’s objections, the four of them had set out down a rocky path into the hollow among the mountains. The sun had not yet risen fully beyond the peaks, offering a jagged maze of light and shadow that made the trail ahead treacherous. She’d seen several more trail markings denoting caliban territory, and she kept her guns handy for an attack.

“It’s not too late to turn back,” Chenoa Gryn said. “Come back after we’ve rested and my power has returned. Until then, my words are just words.”

Targa laughed off the suggestion. “You worry too much, my scholarly friend.” The veteran explorer fairly vibrated with excitement. “The p’tan will warn of waiting foes.”

“Garrull?” Freja looked up to where the wiry scout lurked on the edge of a cliff, about a dozen paces ahead, keeping just within sight. She remembered the hesitant look he’d given the other p’tan when they left, but he’d gone along with Targa’s instructions.

“Right,” Targa said. “No fear. Our gunslinger protects us.”

In response, the prymidian gave them both an uncertain look.

“As you say, boss.” Freja patted the butt of the Last Word holstered at her hip and pulled her coat open to reveal the half-dozen loaded guns and plenty of cartridges strapped to her body.

Gryn’s expression soured, but he nodded and moved on. Freja couldn’t say she felt much more confident than he did, and seeing him nervous made her nervous. Her bruised neck ached terribly, and she wore plenty of blood from the caliban attack. But Targa’s self-assured drive carried them along, and she wasn’t one to go against the flow. She’d never been in a situation she couldn’t shoot her way out of.

“Until your power returns,” she said to Gryn when they started moving again. “You mean no spells until then.”

The prymidian made a small, derisive sound, and it reassured her to get a rise out of him. “Call them spells if you must,” Gryn said. “Power flows through the words, but I can only stand so much at a time. Try not to get yourself hurt—no more healing until tomorrow.”

“Right.” Freja shrugged. In her experience, every spellslinger in Exodus had a different explanation for how it all worked. To her, one metaphor seemed as good as another.

It was slow going. About two hours in, as the sun crested the ridge, they had traveled about half a league. Garrull had insisted they move slowly, giving him time to scout ahead. Ancient stone steps cut into the rock made for an easy enough climb. Targa suggested this was part of an ancient Sorcerer-King’s kingdom, and the crypt—discovered by a previous expedition—might be that of the ruler itself.

“This could be the most significant find in the region in centuries.” Targa opened and closed his hands anxiously. “The name of Targa Voshtet will be known throughout Exodus!”

Freja gave him a nod, but she was barely listening. Instead, she noted all the sprung or disabled traps in their path: a tripwire here, a deadfall there, and the like. Once, they skirted around a pit set at the bottom with rusty knives thrust hilt-first into the thick dirt. She assumed Garrull had disarmed these hazards before they arrived, but it made her wonder.

“All this to protect a tomb?” she asked.

Targa shrugged. “The party that discovered the crypt thought it might have some religious significance to these savages. A place of worship, perhaps.”

“If it’s so important to them—” Freja glanced around. “—why haven’t we seen any sentries?”

“Perhaps our p’tan is simply that effective,” Targa said. “No corpses, though.”

“Exactly.” Freja kept one hand on the butt of her favorite gun. The Last Word comforted her.

They came to a cavern opening, which was covered over with a network of tree branches, stones, and rusted metal. It was crude, but looked solid. Someone didn’t want them to go inside. Garrull perched on a stone next to it, looking puzzled. Targa’s face brightened.

“This is it,” he said. “The entrance!”

“Why seal it, if they go in there to pray?” Gryn asked.

Freja bit her lip. She’d been thinking the same thing.

Targa waved away the objection. He drew a necklace hung with rubies out of his shirt—a piece of jewelry Freja had noticed several times before—and plucked one of the stones from its gold strand, which promptly corroded and disintegrated away as though it had never been. He held the stone between his thumb and forefinger. It glowed with inner power.

“I’d stand back, were I you,” he said.

Targa flicked the stone at the gate. It struck with a soft plink, then erupted in a concussive blast of flame that blew the barrier off the cave entrance. Freja had instinctively covered her ears, and she looked up as the smoke cleared to see Targa smiling wildly, Garrull hissing like a spooked cat, and Gryn wiping dust from his face and glaring at their employer.

“I am certain no one heard that,” the prymidian said.

Targa beamed. “I’ll go first, if you’re worried.” He pulled a torch from his pack along with a flint. “Lady Gunslinger, you follow next. You can shoot whatever pounces on me.”

“Fair enough.” Freja double-checked the Last Word’s cartridge before she followed him.

Beyond the destroyed barrier, the yawning cave led down along a tunnel reinforced with relatively fresh wood buttresses. The sunlight dropped away after three steps, so Targa lit the torch and swept it through the dusty gloom. Garrull followed them, his feline p’tan eyes glittering. Gryn came last, his hooded lantern held up high. It shone with much better light than Targa’s smoldering torch.

About a dozen steps into the darkness, they encountered a series of spiderwebs heavy with dust. No one had come this way in quite some time. The tunnel had partly collapsed, it seemed, and at one point Freja had to squeeze through a tight spot to follow Targa. Gryn, with his big prymidian frame, barely made it. As they went, Freja noted the marks of picks and axes on the walls, and she saw the ashen outlines of old fire circles around piles of

rubble. If she had to guess, she would have pegged this as a former excavation site. Targa seemed to guess her thoughts, because he chose that moment to speak.

“The explorers who discovered this cave brought a healthy supply of explosives to aid in the excavation,” he said. “They got a certain distance in, before caliban attacks made them call it off.”

“You knew about the calibans?” Freja asked. “And you didn’t warn us?”

He gave her a sour look over his shoulder. “I warned our sentries, and they warned us about the attack before it befell us. I expected you to perform acceptably, and you did so. What’s the problem?”

“No complaints, sir.” Freja bit her tongue. Targa seemed supremely indifferent to the injuries they’d sustained—particularly the porter, who might not make it—but she doubted he would respond well to the reminder. Perhaps it was for the best that nothing had passed between them.

Somewhere ahead, Freja heard rushing water. She’d glimpsed a waterfall up the mountain, which she had assumed fed a small lake at the base of the rocks. Maybe there was some sort of underground river in the mountain.

“Almost there—ah.” Targa held the torch aloft, and the muddy light showed a smooth straight line cut along the floor. A smile brightened his face. “We’ve found it.”

The tunnel emerged into a smooth chamber, about ten paces on a side, cut out of the stone. In the middle of the room, two massive pillars vanished up into the darkness. Freja made out movement in the far corner: a waterfall sparkling in Targa’s torchlight. The stone had broken away in some sort of collapse, and the water that had broken through raged through the chamber down a wide gap into the depths. Dust choked the room, trailing from thick cobwebs in the corners of the chamber. It hung as thick as sheets of white silk on the pillars and on a heavy stone block in the middle of the room.

Targa held the torch aloft, making something sparkle to life in the shadows behind him. Freja drew her gun in surprise before she realized the source of the light: engraved and inlaid designs and runes that traced the walls, revealing a haunting forest of faces and claws looming around them. Fortunately, they did not spring alive and attack.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” Targa asked. “Look at the artifice! And the detail on those carvings!”

“Right.” Freja holstered the gun but kept her hand on the butt.

The p’tan padded into the room after her and offered a faint whine that drew out like a nervous breath. He looked even more nervous than Freja felt. The way he held himself, she almost thought just being in this place caused him physical pain.

Chenoa Gryn was the last through the hole in the wall, and he looked up at the walls and pillars with genuine interest. “These markings are old,” he said. “Definitely dating

from the time of the Sorcerer-Kings, if not before. Yes.” He ran his hand along the wall. “Ancient. Primordial.”

“What came before the Sorcerer-Kings?” Freja asked, shedding her pack.

“The First Ones, of course.” Gryn looked at her as at a child asking a very stupid question.

“Fascinating, yes.” Targa moved deeper into the room, casting around the torch. “Can you read them? Gather any hint about this place?”

The pryimidian frowned. “It would take some time and study,” he said. “These runes here—they resemble old protection wards. I’d learn more if I had any more power to call this day.”

“Well, if they are wards, they haven’t immolated us yet,” Targa said. “Whatever warded this place, it’s long dead—probably when the chamber broke open.”

Freja wasn’t too sure. She didn’t feel alone in this place.

Targa had moved into the center of the room, where his oily light exposed a massive stone block, like an altar to some ancient deity. Freja had seen it briefly before, but it must have slipped her mind until Targa actually shone his light upon it. Why had her memory lapsed in that way? Was it magic? The thought unnerved her. It looked like a piece of the mountain itself, shorn off by some unfathomable power from deep in the earth. It resonated with power: Freja felt warm and tingly just being near it. By contrast, Targa approached as though invited, reaching out to touch the dark stone.

Every instinct in Freja screamed at her to stop him. “Wait—”

Targa brushed cobwebs away from the black stone and laid his hand on it. “It’s warm,” he said. “Something...” His words trailed off as his whole body convulsed, jerked taught as though stabbed.

“Voshtet?” Gryn asked.

The explorer made no reply. His brown face had gone pale. A web of red light spread across the stone from his hand, growing wider and more complex as he lost more and more of his color.

Garrull reached for his master, but Gryn held him back. “Touch him and you’ll be caught too!”

With a groan, Targa fell back, shivering and pale, into Gryn’s arms. Whatever it had taken from him remained, continuing to spread across the stone slab. The lines of light crossed over and around one another, forming a tangled network of crimson veins. The light spread until it encompassed the black stone, making it a brilliantly shining star.

Then the light vanished, leaving them alone and dazzled in the dark chamber.

Garrull growled low. Eyes gradually adjusting, Freja leveled her guns on the stone she could only partially see. The world slowed around her as she focused.

Nothing happened, and nothing continued to happen for several long breaths. The stone slab stood, as unremarkable as before.

Targa coughed. “You see?” He stood up shakily and reclaimed his fallen torch where it guttered on the floor. “Nothing to be concerned about.” He took a step toward the slab. “We—”

The slab shattered like glass, sending shards of black stone flying in all directions. Freja managed to duck behind a pillar and pull her coat over her face, stopping the worst of it. Stone shrapnel bounced off the pillar and tore along and through the thick leather of her coat, letting her see slashes of the room. Garrull cried out in pain, and Freja saw him go staggering past, clutching at blood trickling from his cut-open torso. Chenoa Gryn loosed a grunt of pain, and Targa produced a strangled noise that turned Freja’s blood cold. She whirled around the pillar.

What she saw made her hands tremble.

A creature stood amongst the ruin of the stone slab: a woman taller than most men, all jet black flesh stretched over wiry muscle and sinew. A silver circlet sat atop her bald head but otherwise she was naked, and she looked not at all inconvenienced by that fact. Next to her, Targa Voshtet stood—or, rather, hung in the air. He dangled from her left hand, which was thrust through his chest like a pin through an insect. Blood flowed from his mouth, and his eyes had rolled up to the whites.

“Ex—” Gryn lay slumped against the wall, wheezing in pain. “Exodite—”

Why hadn’t Freja fired? Why was she hesitating?

With a maniac howl, Garrull leaped at the woman, blades extended, but she casually reached up with her free hand and caught him by the throat. As Freja watched in horror, the woman squeezed and, with seemingly no effort, Garrull’s head popped off his body like a grape from a stem, blood showering.

The woman dropped both corpses and stared wordlessly at Freja as though at a curious butterfly she had not noticed before. She smiled like a predator, revealing a set of jagged white teeth.

Freja squeezed the triggers, and her pistols resounded in the mountain crypt. But the woman was gone, vanished into the darkness before the bullets could find their mark.

Freja slammed a fresh cartridge into the Last Word.

Hot breath fell upon Freja’s neck, making it tingle. She started to turn, but the Exodite caught her neck and gun wrist in a grip strong as iron. Freja’s bones felt like they would shatter.

“Thank you, child,” the woman said, in a voice like boulders grinding against each other.

Freja palmed the pistol in her left sleeve and fired right into the Exodite's face.

With an inhuman shriek, the creature lifted Freja and hurled her body across the chamber into the waterfall. She crunched against the stone and started to fall, her arm smashing against the edge of the hole in the floor. Instinctively, she scabbled to hold on but slipped.

Then she was sliding down through dark water.



Part Four: Get Out Alive

Waking, Freja coughed out filthy water. She lay on cold stone, soaked to the bone, her lower half submerged in a pool of icy water. Outside of a thin gleam trickling down the length of the waterfall, the darkness seemed absolute. Targa and Gryn had carried the light, and she didn't have her pack.

In the distance, over the sound of rushing water, Freja could make out some sort of faint snuffling noise, perhaps like breathing. "Targa?" she asked. "Gryn?"

The noises paused, and a rumbling growl echoed off the stone walls. Definitely not one of the others. Bloody Covenant, the others. She had to help them.

Her right arm ached badly when she tried to move it, and she flexed her fingers experimentally. Sprained but not broken. Lucky. Freja tried to crawl forward but her leg screamed in pain. It was caught under a heavy rock. Possibly broken. The leather of her leggings was soaked in water and blood.

Something in the pocket of her coat ground into her leg, and with some effort she pulled it out: the tiny illusion projector Milka had made for her. Her lurid, leaping pose cast surprisingly bright orange light, illumining glistening stone walls covered in clawmarks. Not promising. The Last Word lay on the grimy floor just past her hand. She set the projector down and reached for the gun, but her trapped leg exploded in pain and she fell just short.

Freja pulled back, panting. "Bloody and damned," she said.

She pushed tentatively on the rock, grunting at the effort, but she didn't have the leverage or the raw power to move it. She heard the growls again, growing closer.

The light trickled down a tunnel, and she saw movement at the very limit at some twenty paces. The creature didn't seem to react when the light appeared. It was, however, coming gradually closer, scraping itself along the walls.

"Bloody!" Freja pulled harder on her leg, biting her tongue against the pain. Fresh blood welled as the stone scraped through her leathers, but she was almost free.

A blood-chilling shriek echoed up the tunnel, and she saw the thing running toward her. It looked like a hound at first, based on its size and shape, but as it closed she saw that it had quills and spines instead of fur. It had no eyes, either, but it must have sensed her. Freja had heard of razorfiends but never actually seen one. If she didn't move fast, she would get to inspect it much more closely.

With a cry of pain, Freja finally wrenched her leg free and scrambled out of the water. She snatched up the Last Word and took aim at the charging razorfiend. The weapon clicked.

Misfire.

The razorfiend tackled her into the shallow pool. Freja managed to catch her breath before she went under, but hitting the bottom blew it right back out in a swarm of bubbles. She broke the surface with a gasp, and the razorfiend scabbled madly atop her. It thrashed, shredding her coat and skin with its spines, and its mouth snapped at her face. Half submerged, Freja fed those jaws her leather-wrapped arm instead of her throat, and she could feel the teeth digging into her flesh.

The caliban dagger dug into Freja's hip. Without thinking, she drew the blade and plunged it into the side of the razorfiend's head. It wasn't the strongest blow, but the creature yelped in pain and leaped off her out of the pool, taking the dagger with it.

Fighting to breathe, Freja half-crawled, half-stumbled toward her gun, lying on the stone where she had dropped it. She palmed a fresh cartridge, sealed in wax, from her belt pouch. Her right arm pulsed with waves of pain.

Half a dozen paces away, the razorfiend yowled and mewled and smashed itself against the wall in a vain attempt to dislodge the dagger stuck there.

Freja reclaimed the Last Word, and the trembling left her hand. Slowly and perfectly, she lifted it and cleared the misfired cartridge.

The razorfiend whirled toward her and charged, fangs slavering.

Calmly, Freja broke the wax and inserted the fresh cartridge. She ignored the razorfiend.

The creature was upon her, leaping for her throat. The cartridge hesitated, caught on the edge of the chamber. She could feel its hot breath—

The cartridge clicked into place and Freja fired, the bullet exploding into the razorfiend's mouth from less than a thumb's breadth away. Blood and spit splattered her hands and face. The creature sailed back and slapped into the wall, crumpling into a broken hunk of smoking flesh.

Hands still, Freja breathed out, letting the panic burn down to a low, smooth surface of tension.

That was when laughter rippled down through the hole in the ceiling, resonating through the running water. Suddenly, Freja's calm shattered and she felt like a frightened little girl. The Exodite was up there, and it was waiting for her. Her hands began to shake, and her legs felt like dead wood.

"Shut it out," Freja said. "Let it bleed away. You're a corpse anyway."

Slowly—agonizingly so—she grew calm once more.

She had work to do, and she didn't have time for fear.

#

Freja pulled up short when she heard the moan echoing down the tunnel. Closing the projector to bring back the dark, she crouched behind a natural bench of stone and peeked over at a muddy source of firelight somewhere ahead. The moans were louder now, and she heard a series of scrabbling, snuffling sounds that reminded her of the razorfiend.

"Bloody perfect," she said under her breath.

Without her pack, she had only the equipment she'd carried down through the waterfall. Milka's projector cast some light, but she used it sparingly: it both let her see and made her a target, so she held it in her hand inside her coat sleeve so she could at least direct the radiance. Several of her spare cartridges were ruined, and among all her guns she could only salvage the Last Word. The others were either missing or too broken to repair in the field. She had six cartridges she thought would fire, but she wouldn't know for sure until she tried them. She had the caliban dagger, her tattered armored coat, and her hat, which made her feel a little better.

Time to move again. The tunnel sloped upward, which was progress. She let a little of the projector's light out of her sleeve as she went, so she could at least see where she was going. It wouldn't do to brain herself on a stalactite or stumble into a pit.

Then Freja caught herself on the edge of a gap, sending bits of stone down into the yawning darkness. The scuffling noises came from below, she realized. She shone her light that way, illuminating at least a dozen razorfiends scurrying and rolling like a swarm of ants. They clearly detected her and were literally crawling over each other to get to her. Wonderful.

Freja looked up at the opposite ledge. "I can make that," she said, trying to believe herself.

She drew out the projector and tossed it up onto the ledge, bathing the narrow tunnel in light. Making sure her gun was tightly bound in its holster, she backed up, braced, and ran for the edge, ready to leap across the gap.

And she would have made it, had not the ancient stone edge crumbled under her foot.

She half-jumped, half-stumbled into a moment of weightlessness, and her stomach slammed with bruising force into the opposite ledge. Gasping, she scrambled at the stone, trying to find some sort of handhold, then slid backward. She caught just the edge with her left hand, dangling by one arm for a heart-stopping moment. She tried to reach up with her right, but the arm screamed in pain when she tried to pull with it. She hung there, trembling, as the razorfiends scraped and tumbled far below her.

Her hat slipped off her head, and the creatures tore it to pieces before it hit the ground.

“Bloody come on,” Freja said to her body, demanding it pull her up.

Her wet fingers slipped on the stone.

Then thick, red-skinned hands closed around her wrists, and she looked up into the yellow-gold eyes of Chenoa Gryn. The prymidian was bruised and covered in blood and mud, his eyes glazed and his face pale, but he was whole and alive. His arms strained as he pulled, and she kicked her legs to try to push herself up. Finally, Gryn hauled Freja up from the abyss and they lay gasping on the stone. The prymidian groaned, and Freja realized it was the sound she had been following.

“You’re injured,” she said.

Gryn shrugged. “I came when I saw your light.”

After a moment, Freja sat up, bruised and not wanting to move. “The others?” she asked.

He shook his head.

“How—how long?” she asked. “How long have we been down here?”

“Hours,” he said. “It is still day outside. The Exodite is waiting until nightfall to sally forth.”

Freja frowned. “How do you know that?”

The prymidian’s eyes glittered. “Exodites fear the sun,” he said at length.

It hadn’t looked to Freja like that woman needed to fear anything. “If she’s still up there, what do we do?” she asked. “We can’t fight her.”

“We steal past her,” Gryn said. “Voshtet’s necklace. That’s our best chance.”

Freja nodded. “Well, at least it’ll be impressive.”

The prymidian’s eyes glowed in the darkness with something he could not say.

“What?” Freja asked. “Don’t tell me. No healing yet?” She supposed he would have already used it on himself, if his powers had returned.

He shook his head. “Night draws close. We must go.”

Freja nodded, though every bit of her hurt. “Just keep moving.”

#

Gryn led them efficiently to the main chamber of the crypt, which was blasted and littered with the remains of the exploded sarcophagus. Purple fires crackled at half a dozen points in the room, consuming bits of leather, wood, and flesh. Freja could make out Targa’s arm and leg poking out from behind a pillar. It took her a moment to find Garrull: the p’tan’s headless body was partly imbedded, spread-eagled, into the far wall. Blood and other juices had drained down his furry corpse and hardened like a glaze left too long in the cold. It made her sick to her stomach, but she suppressed the urge to retch. The chamber otherwise seemed empty: no Exodite.

“Where is she?” Freja asked.

Gryn shook his head. He indicated the sparkling rubies on the chain by Targa’s limp hand.

“Right,” Freja said.

She crept across the room, staying as low to the ground as she could. In her unhurt hand, she held the Last Word ready, for all the good it would do. The strange fires cast flickering shadows that made her look up constantly, heart in her throat. The Exodite could be anywhere.

She crept up to Targa’s corpse, and realized that his upper right torso and head were missing, his body a hollowed-out shell containing only a grayish stew of guts. She set her teeth to keep from vomiting. Her pack lay where she had left it, with her spare gun and cartridge pouch. Ten, maybe. She donned the pack and reached for the necklace.

The shadows parted and the Exodite appeared, standing over her. The dark woman’s purple eyes matched the pockets of flame scattered throughout the room. She smiled, her lips curling back too far from too many dagger-sharp teeth. Freja tried to bring the Last Word in line, but the Exodite caught her arm. The black fingers closed tight, making her bones grate in her arm. Her struggles ripped open her coat and the contents of her pockets clinked to the ground, including Milka’s projector. A radiant image of her shimmered into life over the small chit.

“Gryn!” Freja hissed. “Gryn!”

He just stood there, trembling but not moving, his face slack.

“You have done well, my pet,” the woman said, making the prymidian stiffen.

Freja furrowed her brow for a heartbeat, then cursed. The Exodite had charmed Gryn—that’s why he’d been acting strange—and she’d walked right into the trap. Bloody perfect.

The prymidian walked toward them, his gait awkward. The Exodite smiled, but her expression slipped slightly when he had come within a few paces. Freja saw it too: Gryn was playing up the charm, but his eyes seemed very bright. He’d worked through the spell.

The Exodite hissed in sudden rage, dropping Freja to the floor. Gryn had been murmuring words for a spell of his own, and he vanished even as the Exodite lunged toward him. Half-sitting, Freja leveled the Last Word at the dark woman’s back and squeezed the trigger. The cartridge fizzed and smoked. Misfire. Blood and damnation! Freja reloaded.

The creature whirled, crouched low, and pounced. Freja reached for the necklace, but the Exodite knocked her flying toward the narrow exit tunnel. She hit and the world turned gray-red for a heartbeat. Freja’s teeth vibrated from the force of that blow. She shook her head to clear it.

The Exodite declaimed arcane syllables, and the air tingled as power discharged. Chenoa Gryn reappeared, right at Freja’s shoulder, and she put the Last Word to his throat by reflex.

The prymidian seemed calm. “Use the necklace,” he said.

Freja looked at her empty hand, then at the Exodite, which had picked up Targa’s necklace and was regarding them with a curious expression.

“We’re dead,” Gryn said.

“No.” Freja took aim, hoping for no misfire. “She is.”

She squeezed the trigger.

The bullet struck the necklace in the Exodite’s hand. Magic flared and exploded.

They leaped into the passage as a wave of force shattered the chamber. Fire and smoke washed over them, and they scrambled down the corridor. All around, the stone trembled, and Freja knew it was all coming down. She pulled Gryn along, through the tight squeeze, just before a massive boulder sealed off the passage behind them. They kept running, not looking back, until they climbed out the cave entrance into the dying sunlight. Dust drifted out behind them.

They stood, covered in blood and dust, bodies aching on the verge of collapse.

The prymidian looked up at the setting sun and breathed out. “A tale for the legends,” he said.

Freja shrugged, looking at the remains of her attire. “You owe me a new coat.”

“Gladly,” Gryn said. “Assuming we survive them.”

The rustling of feet on stone caught Freja's attention. A score of caliban stood on the path, weapons in hand, faces furious.

Freja reloaded her pistols. "Time to go to work," she said.

#

In the tight, sealed chamber, a faint orange light swelled from a small device that leaned against the broken altar. It projected a heroic, risqué image: a woman wielding two pistols, leather coat partly unbuttoned and flowing around her, rotating slowly to show her in all its glory.

It would take time to find another escape—time to memorize every line and curve, the determination in those eyes and the arrogance in that grin.

A jet-black hand reached out of the shadows and righted the projector.

Plenty of time.