

CHAPTER ONE



Shadows in Bristlewood Forest

The violet night sky instigated an ideal occurrence for energy-based spirits to experience a phenomenal boost in bolstered power. Marooned Nightwalkers, the locals called them. They were weightless, undying silhouettes clinging to their collective consciousness through astral bodies, in dark clothing. These ancient beings lived in peace within their own means on any other day, but tonight, Shatham's comet met with the atmosphere to grant these dwellers the light of self-awareness. The comet hovering too close to the planet for an old man's comfort was an illusion. An astral projection which coexisted with its designated life, silhouette, kept a modest campsite in Bristlewood for research and gathered wayward energies on active nights. This bold comet brought them the warmth of knowing in a world where none existed; Benjamin Yarvis, lantern keeper, had his group keep track of the activity to determine a meaning of their afterlife. Yarvis, the tall, dreary-eyed silhouette in a black cloak, topped off this slick look with his ten-gallon hat, accented with a feather of gold. His indifference reflected off two puddles on the ground. He concealed most of his face with a thick cloth. His body hid under the astute get-up. Yarvis peered through his binoculars from the top of the hill, accompanied not

CHAPTER ONE

only by the full moon above but also his pet coyote, Pedro Loc, the humble canine companion every expert wanderer needs. Loc's faded, gold-soaked bandanna not only allowed them to match, but Yarvis could identify him from far away. Yarvis' feather and Loc's bandanna provided protection when close to their blue lantern, which acted as a conduit to the comet's energy in the form of light. He used its wisdom to allow spirits guidance through his forest home. While Yarvis considered his afterlife, an agonized beast's scream caught his attention. Beyond hills, he spotted a bear within shrubs as it cried out in pain from a trap it'd set off.

"You've seen better days," he patted the creature on the nose, but it pulled away from him, and the trap jolted back. Loc jumped as if spooked by the bear. It slashed through the air as a warning not to touch it. They remained still, so the bear wouldn't growl. "Take it easy, okay? We're trying to help you," Yarvis fixed his hands to both sides of the bear trap and pulled apart its interlocking teeth until it released the bear's leg. He took a step back. "There you go. Now you can be a bear without being bothered by trivial hunting equipment. Wait, what's that doing here in the forest of spirits?" In a cloud of confusion, the bear swayed like it was ensnared by an alcoholic beverage past its expiration. "Are you okay? You might have been poisoned, but I'm not sure, yet," said Yarvis. Confused by the peculiar behavior, Loc looked into the bear's eyes as they faded into an opaque white. The coyote hopped into the air with a yelp that echoed in the night. "What a strange insignia...haven't I seen it before? Why else would it feel so familiar?" Yarvis squinted at the outer casing of the trap and noticed a red emblem. Cipher and Cinder: the company insignia reminiscent of two snakes coiling together with the two main letters forming its body. He looked back at the bear to find its wound healed. He noted the teeth of the traps were equipped with poison-tipped needles. "This isn't your typical bear trap. Unfortunate, I nearly forgot about the twisted experiments of the ciphers and cinders of yesteryear. What're they doing back here? We should investigate this matter before it gets out of hand. We can't trust them to leave the spirit animals alone, so we need to get them out of here before they make their play."

SHADOWS IN BRISTLEWOOD FOREST

“Venom,” the bear murmured. “I must serve Valor of Venom!”

“Did you say Valor of Venom? Why are you speaking?” he asked. Loc maintained eye contact with the talking bear as spiked thistles formed at the edge of its body. Yarvis dodged an attack that demolished the tree behind him. “It’s time to go, old friend. We can’t ignore this shadiness,” Yarvis put Loc on his shoulder, and they ascended the branches to get a better look at the lay of the land. Translucent, blue pastures as far as the eye could see. Loc whimpered to Yarvis after noticing the peculiar change in the bear’s eyes. Yarvis placed Loc on a branch while the bear followed them from the ground. “Listen, I’ll take you down if you leave me no choice!” he pointed at the mutated bear as it slashed. Yarvis clung to the tree. “Get back! It’s been a long night, but at least it can’t go on for much longer,” Yarvis complained. Ignoring his warning, the bear held the tree down and flung Yarvis across the forest into another tree like a bag in the wind. Though battered, he felt nothing from the impact, and kept the beast at bay. Yarvis turned his attention to Loc, holding position above. “Loc, can you give me a hand down here, please? If you wouldn’t mind?” attentively, Loc hopped off the branch to help his master. He locked his small chops around the bear’s face as it tried to shake him off. The mutant roared in anguish from the coyote biting its snout and obstructing its view. Yarvis knocked the bear into the downed tree and left it in a daze. From the darkness, a large vehicle with bright red, flashing lights passed them on the road. Yarvis noticed the van’s insignia matched the bear trap. He ducked behind a bush to avoid being seen because he’d never been on good terms with Cipher or Cinder. Loc unclenched his jowls and bounced off the ground. The rectangular vehicle trudged along the dirt path and broadcast a rhythmic frequency, calling forth the animals of the forest to gather. The modified bear stared at the lights and sirens that broke the silence. Among other animals, the afflicted creature lumbered toward the vehicle, following the wail of the siren on instinct. Two soldiers revealed a large cargo bay behind a door. After they gave the animals a fair chance to enter the back of the transport vehicle, they vacated the area. Yarvis helped Loc up as they spotted more wildlife following. The collectors made

CHAPTER ONE

frequent stops and kept low speeds to let stragglers climb aboard. Yarvis watched them pass and disappear over the horizon. “Caustics...their involvement would explain the bear trap! I should’ve known. Of all the nights to come back, they’d pick this one. Loc, we need to get back to camp and find Casey. She could be in danger. The forest itself might be compromised. That’s never good, but we’ve got priorities,” Yarvis sprinted back toward their campsite with Loc until an unexpected explosion threw off their stride. He turned to look as he noticed smoke emanating from behind them. Loc growled in defense and darted back the opposite way toward the general direction of the explosion. “Hey, wait! Did you not hear me? I said we’ve got our priorities!” Yarvis shouted fruitlessly as Loc disappeared in the fog. “Fine, then, you investigate that mess if you’re so curious. I’m heading back to get Casey. Let’s meet later,” Yarvis ran toward the campsite with the thought of a resolution at the forefront of his mind.

Yarvis’ gifted, only daughter, Casey studied the night sky with her telescope; a gift from her father for her seventh birthday. Her outfit looked like her father’s, except she wore a light gray tunic with short sleeves and a black skirt. Instead of a feather, she had a carnation on a hair clip made of the same instance of gold. While gazing at the wondrous stars and the encroaching comet, she recorded her findings on a sturdy clipboard, and set anything worth documenting aside for later consideration. Casey wanted to be a scientist. She glanced at the clock radio on the side table and checked to see how long she’d been working.

“It’s eleven-thirty already? That was quick,” she yawned and poured some hot tea into her violet-red coffee mug. Casey lowered her telescope and sat down in a folding chair with her clipboard in hand. She examined her data of various constellations, meteors, and asteroids she’d borne witness to the last several nights. Casey recorded her findings on Shatham’s comet: speed, velocity, and trajectory compared to previous sightings. When she finished, she fell asleep under the stars.

Loc caught the scent of old gunpowder across the landscape. The ground rumbled in the distance as Loc zeroed in on his target. He came across a paved road that split the forest down the middle. Louder, but not

SHADOWS IN BRISTLEWOOD FOREST

until the commotion emulated construction outside a window did Loc happen upon the culprits. Ominous lighting flickered through the trees as insurgents made their way through the wooded sectors. Caustics used this method to apprehend or eliminate whomever or whatever they wanted. They were equipped with neutralizing pods and poison stingers to expose their dangerous venom strains to victims who would come to support their cause; a malicious hazard thought to be extinct. The caustics led Loc to a stone structure connected to a fountain behind a decimated chain-link fence. He'd rediscovered the abandoned cemetery known to locals as Shatham's Memorial Gardens. Loc ducked behind a bush beyond the fenced-in area and watched soldiers prepare another detonation charge on the sealed doors fixed to buckle from the ongoing assault.

"Heh, we're right on schedule. One more push and the door should give out. Then, this unit can call it a day," said a shrill soldier as he stood triumphant over their vehicle, his foot resting on a hood-turret. "Don't want to keep them waiting any longer!"

Loc figured out where the voice was coming from by using his sonar ability until the ground ignited beneath him. At the foot of the explosion stood the soldier in a heavy-looking ensemble, Valor Craade Talmus. His skin pale, outfit dark, and stature lanky. His right eye covered in shadows cast from his parted hair and left eye enraptured in a bright red, industrial devil-eye monocle darting around like mad. His shark-toothed grin had a twisted gaze to match. The spiky, red hair emulated a tidal wave as visceral intent circulated through his veins. Craade's right-hand man, Sycrose Drillbit, piped up like rust in a sauna.

"I know that was rhetorical, but you're right; certainly not. When have you ever been punctual? He's lucky we've come at all, given his track record. The man just sounds like another monster, in any case. Much less worth the time and effort to track him down than I was originally led to believe," drilled a mechanical tone.

"You're one to talk, Sycrose! Next thing you'll tell me is you regret tagging along on this little expedition. It's not like I had to or anything like that! Don't be ridiculous! It was my pleasure to accept it."

CHAPTER ONE

The coyote caught a glimpse of the towering android. He looked like a toy robot wearing suspenders and twice the size of his boss – with a pneumatic drill standing in for his arm.

“Let’s hurry this up, boss. We’re approaching three in the morning, and we’re already thirteen minutes and thirty-seven seconds behind schedule. Thirty-five, thirty-six, thirty-seven... Any more of these delays and we risk missing the window. So, I should stop counting seconds.”

“Well, at least we’re pacing ourselves,” Craade leaped onto the robot’s shoulders, causing him to capsize. “You should give yourself a chance to relax, Sycrose. We’ve got plenty of time! What’s the old saying? The night’s still young!” Craade landed on the ground and pulled out a detonator.

“The night’s middle-aged, Craade. Do you think your counterpart would waste time like this? I’d have to think he’d be smarter not to do so.”

“Did you say counterpart? You’re insulting my intelligence now. How senseless! You’ve never had a human thought run through your magnet-head in the time we’ve known each other. Why would you start now?”

“We can discuss vacation time later. Let’s just focus on your plan.”

“That’s not what I meant, but fine. I’m going to slice at him until he’s less than minced meat! Each wild slash I drive into him, one more devastatingly painful than the last, until he’s nothing! We should agree on the effectiveness of this dastardly approach, I believe.”

“As expected, you hold open the door for an array of complications with this task. For starters, you must first locate this doppelganger before you can think of what you’ll do about him. Either way, it would be wise to focus on the objective at hand.”

“Oh, he of microcosmic faith, I can think about it as much as I wish to. Here’s the plan, my enlightened friend. Once we pinpoint a location, I’ll write him nasty letters and unleash a devastating plague of gripes to break him into pieces! If he can still crawl after that, it’ll be time to put him out of his misery.”

“This sounds plausible if not vague. What about the silhouette?”

“What do you mean? We’ll use him up and throw him out. It’s not like he’s actually corporeal. Do the honors, my robotic friend,” Craade

SHADOWS IN BRISTLEWOOD FOREST

handed him the detonator. The android soldier pressed the button as it triggered another explosion that blasted open the mausoleum doors through an electric current of red energy. A side effect of the detonation cascaded another tree to the ground. “Uh-oh; back up, Miller! You might die if you get crushed by a tree,” laughing, Craade watched the trees come right for Loc, giving the coyote no choice but to leap out of the way. The soldiers tore down the remains of the demolished doorway as Loc evaded the tree, but the soldiers spotted him in the wide-open field.

“Heads up; it’s his wolf! It’s in the bushes!” Miller warned. Brock and Eddie spotted Loc right after. Frightened, the coyote sprinted back toward camp. Miller aimed his rifle and signaled his platoon to follow.

“Stop, dainty creature of the forest; you’re trespassing our limits! Not to mention interfering with official militant business. Surrender or be neutralized, silhouette’s ally! This is your single warning!” Brock shined a spotlight on Loc, but he sped up when he saw Eddie chasing him.

Craade stepped behind Miller and tapped him on the shoulder.

“It’s not a wolf, it’s a coyote. Do you realize what this means?”

“Yes, sir, the silhouettes sent a spy to investigate the disturbance.”

“I’ll get started in here,” Craade patted him on the back.

“Affirmative,” Miller ran off to join the others.

“Good man. Tell Sycrose to bring me the dog when he catches it. Coyote, whatever it is.”

The unit responded with a hasty group salute and chased Loc into the silent forest. Craade turned back toward the newly opened path leading to the doorway as the dust settled.

Lost in the forest, Loc growled at the soldiers seeking to apprehend him. Loc searched for a gap in their coverage, but he couldn’t find an out after Eddie cornered him. Sycrose appeared from behind Loc and bagged him before Eddie could reach them. Helplessly, Loc barked in disapproval from inside the sack.

“Be quiet and I can guarantee your safety. Don’t become more of a complication in the plan than you already have been! Play your small part like everyone else and we’ll all get to go home a lot sooner,” Sycrose tossed

CHAPTER ONE

the knapsack over his shoulder-plate and headed back to the detonation site with Craade's soldiers. "Let's go tell the boss we caught the target's dog running around the compound, so he can refocus on the mission."

Back at the campsite, Yarvis picked up his trusty cobalt-blue lantern on his lounging chair next to Casey's prized telescope. He needed to travel further away from their camp to track down Loc, and she would've been upset if Yarvis left her in the dark about the situation.

"Wake up, Casey. Loc ran off and he might be in trouble," he shook her lightly until she opened her eyes and answered.

"He probably chased after a rabbit and got a bit lost."

"It wasn't a rabbit, but more of a boom."

"It's four in the morning. Where could he be at this hour?"

"When Loc runs off like this, he's usually back by this hour. But he hasn't returned, which makes me think he can't right now. He knows this forest better than any other creature. He helped us chart the terrains, and those nature hikes add up. I'd bet my hat, the caustics nabbed him when he wasn't looking. We won't know for sure until we find out where he is, but I need to get the lantern."

"What do you need it for? Can't you hear him in your head?"

"Yeah, that's usually the case. I did for a moment, but I think his aura is being blocked, so the visual dissipates rapidly. I've gotten nothing else since that picture. It's bizarre. We need to move fast and figure out what happened to him."

"There isn't another moment to lose!" Casey charged into the forest.

"Wait! I know we're in a rush, but mind staying together? We'll need a visual aid if we don't want to run in circles under the comet," Yarvis snapped his fingers to summon a small, golden flame at the tip of his thumb and lit the wick on the blue lantern, the resulting light giving off a faded impression of Loc's paw prints scattered in circles throughout the campsite, marking his perusal. It wasn't the first time Loc had wandered

SHADOWS IN BRISTLEWOOD FOREST

off and Yarvis hoped it wouldn't be his last. Casey stopped and looked at the comforting, warm glow being emitted from behind. The bright light allowed them to replenish energy and guide their way through the night.

"We're ready. Let's go," he and Casey discovered a remnant of Loc's paws, looking onward toward demolished trees. Yarvis shined the lantern on Loc's characteristic prints, faded in the semi-transparent, grassy terrain.

"Whoa, what happened here?" asked Casey.

"We ran into a combative bear before we got separated. But we have a guiding light to give a focal point to the night; a vote in our everlasting favor. We've got a general direction, so I'd say we're in good shape."

"Pretty! It seems he went that way," Casey pointed. She admired the warm glow from the lantern. Loc's faded paw print trail could be replaced in an instant. It worked a little too well as Casey mistook the helpful projection as if it were Loc himself just ahead of them. "We're coming to get you, Loc!" shouted Casey. They followed his trail that led toward Shatham's condemned mausoleum.

Inside the crypt of Shatham, Craade sorted through hundreds of dust-coated coffins. Searching for a certain identification number among countless corpses, he dusted off several engraved plaques of fallen soldiers, jesters, and heroic figures once forgotten. When he'd started this venture, he'd been careful not to disrespect the bodies more than necessary, but he grew impatient with the dead. Craade treated them like dominoes, pushing them out of sight to make way for his goal: a coffin with a memorable marking and a fabled corpse sealed within.

"Come on, where is it? Where?! You think you're clever?!" Craade shouted because of poor lighting, time limits, and countless coffins that littered his path. He could only describe them as useless clutter gumming up the works; the expedition became violent as he drew his sinister blade and desecrated the coffins – that weren't an objective – by slicing them in half. After applying the process of elimination, he spotted a ladder to another floor and eyed the engravings coated in undisturbed dust. Sycrose surfaced at the doorway with the frightened coyote stowed in a bag for later dealings. The android deemed a sporting warning to be necessary.

CHAPTER ONE

“They’re coming, Valor,” warned Sycrose. Loc perked his ears up. “I stalled them for as long as possible, but it’s time to dust yourself off. Preferably before they get here if you don’t want to look foolish in front of the enemy.”

“What? Do you mean right now? Well, what are you doing standing around down here for? Stall those punks until I find the coffin! Also, do something about the fox, so he doesn’t slip away prematurely. We don’t want the silhouettes leaving before we’ve had a chance to revive the priest!”

“You don’t have to lose your cool over it. Secondly, it’s a coyote, not a fox. But as you command, sire,” he walked through the corridor into the next room to set up monitors and trackers with beeping lights relevant to their mission. Once the screens were up, he caught glimpses of Yarvis and Casey approaching the yard. Loc bit a hole in the lining of the bag. Sycrose picked Loc up by his neck scruff and put him inside an over-sized birdcage. When the assembly had concluded, they left the mausoleum as requested. “Don’t you fret, little one. You’re merely bait for a much bigger prize. Stay quiet, and you may get out of this in one piece,” said Sycrose, his words cold as steel shackles.

Craade analyzed the progress of his wanton destruction. Littered with busted coffins, the area looked like a mummy exhibit had experienced turbulence during a transfer to a different museum. Lifeless bodies hung outside containers. Craade lost his patience and stomped the ground. Finding the floorboards beneath his boots loose and removable, he brushed the coffins’ corpses out of his way to expose a section of flooring that possessed hollow characteristics.

“So, that’s your game, is it? Maybe you are clever! Ha!”

Yarvis hurried through the forest, following the path of luminescent paw prints. They skimmed their peripheral views looking for a sign of their four-legged friend on the off-chance that he’d escaped on his own. They passed by a riverbed under a log structure next to the downed tree Loc had used for cover. Outside the burial grounds, the trail ended as Yarvis and Casey caught sight of the last set of paw prints left in the grass just before the forgotten resting place of the dissociated ancients.

SHADOWS IN BRISTLEWOOD FOREST

“He was here. The trail stops ahead as if he was taken,” Yarvis lowered the lantern and tied it to his belt. “See how the trail changes direction? He must’ve run into trouble. There looks to have been a struggle.”

“A struggle, you say?” Sycrose’s menacing voice fell before them from within the shadows of the trees. The android hid and taunted them at a distance. “A struggle only begins to describe his trials! Your dog’s a fighter, but he turned out to be no match for DeCastillion’s finest. It’s lucky I can’t feel pain; he may have been killed. Then I remembered he can’t die. Ha!”

“That’s not funny. Where’s Loc? Tell me where you’ve got him, and I’ll let you live. Well, you know what I mean,” Yarvis listed his demands.

“Patience; you’ll be reunited with the coyote if you follow my instructions to the letter. Follow me and try not to break anything on your way down. The artifacts in this place are so old that looking at them can turn them to dust, so no sudden movements, you got that?”

Before they could answer, another explosion sounded from deep within the crypt. Yarvis narrowed his eyes back toward Sycrose.

“We’ll take care not to break anything else,” said Yarvis.

Sycrose motioned them through as Yarvis looked back to the path outside. The android stepped to the outlet and awaited their cooperation.

The interior of Shatham’s crypt felt eerie, but at rest. There were hints of interactions from the open books that rested on dusty tables, while spiders claimed the bookshelves as their own. It smelled of mildew from the tattered bindings barely covering rotting flesh. Luckily, none of them had an innate sense of smell. No one had been inside the crypt for what felt like eons until Craade decided he wanted something inside that appeared to be purposely kept out of his reach. A chilling draft came in from outside from a massive perforation in the entrance that had once been sealed tight. With an entryway remembered, they remained vigilant. No going back. They weren’t about to abandon their friend, either. Yarvis started a conversation with Sycrose.

“So, have you got a story worth telling? Who are you? Why have you come here? You’ll have to excuse me; I’m not used to this level of intrusion upon my homeland. You should give me something to chew on.”

CHAPTER ONE

“I’m an android soldier. Not much else to tell you, Silhouette. Now be quiet and follow my instructions as I give them,” Sycrose marched them through what remained of the memorial garden mausoleum.

“Tell me. Where are you taking us? Are you the one who took Loc?”

“Yes, we’re responsible, and I’m taking you both to see him.”

“Do you think we’re stupid, robot man? We’ve been wary of your tricks since before we met face-to-face.”

“No, I think you’re the untrusting type. You’ll have to see for yourself, I’m afraid,” Sycrose ignored the reluctance and unlocked a door that led them into an internal dome within the crypt – complete with a winding staircase and candles to light the descent. Sycrose lumbered down the hall. Casey heard commotion coming from inside the doorway as they saw stone pillars on opposite sides. “We’re here,” Sycrose pulled the door open. “Go on in, you’re expected.”

They hesitated but took the offer. Sycrose shut the door behind them. Yarvis whipped his head back, but Sycrose pointed him in the opposite direction. The walls shook as reverberations from within caught their attention. They heard power-tools on the other side.

“What’s that sound?” Casey looked around as it grew louder.

“My guess is that we’re about to find out. Stay sharp,” said Yarvis. Sycrose ushered them into a stonewall room with a rotunda above them, where Loc rested in the gold-painted birdcage.

“There you are, Loc! We’ve found you!” Casey ran toward him.

“Wait, Casey! This isn’t staying sharp, at all,” Yarvis called out to her, but she’d gotten too far ahead. She ran up to the middle of the room before an invisible wall of energy knocked her backward and into a daze. “Hey! What game are you playing at, Sycrose? We’re using force fields with kidnapping tactics?”

“What do you mean? Sorry, Yarvis, but you’ll find that it’s my job to get results. More to the point, there’s a matter of business to discuss. Give me your feather! It turned out to be more than just an unsavory fashion statement. It’s the key to unlocking the eternity your buddies trapped him in with no regard for how he felt about the arrangement.”

SHADOWS IN BRISTLEWOOD FOREST

“It’s been a long night, android. Are you asking me to dismantle you right now? It’s not a request that you leave her out of this. If you even look at her, you’re dead. I’ll rip out your computer chip brain with one hand.”

“Tempting, but I’m not alive. Your threats aren’t going to work here, silhouette underling. We’ve already been through this once today!”

Casey rubbed her forehead as she saw Sycrose walk through the force field with minimal effort. He stepped toward Loc as the coyote knelt in cowardice, and then connected the birdcage to a metal pole with an interlocking mechanism at its base. Sycrose held it up with his one hand.

“Hey! Keep your mechanical mitts to yourself!” Yarvis rushed over to help them. He got Casey out of the path of destruction as Sycrose swung at the surrounding supports and knocked over the structures. Loc shook with fear and confusion as Sycrose tossed him around like a canary in a wind tunnel. “Knock it off, you sorry excuse for a scrap heap!” he evaded the oncoming drill, but Sycrose picked up speed as the engine warmed up. Yarvis dodged the attacks by keeping his distance, but the birdcage couldn’t withstand the beating and broke apart. Loc rolled out past Yarvis and slid over to the sidelines as Sycrose observed the birdcage and realized what happened to his improvised battering ram.

“Huh. I’d thought this had gotten lighter,” Sycrose threw the pole.

“Great, now I don’t have to hold back,” Yarvis socked Sycrose in the head until it spun out of its socket. The android fell over and tumbled into a support beam near the edge of the room. It rolled its impractical weight over Sycrose. Casey consoled Loc after he’d slid away from Sycrose. “Wait a second,” Yarvis realized the construction noises from earlier had stopped. This gave him a chance to think clearly, however brief a recess. Before he could react, the curtains tore open to reveal a coffin as it barreled toward him. It rampaged down the staircase of velvet and bounced off the ground in his direction.

“Dad, get out of the way!” Casey leapt over the crater to help, but Loc pulled on her shirt collar to keep her from getting in the path of the dangerous projectile heading their way. Commonplace to think it best not to be involved in the collision.

CHAPTER ONE

“No good!” Yarvis shouted. The runaway coffin took him through the floor with a loud crash. Craade descended the steps with a look of satisfaction for his handiwork.

“Oh, good, I hit the right person. For a second there, I thought I’d hit Sycrose with that. He would’ve never let me hear the end of it! Still, that should put you in your place,” Craade walked toward the hole in the throne room above an underground dungeon. “Can you believe this one corpse had a special corridor under this complex? Talk about special treatment! If I didn’t know better, I’d say somebody didn’t want this body to ever be recovered.”

“You’re supposed to be extinct!” Yarvis lost his composure.

“No such unpleasantness. On the contrary, I’m alive and well!”

“I’d still consider you alive and sick. What do you want with us?”

“I want compliance. We can’t have vigilantism going unpunished. Why don’t you look at the designation on this coffin’s plaque? Maybe you can answer your own question as to why we’re here. You can read, right? Read it aloud for us. Don’t be shy.”

“Yeah, it says, K-I-A. Killed in action...nine, seven...”

“And what comes after seven?”

“Well, usually that’d be eight. But in this particular case, it’s three.”

“Yes and finally?”

“The last digit is six.”

“Nine, seven, three, and six – who is it? Tell me!”

“Vantam,” Yarvis shuddered. “Vantam Crauss.”

“We have a winner! That’s right, your old friend is coming back to play and there’s next to nothing you can do about it! Sycrose, get me his feather,” Craade snapped his fingers. Afterward, the nefarious caustic raised the lid to reveal Vantam’s decayed body as parasitic vermin wallowed through his body’s spoiled innards. Sycrose hadn’t moved from under the support beam.

“You’re reviving him after what we went through to seal him away?”

“Is this really how your type keeps their living space?” he wasn’t paying attention, getting a good look at Vantam’s lifeless corpse. “Oh, and

SHADOWS IN BRISTLEWOOD FOREST

don't think our devotion won't pay off, Yarvis," Craade closed the lid and pressed his foot on the coffin and compressed Yarvis' chest.

"Whose devotion, you little cultist?" he coughed. "Is it yours, or your handlers? You can do your black magic trickery all you want, but you are to do them away from my family and forest. We don't want to be involved in it! Why you took Loc is self-explanatory; you knew we'd come back for him. You preyed on our devotion to each other. I understand you're no hero, but you should know this is a real bad idea. So bad, in fact, that we can't let you attempt it. We'll do whatever it takes to stop ne'er-do-wells."

"You and your scared kid with the dog are taking me on?"

"I've heard of more outlandish things happening."

"Sir, I could use a hand down here. My legs are crushed," said Sycrose. Craade spotted him struggling, making modulated grunts.

"Do I have to do everything?" he swiped Yarvis' gold feather.

"Wait! Hang on a minute, I need that! Give it back!"

"I was hoping you knew the difference between a need and a want. Haven't you ever heard of sharing?" Craade refocused on the feather and smiled over his conquest. Loc didn't appreciate Craade's indiscretions and bit his arm. "Ow! Hey! Quit it!" Craade shook his fist and threw the small coyote off as he yelped on impact. "It's time you realized your place – underground! Don't you think Vantam would appreciate you two trading places, Yarvis? Come on; at least entertain the idea for old time's sake! Imagine his appreciation for wronging the rights. Ha-ha!"

"I don't want to imagine that. So, you're planning to kill two birds with one stone?" Yarvis pulled up his elbow and rested it against the coffin to breathe as Craade reinforced his foot on it. Yarvis coughed and struggled under the weight of his enemy's resting place. "This thing's heavy. Stay where you are for a second, I'll be right with you," Yarvis held on to the idea of defeating Craade and escaping the clutches they'd stumbled into. Craade spotted a reflective object wrapped around Vantam's neck. He recognized the charm connected to a broken chain-link. Craade knelt down and took it from Vantam's person. Considering him a prisoner of war, taking his artifacts was considered fair game.

CHAPTER ONE

“The scripture was poorly translated, but anyone would know that’s what he used to remain in command. Have you heard of this shiny talisman? It doubles as a control-brain crystal. Which it is,” Craade dusted off the scuffed charm. “I can’t wait to find out what it can do!”

“I don’t know how you came to such a conclusion, but you should put that back. It’s Influ Doku and you shouldn’t mess with it. There’s a price for holding it too long or even at all, and I sincerely hope you pay it like Vantam had to. Anyone who uses it to get their way deserves what it has to offer, and it’s not pretty. It takes from you what you take from it.”

“No, the true purposes of this charm are to be my articulated instrument to help me keep the so-called priest under control. What’d you say his name was? It was Crauss, right? Yeah. With his incredulous power in my grasp, this is easier than you might think! I’d call you a trophy, but that’d be a compliment. You’re more like a participation ribbon!”

“Why does everything you say need a punch line? Don’t think you’re out of the woods yet, buddy. A lot has changed since the last time I was under the control of the Influ Doku charm. It won’t be as simple this time,” Yarvis extended his arm to its apex to pull his body out from under the coffin, but as he tumbled, his arm corkscrewed and flattened up against his backside. The coffin crashed down on top of him as the dazed silhouette lied on his vague stomach. “Well, this is much worse.”

“Ha-ha! This silhouette is a riot! You’ve gotten me in a good mood, so let’s test your theory,” Craade knelt and smiled. Yarvis raised his head and looked at the reflection of the charm’s glowing pendant. Its projected beam shot into Yarvis’ eyes of distinctive nether. In an instant, his will waned. Casey grew anxious as she watched her father and the caustic soldier trade meaningless words with an encounter that had no choice but to end in their dutiful submission like before. She couldn’t help it.

“That’s enough, you jerk!” she knew what would happen if she stood idly by and let Craade take her father away at the drop of a literal hat. Without a second thought, she hopped on Loc and charged Craade.

“Are you challenging me, little girl? I’ll flatten you and that insignificant mutt for that!” his red monocle-eye widened as Casey

SHADOWS IN BRISTLEWOOD FOREST

collided into him. Craade dropped the feather, which landed square on Vantam's coffin face. The caustic soldier shouted in duress as Sycrose watched. "Hey! Ow! What gives, you have flying dogs now?" Craade lied on the ground as Loc ripped into his jacket. Before he was through, Loc added unflattering holes to Craade's official military attire. "Nice sneak attack, kid, but you just committed a federal offense! Don't worry, it's the last sneak-attack you'll land on me!" Craade wrestled with Loc as he fought to remain in control of his own plan.

"Care to put a wager on that, terrestrial being?" Casey basked in her successful, though temporary victory for as long as she could. Yarvis fought his old tendencies to evade Vantam's toxic influence. He needed to ward off his old, hatred-fueled state of mind that had been forced upon him from his mortal days. He was made to think like a leading correspondent in the EKZ empire while under the direct influence of Inflū Doku. It was similar to what a caustic had to deal with on a regular basis; a demeanor that resembled the will of a subservient drone.

"Yes, a wager is something I'd like very much!"

Yarvis and Craade distracted each other with their individual wills battling for supremacy. Sycrose dug himself out of rubble with his own devices. The android stood over the coffin, raring to stomp down. Craade threw Loc off and held up the charm as it glowed a shade of bright green. The coffin rose from the floor and gave some much-needed relief to Yarvis' backside. He slipped out from underneath the coffin in a flash.

"Get away from him, Craade! That creature is no man! He's a bio-hazard and a threat to this ever-evolving society! Please, don't go through with this act! It will ripple through time in ways you can't possibly imagine!" Yarvis shouted through the imbued coercion as he fought his own punches. Craade became fed up with his interference and defiance.

"What has society ever done for you, ghost? They spread lies about your never existing. This is the change of pace we all needed, and you know it! It's time for our renaissance, my unlikely ally. Besides, the proximate is a threat to another society, but not as bad a threat as I am to him. No contest. Be that as it may, this is just insurance. Case closed."

CHAPTER ONE

“I’ll try to keep that in mind.”

Yarvis’ feather sparkled over the face of Vantam’s coffin. After a moment of concentration on the artifact, Vantam’s lifeless body returned to life and emerged from the inside. Pure dread overtook Yarvis as he pushed him into it, but his body held back his combined strength. The dead curses of Inlu Doku returned, along with the infamous priest, himself. He watched in reluctance until the final moments became apparent. When he emerged, Yarvis lost to the struggle and bowed to Vantam, disgruntled with resentment. The restored priest took immediate notice of his presence and addressed his party swiftly.

“Is that you, Yarvis? And caustics are with you? What are you all doing down here?” Vantam looked around and took his time analyzing the room. Yarvis looked in terror as countless memories of their once-continuous discourse came flooding back to him. For the first time in a long while, he felt a fear of pure evil.

“Crap. Hello, Crauss. It’s been a long time. It could’ve been longer.”

“So, you’ve forgotten how to address me after so many moons.”

“Greetings, you mystical dark priest Vantam. Do you want me to write a song about how great you are, too? You know, while I’m at it?”

“No. That won’t be necessary of you,” Vantam raised his hand. “I’m waiting for an explanation, caustic follower. What is the meaning of this?”

“Do it now! Hold him down!” Craade’s soldiers leaped out of the shadows and restrained Vantam by launching multiple chain-linked hooks through the stone walls as the wires held Vantam still. His reign was over before it had ever begun. Vantam was a powerful being, possessing the ability to command a legion of synthetic drones. But this was only if he was given the opportunity to do so.

“What is the meaning of this?!” Vantam gnawed on the air with disdain as his collar ripped open revealing red bandages over his face and neck. He couldn’t rival the cunning of Craade’s analytical mind at play.

“Sorry, Crauss, but I’ve got a lot more to do, and you’re only the first stop. Don’t go thinking you’re free to reign over the world like before. You’re only a utility this time, got it?”

SHADOWS IN BRISTLEWOOD FOREST

“Influ Doku,” Vantam noticed his charm. “Give me back that stone!”

“I’m using it. If you’re good, I might give it back later. Sound fair?”

Vantam glared at Craade like he was trying to burn a hole through him, but he said nothing. Craade had an upper hand under these conditions. He was still weak after a long hiatus.

“I’m so glad we understand each other! Oh, I need something from you that’s even more precious than a hypnotic rock found in a graveyard.”

“You’ve already got something of mine. You’re trying my patience!”

“Yes, but this is about something more personal. Frankly, I need your left arm. Don’t ask why. Just take heed in my request. I hate giving orders, but I also hate getting them. I’d rather do my own thing; my guys don’t need supervision. They’re self-starters.”

“Address me by my first name, Valor,” said Vantam.

“Yeah, he knows not to,” Yarvis added. “Bad mojo while you’re here.”

“Yarvis,” Vantam struggled to turn his head. “Why are you even here? Why would you return? I would’ve thought you’d never show your face in here again. Your broken seal was meant to be indefinite, was it not? So, how’d you mess it up so much that I’m standing before you now? Why isn’t the insipid proximate rushing to your aid to lock me away?”

“He’s taking care of another matter. I told him I could handle this,” Yarvis lied, but it was better than telling him the grim truth of his friend’s demise. “I figured it wouldn’t last that long. There’s always something waiting to sneak up on you.”

“You’ve withered. Going senile in your old age? Pathetic! Very well! I’ll give you my left arm. But in return, I want my freedom. No more strings are to ever be placed on this vessel. Do you comply?”

“You sure know when you’ve been bested. That’s not too ridiculous sounding, so maybe. We’ll have to see. Though I must say you’re both looking pretty pathetic right now, no matter how you slice it. But before that, I have one other request if you don’t mind filling it.”

“Are you serious? Have you ever negotiated before? It’s not enough to sever my arm and take my prized possession? You want more from me? How are you considered a respectable official? Are you in the slightest?”

CHAPTER ONE

“Well, don’t look at me, it was your idea to work with him.”

“No, but close!” Craade’s smile faded. “I’m looking for someone, and I think you may know who I’m talking about. You might even know him...he’s said to be the son of the late Aaron Ackus, former proximate?”

“You mean to tell me he’s dead?”

“Yes. He’s dead to you as can be. Wait, you didn’t know? Wow. You really need to keep up,” Craade pointed between Yarvis and Vantam.

“His death would explain why he’s not here now to get in the way.”

“You’ve been gone a while, but you’re aware of the proximate and his sudden demise, right? Aaron may be dead, but the next can’t be far behind. There’s been too many for me not to suspect as much.”

“Do I remember the lowlife conduit that got a lucky shot and sealed me away?” Vantam leered down at his restraints. “What about him?”

“Get this – his son’s name is Ascian Ackus. Look, he hasn’t done anything to you, sure, but does that mean you’re willing to give him the chance after everything his father did? We’re looking for this man. Moreover, he doesn’t know I’m coming for him. He’s lived his life in a serious case of ignorance, and I need to get him in on the program. Understand? Tell me where he’s hiding. If you do, then you’re free to go. Doesn’t that sound like a fair business trade?”

“Don’t do it! Tell him to go jump off a cliff!”

“He’s in Sycamore Valley,” Vantam didn’t hesitate.

“Why? Why would you ever tell him that?”

“Whoa, that was easy. Are you positive?” Craade blinked in disbelief.

“Aaron’s son dwells in that town. I’d know the energy anywhere,” replied Vantam. “You’re right, caustic. I shouldn’t give any proximate a shot at taking me out. It’s been deemed risky on more than one occasion.”

“Fantastic; remind me to give you a gold star sticker later. Now, let’s get started. We’ll cut off your arms, and you can frolic out of this dump of a wasteland,” Craade pulled a checklist and outlined his current objectives.

“First off, you only need one of his arms if you’re planning what I think you’re planning. Even that could be considered a high price, caustic,” said Yarvis.

SHADOWS IN BRISTLEWOOD FOREST

“Yes, the agreement was for my left arm. I can handle that much. My only request is for you to remove it in a sterile environment, so I don’t risk needless infection. Agreed? Oh, and what should be done about the ghost cowboy and his companions? He’ll be a nuisance who won’t leave it alone until we’re both dead.”

“His purpose was served. I don’t care what he does now! Besides, you should be more worried about yourself,” Craade took hold of Vantam’s exposed arm and tore it off with one fell swoop.

“Ow, Craade, you’re a horrid, insignificant, wretched little caustic!”

“That wasn’t at all sterile. Stop changing the deal!” Yarvis winced.

“He’s your tormentor,” he held Vantam’s arm. “What do you care?”

“It still felt unnecessarily cruel,” Yarvis took stock of Vantam’s broken condition. “How the mighty have fallen. Well, you were never all that mighty to begin with. So, how the mundane has stagnated.”

“You couldn’t have given me five minutes with both my arms?!”

“What? No! Your off-task mentality is disrupting my flow!” Craade put Vantam’s severed arm in a sealed container and stowed it in a black suitcase. “I got what I came for. I’ll call for your services should I need them. But if I don’t find the boy, I’ll find you and rip your eyes out of their sockets! Do you understand me, miscreant? Oh and here’s your stupid stone. You might need it to be useful. Now, I take my leave – until we meet again, worthless peons!”

“You couldn’t have helped me out of there? What do you take me for?” Sycrose chased Craade out of the spirit-based forested area.

“That dishonorable little roach is a dead man!” Vantam crumpled to the ground along with his menacing aura. Yarvis returned to Casey and Loc while Craade made his exit with Sycrose, while his men trailed behind. Casey gazed at Vantam’s maimed, reanimated corpse as it collapsed in the muck. She couldn’t begin to imagine the experiences and didn’t want to know the details of the fight.

“Yeah, you’d better run, caustic,” Yarvis kicked his shoulder with a swing of his boot and watched his enemies make their retreat. “That was a darn massacre.”

CHAPTER ONE

“I remember him being threatening in your stories from before.”

“He was younger in those, to be fair,” Yarvis hoisted Loc onto his shoulder. “But it’s not him we should be worried about,” Yarvis used Vantam’s chains to bind the vanquished foe to his coffin. “Well, not exclusively, at least.”

“Shouldn’t we put him back in his coffin?”

“No. It wouldn’t matter; seal’s dead. I wish it was I who vanquished him, but whatever happens, happens. No use crying over spilled spirit,” Yarvis wrapped loose, rusty chains around Vantam and propped him up on his coffin. “We can’t make a new seal without a proximate to lock it. Vantam’s in shock and he’ll wake up later. Let’s vamoose. He’ll probably be upset when he wakes up and realizes he’s been had by the caustics. Those old, rusted chains won’t hold him for long. You saw what that stone can do. No joke.”

“In that case, let’s get going. Where are we headed now?”

“You heard Craade. We need to get to Sycamore Valley. It’s not far.”

“Do you think we’ll encounter those guys when we make the trip?”

“I have every confidence,” Yarvis made an exit as Casey and Loc followed him out of the crypt. Vantam made disassociated grunts as the chains rustled. After they were gone, his body convulsed and fell from the coffin with a rattling thump, which knocked him awake. The trio stopped to take stock of their foe.

“Yarvis,” Vantam awoke from the shock but remained weakened.

“It lives,” Yarvis walked off. “If you’re looking for revenge, the caustics said they were going to where you pointed them. Thanks for that, by the way. You were a real help. Do everyone a favor and stay down.”

“I’ll kill you and your daughter for this. I’ll kill your dog, too!”

“Is that a real plan of attack? In that case, we’ll be sure to watch out for a one-armed man with a grudge. Farewell, you sad excuse for a fossil.”

Yarvis and company took their chance to clear out. They may have been outmatched, but that didn’t stop them from going after the son of the proximate to warn him about the encroaching threat. Vantam stumbled to the Inlu Doku stone and focused its energy until his shadow

SHADOWS IN BRISTLEWOOD FOREST

underlings poured out from it as liquid masses; a disgusting display of yellow eyes mixed with particles in the form of hot tar slithered around Vantam's torso, shaping his replacement arm. The sub-creatures conjured razor-sharp fingers on a bulky hand. The priest meandered out of the mausoleum and found himself surrounded by enchanting light throughout the forestation – sending his blood to a boil.

“The land Yarvis calls his own. I'll burn it all for him making a fool of me!” Vantam held his green gem to the light as it harbored a small flame, growing into an inferno that spread through the surrounding trees and grasslands until the area became surrounded by green fire. Vantam got a semblance of revenge on his archrival. But he held revenge with little regard. He couldn't relate to the vindication process of Craade or Vantam.

“Was that all necessary?” an old woman spoke through the mystical gem. “Your actions have resulted in so much loss and all for nothing! Are you taking out your frustrations on the trees because you know you can never match DeCastillion's proprietary information? Now that you're back, do you plan to make the same mistake as the last time?”

“Don't question me, Scalia. I won't be bested. Never again!”

End of Sample

Written by Cody Scites

