

Chapter 8: The War Machine

The scenery of the next two days, if one could call them days, were mundane to the point of monotony. Cut stone followed cut stone, one right after the other along the path. My hope for a window or look into some outside space had diminished as the hours dragged on and on. Frank, while in his state of dismemberment in the orb during the poker game had somehow made a friend with one of the other volumes that De'Vok and Anna had packed. After hours of little talking between the two of us, he begged to let his friend "come out" so that we might listen to one of his stories. Feeling trapped and agitated, part of me wanted to pick up the pace in the hopes that the perpetual box of nothingness that surrounded us might change. Adding another traveler, in my opinion might only slow our pace. A counter argument formed in my mind as I pictured Frank and I running, dust engulfing us, stone coming apart at the seams. My final mental image was a running Frank and myself causing a tunnel collapse. Not good. Stopping midstride, I called out for Ganhiem to take his form.

Ganhiem, an ancient orphan book from Scotland had been penned by an author who had been a ruthless killer. His conquests resulted in blood baths of neighboring clans, foreign rivals and anyone else unfortunate enough to cross his path. My mind sculpted his onion skin pages and sheepskin cover into a stocky Scotsman with bulging arms and a strange gap between his two front teeth. Frank was overjoyed to see his new friend and clapped his hands together with happiness. I, on the other hand, regretted our meeting from the instant he opened his mouth.

Frank asked Ganhiem to tell a story as we walked along the narrow corridor again. With three of us in the party in full form, we had to walk single file. I took the lead with the light of the orb to guide us. Frank, still attached to me much like a child was second and Ganhiem brought up the rear all the while boasting.

"Ya know, legend says my old master made ink for his books with the blood of his enemies" he taunted. "He'd use a quill if he had to, but he preferred the hollow out finger bones of little children."

Frank recalled his past injury and howled. While it had mended once he had disassembled and then reanimated after the match with Tulvekka, Frank was a giant baby in every literal sense. He whimpered and stared at his hand, inspecting it over and over again to confirm his one missing finger had been healed. Ganhiem gave a deep belly laugh at Frank's reaction. His bellow bounced sharply off of the stone walls of the confined space and made Frank cover his ears. I was losing patience; fast. Turning on my heel, I warned both of them that if they didn't stop, it was back into the orb for both of them, safety in numbers or not. The two were very quiet after that.

To my absolute relief, the corridor began to open wide up ahead. The dust dissipated little by little. Soon, I was aghast at the small plants that seemed to be sprouting in between the stones in the floor. Farther down the hallway, the path grew wider still and vines, lush and full climbed their way in intricate patterns on the wall. Frank was afraid of them at first and whimpered every time one would

touch his arm. I was encouraged by the immediate sign of water once again. I encouraged my two companions to pick up the pace on our way to the lake.

Soon the wide corridor gave away completely. We seemed to enter what I thought might have been a large nursery or garden room. As we continued on, there no longer seemed to be a border to the vast space. A forest compounded the farther we walked. First, in the beginning brush and saplings encouraged us to continue on. But the deeper in we walked, the more and more dense the trees became until I noticed our feet were no longer on any kind of path at all. We had stumbled upon a forest.

For a forest, it was not green. Save the muted colors of my restored humanness, everything still lacked color just as it had in Otherworld. A forest without green leaves and yellow sun, white birch and deep hued ever greens gave me the feeling as if I were on some other planet made of plastic where everything was injected with grey dye before it was formed and molded along some factory conveyor belt. A striking feature was there was no sun at all! Touching the bark of the trees helped me to confirm it was not plastic but the grayness of the place still made the place seem foreign and unwelcoming.

I sat down in a thicket of ferns at the base of what looked like an ancient elm tree to watch Ganhiem teach Frank how to throw a proper punch. The Scotsman looked oddly boxy and short next to Frank. Yelling soon ensued as Frank kept trying to tuck his thumb into his palm to protect it. Ganhiem scolded his pupil, instructing that if Frank was going to learn to fight like a man, he needed to stop being a sissy about it.

I sighed and leaned against the tree, looking up into the sky. The contrast of the wide open space felt invigorating. An odd sensation soon came over me as I realized there was no sun. I sat up to look, sure that even in the contrast of black and white, the sun must surely be the brightest source of light. There was none. I was confused and puzzled. How could anything grow without a proper source of food and light? It didn't make any sense.

A loud "pop!" pulled me from my inner thoughts. Frank had successfully mastered the punch, evidently. Ganhiem was nursing a large hole in his lower jaw. It was understandable. His facial construction had consisted of old onion skins and little more. His face looked weathered in appearance but one touch revealed it was thin and fragile. Frank gasped and ran around in a panic, trying to think of what he might do to help his friend. Ganhiem on the other hand was nothing but praise for Frank.

"Just like that!" he cheered. "Now, when a stinkin' thief dares cross our path, we'll be ready for 'em with a good whompin'. Next, I'll teach to wield a proper weapon" Ganhiem promised. Frank with a weapon was a terrifying thought. I brushed the leaves from my pants and suggested we continue on. With the mysterious brightness of the forest, I decided to separate the two boys for a while; hoping Ganhiem would stop filling Frank's head with scenes of fist fights and broad swords. Frank was intent on protecting me. It was a fact. But I didn't need my giant book golem to go looking for a fight either. As the three of us walked, Ganhiem continued to tell one gruesome tale after the next.

One involved a merchant who cheated his former master out of a silver piece while he was buying supplies before winter set in. In retaliation, the author unsheathed a long knife and stabbed the merchant through the hand for shorting him his proper change. Another was a story about a woman who was screaming in the street, disturbing the master's sleep whilst he stayed overnight in town. Upon inspection of the scene, the woman was crying for help because her young son had been trampled by a horse. Hysterical, the woman screamed and cried for help. The old master walked up to the woman and smacked her across the face to silence her. He had the woman and the boy arrested for disturbing the peace and taken away to the local prison.

"That's enough!" I shouted, stopping dead in my tracks. "I've heard enough, Ganhiem. Stop with your terrible stories or go back in the orb. Last warning!" I commanded.

"But I don't understand" he pleaded. "They all had it comin' to 'em."

"That was your old master. I am your new mother. Understand?" I spat.

"Yeah?"

"So from now on, when someone cheats you out of money, you argue in a conversation. And if there is a woman crying for help, you help her, carry her child to a doctor. Understand?"

"Okay" he agreed, wide eyed as if kindness were a completely new idea. Thumping each heavy foot on the mossy ground, he sulked silently as we continued. Frank kept himself occupied with the wonders of the forest. It was peaceful for a while.

The landscape reminded me of the forest near the Sleeping Bear Dunes. Ferns covered the floor and pines grew in vast numbers due to the sandy conditions. I remembered many summer vacations hiking along Lake Michigan. While my walks there had consisted of identifying birds, watching for rattlers and listening for cougars, this forest was strangely devoid of any animal life. The only sound was a low murmuring of what sounded like voices far off in the distance. Every few steps, I took a short break to check to see if the sound grew louder. I was curious to know if we were walking towards it or if something were following us from behind. An hour revealed we were definitely headed towards the sound as the voices grew more distinct. A strange version of twilight was falling across the forest sans any sunlight. My senses grew in intensity like a small rabbit listening for a predator.

As the sky darkened, small lights up ahead of us paired with the chatter and shouts of men in the forest. Afraid that Frank and Ganhiem might draw unnecessary attention, I looked for a way around the team of men and lights. We were cutting a wide swath around a grouping of trees when lights crossed our path; zeroing in on Frank.

"Shit!" I cursed. Unsure as to where to run, I directed the two to follow me. We ran chaotically as I searched for the cover of darkness only to be found again and again by the search lights. The voices were drawing closer and closer. Shouts from either side of our course grew louder. We were being surrounded.

A few meters away, I saw a large oak with a section near the bottom where it had begun to rot. It was a slim chance, but my mind raced as to the logistics of hiding Ganhiem and Frank in the orb and tossing them into the tree. The orphans would be abandoned again but it was the best thing I could offer them until I could find a way out of what looked more and more like some kind of capture.

A voice, alarmingly close to my heels sent me into a panic. I called out for Frank and Ganhiem to return to their book forms. The man's voice cursed with anger and I knew I had set both of the boys free. I held the orb and satchel tucked into my arms as the papers and bindings flew home within. I was running at my top speed, praying that the tree would conceal them all. I was never an athlete. I dreaded that my throw would miss the rotten base of the giant tree trunk.

His steps were so close I could hear the ferns at our calves ripping past his legs. My face was hot from the dead run. My legs screamed to stop. The orb and satchel, tightly in my hand, I'd have to back hand throw so as not to risk my pursuer grabbing my arm mid throw. His breath was audible behind me. His fingers grazed the back of my shirt. I screamed and leapt for the base of the tree. A flash of blinding light made it impossible at the last second to see where I should throw. Desperately, I flung the orb in the general direction. The feeling of falling confirmed that in the leap, I must have been hit by the predator at my heels. Falling was becoming an all too familiar sensation.

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"Eat this. It will help" the tiny woman instructed.

"No, no, you don't understand. I'm dead. I don't need to..." I stopped mid argument. Whatever she had placed under my nose was suddenly irresistible. Without knowledge as to how they had landed in my hand, I was holding a pair of chopsticks, slurping up the contents of the bowl.

"Our family sends good offerings" the woman smiled.

I returned the smile and then reexamined the meal in front of me. As my hunger subsided, I no longer felt exhausted. I had assumed I was eating some kind of noodles. Upon closer inspection, the long strands were in fact made of smoke and smelled of incense. I looked back at the woman incredulously.

She laughed. "I am Lynn. Michael sent an emergency messenger alerting us that the signs of war had doubled in Otherworld."

"Michael?" tears streamed uncontrollably down my cheeks. "A messenger? What messenger?" Before she could answer, a loud explosion seemed to come from over our heads. An old Chinese man stood next to Lynn and steadied her by placing his hand on her shoulder.

"It will hold. In a thousand years it has withstood the winds and wars. The mighty oak will hold" he assured her. Looking at the two of them, I was suddenly aware that there were many people looking up from their smoky bowl staring up at the ceiling above. The pounding of blasts continued for nearly

twenty minutes and eventually died down and stopped. The tree inhabitants went back to their bowls with renewed vigor.

“Lynn?” I asked. “I’m sorry but I have about a million questions.”

The petite young woman with her silky black hair tied in a bun took a small cushion on the floor and sat next to me. “You were pulled in at the last minute by the messenger who has been searching for you. Grandfather used a simple mirror to reflect the lights that were used to track you against your pursuers. It was a narrow escape but one we are all proud of.

I am Lynn and this is my family’s home. We have lived here for centuries. Recently, the army of darkness has invaded our forest. Most of the People of the Trees fled in the violence. But how could our living relative find us if we left?”

“What do you mean find you?” I interrupted.

“The meals we share are the offerings of the living. They send us messages of remembrance that feed us and keep us alive....so to speak. How do you feel?”

“Like I could wrestle a bear” I laughed. I looked down into my bowl. The long smoky lines which resembled noodles were nearly gone. It was like a medicine in a way. I felt better as if I’d forgotten what it meant to feel good and suddenly remembered.

“The incense, prayers and messages, they come from our family altar above and travel here to our hearth below. We are linked in tradition and family bonds. To leave this place is to leave our families making them orphaned souls when they pass into this world.”

“And that’s why you’re willing to risk being discovered to help me?” I surmised.

“You are a mother to orphans, according to Michael. If we are ever found, you will be our only hope when the war is over. Family is very important to us. In life and in death, it is all anyone has.”

A sick feeling washed over me. How could I possibly break it to this beautiful woman that I was only here to do whatever was required to get me, my soul home? Obviously I couldn’t reveal any of that. “Who was that out there?” I pressed to change the subject.

“The forces of evil who live here are trying to join their brethren in Otherworld. Talk of the Great War have them salivating for destruction and blood. All entrances to Otherworld are protected by holy sanctuaries as well as guardians. They have taken to enslaving the trees in an attempt to break through to the world above. So far, they have been unsuccessful.”

“Break through?”

“I will show you. But first, your messenger has been asking for you.” She handed me the orb. “And I believe you are strong enough to have this returned to you.” Lynn lead the way to a small room down a narrow corridor. A small table, low to the ground was in the middle matched with several small

wooden seats. In the darkened corner of the room sat a familiar face. "Steven!" Without thinking, I ran across the room and hugged him. I was so happy to see a familiar face. A jumble of questions tumbled out of my mouth at once. "Are De'Vok and Anna alright? How did you find me? You pulled me in here? How did you get here?"

He said nothing but raised his palms up as if to silence me. He studied my face and looked at the strands of my long hair which had changed to color in the capture of Thaddeus. Lynn cleared her throat. "I'm sorry I cannot offer you a proper meal, Steven."

"I've fed recently. Thank you for your hospitality. If you will excuse Louella and me, we will be preparing to depart as soon as we're finished in here."

"Grandfather was hoping she would leave her golem here, in the event of an emergency. He has offered to train him in the arts."

"Frank? No, no, that won't be possible. He's no fighter. He just looks intimidating. Besides, he doesn't respond to anyone but me and...."

"Louella!" Steven shouted. He turned to Lynn. "Please a moment for us to talk." Lynn, looking defeated and hurt by my refusal left the room. Steven sat down and motioned for me to take a chair. Looking at his face, he appeared as if he had aged twenty years. "Have you eaten?" he asked.

"I should be asking you the same thing" I said, without fear this time for myself but rather for his own well being.

"I have fed quite recently" although the pain in his face seemed to indicate that something was terribly wrong.

"Lynn fed me nood..I mean smoke" Steven smiled.

"Good. Her family has lived here a long time thanks to her loyal family offerings. " He shifted in his chair as if to find some comfort. "There is much to tell you but we have to deal with the immediate needs first. We're running out of time, Lou."

"We?"

"All of heaven and earth and Otherworld is under siege by evil. Michael has sent me to find you and expedite your progress in whatever means necessary. The casualties are piling up and the side of good is dwindling in numbers. My work in Otherworld is finished. Now, Michael has sent me here to find you, secure a holding area for prisoners and report to his quarters at the end of the catacombs. We have to send Grandpa Chu any recruits we might have for him to train for the battlefield before we leave."

"I don't have any 'recruits', Steven" I said firmly.

"Yes you do and you know it"

“Frank and Ganhiem are just children!” I argued.

“Frank has kept you safe all the way here. His friend is equally capable.” Steven leaned in closer and held my hands. “Lou, I know this goes against your nature. But Frank and any of the others you can get to manifest must take form and be made ready. Evil is spreading into every corner of time and space. To leave them unprepared would be wrong.”

“But”

“Louella, please. Don’t make this harder on everyone involved.”

“You have Michael’s permission to take them away from me”. I knew his answer as soon as I had asked the question. Steven looked down into his hands and remained quiet.

“I wish he’d make up his fucking mind!” I slammed my fist on the table. “Here, save the universe and take these books to help you. Oh sorry we need the books that you have so carefully taken in. And that saving the earth thing, could you make it snappy, we haven’t got all day, you know!” I mocked.

“You’re not the only one who has had to make sacrifices!!” Steven was suddenly right in my face, screaming at me, contrary to his collected self. I was instantly silenced and afraid. His chest was heaving. He closed his eyes and gathered his composure. “I’m sorry” he whispered.

“Who’s been sacrificed?” I whispered back.

Steven kept his eyes closed. “One difficult step at a time, Louella. First, Frank and the rest need introductions to Grandpa Chu.”

My lip was trembling. My body was going numb again in to mode of self preservation. Steven pulled me into his arms and whispered in my ear. I promise to tell you everything as we go. But we need to move, now!”

Keeping myself together, I tried to form a mental speech of what I might say to Frank and the others. Lynn ran into the room as I was heading out and the two of us nearly collided. “They’ve broken through!”

“Here?” I froze, gripped the orb in my pocket.

“No, they’ve broken through to the surface. They’ve learned the right combination. C’mon!”

Steven and I ran after Lynn as we climbed a ladder several storied up within the thick walls to the trunk. Opening a hatch door in a larger branch, we climbed out and onto the steady limbs, high up in the top of the tree. Men on the floor below were searching for saplings. They poured neon bright liquid from tiny viles at the tree’s roots. Suddenly, the tree grew wildly, thrusting itself high up into the sky far past the tops of our oak. I wasn’t sure if it was the creaking of the wood, but I had the heart

wrenching impression that the trees were screaming as the liquid took effect. What followed was an ear splitting explosion that sent shock waves to the floor below as it thundered across the forest.

Looking up, I could barely make out the men who had ridden the mutated tree. They picked away at the broken stone until an odd grey light shown down from above. Then, they heaved themselves through the barren openings. A crackling sound soon followed within minutes. The tree, in its forced rapid growth had accelerated not only in size but also in age. It's bark grew thick and brittle; its insides hollow. Like a tower falling under the careful eyes of a demolition crew, the tree crumbled under its own oversized weight and fell painfully to the ground. Branches crashed to the forest floor like meteorites and turned to dust upon impact.

Repeats of the same scene played out all through the forest as the catacombs inhabitants who supported the side of evil answered their army's call. Trees crashed to the ground within minutes of their impossible shot upwards, bursting through the sky. The process played out in the hundreds right before our eyes. Some of the men put chains on the limbs of their trees before applying the vile of glowing fluid. Men grabbed hold of the linkage as the tree carried them sailing into the atmosphere. It was difficult to imagine the size of the army marching against Michael now. I wrapped my arms around my middle where the orb rested safe and warm. I thought of Frank and the others.

"They've been trying for months to get the right formula. I never thought I'd see it in my lifetime. Now, this will be the gathering place for them." Lynn sighed.

"Until there are no longer any trees to manipulate" Steven pointed out. "You'll have to leave the Oak and soon."

"No. Our family is here. We will win here or we will die here" Lynn argued emphatically. Grandpa Chu was solemn as he watched the annihilation of his neighborhood. The last of his neighbors now resided in the Oak with his family; the last strong hold.

"We will build a resistance here. Every capable body will learn to fight" he said still staring out across the landscape. He turned to Steven. "Tell Michael we will hold them off for as long as possible. If he calls us, the Chu family" he stole a glance over at Lynn, "whatever is left of it, will come."

Steven nodded in gratitude on behalf of Michael and his army. When the old man made his way back inside the Oak, Steven took his chance to stare at me. I was already feeling guilty for the argument we'd had inside. What he didn't understand, even in the face of such destruction is that it wasn't right to force any of the orphans to go to war. I would explain the situation and leave the volunteers to fight.

Grandpa Chu met us back inside of the Oak. "Do you have one of the viles from the men below?" I asked.

"We have collected the failed samples that have been left to poison the ground. Yes."

"Could you bring one to the tea room?" I continued.

Steven stood out of the way in a far off corner as I called all of the orphans and the endless volumes out from the orb and asked them to take form. I hadn't realized how many volumes De'Vok had added to my orb in addition to the orphans. The tea room quickly filled.

"Lynn, would you open the tree top door, please?" It wasn't a question. It was more like an instruction. I wasn't going to be cordial in any of this, I could see. I looked around the room. In pairs, I would like you all to go fly up through the tree top door and watch for a minute at what is going on. Then come back and let the rest see."

Anxious and excited to be part of a large gathering, Frank and Ganhiem separated into pieces and each flew taking the form of a flock of crows. "Stay less than a minute and stay in the branches!" I called after them. For me, it was nearly the longest minute of my life. The orphans looked to one another and kept to themselves while the other volumes from the library appeared confused. Some, I assumed had never taken any other form than their book selves before. Their paper shapes ran the gambit from human like to animals standing on all four legs. The authors of the future needed no help in presenting a 3-D form but still seemed as confused as the others when called into a meeting.

The flock of crows flew back into the tea room to my relief. Frank and Ganhiem took their assembled forms once more. They wore somber looks on their faces and said nothing. "Next two" I instructed. The process of observing in pairs took a considerable amount of time. Steven shifted impatiently in the corner of the room. I ignored him. Telling and seeing for ones self were two extremely different perspectives. If any of them decided to volunteer, they needed to know exactly what they were challenging.

Soon, all had witnessed the war outside. The room was silent and tense. "Some of you joined me because we became family; bound by a common language, bound by family ties of mother and child. Some of you were sent here by the directive of your keeper, De'Vok. In either case, your fate, from this moment on becomes your own. The forces of evil gather here to make their way to Otherworld and beyond. They are joining the army of hell.

"This" I held the tiny vile collected by the Chu family. "This is their war machine. From the uniforms worn by many of them, these are dead soldiers from the future. Many of our friends; people, books, authors will be at a disadvantage because they know nothing of technology. They'll be slaughtered before they ever draw their archaic swords.

So, it is with a broken heart that I ask for volunteers. Grandpa Chu has offered to train anyone willing to stay here and fight with him and his family. You will protect the last of the people who have called this forest their home. If possible, you will make life as difficult as possible for the soldiers out there to get to Otherworld.

For those who decide not to stay, you will continue on with me in the pursuit of the original plan. There will be no judgments made about anyone's decision. Agreed?"

"Agreed" nodded the tea room members.

I sat down on a small, wooden seat and let my travelling companions ponder their decisions. Grandpa Chu cleared his throat to get the room's attention. "Anyone interested in my training, I will see you by the hearth." He left to prepare his own speeches, I thought to myself.

"Anyone who stays with Grandpa Chu will have to take form and shape commands from him. As I am talking to you in English, it is obvious that you can learn outside of your own ancient languages. You will again, be expected to adapt." I was stating the obvious in a way. But I wanted those who chose to stay to think of all aspects. Stubbornly, I wanted to keep them all safe with me. But safety was a luxury none of us could afford after the explosions outside.

I felt as though the room needed time without me. Leaving the tea room, I checked on the satchel with my two charges still imprisoned within. One by one authors and orphans divvied themselves into the rooms where they felt they could do the most good. My heart leapt into my throat when I saw Frank and Ganhiem on the heels of Grandpa Chu.

The tea room was sparse. Three of the orphans consisting of tiny pages, one author from the future and Steven remained. "Well, that will make the orb a lot lighter to carry" I said in mock cheerfulness.

"Right" said Steven. "Then let's pack up and go."

"Not so fast. We're going to make a trial run. Grandpa Chu!" I called. The little old man peeked his head into the tea room. "I'm not leaving until we try this arrangement out. I say an assault tonight should prove whether this is a good idea or not."

"But they can't possibly be ready" he argued.

"I don't have any more time to give you than today. Teach the basics and let's make an attempt at stopping one band from reaching the top." The little old man nodded and hurried out to gather his rookies.

"We leave as soon as I know they are all in good hands".

Steven growled low and angry but I ignored the protest. Instead, I sat down and brain stormed with the remains of my own party.

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The raid targeted a small group of soldiers patrolling nearly half a mile away from the Oak. Steven and I kept our distance in a nearby grouping of trees, closely growing together where few ferns had taken root. We were considered back up in the event that the attempt should fail. The closer Frank crept up on the unsuspecting patrol, the further I stepped closer to the edge of the trees' safety. Steven pulled me back in to the cover of darkness. "You have to give him a chance" he whispered in my ear.

"Your arm is blocking me" I snapped as I bobbed my head up and down to see clearly.

"Exactly" he replied dryly. I cursed under my breath and used his iron like arm like a chin up bar, peaking over for as long as my own arms would hold me. "Here" he lowered his forearm making it

possible for me to keep a beat on Frank but unable to step out of the shelter. “I promise if anything happens, you and I will fly out of here.”

“You can fly?” I whispered surprised.

“No. It’s a figure of speech.”

“You mean you can’t fly?”

“No”

“Hover?”

“No. Now do shut up help me to observe the situation. They’re about to pounce”.

I was sure that Steven’s sight had no problems in the dark. I, on the other hand, strained to make out everyone in the party. As they crept up, the large group split off into two groups. The authors from the future approached the soldiers head on.

“What are they doing?!” I shouted out a whisper.

“Relax. I helped them pace off the exact limits before their discs pull them back to the Oak. Lynn has been watching this patrol for weeks from the tree top. She knew their route like clockwork.”

As predicted, the authors walked up to the patrol brazenly in a head on confrontation. Mary, an archeologist who’s book was an epic dissertation on twenty second century gang weapons stopped dead when one of the soldiers ran up to grab her. She gasped when the two were face to face. A shove from another on her team separated the two. She leaped over her limit marker, a line of broken branches they had left earlier and she and the others were yanked back; disappearing before their enemies eyes.

The second party was already on the soldiers, attacking from behind. Frank was running front and center with Ganhiem and Morbia flanking his left and three other orphans flanking his right. They ran straight for the soldiers. Turning around to face them, the soldiers were caught off guard. As predicted by the combined strategy of Grandpa Chu’s ancient Chinese fighting tactics combined with the future authors strategic precision, the soldiers zeroed in on the biggest target first, Frank.

The distance between the soldiers and the orphans shrank faster and faster. At the last minute, all the flankers broke apart from solid form to that of thousands of pointed paper stars. Spinning mid air, they ripped apart the soldiers skin infused uniforms who’s lights and readouts were blank with death. Frank plowed through his target like a freight train, knocking him down and trampling the soldier with his giant feet. The beaten soldier disintegrated leaving behind only a tiny puff of dust in its wake.

Frank stared at the dust as it swirled upwards from the forest floor. I tried to break free again from the dark place where I was hidden as the wounded soldiers rounded on the distracted golem. They rushed Frank, climbing onto his back and tearing away at his shoulders. He reared back and hollered in pain. Descending from the trees came Grandpa Chu, Lynn and two others from the Oak dwelling. They

each landed on one of Frank's attackers; throwing them down to the ground using the force of gravity; taking the fight to the forest floor.

It became very clear why Grandpa Chu carried a gnarled walking stick. With every attempt his soldier made at withdrawing a weapon, the walking stick came down with a loud "thwack!" Hand to hand combat was almost amusing as the old man blocked each blow the young soldier threw. Round and round the two went. Finally, Grandpa Chu exposed his back for a moment. I felt Steven's body tense behind me, ready to launch himself into the forest at the old man's defense. The soldier pulled out some kind of blade. He threw himself into the downward thrust to pierce Grandpa Chu. The old man, wielding graceful simplicity spun around and caught the soldier in the throat with the top of his stick; crushing the esophagus. The soldier dropped the blade and clutched his throat. He shook and jerked, kicking his black boots into the mossy peat. Finally, all twitching stopped and the soldier disintegrated into dust.

Lynn and the two others were still fighting. Ganhiem returned in full form to help one of the others. The soldier had the man knocked to the ground and had drawn his gun. Ganhiem ran up from the side of the soldier and hit him full force with a limb from a broken tree branch. The blow was enough to set the soldier on his back. The friend of Grandpa Chu took his chance at hand to hand combat in a jujitsu style wrestling. While the soldier was larger than the man, he was not skilled. The man soon had the soldier in a choke hold. The soldier turned to dust before the man could break the death hold. Grandpa Chu and his other neighbor soon had another soldier down. Lynn continued to fight her aggressor.

It was as if the two were working their way across the forest floor in a choreographed sequence of move against move. The soldier threw a punch. Lynn ducked and countered with a round house kick to his face. The soldier angrily grabbed her foot and threw her on to the ground. Lynn rolled backwards and regained her footing. The fight came closer and closer to where Steven and I stood hidden in the trees. The punches flew between the two over and over each one blocked. Breaking his pattern, the soldier kicked Lynn on the ribs. It knocked the wind out of her and she fell, stunned. The soldier scooped her incapacitated body and began to run back to his camp with her.

Steven said nothing but he and I were, as he had promised, out like a shot. While he ran faster than I did, a plan formed in my mind. I yelled to him before he could get too far and he nodded in agreement. He met the soldier at his side and hit his left arm, breaking it, I was sure. Steven easily swiped Lynn from his arms and ran back in the direction of the group. Nursing his injured arm, the soldier zig zagged across the forest floor. I pulled out the orb and directed the orphans within, "Secerno!".

Two tiny volumes exploded into a deadly band of spinning, circular, paper blades. They flew through the air dodging saplings as they honed in on their target. One miscalculated and deeply nicked the bark of a larger tree. They followed the screaming soldier like a heat seeking missile. When the first one hit, it cut off a large chunk of the soldier's good arm. He screamed in agony and terror. The

second blade travelled faster. One second the soldier was yelling for his life, the next, silence and the second blade cut completely threw the soldier's neck, severing his head from his torso.

