

### Chapter 3

*Ootare is home to a race that constantly lives with the chance of apocalypse from the reaches of space. Comets are the fists of death that fall often and with little warning. On Ootare, comet-fall is as common as hurricanes on Earth. The Oot celebrate the constant judgment from above. In fact, they have all but deified the vast net of comets that are rained upon their planet from the outer gas giants of the Ootare system. Keen-eyed shamans of the Oot religion can predict, with uncanny accuracy, the comets that will make planet-fall and therefore bring an end to entire clans.*

*Oddly, rather than cower in fear or hearken to times past, an Oot clan is galvanized into a final frenzy of activity. At the whim of the Shaman, the clan embarks on a quest to become memorable in the spoken history of other clans. [See gateway reconnaissance footage of the 5-square kilometer temple constructed in less than one month's time]. It is the completion of this quest, the Shaman tells, that signals to the gods to bring the comet down and complete the clan's story. The life of an Oot ends with an acceptance of fate and a howl of defiance to oblivion.*

*"The Lewis-Clark Chain: Worlds of Contrast" by Commodore Leslie Deerborne*

"Comet Ootare-2528-73 about to make contact," a crisp report came from the unisex voice of the OpsLogic system. "I am placing *Augurio* in navigational quiet mode for scientific recording of event."

"How many strikes have we seen this tour, cadet?" Captain Bell nodded to the magnified view of the projected target grid on Ootare. "Have you had your fill of this spectacle?"

"19 sir. Actually sir, this is still quite exhilarating," the slender woman stood tall at the captain's right. She spoke with eyes focused on the brightening corona of the comet.

"Perhaps the wagering of the crew is the exciting part?" Bell swallowed a yawn before clearing his throat. "You must be part of the betting by now?"

The cadet shifted slightly away from the captain's chair. "I believe this will be my first win, sir."

"Bold prediction indeed," Bell leaned back to look up at her. "Why would a cadet believe that Mr. Hudson would not predict today's tear to the meter? Our geologist is the expert on the impact of these smaller comet hits, after all."

"Sir, the rest of the crew will not allow Hudson into the pool anymore," she managed to stand slightly taller. "But I have challenged him directly and have allowed him to use any modeling software of his choosing."

"You are not joking!" Bell forgot the next urge to yawn. Bell snapped his fingers and rubbed the aging joint on his hand.

"Sir, you ordered me never to employ humor," she remained still.

"Cadet, I think that you will need some common sense to recognize my humor from my orders," Bell shook his head. "OpsLogic, page Hudson to Tactical."

As the comet reached the lower atmosphere in a widening fireball and trail of debris, the OpsLogic system turned the Ootare globe before the captain to keep pace with the descent. Bell could hear Hudson's shuffling walk as he entered *Augurio's* tactical command pod.

"Hudson, I have played a share of poker hands in my time, and you have the look of a man with a winning hand."

"Captain, I have little doubt," Hudson placed hands behind his back, causing his round belly to also rest at ease. "But I gave the cadet good odds – my day's pay against hers."

"Very well then, Hudson," the captain thanked the low gravity that allowed him to hop from his chair. He walked around the curve of Ootare's hologram to point at the projected landing zone. "Show me your educated guess."

Hudson smiled at the cadet as he followed the captain. "This is hardly a guess, sir. 2528-73 is a small drill of a comet that will vaporize a swath of tangle trees roughly 20 kilometers down range of ground zero. It will follow the model of at least 10 other minor comets of similar size – see this one?"

Hudson pointed to a narrow rift along the equator of Ootare and moved aside to show the cadet. "This was 2527-11 and it was slightly smaller than today's comet. It left a 19 kilometer signature before the tangle trees held back the ejecta blanket. Your cadet is betting on a strike of 31 kilometers or longer!"

"Cadet, the military operations of the fleet have been a notoriously free-spending; a large part of the Triad budget," Captain Bell turned to the youth. The top of his head reached the level of her chin. "But, I had hoped the academy would teach you some appreciation of money. Can you afford to lose

that day's pay?"

A hint of pink flashed from her chin to her cheeks, just as the flames of 2528-73 burned a red mark into the surface of Ootare. "I will still have my three squares provided by the fleet, sir."

"OpsLogic magnify and follow," Hudson's hands gestured over the planet's projection to the gradually dimming flash of the comet's impact. "Look at the devastation! Ejecta material of tangle trees, soil and bedrock spread out like a wave from the strike! It must be literally hell down there! The poor Oot devils!"

The cadet edged around Captain Bell to see Hudson's projected yellow target zone at 20 kilometers. Her right hand gripped a portion of the leg of her uniform, creating the only wrinkle in her perfect dress whites. Her target zone of green seemed impossibly far away.

"I am no expert Hudson," Bell watched the comet's destruction touch the start of the yellow zone, "but I do not see this comet obeying your physics."

Hudson's jaw slowly dropped as the comet pushed beyond the last of the yellow zone and seemed to skip closer to the cadet's mark. "Not possible!"

The comet dimmed to a reddish glow beneath a veil of steam from swampy surface. The snare of the gigantic tangle trees finally netted 2528-73 at a mark of 32 kilometers on the Eastern side of the crater.

The red of Captain Bell's face surpassed both the cadet's blush and comet's fading light. The color even showed through the white of his mustache.

"Sit! Both of you!"

Hudson nearly missed the deck chair as his eyes never left the constant flow of telemetry of the strike. The cadet sat straight-backed, hands on knees and shoulders level before allowing the smallest hint of a smile to her lips.

"Sir, you appear angry," her smile fled as the captain turned to the sound of her voice. To the cadet, Captain Bell now appeared to be at least 7 feet tall.

"Cadet, I am furious! Hudson," Bell's eyes did not leave the woman, "would you care to tell the cadet why I would be ready to throw her out an airlock right now?"

"Captain, if I were a betting man," Hudson waved at Ootare's projection to scroll through another stream of statistics, "I would say that the cadet has kept a vital piece of information from both the commanding officer and the geologist."

"Exactly," Bell's nose was now inches from the cadet. "Before I send you back to the academy to repeat at least two years of training, give me a precise account of how you determined that comet's actions!"

"Sir, would you have been angry if I had been wrong?" the cadet refused to blink and kept eyes straight ahead.

"Of course not," Bell waved both arms over his head. "Cadets are supposed to be wrong! Cadets get lost looking for the mess hall. Cadets don't know how to use the head in low gravity. Cadets will bet all their pay against impossible odds. Cadets get themselves killed in their first combat assignment. It's a rule!"

The captain smoothed his hair and took a deep breath.

"Twenty kilometers of tangle trees on the East side of the crater did not hold against the wave of debris," Hudson muttered to himself before he grabbed a datapad.

"What boils my old navy blood is a cadet that actually knows something that I do not!" Bell's voice echoed in the room.

"Sir, if I may."

"Go ahead, cadet," the captain sat firmly in his chair, but experienced a low-gravity bounce.

"Sir, you have assigned me the study of indigenous life on Ootare," she began.

Bell nodded.

"However, the Oot have made a habit of attacking anything that makes a landing on the planet," she pointed at the rotating image of Ootare. "This makes studying the Oot up close nearly impossible. I have had to watch the actions of the Oot from our satellite footage and from surface probes – at least until the Oot smash them."

"What do the aliens have to do with the comet's impact on the surface?" Hudson stopped her.

"I have studied the action of the Oot in the times before a comet strike," she looked to Captain Bell without glancing at Hudson. "Once we predict the path of a comet, the Oot begin a frenzy of activity in the area of the projected strike."

"That hypothesis is disputed, Cadet," the captain noted. "You are assuming that the Oot have

some way to predict where a comet will strike.”

“I do not have a theory about how they know,” she somehow appeared to shrug while still being at attention, “but the Oot certainly do behave differently. We have seen this increase of activity in the form of a temple made of tangle tree lumber that extended over a 5 kilometer square of jungle. They have diverted a river to create a massive plume of steam during a strike. Oot were seen to go on a food-gathering binge that appeared to start a days-long festival punctuated by the comet.”

“I repeat my question,” Hudson said with considerably more volume.

“So what activity did you see before 2528-73?” the Captain also ignored Hudson.

“Sir, the satellite footage showed a band of the Oot, the members of a small clan, begin a systematic series of digs at the base of the tangle trees. They cut a widening arc on one side of the projected ground zero – within meters of the target determined by Lieutenant Hudson’s model. When I deployed a probe to take a closer look at their work...”

Captain Bell’s eyebrows lifted.

“Um, yes sir, the probe was destroyed after barely 20 minutes,” a tint of red returned to her cheeks, “but it did show a critical fact. The Oot were cutting tangle tree roots on the same side as the impact point of the comet. They made gradual but steady progress, tree after tree on a north-eastern bearing. As far as I can tell, they did not miss the roots on a single tree over a span of 20 kilometers.”

“Just a minute!” Hudson frantically spun through tables of data on the comet strike. “The strength of the tangle trees is the largest factor in limiting the comet’s damage. The trees are larger than the Earth redwood. Don’t these trees have single deep taproots?”

“No, sir,” she glanced to Hudson. “They have fibrous roots near the surface and have their strength in creating a root fabric with other trees. There is no deep taproot. Earth redwoods do not have taproots either.”

“You knew the tangle trees would not hold firm against the comet’s impact!” Hudson shook his head as he furiously re-worked formulas in his model. “The comet’s crater would be asymmetric and the damage would spread quickly in the direction of the cut trees. The trees fell apart like a tear along a strip of fabric.”

“Do you have any idea why the Oot would want to cut some of the roots?” the Captain sat closer to the edge of the chair. “Why would they fan out in a single direction and not on all sides?”

“I puzzled over the actions of the Oot clan for nearly a week,” the cadet stood and pointed to a section of the weakened trees on the Ootare globe. “I charted the progress of the root-cutting and then projected how far the clan would get before the comet hit. I found that this clan of Oot would finish cutting roots just shy of this neighboring Oot clan.”

She highlighted a zone just beyond the weakened trees. The section of land was squarely in the extended destruction of the comet strike.

“This second clan appears to have been a mortal enemy of our root-cutters,” her finger highlighted a red zone between the clans. “This territory was disputed between the clans and has changed hands many times during our tour. I have not figured out if this land has economic, strategic or religious importance. I just know the battles between the clans have been constant.”

“If I look at your information with a military eye,” Bell stood to look more closely. “I would say the root-clan was trying to use the comet to damage their enemy’s land as a final attack.”

“Even more drastic, captain,” she said. “When the comet hit, the root-cutters had launched a full attack in the disputed zone, and their enemies responded with nearly every warrior. The comet’s destruction in the zone was complete. Both clans should be utterly destroyed.”

Hudson whistled. “Stone-age aliens projecting a comet’s path and orchestrating shared extinction? That is a big jump.”

The cadet scrolled through latest telemetry to show a slowly clearing view of Ootare’s surface. “The white points of light are confirmed survivors from the event. There are no white points in the contested grounds of the two clans. Only a few pockets of survivors remain on the second clan. There are no root-cutters left.”

“Triad command orders waiting,” OpsLogic spoke in the lull of the conversation. “*Augurio* command team only.”

“Cadet, I want a formal presentation of all of your data to be attached as a supplemental report of this comet strike. Do nothing else until you complete the report. We have so little information on the behavior of the Oot that any theory of yours will be better than the unknown.”

“Sir,” she saluted before leaving Tactical.

“My orders, captain?” Hudson closed the array of formulas next to Ootare’s image.

“Pay the cadet. You lost the bet.”

Captain Bell took a last look at the glowing edges of the lopsided crater on Ootare. “Opslogic, close the Ootare display. Give me the Triad order.”

“Captain Bell, you are ordered to leave Ootare orbit and report to Admiral Kale of *Redemption*,” Opslogic's voice carried all the excitement of a weather report. “*Augurio* must report to Livingston 12 by June 1, 2528. The objective will be a complete blockade of Frobe's world.”

“OpsLogic, make for the Ootare gateway, best speed,” Bell frowned. “Call the command team to Tactical. Respond to Triad fleet that we are underway with due urgency.”

Bell walked to a small moleglass port and watched the planet of jungles and comet scars turn far beneath him.

“We should have a blockade here,” the Captain nodded at Ootare. “God help us if these monsters ever figure out spaceflight. OpsLogic, deploy a surveillance probe, military grade. Full countermeasures gear.”

“Is there a threat here, sir?” Opslogic said.

“No, just being cautious... OpsLogic, diary a reminder for me.”

“Topic of the reminder?”

“Submit a commendation for Cadet Leslie Deerborne,” the Captain rubbed his jaw. “The cadet knows her Oot.”

As the last flash of *Augurio's* departure through the Earth-bound gateway faded, the Triad military probe turned its attention to the planet's surface. It detected a small ship leaving a trail of flame behind its path in the low atmosphere. Since the probe received no warning from the gateway for an inbound ship, the probe noted *Gash* as an unidentified local transit.

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“I have the Great Sight, but the comets no longer speak to me,” Wrezona Ty hid none of his anger as Grapple, his lower outer limb, tore at the wooden platform.

The Oot anchored his four lower limbs into the deck and leaned back to give all four eyes in his upper carapace full view of the night sky. Above him, the tails of twenty comets, all with distinctive lengths and colors, swirled around a polar star. Dutifully, the old shaman dipped the tips of Rend, the upper interior arm, into bowls of paint at his side. He traced the pattern and color of comets onto a crude bark-paper in order to record the prophetic heavens. In the shaman's mind, he could see no future for his clan. He howled in agony. There was no answer except the rustle of the highest leaves in the canopy of the tangle trees.

“Honored Shaman,” the youth far below on the forest floor called, “can I help?”

The shaman ground his lower jaw against his upper ridge. “Unless your four eyes work as well as your mouth, you cannot see a Comet of Omen! Go home boy!”

Wrezona Ty kicked with Grapple once more, but hissed a laugh as well. Of course, the boy would never leave. He was a good youth, this helper assigned by the clan, and the shaman did not neglect his responsibility of abusing the boy. How else could a youth realize that one could never despair or quit? Wrezona Ty painted another new comet in his mosaic and waited nearly 10 minutes before speaking again.

“Yes, child, come up anyway!” The shaman listened as the small Oot sprinted upward using all 8 limbs. Although this was the tallest tangle tree in clan lands at 150 meters, the youth scrambled over edge of the platform in fewer than 10 seconds.

“At your service lord!” Levrett fell at the shaman's feet as chips of tangle tree bark fell from his outer limbs. “Command me!”

Wrezona found that he could not remain angry with Levrett around. The youth certainly did not have the Great Sight, but his eagerness to serve the shaman was unquestioned, as was his faith in the eyes of his master. “It is Cast again,” Wrezona turned to show a stump that was once his left upper lateral limb.

Levrett hopped from the floor, smoothed his quills to shiny bundles and climbed up his master's side far more carefully than he had the tangle tree. After Levrett anchored his lower limbs in Wrezona's carapace notches, he pulled at the stump with all four upper arms. Wrezona moaned in pleasure as the joint's movement stopped with a loud snap.

“Good, child. Better...” Wrezona Ty opened his eyes and noticed the slightest trace of light far above. It was a new sign in the heavens! All eyes focused on this new harbinger as it moved with unnaturally speed. The shaman snarled so angrily that Levrett jumped from his shoulder and fell back to the platform. The youth tried to press his head into the wood.

“That is no comet! Levrett! Get up and tell me if you see this motion in the sky!”

The boy jumped to his master’s side. With the dark yellow eyes that were common to his kin, Levrett searched in vain. His upper limbs flexed nervously as he swung his eyes in wide arcs around the starry dome.

Wrezona Ty’s colorless, clear eyes were the telltale sign of the Great Sight, and fate had placed the shaman’s mantle upon him. Since the amusing child was only to be a simple warrior, he could summon no anger at the child for the failure to see the object. Wrezona Ty pointed Smite above Leverett’s head. “It is very bright now and getting brighter! See there?”

“Yes, Yes!” Levrett was a third of his master’s height, but jumped high enough to tap his head against Smite. “What is it Honored Shaman?”

“I believe our warlord returns to us, Levrett. We must climb down,” Wrezona Ty stepped from the platform to begin the long climb. The youth shot by, running head-first down the bark.

“Fengor Ool! Fengor Ool! Fengor Ool!” the youth’s voice rang out in the dense forest as he hit the forest floor and ran circles around the massive tangle tree. “Hurry master!”

As the shaman grumbled and climbed slowly, many of the RootBroth clan gathered at the sound of Levrett’s calls. Still meters from the forest floor, Wrezona Ty waved Smite and bellowed. “To the clearing, RootBroth! Welcome our warlord back!”

In a moment, Wrezona Ty was alone at the foot of the tallest tangle tree and hugged it with inner arms Rend and Impale. “My old friend, I took a terrible chance sending the warlord away. If our enemies had attacked once more while our 4 best warriors were serving BlueGreen, RootBroth would have been lost.”

At the sound of *Gash’s* engines rumbling in the nearby clearing, Wrezona Ty ran to the ship with an awkward limp cause by Lock’s frozen joint. He weaved between the huge trunks and hopped through a narrow gap to enter the clearing. Nearly 100 of his clan formed a black wall of carapace near the opening hatch of the craft. Levrett had been pushed to the back of the crowd and jumped up and down to get a glimpse of the travelers. Levrett spun to see Wrezona Ty walking to the group.

“Clear the way!” Levrett pulled at the largest adult near him. “Wrezona Ty, our wise shaman, is here to greet Fengor Ool!”

The clan of RootBroth split to either side of *Gash* as Fengor Ool led his fighters down the ramp of the ship. He stopped before Wrezona Ty and after touching all eight limbs to the floor of the forest, yelled with all his might.

“Wrezona Ty, shaman of RootBroth, give us your blessing!”

“Your return to us is the true blessing,” Wrezona Ty answered. “Revel in your clan’s celebration!”

Each clan member, large and small, reached to grab any loose stone, branch or bone. Using the longest limb, Cast, the clan hurled the objects at the nearby trees. The echoes of the collisions with the tangle trees were a call of confidence to any other Oot clan - “we are here – challenge us!”

“Clan of RootBroth,” Fengor Ool called and waited for the hundred howls to fade. “Our journey was not in vain. BlueGreen is weak in limb but much stronger in battle. We now share this legacy.”

The four warriors reached into their side niches with the lower interior arms. In the grip of the left arm, Lance, each Oot held a plasma rifle. The inner right arm aimed a shorter weapon.

“I know that one,” Wrezona Ty pointed to the plasma rifle, “but what is the other?”

“A device that throws fire!” Fengor Ool aimed the Pyros flamethrower over head and sent a burst of fire to open ground. Levrett and another youth charged after the spreading fire in the clearing’s grass and laughed as they stomped out the flames.

“We will call your lower right arm... Flame!” the shaman felt the strength of youth return for a moment. He turned and swung Smite in a high arc to crack the heavy weight against a bolder. With a spark from the stone, a sizable rock fragment broke away.

As other Oot imitated the Shaman and the snaps of stone became deafening, the shaman motioned to his warlord to follow him. Fengor Ool walked slowly behind his limping master, and soon they were into the maze of the trees. Wrezona Ty climbed up one of the towers and sat, lower legs gripping the bark of a limb that was 20 meters above the ground. At the shaman’s call, Fengor Ool covered the distance in 3 agile hops and gripped the same limb to face the shaman.

Wrezona Ty looked at the warlord and marveled at the magnificence of the fighter. Fengor Ool was a titan, even among Oot. His chest carapace was a hail of favorable red and gold comets – painted there by the shaman a mere 10 years ago. The center jewel of Yarjar was the ornament of a clan commander, but it added little to Fengor Ool’s mighty frame. Children puffed their ring of quills in

imitation of the warlord's thick mane. Other Oot males could only dream of mimicking his prowess in battle, and none could display so many carapace scars and cracks. As for the females, they spoke often of another prowess of the warlord.

"The warlords of other clans may be great in battle but foolish in the ways of life," Wrezona Ty began. "You are no fool Fengor Ool. I saw your eyes darken and your mane contract when you fired the flame-gun. What did you see?"

This time his quills flared. "Only 2 children chased the flame to put it out. I saw that only one-third of the clearing was filled by our people. Why didn't the rest of the clan come to greet us?"

"It is as you fear," the shaman's four inner arms drooped to his side.

"All the rest are dead," Fengor Ool barely hissed the words. "It was BrambleStone?"

"BrambleStone and Unbrat Pa attacked us 5 days ago," Wrezona Ty scratched a rough map into the bark between them. "The villains went directly for the hatchery, and our guards were no match for them. Before we could push them back, they murdered nearly every youth."

"Telbred Im," Fengor Ool pointed to the map. "He should have defended here!"

"Do not blame your captain, my friend," Wrezona Ty tapped another spot nearby. "Without his sacrifice at the choke point to the narrow end of the mating marshes, RootBroth would be gone entirely. Telbred Im stood in the low niche of the tangle tree line and challenged BrambleStone's warlord to personal combat. Believe me when I say that you have no rival, but the BrambleStone champion appeared unbeatable in his battle-madness. Telbred Im charged and dove directly into the enemy's Impale arm, and broke his own breastplate in order to push with all limbs against Rend – the champion's other inner arm."

"Why would Telbred Im spill his life this way?" Fengor Ool's four eyes brightened as he saw the answer. "It would be like breaking an insect's nest with a long branch!"

"Yes. With the last of his strength, Telbred Im cracked the warlord's impale horn, and fell dead with the enemy's limb in his chest. The impale horn was wedged so tightly, we buried Terbred Im in the swamp with the horn still in place." Wrezona Ty showed his upper tusks in an Ootish grin. "Can you imagine the shame of a warlord without an impale horn?"

"A great humiliation," Fengor Ool agreed. "Nearly as great as losing every quill to blight! Perhaps as bad as being blinded in all four eyes! And their shaman saw this?"

"Unbrat Pa howled as his clan fell back at the evil omen. Their confidence was broken," the old Ott said. "BrambleStone was forced to retreat until Unbrat Pa can name a new warlord. We have spied on him – he stands every night on his high platform and waits for a particular Comet of Omen to give him the new captain. I fear that tonight's clear sky has given him his answer. BrambleStone will be attack again soon."

Both Oot were silent for a time.

"Such evil and bravery on the same day! Was there no Comet of Omen to warn of this?" Fengor Ool shook all upper arms in anger.

Wrezona Ty turned his eyes to the glowing canopy above as the sun began to rise. "Warlord, no comets have spoken to me since you left. It is as if your quest was a curse. I thought that our alliance with BlueGreen was taken as an affront to the heavens. Perhaps my deal with the fat human would bring us all to ruin."

"We have the four sets of BlueGreen weapons," Fengor Ool lifted Lance that held the plasma rifle. "And Tobr gave us a device for making hunting weapons. The ship told us iron is a material that can be made sharp and used to lengthen battle-reach or cause more damage with a Cast throw. I have it here!"

The giant Ott held forth a decimeter-sized cube. Immediately, it began to babble in the soft BlueGreen language.

"Every object on BlueGreen talks," Fengor Ool ground his lower jaw. "Imagine every tangle tree speaking at the same time, and you would know what it is like to visit BlueGreen. Ah! I have it."

The warlord found his translator in a side niche and set it next to the cube. A small data disk dropped from the niche as well. Fengor Ool poked at the translator with the blades of Rend until it began to speak in a familiar Oot growl. BlueGreen words did not have many Oot translations, so it spoke with many pauses for omitted words.

"Place any \_\_\_ disk into the \_\_\_ slot."

"That object is the same size as the niche on the cube," Wrezona Ty pointed to his side of the factory. He picked up the disk and placed it into the cube.

"Select: \_\_\_\_\_ ship or \_\_\_\_\_ rifle or All."

“All,” Fengor Ool was grateful to know the answer.

“Rifle item count?”

“Honored Shaman,” Fengor Ool was less pleased with this question. “What is a large number?”

“Shamans can number the stars,” Wrezona Ty puffed quills in pride. “The largest number we know is called pondacti.”

“Confirmed,” the translator repeated the calm tone of the factory. “You have requested six million. Ship item count?”

“Humans say thousand as a number when they speak of many ships,” Fengor Ool recalled.

“Confirmed – one thousand ships. Place this cube on open ground.”

Fengor Ool dropped the cube from the tree, and the box immediately began to dig into the dirt above the web of roots.

“We must return to the village,” Wrezona Ty climbed while the warlord jumped all the way to the ground. “We will feast in your honor.”

Fengor Ool and Wrezona Ty walked to their village in silence, and listened to the din of Ootish song and dance. Although they now climbed over and through an increasingly dense stand of tangle trees, the noise of the RootBroth celebration grew louder.

“Allow me, Honored Shaman,” Fengor Ool leaped to pull open a door that bridged two immense trees. After hopping up into the threshold of the wooden frame, Fengor Ool extended Cast back to the older Oot. The warlord held his shaman’s weight and at the same time lifted the door of carved tangle-tree wood upon his back carapace. With Wrezona Ty standing across the threshold, the warrior nimbly hopped into RootBroth’s home.

The pair stood at the western door, a heavy portal 20 meters above the forest floor. As the door rocked shut with a crash, echoes of the beat returned from the other side of the 100 meter bowl.

Around the perimeter of the village, carefully cultivated tangle trees grew in tight ranks in a rough circle.

The trees, limbs locked together in neat mesh, formed a wall of wood that even the smallest Oot could not squeeze through. Far above the doors of the keep, the trees bowed away from the center to overhang the outer walls. The middle of the ring was kept clear of the stubborn surface roots.

Wrezona Ty sighed as he felt the safety of the ring of tangle trees. This was RootBroth’s last refuge in this time of war.

“Wise Shaman! Brave Warlord!” the Oot tending a fire in a stone pit in the center of the village called up at the sight of the leaders. A fresh tanglepig had been killed and was already nicely blackened above a healthy blaze.

“We will need a new captain,” Wrezona Ty looked up to the niches in the trees to see all of the RootBroth Oot jumping from niches and running down the trunks. “You must have a trusted second to replace brave Telbred Im.”

Ten fighters scaled the western tangle tree and let out a long, baying war call to Fengor Ool. Dozens of upper limbs reached high to grab the warlord, but he shook them away easily. Instead, after a laugh at the disappointed crowd, Fengor Ool lifted the shaman and dropped him to the wave of limbs.

Many tall Oot bounced the shaman roughly as they paraded an endless loop around the mangled TanglePig carcass. Even Wrezona Ty began to laugh between bounces as he looked down to see a worried-looking Levrett running at the back of the pack. The child’s arms were extended to catch the shaman in case his master fell.

“Enough! Enough!” Fengor Ool had jumped to stand near the shaman’s throne that was carved into the largest tangle tree. “Bring our shaman to me!”

The group managed to lift the shaman up with small slips and a few grunts. Just as Wrezona Ty settled into the throne, Levrett was at his side with the largest drinking bowl that he could carry. The Shaman lifted the bowl from the boy and saluted his people before pouring the entire dark drink over his tusks and into a long alimentary canal.

“Levrett!” Wrezona Ty shook the bowl. “You know how I like my drink! There was no gravel in the mud! How do you expect me to digest any TanglePig without gravel?”

“I will fix it my lord,” Levrett grabbed the bowl and sprinted to a hatch leading to the marshes. Several adults hissed at him for causing the shaman displeasure.

“The drink was perfect, actually,” Wrezona Ty leaned to speak to Fengor Ool. “But how else do we teach patience to young Oot?”

“Honored Shaman,” Fengor Ool tucked in his head as a type of bow, and spoke very softly. “I place the name of Korbec Oos before you as my next captain.”

“Indeed?” Wrezona Ty saw the warlord’s friend among the clan and studied Korbec Oos until

Levrett dropped the heavy drinking bowl into his crossed lower limbs. "Comets, Boy! An Oot can drown after all! Be a good lad and fetch me a cut of tanglepig."

As the boy ran to the center of the party, Wrezona Ty examined his drinking bowl and clucked a rough chuckle. "The child must have thrown 10 Cast-fulls of gravel into this drink. Ah, well."

"My lord? Korbec Oos?"

"Yes, Fengor Ool, I heard you plainly," Wrezona Ty poured the drink down with equal relish. "You know why I do not approve of him?"

"He is the best of fighters..." the warlord followed the shaman's gesture to see Korbec Oos among the clan. "His strong limbs would always suit us."

"Strength, valor, agility, focus," Wrezona Ty agreed. "He has all of this in greater abundance than all his kin except you. It is his heart that concerns me. Look down the right side of the throne-tree. Tell me what you see."

Fengor Ool took a glance and uttered a surprised snarl before turning back to the shaman.

"Yes, warlord, they wait for you to end this prattle with an old Oot like me," the shaman leaned around the fighter to take a quick count. "Four females are here to petition for your company! And just for one night! How can I possibly choose from so many?"

The warlord's brightening eyes showed that he could barely wait for the shaman's decision amongst the females.

"Now look to your friend again," the old Oot spoke sternly, nearly the tone he would use with Levrett in teaching the names of comets. "Korbec Oos has chosen a single mate – one female who will dominate his time, and who would not share him with others."

Fengor Ool remained silent. It was a serious problem – the best of the fighters must be free to mate with the unattached females. It is these females who must replenish the dozens of fighters lost in the battles with BrambleStone. Korbec Oos had rejected any position of power by acting as a simple hunter or gatherer of the clan. Lowly males were welcome to a single lowly mate.

Levrett struggled up the trunk of the tangle tree, pulling a huge chunk of tanglepig, and with all his might, he lifted the half flank above his head in an offering to his master. Wrezona Ty regarded the boy and marveled at the strength of this yearling. Just before Levrett's limbs gave out, the shaman snatched the meat away from the boy. Levrett collapsed at the foot of the throne and grasped at his master's exterior leg.

"I think this will do, Levrett," Wrezona Ty flopped the meat over his inner knee, and a tattered edge smacked against the throne. "Even silly youth like you must eat. And this celebration is for everyone. I will not need you today, but be ready to assist tonight. I will be on the high platform watching the comets once more."

After a sharp cheer and bow to both shaman and warlord, the boy scampered off.

"I can never keep anger in me while that child is around," Wrezona Ty looked back at Korbec Oos and could find no anger returning. He tore the meat in half and handed a dripping chunk to Fengor Ool. "Very well, my warlord. No comet has proclaimed wisdom to me in many days. I must believe that you have the blessing of the heavens to venture to BlueGreen and return safely. RootBroth needs the best captain in the field. I will concern myself with his mating habits later. We eat!"

Fengor Ool snapped down his meal in two great jerks of his lower jaw, and followed it with a slow grating sound of the lower ridge sliding along his tusks. The females below hummed in admiration.

"Have you finished already?" Wrezona Ty had taken a few more bites and had gulped with a softer grating sound. "That is good. You will need your strength."

Fengor Ool stood to full attention as the shaman rose from the throne. He puzzled at Wrezona Ty's comment.

"RootBroth clan, I will speak now!" the shaman stood to his full height and swung Smite as a gavel to sound a wooden echo from the throne tree. 10 meters below him, the last 95 of RootBroth pressed to the base of the tree and fell silent.

"Telbred Im has fallen," Wrezona Ty noticed that no sound, not even a heavy breath, could be heard from the clan that had danced and chanted a moment before. "We are silent to listen for his spirit. I will watch the heavens to see the Comet of Omen that he will push to signal us that he has arrived with our ancestors. His great strength in life will flow into the power of this comet."

The clan raised a great howl to try to shake the ring of trees around the village.

"Warlord Fengor Ool has placed a name before me as his new captain. Korbec Oos! Stand before us!"

A growl of approval from the fighters followed Korbec Oos as he leaped to the highest tangle



root of the throne tree. But small cries from the unattached females confirmed Wrezona Ty's concern. Since there are so few heroes of war, they would have one fewer sire of children. Slowly, those in the center of the crowd gave way to leave a single female to stand alone. All eyes except those of Korbec Oos held fast on her.

"Tradition from many lifetimes has told us," Wrezona Ty waited for the silence to return. "The warlord and the captain are servants during every moment of the day. They break the life of an enemy in the day grow the life within the clan by night. If Korbec Oos is to be the captain, how shall I command him in ways of life?"

Korbec Oos continued to stand at rigid attention while the murmurs rose around his mate. Emllel Len, Korbec's mate, stretched taller and glared back in challenge to any other female.

"Does Emllel Len confirm her bond to this Oot? Or, will you reject him and free him for service to the clan?" Wrezona Ty called down.

"Honored Shaman," Fengor Ool barely hissed. "Your daughter will not deny Korbec Oos!"

The shaman hissed more softly. "She is about to become the most despised of all females. She must choose this fight herself!"

"Our pledge is greater than the bond of root to ground," Emllel Len's voice was a high keen, filled with anger at the question. "No Rend can part us. No Smite can break our embrace."

The slightest motion in Korbec Oos jaw spurred the warlord to jump halfway down the trunk. Fengor Ool's chest carapace was a claw's width from the captain's eyes.

"You will not speak!" Fengor Ool bellowed. "To be captain is to do all of the shaman's bidding. You are no longer a free Oot!"

"Emllel Len, you have chosen a difficult way," Wrezona Ty pointed Smite at her. To claim a captain, you too must be a servant of the shaman. You are no longer free as well! Do you sacrifice your needs for the good of clan – with the exception of sharing Korbec Oos as a mate?"

Fengor Ool took a step back from Korbec Oos to get a clearer view of her. Other males in the clan bowed to her as the females continued to stare in challenge.

"Reject him daughter!" Wrezona Ty cried in his soul. "I can give you only this single chance!"

"I will die at my mate's side," Emllel Len's eyes glowed bright gold and her mane of quills gleamed in natural oils. "If one day my mate must push a comet to Ootare, I will travel to the heavens to lend all eight of my limbs!"

Wrezona Ty slumped slightly as he heard the certainty in his youngest daughter's cry. With agility beyond his years, Wrezona Ty jumped from the throne to land next to Fengor Ool.

"Korbec Oos, kneel for a blessing!" Fengor Ool commanded. He steadied the shaman before stepping back.

"The comets foretold of a warrior on the day of your birth," Wrezona Ty placed Rend and Impale on either side of the captain's head. "Carry this mantle of prophecy into battle and live out the destiny of the heavens. You are the RootBroth captain!"

The clan erupted in bellows as Korbec Oos stood and returned to his place next to Emllel Len.

Wrezona Ty glanced at the four females as they pressed closer to the warlord. Although Fengor Ool would never acknowledge them without his shaman's command, he felt one caress his back plate with Cast's blades. Another tapped Smite on his lower claws in hopes of drawing his gaze. A more aggressive one looped her Rend around the mid-joint of the fighter's lower lateral limb, Lock.

"Your fate is equally sealed as that of Korbec Oos, my friend," Wrezona Ty hissed in his left ear bundle. "You must serve RootBroth more greatly!"

Wrezona Ty afforded himself a grin at the uncomfortable passion growing in his warlord. "Is there any other petition before the shaman can retire? I am quite tired."

A frustrated yelp sounded from all four females as each took hold of Fengor Ool in some way.

"Yes, I thought so," Wrezona Ty nodded. "The fighter is dedicated to his mission. It is his quest to conquer. And, on the occasion of great victory – or perhaps in response to great loss, the shaman will select a mate for a warlord. I find that in this day, we have both victory and loss. And, I must choose from among you to both celebrate and bear the burden to bring more warriors to us."

Wrezona Ty paused and looked to the females. They pressed still closer to Fengor Ool until it seemed he was bearing half of their weight.

"But in no day of my long life, have I seen so great a happiness and so dire a need. I see barely 20 warriors remain alive, and many have chosen mates," Wrezona Ty took a moment to glare at Korbec Oos again. "I must give our clan the greatest chance to return to strength."

Wrezona Ty stopped again – his clear eyes dimmed and flashed in a lively wink at his warlord. "I

command Fengor Ool, warlord of RootBroth, to accompany all four females to the mating marshes!"

The warlord's growl of surprise was cut short by the pull of more than 20 limbs. After a few slow steps, he willingly strode with them to the far door of the fortress.

"Soon, he will be as tired as I am," Wrezona Ty could see his sleeping hollow in the side of the throne tree. With a loud creak in Lock's lower joint, the shaman climbed into the smooth curve of wood and folded his limbs to rest.

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"Great Shaman!" Levrett pulled and pushed the bulk of the old Oot to create an annoying rocking motion. "It is near nightfall. You do not want to miss the comet of Telbred Im."

In a sleepy reflex, Wrezona Ty swung his missing arm, Cast, out to knock the youth away. The snap of his stump was enough to wake him fully. Each remaining limb stubbornly began to move, and the shaman climbed out of the hollow.

"I am awake, child," the shaman waved a real Smite to chase Levrett back. "Climb to the door and open it. I am behind you."

Wrezona Ty climbed around the perimeter tree trunks to loosen his joints. Levrett had wedged himself into the jamb of the door to hold against the counter weight, and the shaman stretched as he stood on the threshold. He looked at the yearling struggling to keep the door open.

"Be sure it closes, Levrett!"

The shaman walked toward the tallest tree in RootBroth lands. Seconds after the thump of the door, Levrett flashed past to hop thick roots and skip from tree trunk to ground and back. Soon, the child was far ahead, but his yelps of pleasure halted.

Wrezona Ty immediately crouched and flexed Rend and Impale and strained to hear any sound down the worn path. His Great Sight could spy a comet, but showed him nothing in the darkening forest. Finally, he decided to move forward silently to find what had happened to Levrett.

In ten quick steps, he began to hear the odd sounds of a BlueGreen voice. Raising Smite in preparation, Wrezona Ty moved to the sounds.

"Honored Shaman!" Levrett was suddenly beside him, but hopped back at Wrezona Ty's surprised howl. "I have found an odd fort."

"It was but a cube this morning!" the shaman reached out to touch the pearly surface. "It is nearly the size of a fallen tangle tree. It has filled the path and presses the forest on all sides."

"What does it say, my lord?" Levrett whispered at the factory continued to talk.

"The warlord tells me that all BlueGreen devices talk."

"But it does not say anything!"

Wrezona Ty clucked at the lad's simple thoughts. "Find an easy way around it for me."

In a moment, Levrett had found a rift through the neighboring tangle trees and led the shaman back to the path beyond the factory. He stopped as soon as he was on the far side of the factory.

"What is this white vine?" Levrett pointed to a cable that led from the factory to snake its way into the deepest wood.

"A question for another day," Wrezona Ty growled at the alien device. "Comets for tonight."

The pair reached the base of the greatest tangle tree. Levrett knew his place, and curled up at the base to catch some sleep before his master called.

"May the comets speak more than the BlueGreen box, Honored Shaman!"

The words kept the shaman from a single grumble as he made the long climb. Even the ache in Lock could not prevent him a chuckle as he remembered the boy's wish. After he pulled himself over the edge of the upper platform, he gasped in surprise. It was the clearest night in memory, and both moons were below the horizon. The familiar comets were all there, with a barely perceptible difference from the prior night. If there was a new comet, his Great Sight would find it.

"Push your comet firmly, Telbred Im. Give me a Comet of Omen to show me the right way..."

As soon as Wrezona Ty leaned back to give his four eyes a panorama of the heavens, the shaman saw it. From his first year, at Levrett's age, he used his great sight to memorize the pattern of the stars. It was not a boast to say that an old, wise shaman could recall pondacti – the millions of visible points in the heaven that would never change. It was the comets that stood out. They were both out of place, and in their infancy, a fuzzy imitation of a star. And it was in the trance, the distant mind that listened for the comet's words, that the shaman found the secret council.

"Telbred Im, you have chosen a reddish comet," Wrezona Ty sighed in happiness. "As the best of fighters should. I await your words, Comet of Omen."

Wrezona Ty entered the trance and the Great Sight narrowed to watch this one point.

Throughout the night, he followed the comet's swing high overhead and drop back down to the tree line. The words Wrezona Ty craved finally came.

"Unite. Unite. Exile!"

"I do not understand," Wrezona Ty's hiss was no more than whisper, but he heard no other sound but the distant scrapes of Levrett's careless climb.

As light leaked into the sky to erase the comets, Wrezona Ty brought himself back from the comet-trance. The boy was already face-down at his lower claws.

"Levrett! I did not yet summon you!"

"Your pardon! Your pardon, lord," Levrett's voice was a high squeak. "BrambleStone attacks!"