

# **ASHEN SNOW**

## Scorched Earth

(Round 1 Entry)

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# PROLOGUE

## A DECLARATION OF WAR

Are we not generous for the noble gift of eternity?

For death by rot is naught; Life by cold is certainty.

Those with eternal life shall live, we have made it so.

We have purged the sun, eternity is under our hold.

Yet, despite all we've given, some still disobey.

They'll find others, and more are led astray.

We've seen many like them, they mock our gifts and wishes.

Our many horns will sing for them! Final death awaits the wicked.

Those who dissent will breathe their final lie.

Those who are branded for final death shall die.

May the soil underneath them swallow their cries.

May those who follow them meet our many eyes.

# CHAPTER 1

## SLOW BURN

Unknowing darkness. A darkness surrounded by a cramped, humid, and cold room.

In turn, the darkness surrounds a once nameless woman, now named by her own will; Quin.

Her eyes are shut, yet she still sees, her gaze defined by a puncturing blue light on her forehead, denying the darkness its purpose. The light, as dim as it was, shined off her broad armor's blackened sheen, made of nothing but hardened steel.

The walls around Quin, however, are made of wood. Wood that had come from trees. Trees that came from 'soil' and 'water.' Language that Quin isn't familiar with in the slightest. Ornate carvings are adorned onto the walls, only interrupted by two double-door gates, both in either side of the room. Next to one of the gates, a power hammer with a shaft and a trigger stands against the wall beside it, rivaling the gate's size; Quin's hailmaker.

Fervorous uproar. Spirited unrest. Clamor from the outside, pouring down above Quin through muffled shouting.

For a brief moment, an exaggerated sigh leaves Quin's lips. She takes out a piece of paper she had kept between her neck and her armor's padding; An invitation, the reason she's here in the first place. She skims over it momentarily before slipping it back in.

It's been about four hours since Quin had entered the crossroads. She had spent three of those hours standing in this room, waiting for its gate to open.

She was promised to wait for only a maximum of thirty minutes.

After a couple more moments of solitude, the unknown voices and shouting around Quin

begin to die down. It's only replaced by a loud whisper, a stream of thoughts and concerns that flow like water toward no destination in particular.

Quin is only able to make out certain sentences, which is a step-up at the very least.

“... Okay— Should've turned out fine— Pretty sure I did that, yeah...”

It was vibrant voice, one that Quin immediately recognizes before turning towards it.

“Ms. X?!” Quin yelled to the voice as loud could've yelled, calling out the voice's name. Despite her yelling, her tone remained as it had before, like ice running against rough steel.

Relief washes over her as she immediately gets a response. No more waiting.

“Quin? Hey, Quin?! Wha— What are you doing still in the Colosseum?!” Miss X boomed. Footsteps approach the gate as light from the outside begins to seep through the cracks.

“You told me to wait in the gate room,” Quin firmly retorted.

“If I *told* you to stay in there *forever*, would you?” Miss X pressed.

...

“Fair.”

Quin approaches the exit gate before feeling around for the gate's handles. She finds them, along with a wooden beam that secured the gate from the outside. As soon as she pulls the beam out, Miss X opens the gate before Quin could.

Light floods the room, blinding Quin momentarily. When her sight readjusts, she's greeted by something quite unordinary...

... Miss X's lips are slightly pursed, and her eyebrows are furrowed.

Quin and Miss X exchange stares at each other. It lasts for only a second before Miss X lets out a deep sigh.

“What happened to the fight?” Quin asks.

“Reeeeescheduled until an hour from now,” Miss X drags, rubbing her temples as she straightens her posture. “*Instead*, we had to get some backup entertainment for the crowd.”

She plants a palm against her forehead before sliding it down her face. “Don’t even get me started why. Nalagrom’s missing, tech’s on the fritz. . .”

“Uh, excuse me,” Quin interrupts, “Who’s *‘Nalagrom?’*”

Miss X forces a smile. “Didn’t have the chance to tell you, sorry. He was supposed to be your competitor.”

“No worries,” Quin assures, “I’m sure you didn’t want to overwhelm me with details anyway, especially given the little time I spent here.”

Quin *was*, however, given an explanation of the rules for qualification: Be there, or forfeit.

“Was he disqualified?” Quin asks.

“If it weren’t for the sudden blackout, then that would’ve been the case. He’s *beyond* lucky.”

...

“Hey, uh. . .” Quin interjects, her voice noticeably more quiet than before. “You look exhausted.”

“*Right?*” Miss X suddenly shot. “I’m. So. *Tired.*” She throws her hands up in the air, “I have *no* idea why. Don’t even get me started on this *splitting* headache. . .”

Even though Quin only knew Miss X for about an hour, it would be anyone’s guess that Miss X’s current state is a rare one, her usual optimistic and energetic aura having lost some of its spark.

Quin takes a step back away from Miss X, her hands up as if in surrender. “Well,” Quin begins, “Do you have any idea where Nalagrom could be?”

“No,” Miss X tersely responded.

“Don’t wanna talk about it anymore?”

Miss X holds back a giggle for a moment, her glow becoming brighter, even it’s just a little. “Yeaaaah. . .” She points a thumb behind her, “I’m gonna go for a walk. . . See if that clears my head. If you want, you can come with.”

“Understood,” Quin confirms, “I’m not used to boredom, either.” She had already pulled

her hailmaker close, resting it atop her shoulders. She's the first to take a step out of the Colosseum's gate room.

Miss X follows close behind, her usual smile having returned for an unusual outing.

Leaving the Colosseum behind with Miss X behind her, Quin is met with the familiar sight of a glimmering city; The Business District. A place where a shop or other sort of trade market was just a block away from someone's home.

Still, 'familiar sight' may be pushing it, as this is only Quin's second time here. She had only seen this city once, or any sort of civilization for that matter. It was strange, but she's seen stranger. Knowing that was comforting, at least in its own special way.

However, unlike the first time Quin had walked through these streets, the path ahead had lost its usual crowd of tourists and window shoppers, spare the occasional passerby.

As for the buildings, none tower quite as high as one in particular, crowned by a large, golden emblem of a lotus flower. Clouds of smoke and steam swirl around it, piercing the sky.

Quin finds her gaze drawn to such an icon, feeling as though it's peering right back at her. She turns back to Miss X. Despite Miss X's initial mood, her attention was also drawn to the surrounding scenery. The lights around them have begun to flicker as a chill breeze through the air. Miss X *had* said the 'tech is on the fritz,' but Quin hadn't realized the *entire city* was having issues until now.

It takes a moment for Quin to say anything until Miss X takes notice, her eyes meeting Quin's puzzled look before turning her head towards her with a smile. "Something on your mind?"

Quin moves her hailmaker from her shoulders to her chest plate, wanting to get a better look of Miss X. "Just that building over there, the one with the lotus flower on it," Quin answers.

"Oh, that place?" Miss X asks, tilting her head. "That's the..." Miss X trails, "Uh..." As Miss X spoke, her glow begins to flicker a little.

For a second, Quin could see the pavement behind Miss X, right through her body.

“The... what?” Quin puzzled as she continued.

...

With a groan, Miss X shakes her head before looking at Quin again. “... *The Fox Den!*” Miss X suddenly blurts, “It’s called the Fox Den... Yeesh, didn’t think it was even *possible* for me to forget that.”

“...Huh,” Quin simply replied. With a sigh, she feels a sinking feeling in her chest. Whether it’s from watching a friend being in such a state, or from something else, she can’t tell.

Everything, all of this, was a wonderfully terrible feeling.

... Followed by pain. Not Quin’s own pain, but someone else’s. A man that she hadn’t seen before crashing against him. She didn’t even realize he’d been shouting at her, with unknown words and language she’s never heard.

“Fuckin’ hell,” A gruff, horse voice chastises under Quin. He groans in pain between sentences. “Shit, watch where you’re fuckin’ goin’, damn.”

Miss X, peering to the side of Quin’s armor, clicks her tongue as she raises an eyebrow. Having gotten a good look of the man, her expression loosens again. “Oh,” Miss X realizes as she squints her eyes, “I think that’s a hobo, Quin.”

Quin finally turns her head towards the direction of the voice, expecting him to be right in front of her.

“Down here, dumbass,” the voice groans again.

As requested, Quin looks down.

She’s met with a burning gaze of the man she had stumbled onto. His face is covered in rags. In fact, his entire body is covered in torn clothing and other oddities. Even if Quin was watching where she was going, there’s a chance she would’ve mistaken him for a trash can.

Or a corpse. A burnt one, specifically. Yet the man still breathes. The little skin that

would've shown through the man's rags is replaced by a charred, red and bumpy mess, spare for his crazed eyes. It's not rotting away or anything, and there are no other grave wounds to be found, but the smell of charcoal is still fresh from his body.

“...Uh— What?” Quin puzzles, barely showing a reaction. Miss X watches from behind like it's a play.

“I wouldn't go down that way if I were you,” The burned man tersely warns.

Raising an eyebrow at the scene in front of her, Quin kneels down to get a better look of the burned man. “Why?”

Having just sat upright, the burned man outstretched his arm behind him, pointing toward Fox Den. “The man who caused my scars had sought refuge over yonder.” He clasps his hands together. “You'd be wise to steer away from the path, as it's laid with nothing but ash.”

“Bluffing,” Quin accuses, “the 'Fox Den' is still intact.”

The burned man lets out a heavy groan that rattles what's left of his vocal cords. “Not what I mean, you fuckin' idiot,” the burned man scowls. “Is your memory shot, or haven't you noticed the *huge* trail of smoke blowing against that place?”

Quin looks toward the Fox Den again. As expected, the smoke and steam are still surrounding it.

“All that smoke is from one man?” Quin asked.

The burned man shrugs. “That's all I'll say,” he concludes. “Beware the cloaked, hooded man. Beware his lies. If you ever, *ever* cross paths with him, know this...” With crooked knees, the burned man stands over Quin, who was still kneeling. “...Don't poke the hornets nest. Don't be like me.”

“Knowing my luck, that's probably what's going to happen,” Quin adds. Although unsure of what a 'lie' really is, she disregards it as just another strange word coming from the burned man. She stands up, resting her hailmaker on her shoulders once again.

The burned man's eyes narrow at Quin. “Why tempt fate?!” he badgered, his voice hoarse against his throat. “Why make the same mistake I made, seeking danger when it may



consume you like fire?!”

Quin’s expression softens at the man’s words, even if only by a slight amount.

“I don’t know,” she answers honestly. “I guess I’m headed there to find out.”

Despite the first impression, Quin smiles at the burned man. “Still, thank you for the advice.”

“Just do me a favor and watch where you’re going next time, glass eye,” the burned man retorts. “You almost crushed my spine.”

...

“Uh...” Quin trails, “Bye...”

“Yeah. *Bye.*”

With Miss X still following behind, Quin waves at the burned man before walking in the same direction they were headed toward in the first place.

When they move out of sight of the burned man, however, Miss X quickly steps in front of Quin, stopping the both of them. They had come across a fork in the street, yet Quin’s course of direction had not changed.

“You’re still heading towards the smoke?” Miss X asks.

Quin nods firmly, taking the time look back toward the sky again. Unlike the first time she looked, the stars have gone. They’re instead hidden by blackened, opaque fog that cover the heavens above. However, it’s not dense enough to hide the blue tint beginning to fade in the sky. She then looks back at Miss X, her expression having hardened.

“One man cannot possibly cause such weather,” Quin states. “This, I am certain.”

Miss X’s lips curl into a smile before she hides it behind her hand. “Funny. You should probably find a good reason for going there, though,” she simply responds. “I’ll... probably keep walking around until the streets get busy again.” She then stretches her arms above her shoulders, letting out a yawn.

“Again, the fight’s in an around *hour*. Make sure you’re there when the sun comes up. Don’t make my headache worse, please,” Miss X gently reminds.

Quin nods.

With a twirl of her heel, Miss X turns her back toward Quin before strolling down the other direction. However, after a few seconds, she stops before looking up toward the fogged sky, then looking back at Quin.

“You miss the stars?”

...

“A little,” Quin admits.

With Quin having the last word, Miss X takes her leave with the usual smile on her face that she had been missing. As does Quin, walking into danger as she always had. . .

Chasing fire with a heart of null and a body of ice, as she always hoped.

## CHAPTER 2

### OMEN'S PROMISE

Having left the Business District behind for a long while now, Quin is met with the sight of a rocky, humble hot spring. A rustling of dried leaves and bushes sings in the air above the steaming waters below. Bricked walls of stone and earth are laid against the hills, polished and smooth.

A constant chill is spread across the springs. Cold wind blows against Quin's face, yet a shiver does not run down her spine. Her attention is, yet again, caught by the sky above her.

Gray snowfall, a blend of ash and ice. Quin had not *completely* entered the area yet, so she can see the clear divide between soil and snow beneath her boots. Snow only falls within the boundary of the shrine, nowhere else.

The color of the snowfall is, without a doubt, the consequence of the pungent smoke blowing above the springs. It's unordinary for Quin, who had expected the snowfall to be completely tarred instead, electric to the touch.

Still, Quin's not here to sightsee. It took her thirty minutes to reach this location. She has only another thirty minutes until both her competitor and herself are disqualified. She continues her investigation, leaving footprints behind her that go straight to the earth below, a mark of her hefty weight with the armor she dons.

Her goal is simple: Find the hooded figure the burned man had spoken of, and find what's causing the smoke before sunrise.

As Quin treads against the path while nearing the source of the smoke, the sound of rustling leaves had begun to grow louder. Suspiciously so. She readies her power hammer by her side, wielding it with both hands.

Her suspicions were proven when she hears a voice calling out from behind the evergreen.

“Curious. . .”

A bellowed voice. This one being smooth as silk and colder than the snowfall.

It came from above. Quin’s on low ground.

She promptly stops in her tracks before turning toward the direction of the voice. She finds nothing.

“We weren’t expecting a visitor. . .”

Another voice. Lilted and barely a whisper, yet it echos through the icy air. It’s from a different spot. Quin doesn’t bother to look for it.

“Leave. Take another step, and the snow will become your eternal resting spot.”

Quin scoffs as she continues marching forward. She had taken many steps, and she continues to do so. Uninterrupted. As she hikes up the hill, unimpeded by the many layers of snow under her, she hears whispers around her as she approaches it.

The whispers sound. . . worried. Increasingly so. The persuasion had stopped, or rather, the bluffing. A mere scarecrow’s tactic.

The theatrics had certainly peaked her attention, though. Something to remember.

Reaching the peak of the hilltop, the surrounding smoke grows denser and warmer, threatening to rob the air of its cold. The heat, although a minor annoyance to some, had made Quin feel a shiver down her spine, straight to her chest. It was an odd feeling, as she was used to feeling nothing but the cold.

More obviously, the snow on the ground had gone from gray to ash, having already been robbed of its white shine. Quin was, unfortunately, much more used to this.

As the ashen snow falls, embers rise, shedding light on two figures in the distance. One is as dark as the ashen snow under them, hard to discern. The other is as bright as the embers, his brown cloak flying against the smoked fog around him, his face completely hidden under the shadow of his cloak.

The burned man was correct. They’re here.

“She’s here!” The same lilted voice from before had suddenly shrilled, its initial hushed tone having vanished. An ember grows larger, revealing the source of the voice: A wisp, trapped between life and death.

And death calls for them, in the form of a light tremor in the ground. It’s harmless up here, but...

“RUN! She’s going to eat us!”

... The whips don’t think so.

The air is now filled with squeals and other chatter before the surrounding ‘embers’ begin growing brighter. Rather than rise, they fall. Very quickly. Preferably behind trees or under the snow so the woman they were ‘warned’ about wouldn’t hurt them.

With silence filling the air, the two figures turn their attention toward Quin before turning back toward each other. It’s immediately broken by the sound of bickering between them.

... Very loud, one-sided bickering. The dark figure, with voice with a tone as deep as the void with a crown to match, is seen swearing at the hooded figure. Their responses were as shallow as the grave he’s being threatened to be put in.

“I TOLD YOU THE ‘GHOST PLAN’ WOULDN’T *FUCKING* WORK!”

“Okay.”

“JUST... JUST, LOOK! SHE’S HERE NOW!”

“Okay.”

“YEAH? ‘*OKAY!*’ YOU GOT A FUNNY PLAN FOR THAT, FUNNY MAN?”

The hooded figure shrugs before yelling to Quin (with a ‘reasonable’ volume).

“Hey! Tin-can! Can you come over here for a sec?!”

“NALAGROM, WHAT THE FUCK—”

The dark figure continues to argue, on and on as he tries to take the hooded man’s attention.

The hooded man, however, had certainly gotten Quin’s attention, all with a single question; A single question that spurred many more, half of them already answered:

Was that Nalagrom? Yes.

Did ‘ash lay in his wake,’ as promised by the burned man? Yes.

Why hasn’t he attacked her immediately? She didn’t know.

How much time does she have left until the competition begins?

Quin looks at the sky for the last time. The smoke had completely blanketed the area from where they stand.

She doesn’t know if the sun’s up. She doesn’t know if there even *is* a sun.

All she knows is that there’s smoke in the way, and that Nalagrom wouldn’t be here without some sort of purpose. As she said to the burned man, she’s here for answers. Nalagrom had to have been here for some reason. Any reason.

If anything, however, Quin’s not looking for a fight.

Wordlessly, Quin slides down the snowed hilltop before walking toward Nalagrom. As she approaches, Nalagrom slowly claps his hands before approaching her as well. “How’d my trap work?!” he hollered as he asked Quin.

“It didn’t,” Quin deadpanned. . . Her usual tone.

The dark figure behind Nalagrom steps out of the smoked shadow, but the light fails to shed on his surface. “Harsh,” he mused to Nalagrom with crossed arms, shaking his head with what would’ve been a coy smile; No mouth is visible on his face. “I told you, there’s a time and place for theatrics.” He keeps a slow, but steady pace as he continues to catch up with the group. The sound of crunching, sizzling snow add to the sound of his footsteps.

Nalagrom stops in his tracks to look back at the dark figure. “And I told *you*, that it’s anytime. Anywhere.”

Halting her heavy footfalls, Quin stands before Nalagrom, waiting for his attention.

“Mr. Nalagrom?” Quin asks with focus, waiting for a response.

She gets one. Nalagrom’s gaze is still directed toward’s the dark figure, but he addresses Quin nonetheless. “Pfft. . . ‘Mister’ Nalagrom? What am I, rich? God, I’m not the kindest guy here by any means, but c’mon. I’m not *that* bad.”

And as Nalagrom takes a step forward. . . He suddenly thrusts his face right up Quin’s

own, the gnashing of his sharpened teeth appearing from the darkness of his veil as quick as he lunged.

...

No response.

Nalagrom steps back again. “Tch, what are you, a monk? Or do ya’ have that armor on ‘cause you’re just that tough of a crowd?”

The sound of sizzling snow is extinguished as the dark figure stands beside Nalagrom. “And, if I may ask, what are *you*, Nalagrom? A clown?” He dusts off smoke on his shoulders. “Because any other person would’ve greeted them with a simple ‘hello.’ Remember, we’re here to get that wish, not to play *peek-a-boo* with the enemy.”

Funnily enough, Quin was the only one who’d forgotten. This was all for a wish, right.

“What? You wanted to kill her, though. What?” Nalagrom puzzled.

Figures.

“Well...” the dark figure enunciated to Nalagrom. “*Despite* my suspicions, she hadn’t attacked us. At least not immediately.” He then looks toward Quin, giving her his full attention. “You have a fair display of manners, at least. That in of itself is a rarity.”

With an outstretched hand, the figure greets Quin with a welcoming gaze from his starlit eyes. “I’d prefer if you’d call me Baladeth, ma’am. Do you go by ‘Miss’ or ‘Missus’ by any chance?”

“You know my name?”

“Despite your late arrival, yes,” Baladeth responds. “We’re competing against each other, after all. Quin, right?”

“Then that’s all you need to know, Mr. Baladeth.”

...

“You still haven’t shaken my hand yet, *Quin*,” Baladeth reminded.

Resting her hailmaker atop her shoulders, Quin reaches out to meet her hand with Baladeth’s. As soon as her palm presses against his, her chest jumps a little before her

hand recoils back, shaking it off.

“That...” Baladeth drags, “was a controlled gesture, a lukewarm touch at best. My apologies, I hadn’t known you were sensitive to heat, much less my own.”

“I had,” Nalagrom blurted. He takes a peek at Quin’s expression again, or the lack thereof.

“Only a snowflake like *her* wouldn’t be able to take the heat.”

His only response was a question.

“Did you cause this smoke?” Quin straight-forwardly asked the pair of men.

She would’ve asked more questions, like: How did you know my name? Or: What in the world was that ghost setup that happened earlier?

She decided against it.

Nalagrom leaned forward as he breathed in to speak. Before he could, Baladeth held his hand above where Nalagrom’s face would’ve been. A gesture to stop. “No,” Baladeth gently replied. “Now that we got that out of the way, I’ll ask you a question in response. It’s only fair.”

Quin simply nodded, allowing Baladeth to continue.

“Why come here this late at night, if at all?” Baladeth inquired. “It’s almost morning.”

For a first, simple question. It was an oddly loaded one.

“I wanted to find the cause of the smoke covering the sky,” Quin answers.

“Well, I assure you, we weren’t the one’s that had caused it,” Baladeth corrects. “Still, I’m sure you have more questions to ask.” Baladeth’s voice becomes considerably harsher as he speaks, “Like, for instance, about the little tale that Nalagrom told me to tell this shrine’s posthumous inhabitants. Particularly about how outrageously stupid it was?”

Nalagrom threw his hand up in the air, having cast a fireball with it as it soared above the sky. Whether it was intentional or not was left in the air. But the fireball was not, having landed on a pine tree behind him as it burst into flames.

Quin raised an eyebrow to Nalagrom’s reckless display of power. She thinks about the burned man again. Poor guy.



She also thinks about how little time she actually has until the fight.

“Hey man,” Nalagrom chastised, “I’d take presentation over practicality *ANY* day of the week.”

“You made me lie to those poor ghosts that Quin here would’ve eaten them,” Baladeth rebuts.

“And *you* hadn’t told them to ask her if she could twirl or dance,” Nalagrom hisses.

“A-Ahem!” Quin loudly coughs before snapping her fingers.

Just like that, Baladeth and Nalagrom turns to Quin, both of them shouting at her.

“What?!” they yell.

“Tell me where the smoke’s coming from, and I’ll leave,” Quin intoned.

Silence fills the air for a moment, right before Baladeth could speak, Nalagrom steps in front of him, his expression hidden by his hood, along with his intent.

“Suuuuure,” Nalagrom singsonged, “Just follow me.”

Quin, without thinking, takes a step forward toward Nalagrom before stopping. She remembers what the burned man said, and how he looked.

“Don’t poke the hornets nest.”

Not much of a choice though. He’s her only lead, save for the ghosts she can’t talk to, especially since they’ve hidden away.

She looks back at Nalagrom, he’s already moving forward.

“Understood. Lead the way,” Quin confirmed as she joins him, Baladeth following soon after. “Make it quick though, we don’t have much time until the fight.”

...

“The fight?” Nalagrom quizzed.

...

“Nalagrom...” Baladeth sighed as they continued their walk. “Nalagrom, you got— You got to be fucking kidding me.”

“I swore it was a day until we even got to know! No fucking shot.” Nalagrom bellowed. “She’s obviously lying.”

“Negative,” Quin corrects. “I don’t know what a ‘lie’ even is.”

Baladeth stopped in his tracks before facepalming behind the two. “Thought Nalagrom here was the only one with a poor grasp of a dictionary,” he chided. “You see, a lie is—” Before Baladeth could even breathe the next word out, Nalagrom darted a glare at him, fanning a straightened half horizontally toward his neck.

Only Baladeth notices a red glimmer from the darkness underneath his cloak.

“—Nothing important, I promise,” Baladeth concluded before moving on. “But still, instead of preparing like anyone else would, we’d just sit around and do nothing in a hot spring?”

“Don’t tell me you didn’t need it,” Nalagrom retorted.

...

“Fair,” Baladeth responded.

With that said, they had reached where Nalagrom had led the other two. The snowfall had stopped, yet the smoke remains, albeit much thinner than before. The sky above is a vivid orange; the sun’s almost up.

Continuing their approach, they come across a very scenic view. Marvelous, yet even more humble than the springs that Quin had left behind: A canyon, with rivers that have no visible bottom, and a rushing current that could chip through steel.

The most notable aspect of the flooded canyon would be how it twisted and turned. The flooded trenches form crosses and curves with each other, creating a looped current with no clear end.

“Hey, Nalagrom,” Baladeth inquired. “This canyon doesn’t look like a natural.”

“Neither is anything else here,” Nalagrom quickly countered.

...

Quin stops before turning to Nalagrom, “The smoke has thinned. Where’s the source?”

“Oh, it’s uh. . .” Nalagrom trailed, looking around the canyon before pointing toward a cliffs edge. “It’s over there.”

Quin nods at Nalagrom. Without hesitation, she dashes toward the area Nalagrom had directed her to.

Not much is there to be seen. It’s just the same sight of a flooded trench. Having stepped closer, however, she notices tunnels under the rivers below. Many of them are adorned on the river’s walls, along with a massive hole, one that stands out from the rest.

She has yet to see the bottom, nor what she was looking for.

“Mr. Nalagrom,” Quin stated in a huff, “I don’t exactly see what I’m looking for.”

“Look harder,” Nalagrom reassured, his voice still close behind.

And that’s exactly what she does, despite her waning patience. It takes a long moment until she finally gives up. “Nothing’s down there, Mr. Nalagrom—”

As she turns her head to face Nalagrom, she finds him— Right behind her.

“NOT YET!” Nalagrom cackled at the top of his lungs. Subtlety is left to the wind, and so is the wave of his hand, throwing a wave of flame from his palm as if it came from his pocket. It cascades in the air in a blaze until it right towards Quin.

Still, the flame itself had lacked power. The damage was to be as minor as a burn from touching a hot stove.

It, instead, had completely and utterly disabled Quin. She groans as she falls onto one knee, her armor becoming a furnace to her as she struggles to stand back up, tightly gripping the shaft of her hailmaker. The shivering in her chest is back, much worse this time. No pain, just numbness.

Then, with all his strength and a grunt, Nalagrom tries to shove Quin as hard as he can to knock her off balance, beginning to tip her over the edge of the river. “*Hasta la vista, Motherfucker—*”

Quin grabs Nalagrom’s arm.

She then tips over completely, sending both her and Nalagrom into the river. With quick thinking and a couple of swears, Nalagrom forms a bubble of fire around his head before they're submerged into the depths below.

And as they sink into the current, only one sound manages to penetrate the tide they can't escape. A deep voice that had remained from the surface.

“NALAGROM YOU FUCKING DUMBASS.”

## CHAPTER 3

### ASHEN RUIN

Flowing. Endless flowing water.

The only tunnel they had managed to fit through was the largest one from before. With Quin's armor, she had sunk like a rock, but her grip on Nalagrom's arm had not faltered. Neither had her strength, as the waters were chilled to the touch, her shivering having vanished as soon as she was submerged.

No sunlight is cast onto the tunnel. If it wasn't for the flame around Nalagrom's head, Quin would have surely been blind.

But she isn't. And she sees multiple forks in the tunnel, having crossed with each other much like the trench she fell into.

All of them look like they've been dug instead of naturally formed, yet their structure is nowhere near a perfect circle. Some go up, some go down. Some have visible air pockets. Considering that Nalagrom had cast a flame bubble around his own head, it would be safe to assume that he can't breathe underwater. Neither could Quin, as she hadn't needed to breathe.

So she swims; In her own way, at least. Riding the current, Quin shifts her weight toward the tunnel's frosted walls, striding with the flow of the tunnel until her legs could reach them.

With a squat, a push, and some effort, Quin bounces from wall to wall, tunnel to tunnel. Only the ones with cracks above the water's surface were navigated through. Whenever she had the chance, she glided right below an air pocket, sticking Nalagrom's head through the water's surface. Although the rush of the current is deafening, Quin still had her own

moment of reprieve knowing that she wouldn't be carrying a corpse after this.

Having most of her boundless effort spent, the game of ping-pong lasted as quick as Quin's thinking. The tunnel takes a sudden shift in direction: Straight down, sending Quin and Nalagrom plummeting into the depths below.

One moment, they're riding the current. The next, they're riding a waterfall, into the dark cavern depths below.

The both of them fall into another pool of water. Unfortunately for Quin, she still sinks like a rock as they're submerged once again.

Fortunately for the both of them, the pool had a bottom this time, one that Quin had landed onto with her boots, carrying Nalagrom under her shoulder. The fire around his head had dissipated a while ago, most likely while they were falling just now. For now, they're blind.

Quin then took her first step, having expecting resistance from the water.

But the water didn't resist.

Her foot had fallen with stride. Her step was frictionless and weightless. Walking in the water felt lighter than air, as fast as the current they were swept under mere moments ago.

It doesn't take long for Quin to resurface the water. Both Nalagrom's cloak and Quin's armor were completely drenched, but intact, albeit with a few cuts and scratches from the ordeal. The sound of water crashing against her ears is soon replaced by a brief flicker of silence, save for the waterfall behind them. . .

Followed by sputtering and coughing from Nalagrom. Then followed by the sound of a thud as Quin releases him from her grasp without any grace to it.

With a groan, Nalagrom gets up on his knees before adjusting his very crooked posture.

"So. . ." Nalagrom huffed, "Find the smoke yet?"

. . .

Jokes? At a time like this? Why?

... Rather than ask Nalagrom these questions, Quin had settled for a statement.

“Lights, Mr. Nalagrom,” Quin ordered.

“Tch,” Nalagrom scoffed. “Why should I light up the place? Cause you said so?!”

“Because we can’t see,” Quin replied.

...

“Fine,” Nalagrom scowled before snapping his fingers, a small flame burning from his fingertips. “You owe me, though.”

Quin didn’t respond. Not only did she refuse to entertain his jests, she refused to waste the little time they had to argue.

... He can do so with Baladeth for all she cares.

If they don’t leave soon, the sun will come up. If the sun comes up, and they’re not in the Colosseum, they’ll both be disqualified.

...

Oh. That’s why Nalagrom pushed Quin down here, huh? For a cheap victory? Was his purpose here that vain?

Still, upon meeting that revelation, Quin keeps a straight face, albeit with some effort this time.

“Hey, Berry-Blue,” Nalagrom called. “We should probably keep moving instead of standing around like a statue. I know it suits you but still...”

Quin’s eyelids, although shut, twinge a little Nalagrom’s fresh new comment.

“Then lead the way,” Quin responds.

Nalagrom, having stood up at this point, walks away from the pool they fell into, bumping shoulders with Quin in the process. “Yeah, whatever. Pansy.” Still looking straight ahead, he flips Quin off with a flaming finger as he turns a corner.

“Probably gonna lead to some dead end anyw— woahoh—HOH!”

If Quin could’ve rolled her eyes, she would’ve. “What is it?”

Nalagrom doesn't respond. He just stares toward the beyond.

Quin approaches Nalagrom anyway, raising an eyebrow as she readies her hammer. And as she turns the corner herself. . . She's greeted with another cliffside, and a sight to behold.

Light. Sunlight. Sunlight that pierces through the ceiling above. Streams of falling water carry the light, turning it into a bright blue, reflecting its waves atop the expansive walls. Walls covered in massive holes, like it had been riddled with massive bullet after massive bullet. Smoke is bellowing from them, constantly.

The smoking walls, however, surround something much more breathtaking. . .

A city made of blackened, glimmering quartz. It now lays in ruin, denied of its purpose. Bridges that lead to nowhere, now carrying an endless flow of water, overflowing at the ends. Towering monoliths that once held people, now hollowed out, housing only pools and waterfalls, which fall into bottomless pits below.

It was something new and unknown. Quin and Nalagrom may be the only people from the surface to have seen such a place. Especially in this state. Give or take a couple of years, and this place would become completely flooded.

It was peaceful. All of it.

...

The tournament. Right.

"We should find a way out," Quin said.

Nalagrom immediately looks at Quin, shooting her a glare. "And miss all of THIS?!"

Quin nods.

Taking a step back from the edge of the cave's cliffside, Nalagrom maintains eye contact with Quin, shoving his hands into his pockets before jumping backwards, straight into the unknown.

...!

Quin rushes to the edge, looking for where Nalagrom fell with a worried look on her face.



Her expression immediately hardens again when she finds him surfing across the cliffs edge. He's fine, having slid on one of the many bridges carrying the water in them. Seeing how fast he's going, it's absolutely the same weightless water that Quin had fallen into a minute ago.

And so, she follows with her hailmaker in her hands, jumping off of the cliff before as a chilling breeze flows against her.

They both jump from bridge to bridge, with Quin trying to catch up with Nalagrom, and Nalagrom seeming to run away from her. They could've just walked instead. What's the point?

...

Well, it's faster this way, actually.

One burst of flame after the other, Nalagrom propels himself from bridge to bridge, pillar to pillar. A simple tactic for a magician. With exceptional agility, Nalagrom's cloak flows with the fire bursting from his hands, leaving a swirl of light and flame. Quin could swear he was making dumb faces at her with the apex of every one of his jumps.

In turn, Quin swiftly pulls the trigger of her hailmaker. It rumbles and shudders before she releases a hefty swing, followed by a massive trail of frozen shrapnel behind her, using it as momentum to carry her to another slide. A complicated tactic for a soldier of snow.

"Hey, hard-ass?!" Nalagrom yelled from afar. "Wanna see a trick?!"

Quin doesn't respond. She learned her lesson with the burned man. It's not a good idea to look anywhere but forward if you're on the move.

A lesson Nalagrom learns immediately after speaking. His attention is still on Quin as he prepares another job. With relative ease.

Until another tremor shakes the earth.

Nalagrom's knocked off balance before he makes a slight course correction to reorient himself. *Not watching where he's going*, his back hits a solid quartz pillar, falling onto the ground below.

...

“I’m good!” Nalagrom shouts. “Thanks for asking!”

With a sigh, Quin continues her path toward Nalagrom. Finding him splayed on the ground, she jumps from the water before falling onto her feet. Both Nalagrom and Quin find themselves within a ruined temple. Seaweed and other bits of uprooted flora hang from the edges of the walls.

The embers are back. They are simply that— Just embers, rising from the ground.

Quin looks down, finding the ground covered in ash and debris. . . and the sight of Nalagrom struggling to get up again.

“The sun’s up. Mr. Nalagrom,” Quin informs, her tone having smoothed but quickened. “We’re late.”

“God. What are you, my mom?” Nalagrom scolds, looking up at Quin. “I got Baladeth already telling me this stuff every morning. I’m only fine with just *one* of him.”

...

Quin tilts her head. “Excuse me?” She puzzled.

“You got water in your ears?” Nalagrom hissed, the gums of his sharpened teeth beginning to show from the darkness of his hood. “Cause I don’t need someone yapping in my own pair. ‘*Yeah. I fucked up—*’ Who gives a shit. . .?! Your fault for being so stupid anyway. No one else would believe some stranger that easily, dumbass.”

Was that supposed to anger her?

“I’ve come here with more questions than answers,” Quin retorts coldly, her expression dull and unchanging as she surveys the room. “Forget the smoke for now. We need to leave. We may still have a chance before disqualification.”

...

Alright. Quin needs escape method. The cave’s walls are too narrow. And the ceiling’s way, *way* up high. However, one of the buildings stands taller than the others: A spire, as sharp and beautiful as the quartz it’s made out of.

Quin nudges Nalagrom with the underside of her hailmaker’s shaft, urging him to get up

from the floor. He's fine. He'd somehow have a trick under his sleeve anyway. Anytime, anywhere, right?

With a grunt, Nalgrom swipes the weapon away before getting up.

## CHAPTER 4

### HASTED EXTINGUISH

Coming up to the spire, Quin and Nalagrom walk up it's many, many steps.

Ornate carvings are adorned onto the blackened, quartz walls, only interrupted by the few pillars still holding them together.

There is no darkness. A view of death lies below, riddled with massive pits, ash, and embers.

It was pointless. All of this was.

Why did they even have to be here in the first place? What even was the reason?

Many minutes pass as they continue their ascent. Nalagrom, having spent a fair amount of his energy moving about, had suddenly come to a halt.

"Hey—" Nalagrom exhaled, leaning forward while catching his breath. He's gripping something in his hand, attached by a chain. "I have no idea. . . how you're this stubborn. . . But I need a second."

Oddly friendly and sudden. Suspicious.

"Better not be one of you're 'plans' again," Quin answered, halting her step.

"Oh, seriously?" Nalagrom pipes, his breath having suddenly come back to him. "Not even a chance? I'm actually exhausted here."

"... You sure look like it," Quin mumbled under her breath. She begins taking a step forward once more.

"Funny," Nalagrom commented. "Didn't expect a doll like you to just not listen to others."

...

Seeing Quin stop in her tracks had just given Nalagrom the burst of stamina he needed.

“*Finally*. I struck a nerve, huh?”

No response.

Nalagrom cross his arms, a toothy grin that’s so obvious, it reflects off the blackened quartz beside him. “It’s obvious! No sense of direction. *No* grasp of style— Hell, I could probably leave you in some room, and you’d just *stay* there? Wouldn’t you. Cause you’re obviously some emotionless husk, huh?”

...

Nalagrom’s right up at Quin’s face at this point. “You’re probably still hard of hearing, huh?!” His smile widens. “Let me make myself clear, *Doll*.

*Toy.*

*Plaything.*

*Puppet!*

**Doll!”**

A deafening crack echos through the caverns.

And a cold reddened bruise is cast from the darkness of Nalagrom’s hood.

Quin’s hand hangs in the air, still outstretched before returning it to her hammer.

“I am not a doll. *Clown.*”

The last thing Quin sees in a casual lens is another red glow coming from under Nalagrom’s hood. She only slapped him once, yet two more appear, brighter than the first. Rage begins engulfing him whole.

No heat came from this rage. The room instead got colder for it.

A blaze of fire erupts from where Nalagrom stands before he lunges himself at Quin. With no time to react, she’s immediately hit by the impact of his body against her own, thrown against the wall behind her with a grunt.

The impact had immediately sent shivers in her chest. She's not sure if it's from the heat, or something grander.

Before Quin could make another move, Nalagrom jumps off of her. As a matter of fact, he had jumped of the spire as well.

His next words are indiscernible from the flame he had created. He hovers in the air as he is lifted by his own rage, no one else's.

Like a phoenix, he danced in the air as if it was his stage. With his flame as his song, he had danced in the air. It was a glorious display of life by fire.

And death called. The blackened quartz walls return to a pale color for only a flicker.

The embers from the ashen floor beneath them begin to swirl into a spiral of dust behind Nalagrom, inspired by the fiery emotion coming from Death's Apprentice.

"QUIN!" Nalagrom yelled, pointing toward his assailant. "YOUR PURPOSE IS TO DIE. HERE AND NOW."

...

Nothing happens, spare for a massive tremor in the ground.

"What?!" Quin hollers?

"What do you mean, what—?"

Hulking mass. Finite ouroboros. All laid before Quin's eyes, and right behind Nalagrom.

A mass shapeless, now shaped. Molded by its chain of iron shells of snake head after snake head. Many hideous forms hidden behind many steel masks. It ruptures through the floor, consuming the storm of embers that had formed above it. It leaves nothing but a dense fog of smoke behind.

Yet ghosts can't die. Nalagrom's dance was one to resurrect the dead.

Or bring them back to their body. And brought back they have been, yet they cannot speak, for the Molded has no head to bare a mouth. Yet they haven't died, for the Molded is blessed with eternal life. Their souls were no longer theirs the moment they fell into its severed neck, now a void for a maw.

This civilization was brought to an end today, and no later.

It was punctuated by the screams of the Molded Serpent.

As the screams echo throughout the air, the blackened quartz around Quin shines again. This time, with a constant glow that lasts as long as the Molded Serpent's shouting.

Such a shout had also caused Quin's hailmaker to rumble and sputter without her input.

And as the screams halt, everything around Quin becomes broken for a moment, having spent its energy without deciding so for itself. Quin pulls on her hailmaker's trigger: No response. . .

Missing the competition had become the least of Quin's concerns. . . Especially when there's a massive wave of fire headed her way.

"Not good," Quin mumbles to herself. The fire's coming. *Fast.*

Her only option is to duck behind a pillar as cover. As the flame washes over her, the pillar shields her from the flame itself.

It doesn't, however, shield her from the intense heat. A groan escapes from her lips as she leans against the pillar for support, her metal armor retaining heat rather than cold this time.

"Hiding, dipshit?!" Nalagrom yells from afar. Quin can't find the breath to respond. She feels like she's about to melt.

Suddenly, the quartz pillar Quin had hid behind flickered a bright light again. Its glow is. . . chilling. Frosted to the touch. Having rested against the pillar, Quin's steel armor had quickly cooled down again, revitalizing her as she catches her breath.

"Of course you would. It's the *practical* thing to do," Nalagrom continues.

Such a boon could not be taken lightly, however. Such technology had been manipulated by a million screams of those without mouths. The sound of rusted screeches and bellows fill the air, like that of a train; A signal that the Molded Serpent will return.

"I know what you are!"

Quin had made two enemies in a single day. Why? Why?

“Just. A. FUCKING—”

“...Idiot,” Quin cried. “I’m just a idiot. I’m sorry.”

Quin expected retaliation from Nalagrom.

She had gotten something else instead.

“D—” Nalagrom stuttered, “Dumbass. . . Yeah. Suits both of us, huh?”

...

Another tremor shakes the earth under Quin’s feet. She doesn’t care.

“No,” Quin admits, stepping out from the pillar’s hiding spot. She jumps down the spire, landing on the roof of a caved in quartz house below. “No it doesn’t. . . For either of us.”

The end of Quin’s sentence marked the beginning of the Molded Serpent’s re-entry as it tore through the spire, leaving a massive hole in its center.

“Shit,” Nalgrom whispered to himself as his flames withered, beginning his descent back down to Quin. “You know. . . if it wasn’t for me, we wouldn’t even be here.”

Quin shakes her head before as the sound of crashing and destruction had continued to surround the two.

The Molded Serpent had not retreated back into the earth. It had begun wrapping its steeled second skin around the spire, preparing to consume Quin from above.

Quin then spots its smoking, gaping maw. A cascade of snake heads, only ending with a maw similar to the head of a worm. . . Along with a steel, upside cross inside the back of its mouth; The bottom half, a circle. The top half, an upside-down T shape. Behind it, a massive, unblinking glass eye.

“And if it wasn’t for me,” Quin answered back before shuffling to the left, “This *thing* wouldn’t be here. Probably. I’m pretty sure it followed me, anyway.” She tilts her head to her left for a second, wordlessly urging Nalagrom to move to the left.

He obliges. When he moves out of the way, the Molded Serpent descends onto where they had stood before. It leaves behind nothing but a bottomless pit as it burrows into the earth, disappearing once more.



“So, if I may ask, why are you here, Mr. Nalagrom?” Quin inquired.

Nalagrom pointed a finger at her, throwing his other hand up in the air. “See, that right there,” he complained. “You sound just like Baladeth, *especially* when he’s about to give me some lecture. I don’t need a goddamn therapist—”

Quin then looks at her own hand, the one she had hurt Nalagrom with.

It then had dawned on her. She had never healed anyone, or rather, anything with her hands. She never had the chance to.

“Baladeth wouldn’t have slapped you,” Quin gently interrupted. Her tone softens considerably as she speaks. “You just need to find your own reason to be here, right?”

...

“Y-Yeah...” Nalagrom answered before stuttering again, “No...? No.”

...

“...I don’t know.”

Quin smiled, “I think we’re one and the same.”

“No fucking shot,” Nalagrom chided.

Quin looks up at the ceiling for one last time. Without the Molded Serpent in the way, she can see that same sunshine piercing through the ceiling.

Without the constant gaze of a headless beast who claims to have one, she could almost see the stars.

Miss X was right. Quin did miss the stars. A lot. Yet she hadn’t admitted it.

She simply had to fight for it. Nothing as complicated as a grand purpose. Nothing as simple as recklessness... or hatred.

“Mr. Nala— No. Nalagrom?” Quin asked, correcting herself.

“Oh. Oh shit... Yeah?”

“If we make it out now, we’ll still have at putting on a good show in the Colosseum.”

With a warm smile, Quin rests her hailmaker on her shoulders. “Well? Wanna just get out of here?”

...

With a grin spreading from ear to ear, Nalagrom chuckled through grit, smiling and sharp teeth. “Yeeeeeeeah. Sounds like a plan.”

...

Nalagrom’s smile fades for a second. “Well?” Nalagrom grumbled, “What are we doing standing around?”

Right as Nalagrom finished his sentence, yet another tremor shakes the earth beneath them.

Luckily for the two of them, they’re already on high ground. . . which means they can surf from bridge to bridge like before.

Well, at least Nalagrom can. Quin’s hailmaker is out of commission, but. . .

“Good point,” Quin answers before pointing as far as she can. “Do what you do best. Make a display. See if it’ll even bother chasing you.”

Nalagrom crosses his arms. “And what if it doesn’t?”

Quin rests her hand against her chest plate. “Then the plan will change. You would certainly know. . .” She clenches her hand into a fist, “Trust me.”

...

“Got it, Quin,” Nalagrom beamed.

No more distractions. It’s time for Nalagrom to do what he does best.

It’s time for some presentation.

Both Quin and Nalagrom scatter away from where they stood, splitting up. With renewed energy, they make a mad dash toward the highest location they can find; Preferably in opposite ends of the cave.

The surrounding tremor worsens before finally, the Molded Serpent ruptures through the floor again, right in the middle of the city as it plows through it, searching for its

target. With a rusted bellow, it first finds Nalagrom, who's certainly delivering on his part. Fireworks, trails of flame, the quartz flashing around him. All of it had swirled together as a dance of passion, nothing else.

Above all else, Nalagrom had made sure that he'd flip the Molded Serpent off any chance he'd get.

...

No response from the Molded Serpent.

It continues its search as it circles around the ruined city, paving trenches and collapsing buildings as it does so. It finds Quin as she dashes up toward the heavily damaged spire. The blackened quartz glows brighter than it ever had before as the Molded Serpent bellows the loudest wail it can muster. It digs into the earth once again, disappearing for the last time.

No doubt, its patience had run dry.

Nalagrom watched as the Molded Serpent had just ignored him. With no spectators for his theatrics, he stops as he stands atop a building. He kicks a rock before stretching his back, picking his teeth with a fingernail. "Welp," Nalagrom mumbled to himself through grit teeth. "Plan's changed."

Meanwhile, Quin reaches the top of the spire, dropping her hailmaker on the ground. She outstretches her arms by her sides, standing right in the middle of the spire's glowing roof. She then does something pretty stupid.

"Nalagrom!!!" Quin yells to the air as loud as she can. She bangs her chest plate with a fist. "Aim for the mouth!!!"

She can only hope Nalagrom had heard her from here. It's the first time she yelled that loud.

And death called as loud as it could. The entire spire shakes, causing Quin to stumble. Immediately picking up her hailmaker on the floor, she darts toward the spire's edge, the farthest away from where Nalagrom is.

The spire glows as bright as it ever will. And so did Quin's hailmaker, sputtering to life once more under the Molded Serpent's shout. She readies a swing, as does her resolve.

The quaking grows stronger and stronger... until...

The Serpent bursts! Straight from the middle of the spire!

Quin swings her hailmaker, straight against the Serpent's armor. The force sends both Quin, her hailmaker, and the Molded Serpent flying in the opposite direction.

Quin cannonballs into a wall, her hands burning from the heat expunged from the hailmaker.

The hailmaker catapults into the floor, embedding itself against ash as it smokes in the ground.

And for the Molded Serpent, it had completely course-corrected. Straight. Toward. Nalagrom.

Unfortunately for Nalagrom, he hadn't heard Quin's cry for attention.

Fortunately for Nalagrom, he knows a weak spot when he sees one.

Gripping an obsidian pearl in one hand, he clenches a fist with the other with a red, searing hot glow.

He inhales. He's preparing himself.

It's the smart thing to do, after all.

The Molded Serpent's chilled, smoking maw falls atop Nalagrom. Yet Nalagrom's fist meets the steel cross within it.

The artifact is denied of its purpose. The Molded Serpent rests once again.

In an instant, Molded Serpent's armor engulfs Nalagrom for a mere moment. Only the armor digs into the earth. The mass inside had lost its cohesion, melting instantly.

Yet, even though there's fire, no embers burn.

The only recourse towards such an act of violence? One, final tremor in the earth. Without a source of cold, the late Serpent's armor begins to overheat...

Nalagrom stares at the ground as he puts his hands in his pockets once again. A smile grows on his lips.

“Oh? Explosion time?”

...

Explosion time. A big one. One that ruptures the walls around the cave as water floods at a rapid pace.

And then, like a volcano, everything inside is sent straight up the air.

They made it out.

# EPILOGUE

## THE EMBERS HAVE SILENCED

Unknowing sunlight. A sunlight surrounded by empty streets and shattered quartz.

In turn, the light surrounds a once unlikely bond, now bonded; Nalagrom and Quin.

Nalagrom's eyes, are shut, yet he's still awake, his white smile reflecting the sunlight like a mirror. Both Nalagrom and Quin, as dim as they were, had shined brighter than the shattered remains of blackened quartz beside them.

As the pair both sit up from their brief rest, they exchange stares at each other. One of their eyes are closed. The other's own pair hidden behind a cloak. Yet, both red and blue, they shine brightly toward each other with a smile.

Next to Quin, her hailmaker stands beside her, worn and tested; A mark to remember by.

Whispering murmurs. Worried chatter. Many of the people within the Business District had gathered around the wreckage surrounding both Quin and Nalagrom. They were mostly simple people of differing folk, of different skin and fur and other oddities that were considered the norm.

The clamor had yet to die down, but one voice is louder than the rest.

"NALAGROM?!" Baladeth had suddenly shouted from within the crowd, his voice plagued with worry as well. "WHERE ARE YOU?!"

Nalagrom hadn't needed to turn toward the voice, as Baladeth had already found the answer to his question. With relief crowned, Baladeth had run toward Nalagrom as quick as starlight.

Sparing the poetics, Baladeth had hugged Nalagrom. Tightly.

After all Nalagrom has been through in the course of thirty minutes, this was something

he needed for a long time.

Nalagrom was the only one Baladeth could hug without burning them, after all.

A relieved sigh escapes Quin's lips as her expression softens. She grabs the shaft of her hammer, standing up. With the sunlight pouring down on her, it had taken more effort than she was used to.

The shivering in her chest wasn't there at the moment. Replaced by a wonderful feeling; She finally got to see the sun.

...

It hurt to stare at it. She covers the glass eye on her forehead with both hands. The thud of her weapon falling grabs Nalagrom's attention.

"Hey Berry-blue," Nalagrom warned, "Don't do that shit."

"Sorry. Can't see," Quin blankly apologized, still covering her eye.

Baladeth nodded as he pulled away from Nalagrom, straightening his 'jacket.' "I'm glad to say this... Nalagrom has a point," he simply states. "Still. This is one of the rare moments Nalagrom had been brought back *conscious*. Good job."

Quin nods. "Affirmative—" she says with a sudden pause. "Or, thanks, or something."

"Alright then," Baladeth begins before suggesting, "I think the both of you have forgotten about one thing."

"Uh, yeah, what?" asked Nalagrom.

...

"THE TOURNAMENT?! THE REASON WE'RE HERE!" Baladeth shouted. "IT'S IN FIVE MINUTES, GET READY!"

Complete silence fills the air.

"Okay," Nalagrom noted.

...

"P-Pfft."

Baladeth lowers his voice immediately, kneeling down to Nalagrom. “Nalagrom, this is actually serious. Please don’t laugh.”

Nalagrom shrugged, “Okay.”

“P-ffft— Hehe-he...” Snickered someone other than Nalagrom. Their voice was as soft and lilted as a cloud.

Baladeth held a groan in his “Okay, who the hell is—”

“Ha-ha-HA-hahaha—” Quin giggled loudly as she covered her mouth, hiding a wide smile. Her once cold expression had beamed with radiance, not flickering even once. A doll can’t change their face, can they?

If only Miss X could’ve seen it. How’s her headache doing, anyway?

...

Oh yeah, the tournament.

“Hehe— We should leeeeeeave,” Quin dragged between breaths.

Nalagrom, dusting off his drenched and burned and scratched cloak, flips Quin a thumbs up. Rising to his feet, he turns the toward the Colosseum with the usual smile on his face. “Ditto,” Nalagrom agreed, “Let’s put a good show for these guys.”

Right as Nalagrom took the first step forward, Baladeth had spoken up behind him. “Nalagrom?” Baladeth gently inquired.

“... Yeah, what?” Nalagrom quizzed.

“Good luck,” Baladeth nodded.

“... Thanks.”

...

Carrying her hailmaker, as well as her smile, Quin follows behind Nalagrom as they get ready to fight in the Colosseum. Informally, they were simply preforming for the audience. Maybe they could even top the backup performance, despite how ill-prepared they are.

Still, no plan lasts forever. Nor the reason to fight.



Quin and Nalagrom approach the main entrance of the Colosseum, side-by-side. The Colosseum looked like a Colosseum. That's all Quin cares about right now, especially with the shiver in her chest. The sun was awfully warm today, and so was her steel, *black* armor; It caught heat like a cold.

Still, she'd be damned if she couldn't put on a better show than Nalagrom.

Turning a corner, the competitors walk under the entrance's archway, Quin is, yet again, met with the familiar sight of the few friends that Quin had made here.

Of course, it was no-one other than Miss X. With her constantly glowing body, you couldn't miss her unless you were any sort of blind.

Especially since most of her color had returned. She's especially vibrant today, actually. Her smile had returned as she fidgeted with her leg, leaning against the archway in wait. Despite Quin's heat-induced daze, she notices Miss X's eyes tracing along the engravings on the walls of the archway, humming to herself in a perfect tune. She had done this until her sight falls on both Quin and Nalagrom.

Her smile only widens from there.

"Hi, hi! Hello! Hi!" Miss X effused. "In the nick of time, huh?"

Quin nodded to Miss X, right before looking to Nalagrom. Surprisingly, it was just now that she noticed him stuffing food into the shadow of his hood; The same food she had seen sitting in an outdoor aisle. It even still had the price tag on it.

Eh. No harm done.

"Correct," Quin responded to Miss X.

A loud gulp escapes Nalagrom's throat as he inhales his food. "We almost paid with our lives."

"Wow, that's... Wow!" Miss X sang before stepping away from the wall, looking up toward Quin. "Anywaaaaaaaay, hey Quin! You look absolutely *exhausted!* How's it going?"

"I stared at the sun."

Miss X gasped with awe at the comment. “Really?!” she beamed with narrowed eyes, “So do I!”

...

“You’re not— *You’re not joking. . . Okay,*” Miss X simpered before promptly changing the topic. “At least you knew when to come. And you did!”

Quin opened her mouth to speak, but hesitated for a moment as she averts her gaze from Miss X. “Yeah.”

Bumping against Quin’s shoulder, Nalagrom steps in front of her with an equally colorful expression that’s practically glowing. “Yeah, not gonna lie. . .” Nalagrom started. “Well, at least not now, anyway. . . We thought we were cooked when the sun came up.”

“Oh really?” Miss X coaxed as she leaned back in the air, her hands clasped behind her. “That. . . was probably my fault. Should’ve been more clear, sorry.”

Miss X then begins pacing in a circle as she speaks, shifting ‘eye-contact’ to Quin as she enunciates her speech. “I told Quin here that she should *be here* when the sun comes up. Its standard procedure around here to at least come *thirty minutes early*. You know, so you’re not *late*. Which you weren’t! Good job!”

Taking a deep breath, she takes a good look at Nalagrom for a second. “By the way, hello!” Miss X greets him again, “Nice snack you got there, huh?”

...

“What— Uh, yeah,” Nalagrom stammers. “Yeah you can’t have it, it’s mine.”

Miss X’s lips part to speak, at least until she gets a good look at Nalagrom. A *very* good look. Her eyes narrow as she frowns. . .

Until she doesn’t. “Oh!” Miss X chirps with a smile, “Hey, you’re the other interloper here! Nalagrom, right?”

...

Nalagrom drops his snack on the floor. “What? You’re. . . smiling? Huh?”

“Well, yeah!” Miss X replied, “I’m happy to see you.”

“What a day,” Nalagrom groaned. “Yeah, I ain’t used to having so many people actually *happy* to see me. Usually, they’d... Uh...”

“Hey,” Miss X gently interrupted. “Everyone deserves a smile. It’s rare these days.”

...

“Yeah.” Nalagrom admitted, “Yeah, it is.”

“You know what’d make me smile even more though?” Miss X suddenly, “If the both of you made your tags more visible and then got in your gate rooms. Show’s about to start!”

Nalagrom nodded, and so did Quin.

From between her neck and her armors padding, Quin pulled out something red from between her neck and armor; A golden bell, attached to a red necklace.

All Nalagrom did was loosen the clasp of his cloak.

“Very good! Get in the gate rooms! We start iiiiin...thirty seconds! You should hurry... Now.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Nalagrom chided, crushing the food that he dropped as he made his way to the other gate room.

As for Quin, she looks at the one right beside her before Miss X steps in front of her sight. She’s smiling. A usual.

“Thanks, by the way, Quin,” Miss X hummed.

Quin’s eyelids tightened as she tilted her head. “I’m sorry. For... *what* exactly?”

“For clearing up my headache. Mom told me.”

“Mom?” Quin asked.

The last thing Quin could clearly remember was Miss X, pointing toward her right; The same direction the Fox Den stands. Although the prolonged heat had begun getting to her head, she wasn’t that conscious about it. After all, what’s some more fighting going to do? Right?

Both Quin and Nalagrom had entered the Colosseum’s arena. There were a lot of people who had come to see their fight. Only a few had stood out.

One man among the audience, black as void, had occasionally cheered for Nalagrom before the show had started. He was the only one. If more had cheered along with him, he would've surely gone with them.

One girl among a pedestal, as bright as the sun, had introduced both Nalagrom and Quin as they had entered the arena.

And one woman, who had sat beside the girl with a focused smile. She was adorned in gold and red. She merely sat and watched.

And then, the theatrics started, as there was no need for pointless fighting when a point could be made on one's own accord.

Fire blazed. Hail had fallen. None had found their mark, for the fight would have ended as quick as it came. They both gave the crowd what they had come for, a dance of fire and ice.

And as Quin and Nalagrom danced and sung with the hiss of a blaze and the sigh of ice, their endurance had begun to wane. It had become a battle of the last one standing.

But they stood strong. As they have before.

Otherwise, they wouldn't have gotten to show off the finale.

Quin had transformed the stage with the might of her hammer, while Nalagrom had danced atop it. They hadn't the idea of who would win, but they had a hunch.

And as Quin used the last of her energy to design a wondrous stage for Nalagrom. They pass glances at each other. It was their moment, they could finish each other here. Right here and now to secure their victory.

Instead, Nalagrom smiles at her.

And Quin smiles back. She doesn't lay a hand on Nalagrom, not anymore.

Instead, she lifts the stage above him, right where she wanted. After all, the stage master decides where the dancer goes. Through her own will.

She swipes Nalagrom's tag away, the last of his energy having been spent as well before tumbling to the floor.

Quin is the last to stand, but not for long. With the sun beating down her neck, she uses the last of her strength for a final display.

She holds up Nalagrom's tag. A sign of an eternal bond, now under her hold.

As the curtains fall upon the stage, Quin follows as well. The last thing she heard until she wakes up again are the concerned cries of a voice she immediately recognizes— Coming from the vibrant girl.

Maybe this was exactly what she needed. Not simply an escape from a past she doesn't know. Just to meet more people, like her new friend. A new purpose after the next...

In due time. When she wakes up.

## Afterword:

From the Author

IT'S DONE. 40+ PAGES. MORE THAN DOUBLE THE AMOUNT OF THE AUDITION.

I'd like to end everything off by thanking Chocod, my competitor for this entry. Nalagrom was very fun to write, and so was Baladeth.

If you can, read Chocod's other entries as well. If any, **at least** the audition. It's not required reading, but it gives a lot more insight on who Nalagrom and Baladeth are, and where they're (generally) from.

I'm sure I did a good job with his characters, as I'm sure he is with mine. We're basically writing fanfic about each other's stuff, so it's only reasonable that both interpretations of the characters are a little different. That's the fun part, though. I had fun.

Lastly, expect an extension of the epilogue for this entry. *Despite the already massive page count*, I'd like to elaborate on the short ending. . . When I have time, at least.

As usual, if you're a participant and want to reach out to me for any reason, **please do**.

(Also, Quin's dialogue spelling 'Ms. X' instead of Miss X is intentional.)



Cheers,

Alaa "Woodensponge" Ramzi