

THE INDWELLING GOD

HONORS THESIS

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By

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The Indwelling God

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Abstract

The Indwelling God is a script for a potential video game. There are three protagonists – Equii, Vlanci, and Rekin - who attempt to overthrow the antagonist, Afanasi, at different periods. As the story progresses, each protagonist will help the game-player learn more about the world and develop a bitter hatred towards the antagonist. Philosophical themes will include ideas of eternal recurrence, duty versus familial ties, the dualistic nature of man, and the difference between duty and opportunity. There are several scenes within each chapter that span lengths of time which are meant to allow the player to play the game; whereas, the scenes themselves are checkpoints that the story and the player must progress through.

The Indwelling God

By: Ben Crawford

Characters

Don Equii – 45; Volvecan; Colonel in the Volvecan Army; wife, Mariela

Vlanci D'Aubigne – 28; Getaen; Prince of Getae; Father, Leo D'Aubigne, Older Cousin, Afanasi Dabigov;

Rekin Adolphus – 49; Kievan Rusan; Grand Advisor to Afanasi Dabigov; No relations

Afanasi Dabigov – 51; Kievan Rusan; King of Kievan Rus; Cousin, Leo D'Aubigne, Younger Cousin, Vlanci D'Aubigne;

Leo D'Aubigne – 52; Getaen; King of Getae; Son, Vlanci D'Aubigne; Cousin, Afanasi Dabigov

Auriane Bagot – 30; Kievan Rusan; Captain in Kievan Rus Air Navy; No relations

Diego Profeta – 55; Volvecan; President of Volvec; No relations

Settings

Prologue – Algarrobo – A full moon is out with owls flying around. Eyes are seen in the branches. Matoya and Equii have shining silver armor on. They are scouting a road horse hooves and cart tracks have worn. The clearing is a couple miles from their base camp. The edge of their post is almost at the end of the Pine Forest. Afanasi and the rest are dressed in black cloaks with silver swords hanging at their sides except Afanasi who has a black sword.

Resignation Scene – Equii is in the ragged civilian pants he joined the army in while Matoya has his full armor on. Two new gold medals are sitting on top of a letter addressed to Equii with a regal seal that sits on an empty, poor desk. Equii's sole luggage bag is jagged with only his armor inside. The rest of the tent is bare but new, as if nothing has ever been stored in it.

Equii's Home – On twenty acres of cleared land, wheat fields lay on one side and assorted fruit and vegetables lay on the other. There is a circular path up to his front porch. The house is modest, painted a dull yellow, made with dried clay bricks. Forests extend in the back of the property as well as outside the fields. The inside of the house is more festive. There are paintings of the Volvecan palace, his countryside, the President (with his signature), as well as furniture in bright reds and greens. Although small in appearance on the outside, the house is quite expansive with five rooms and a big kitchen. Equii displays

his swords above his couch in an “X” shape, and his armor is kept in a trunk; both have signs of rust on them. The house is well kept, but only to the point of necessity as no one ever comes to visit it.

First Battle – Open plain, both armies are on small hills and battle in a pit between the two hills. Behind each army is a wooded area. The trees hide the sun, creating a spray of sunshine across the battlefield. The command center for each army is in a tent behind their respective armies but in front of the woods.

Equii leads his troops to a marshy area; the brush is thick to hide his men but the path is wide. The sun is now to the back of Afanasi, but does not gleam off his armor as it does that of the rest of his troops.

Afanasi’s Tent – The whole Kievan Rus army’s tents are black, but Afanasi’s stands taller and wider with a red stripe running the middle of each side. The inside is lavish; on each side of the huge feasting table is the drapery of his palace. Hanging from ropes from the top of his tent are swords, spears, and axes. One desk encases his chair on three sides. There were piles of books on each side that read: History, Strategy, Religion, and Philosophy.

Fort Pasnea – The fort stands on a hill. It is triangular shaped with sharpened posts on all three sides. A river ran beside it while woods were all around it as well. The tops of the watchtowers are unnoticeable from outside the fort. The sun is hidden during the battle until Equii appears and it peaks above the opposite woods.

Getae City Castle – Vlanci's room is adorned with golden artifacts and trinkets on every wall. His monstrous bed is in the middle of the room. There are quotes and verses written

on every wall, too. The wall he continuously stares at reads, “The transcendence of the soul is found on earth.”

Dining Hall – The table is massive and circular with a maroon and blue cloth draped over it. The walls are painted likewise with golden draperies hanging from the high ceilings. The chairs are skinny and tall. The room isn’t very wide but is extremely long with the table in the center. There are four doors on each side of the room: one to the kitchen where caterers waited by the door and one that exited to the main hall. The other two exited to the wings of the castle.

First Expedition and the Vauquelin – The Vauquelin is made of wood with two big engines and two smaller ones at the back. It has small wings on the sides, pointing down and to the back, painted light blue. The bridge is an elongated room made of glass. The deck was maroon with railing all around and open slots on each side for a boarding ramp.

The terrain surrounding the Vauquelin is dry and desolate after the city until it ran over a lake, which signaled mountains and cold. After the mountains, there flows a grand river connected Getae to Volvec and ushered the woods of Volvec in. The horse paths that led to the Volvecan city were strewn with carcasses and abandoned carts.

Getae City – Outside the Palace – The city is built around the palace and is surrounded by a circular, thick concrete wall, which houses archer-towers every quarter mile. From the palace sprouts six main roads that houses the market, army, and religious sectors. Houses are tightly packed together and ceremonial and oratory places are in the center of each sector. The whole city has a blue hue to it and the public buildings and monuments are bathed in a maroon light from the ground. Streetlights are prohibited except on the most

desolate streets because the stars shine so bright, unhindered by a moon. Only a few buildings, aside from the palace, can be seen outside of these walls and all four are on the cardinal direction lines. One is an observatory, one a sightseeing attraction, one a university, and the last a monument from the lost ages.

The Southern Sea – The Sea is a blue-green with lime cliffs separating the land from the sea. There are no houses or villages to be seen from where the Vauquelin hovers. The wall that surrounds it is 100 feet high, and the Vauquelin sits on top of the spraying water, barely perceptible. The ocean swirls below the two airships in different patterns as the fight rages on; sometimes it shows monstrous faces and looks as if it will swallow the entire world, and at other times, it shows symbols of courage, lions, and eagles.

The Ending – Until the haze and mist disappear, the world is grayed out. It cannot be seen except with the whispers of the heroes. The sun wanes in the final days of the world, turning from a dull red to a gray-white speck in the sky. On the first days when the world turns over, the sun is still small but has a yellow tint and radiates warmth and brightness. Stars can be seen shining with a couple supernovae sights in the background to show that other worlds are beginning as well. The mountains have a blue breeze blowing around them, and the snow is a soft white. One peak reaches higher than the others do, and this is where the heroes stand to survey the world. The battle destroys many of the mountaintops, but not this one, and Rekin rebuilds the other mountaintops after Equii leaves. The final picture is one of Rekin walking towards a faraway point, and a constellation in the figure of Vlanci.

Chapter One – Don Equii

Prologue

Don Equii and Matoya joined the military early, around sixteen or seventeen. They are in the same regiment, and, though Matoya has achieved a few ranks higher than Equii, the two friends know they're equals. They are out on a routine patrol mission in the forest of Algarrobo, with Equii in the lead, when they stop at a clearing to rest.

As he sits down on the grass, Equii says, "It's a boring night."

"It's always a boring night. We haven't had a fight since we joined, and now here we are, four years later, with brand new armor on," Matoya retorts.

Equii laughs, "Yes, but wait until the day they need us, wait until we ride gallantly into battle and save the day."

Matoya scoffs, "We'll be generals of an army with no soldiers before that happens."

Equii has a distant look on his face. "Alright, let's go."

Matoya nudges him up, and they get back on their horses. Nearing the edge of their post, they hear voices from deeper in the woods. Matoya stops as Equii smiles and walks closer. Cautiously, Matoya ties up his horse, and they start towards a faint light and wisps of smoke. They crouch behind the bushes and watch as four men lay a small body on the

ground. Matoya unsheathes his sword and begins to get up, but Equii holds him down. The four cloaked men draw a circle around the small body then make a fire around it. As Equii and Matoya look on, the four men stand at the corners of the body and draw their swords. The two hidden men immediately stand up and reach for their swords, but halt when they hear chanting. They notice the swords of the cloaked men have been stuck into the ground in front of them, and they have fallen into a trance. Equii and Matoya linger a little longer, unsure of what is happening. Suddenly, the trees brighten into a dim green with black shadows forming monstrous pictures of wild animals on the trunks. The green light sends a shockwave all around them, knocking the trees down, and, as the body remains untouched, an apparition appears above it. It has a human shape, with indefinite features, but childlike. It vanishes when Equii's and Matoya's horses neigh. The four men, awoken from their trances, pick up their swords, and guard the body on the ground. Equii and Matoya unsheathe their swords as well, but, with their positions given away, decide to flee back to their base.

Equii's Resignation

The two friends haven't spoken to each other in a few days. Matoya has just found out Equii intends to resign today and is hurrying to his tent.

"What are you doing?" Matoya asks Equii, who is packing.

"I met someone; I'm leaving."

"Does this have anything to do with the other night?"

Equii's eyes grow wide. "Matoya, what did we see? I don't know, but I didn't join for that. I wouldn't know how to defend people from things like what we saw," his voice trails off, and his eyes glaze.

"We can't quit now; we can stop that!" Matoya exclaims, but Equii waves him off.

"I know, I know. That's what we joined for, but I met a woman. . . . I was introduced to a woman. . . . I received a message about her, from the president." Equii looks down, then back up at Matoya. Matoya understands. He shakes his friend's hand and walks out. Equii sighs and looks at the new medals he received for their report of the events the other night.

Meeting Mariela

Equii decides to ride alone to her house. "Mariela," he thinks aloud. He takes the letter out of his pocket. President Diego urged him to leave the army for this woman of nobility. Diego has described her as a, "Princess without the title; lonely, but strong and decisive." She is a couple years older than Equii, but the president's urgings are more like orders. He received his commendatory medals, but burned them to show Mariela his devotion to her, and sets off on the journey to her villa.

She awaits him at the end of her gated road with a bow in hand.

"Hello. Don Equii?" she questions.

"Yes. Mariela, then?" Equii asks, dismounting his horse to bow.

She nods. They look each other up and down, and Mariela smiles at him.

“You look handsome. I was afraid you would show up in a military outfit. I wouldn’t have known what to think as I can’t handle the thought of my husband in war with the blood and the fighting.”

Equii responds, “No, those days are behind me now. Here. I made these clasps for you.” Equii hands her a pair of gold hair ties, and she puts them in her hair. “Now,” Equii asks, “I want to hear all about you.” He puts on a smile and holds her arm to walk her to the house.

20 Years Later - Last Days at Home

Equii tries not to rummage through the mail quickly. He hurries through the letters hoping not to find a conscription notice. His mind wanders as the mail pile falls from his hands to the floor; he hears his wife, Mariela, heave the wooden front door open. She has seen from the window what Equii suddenly recognizes, two horses charging at full speed on the trail to his house. He can’t tell what type of riders they are; while he strains his eyes to see them, his wife tries to rush him inside. The messengers, with their blades drawn, ride on the side of caution. They holster their weapons because they see Equii unarmed, wearing an unendingly baffled face, and yell apologies at him for their urgency. Equii steps aside from blocking the gate and leads them to his stable. Their urgency subsides, as they each fall from their horses, hanging by their stirrups inches above the ground, from exhaustion. After tending the men and preparing lunch, Equii and his wife wait for the two young men to regain their senses. Their eyes see the woman first and widen. As Equii knows, he has

been fortunate enough to meet her long before the war began. She has held the upper-hand from the start.

Mariela says, "Come, messengers of the state, and bring us your news over supper."

As they each sit down, the messengers look more and more worried as time passes. Equii knows they have something on their minds, probably him, and wishes for them to speak.

"Don Equii, sir, we do not wish to bother you, but the general could not wait on the mail to arrive. He requests your entry into the military. He also says you will be given a colonelship upon entry."

Equii steals a look towards his wife and leans back in his chair. Matoya is the only one to know Equii's past; he might also be the only man able to tempt him into joining.

The courier interrupts Equii's thoughts, "You know, sir, the general told us of some of your adventures together, and a lot of the men were hoping to serve under you."

His pride surges; Mariela gives him a long, amused stare. She knows his past; though it was not controversial that he was a soldiering man, she hasn't seen that side of him in twenty years.

"Sir, we were told you objected to the war by our general. He would like for you to join our cause."

"Matoya? He never could leave me in peace. I've not spoken or even been seen since the war started and he sees it as an act of protest."

"He said you had fought with him before."

Equii takes a moment to recollect. "We have, but how should he know my intuitions now?"

“The general thought you might say that. He told us to reply, ‘A man of convictions never changes’.”

Equii and Mariela laugh.

“Quite true,” Equii replies.

“He also told us to mention Afanasi’s ruthless nature. Villages and churches in his warpath are burned down. With little or no survivors.”

Startled, Equii asks, “Then, why are we the only ones in this fight?” His voice grows louder and louder. “It is clear he does not simply wish to enforce a change of government. He wants to rid the world of Volvekans.” He stands and pounds his fist on the table. “How should every other nation react if this was their country?”

“Are you ready to join us, then, sir?”

Equii looks to his wife and calms down. “No, give me the night to think it over.”

At Night

That night, Equii does not intend to go to sleep; his wife, apparently, hasn’t intended to let him in any case.

She speaks first, “Are you ready to strap your helmet and greaves on again?”

“Hmph,” Equii snorts, distracted from his moments of glory with Matoya. Those had been some of his most exhilarating days, if not the most memorable.

His wife speaks again, “Do you really wish to keep this life? Men in old age sometimes wish for the more adventurous days after they’ve won what they were fighting for.”

“Wife, what am I to do? I left the army for you. Now, must I leave you for the war?”

Mariela shakes her head. “No, it’s not that you would be leaving me. You would be going to fight for what you’ve wanted all along.”

“And what is that?”

“Equii,” Mariela responds with a pause. “You’ve fended off our neighbors’ farms without their asking. The boys in the town know how to fight before they’ve become young men, and the town magistrates kick you out of their offices because you debate policy with them.”

Equii replies indignantly, “Well, those boys need to know how to fight against people like Afanasi, and those politicians don’t know anything about managing people.”

“And you do?”

“Well enough. You see, we all have a duty to each other. It’s unwritten but understood. Where would we be if everyone argued and stole?”

Mariela responds quickly, “Right where we are now.”

“Exactly. Which is why I have to fight.”

Mariela smiles at him as he realized what he said.

Lost in thought, Equii tunes out the world and turns inward. Equii had let those times go; but here was Matoya, his former friend and idealist, asking for his service, he thinks.

Mariela interrupts his thoughts for the third time, “Husband, you need to resurrect your youthful ambitions. Prove to me and the nation that you haven’t shunned what you believe in.” Equii acknowledges her and turns away.

The morning is dreary – not black, but grey with a white and black peppered sky. Equii has slept late, though not on purpose. Mariela has already cooked breakfast, but the messengers are nowhere to be found.

“Mariela, where are the two couriers?” Equii questions, beginning to search the house.

She lets him continue his search instead of answering; as he makes his way around the house and back to her, she slowly murmurs, “I told them you would accept the colonelship.”

Equii’s eyes widen as he fights back tides of fear, anger, and a small sense of relief that he didn’t give his own answer. After stammering and glaring at his wife, Equii goes to his trunk, which has been stashed away for years, to examine his old armor.

Before Beginning Training – Meeting with General Matoya

The commander finishes pouring his drink as the rambunctious crowd outside his tent clamors on. Don Equii walks in.

“Battles can’t be won on the sword alone, Equii.” Matoya tells the man walking into his tent.

“Why did I bring mine, then?” Equii asks grinning and shaking Matoya’s hand.

“You can’t stand on those convictions of yours alone, and if I remember correctly, you were only the second best fighter in the squad.”

“Only if you mean my left hand. My right would certainly be the best.”

Matoya offers him a seat. “We need you, Equii. Volvec and the army. Afanasi says he’s only wants to fix our government from corruption in Diego, but it’s apparent he’s out for personal reasons as well.”

“I’ve heard as much. But what am I other than an old farmer with a sword now?”

Matoya gets up from his desk. “Don’t think I’ve forgotten the speeches you used to give to our troops and the people in towns. You stood up there, in full shining armor, shouting about our moral duty to one another. How our army should set the example the world should and could follow. We were to be the standard.”

Equii blushes at the aging thoughts. “Those days have passed. I am married and have other priorities.”

Matoya nods and smiles at Equii. “That isn’t what your wife tells me. I wrote to her a few weeks ago. She said you still protect your friends and argue the need for ethical codes and laws.”

“How did you get to my wife?”

“She got to me Equii. It seems that you’ve been acting too rebellious or youthful, and she wanted to send you away.” Matoya lets out a laugh and continues, “She was concerned about the effect the war would have on you if Volvec lost. She said you would not forgive yourself.”

<Thoughts of his recent behavior flash through Equii's mind. Equii teaching boys how to fight, fending off his neighbor's farm from thieves, and arguing in the town hall.>

"She is a great woman."

Matoya is now on his second drink, pacing around the room, and touching his spears. Equii's face deepens, imagining each weapon in action over the years at the end of Matoya's hand. He is everything an army could ask for in a general: war-hardened but understanding, relentless but not vindictive, and, above all, he believes in his cause and his men. Equii had forgotten the effect of the presence of his old friend.

"You will be tested of your convictions, colonel, if anything in war is sure, it's that."

Equii takes a last look at Matoya as he silently gets up and leaves.

First Training Day

It wasn't a comfortable life; he was used to that, though. Equii had been happy to live with his wife, eking out a living. He has been given his own quarters, but they were close to his troops. The colonelship given to him was unwarranted as he had been out of the army for so long; he is teased for bringing his pillow from home to sleep on. Aside from the material and arms given to him by the State, he had only this pillow, an aging portrait of his wife, and a book on religious prophecies in his room. Outside his tent, there is still a banner up commemorating his leadership made by eager privates excited by the newness of war or secretly pleased by a green commander.

On his first day of training the troops, he is very much the learner as well. He drills them until mid-day then takes a break for lunch. Seated in his chair, which he is too big for, he looks up to see one of the oldest recruits. Known to be quite the ascetic, the lieutenant, Guillamo, is too entrenched in protocol to step into the Colonel's tent without formal summons. However, Equii, taking his position less seriously than others do, hastens the man in. None of the troops in this legion knows of Equii's previous military career. It makes all their military formality an amusing event for him.

"Good day, sir."

Equii dismisses the small talk and questions Guillamo, "If you see the sun shining on my head or rain bursting at my feet, it's a good day lieutenant. Now, do you have more pressing business?"

"Sir, we are of the same age, are we not?"

"Thereabouts, yes."

"Well, sir, it seems to me we are two different breeds. You can tell from our wrinkles that we have lived our lives, but, though alike with respect to age, they tell different stories."

"And is there one you wanted to share with me, Guillamo, or one that I am missing?"

"Missing, sir. Battle experience I mean specifically. Have you handled a blade, led a charge?"

Cutting him off, and remaining unshaken, Equii stands up, debating whether to tell the experienced lieutenant of his full military experience. As he remembers and heeds his

wife's advice - "You're better at listening than talking, dear, so keep at it" - he decides to let Guillamo explain himself; he is also a little curious as to whether he holds the respect of the seasoned veterans. Instead of taking his seat again, Equii rounds the room apprehensively and, with very little to examine of value, he sizes up Guillamo with a flick of his eyes, asking him to speak his mind.

The lieutenant does not hesitate, "I'm a loyal man, sir; however, your rank is a surprise to all of us that have been here for a decade. We will follow you, but not blindly. We, I, only ask that you would listen to our advice."

"Very well lieutenant. I understand my position, though I don't expect to have any riots and dereliction of duties, especially from my commanders. It was hard enough to get swept into war without making enemies of statesmen."

"True enough, sir. I've seen enough to fill my goblet 'til the end of my days. The blood gets sweeter the more you sip."

With a bow, Guillamo leaves the room and Equii sits to plan the rest of the day's training, portraying new confidence in his leadership.

First Battle – Meeting with Afanasi

Equii's first battle is going well. He leads the charge on foot, and with his recently appointed Captain Gonzalo at his side, he is of one mind in doing his duty.

"Finish the job that your blade started," the bulky, clean-shaven, tight-lipped man says.

Gonzalo, clad in gold, is running to the brawl, shouting, "Colonel Equii," but Equii wrestles the knife away from his enemy and waves off his captain. With a slow, understanding stop, the captain finds his sword holster and watches Equii withdraw a sizable knife from his forearm guards and slide it into his opponent's side.

"Farewell," Equii says as he etches a final bloodline across the other man's throat.

"Quite a battle, eh, sir?" Already seated on his helmet, Gonzalo cleans a place for his rations and smiles at his Colonel, placated by his victory and battle.

"Yes, but we've only been able to stall Afanasi's troops. I'm afraid they're overwhelming our other forces. Even if our legion never fails, which I expect, we may have to retreat to Getae and protect the last of our citizens and disrupted government."

Guillamo comes running to them. "We have a few Kievan Rus soldiers we need to know what to do with, sir."

"The only sensible thing is to execute them," Gonzalo proposes. Guillamo thinks it over and agrees.

"Sensible?" Equii asks. "I would rather carry them on my back. What if we were to kill them and every other army followed our example? No, we will win this war and set the model of proper action."

"But Equii, we would have to drag them miles back to camp, and they would surely not do the same for us."

Equii responds, "Precisely why we must do it. If there is no good in this world, we will make it. If there is, we will find it and lead the others to the light. Take them to our base."

As the battle draws to a close and victory becomes almost guaranteed, Equii makes his way back to the command center. He urges the men on and meets Guillamo's gaze with pride. The command center, however, is hectic. Couriers and scouts are shoving their way in and out of the hut while his superiors hover above the strategy board.

"Equii!" Matoya yells above everyone else. "I need your troops."

The plan wasn't simple or safe, but for Equii it was the best time to prove his leadership. Scouts had spotted movement to the east of their position and what looked like an entire legion. Worse yet, a man is spotted with a profile and armor resembling Afanasi's. Equii had never seen Afanasi, and had only read about him in a few scouting reports. Afanasi was said to have razor thin black hair, leading some scouts to speculate his head was completely tattooed, denoting his devotion to a foreign god who could look down with favor at Afanasi. "That's nonsense," Equii thinks, "because the gods still favor me, and here is my chance to prove it." His mission is to hide in the forest and spring a trap on the highway Afanasi would have to pass through. He is given only fifty of his troops so if the mission failed it wouldn't be a disaster to the regiment. They aren't meant to win against a thousand troops, merely stall them so the rest of the army could regroup and find a more defensible position.

After his men secure their places behind trees, under broken branches and moss, and with a few archers in the tree branches, Equii has a moment of genius as he leads the five-man welcoming party. Within the hour, the front of the Kievan Rus legion nears Equii led by a solid black figure. From the stallion's monstrous hooves to the man's plumed helmet, Afanasi rides tall towards Equii, unsheathing a sword that blots out the landscape.

“Stand aside, soldiers, we have the tide of battle to turn,” the dark man bellows, with an echo that is hollow and booming.

“Well, our scouts have spotted you, sir, Afanasi, correct? Our army immediately fled, as you can imagine, and we five are offered to you so you wouldn’t follow. If need be, we will fight you for the moment’s delay, but, from what I hear, you have more tortuous plans for your captured enemies.” Equii’s new plan relied on a few risks, but it might save lives. He hopes the troops stay hidden and that the four men beside him won’t mind being taken prisoner for a while.

Afanasi’s Camp

Afanasi takes Equii’s bait as a chance to rest his legion and interrogate the troops he has just captured. Equii waits patiently tied to a chair in front of Afanasi himself.

“Colonel, I thought men of your country would almost rather kill themselves than surrender. And then I thought this to be some sort of trick, but in face of my power, I didn’t think you’d take the risk. So, you are here to answer questions, fuel my speed and victory.”

Equii chuckles, “There aren’t any answers. We were meant to stall your army long enough for ours to regroup after we beat your other troops. I have completed my command and duty.”

After a momentary sneer, Afanasi remarks, “Congratulations, then. If you think merely stalling me will save your pitiful army, you’re sorely mistaken and you get to suffer a bit more for the few days that I’ll keep you.”

The first few days they left him alone in a cage in Afanasi's tent; but Equii takes joy in being able to observe Afanasi. In the morning, Afanasi takes his reports for an hour, and then holds a ritual ceremony with a few of his closest generals and allies. They aren't praying but rehearsing a ritual. Afanasi writes all afternoon in three different journals - one for military strategy, one about laws and customs, and the final one about his spirituality; this isn't religious, but a chronicle of how far he believes he is towards a metaphysical goal. In the evening, Afanasi hosts a dinner for a few lowly soldiers who had performed well in battle.

After the fourth day of slinking in his cage and wondering about his four other men, Equii is unshackled and told to be ready to dine with Afanasi. He is startled by the news. Afanasi is a powerful man and shouldn't be having dinner with an enemy, one that wants to kill him, Equii thinks. He sits down across from the warlord and feels an air of equality. He knows assassination is impossible; but he feels an attempt is necessary. After the guards bring the food, Equii dives for Afanasi's sword. As he bears the weight of all the souls cleaved with that blade, Equii roars toward Afanasi. As the dirt floor doesn't shift, nor does the wind whistle through Equii's teeth, Equii feels a hand holding him in place by the back of his neck – though, nothing is there when he reaches back to remove the grip. Afanasi, bemused, lowers his hand and Equii drops the sword. Equii, hanging suspended above his seat, is not sure of the consequences. A few plates begin hovering around him, as do the chairs. Afanasi doesn't have as much control over them, and they wobble, fall, and lift up again; however, Equii is under his complete, albeit invisible, control. Afanasi laughs monstrously, and Equii is seated again.

“Next time, dear foe, you won’t be so lucky. Unfortunately, I don’t think you will be too happy with living.”

Seeing His Wife Die

The silent supper concludes. Afanasi offers no hint as to the events that happened earlier at dinner while Equii has been jumping and hearing voices since his moment of suspension. Before he has more time to reflect on the matter, Afanasi smiles broadly, slowly, and Equii hears the muffled cries of a woman. As she is thrown on the table between them, Afanasi lifts his left hand and she rises again, this time to the top of the tent. Once more, she plunges onto the table, shattering plates and utensils. It is only now, after her blood runs toward him that Equii notices the gold clasp she has in her hair, one similar to the medals he had melted down and given his wife to show his rejection of all his former military ideals, ones he had cast off to marry her.

“Afanasi!” Equii charges Afanasi, this time with nothing in hand. His fist steals squarely across the temple of the black-clad man. Equii twists around for his second blow, but Afanasi, whirling in surprise, holds his right hand up and squeezes. Equii rises and feels a separation within him, as if his muscles are being peeled from his bones. He lets out a howl only to hear it overcome by his wife’s shrieks. She is being fastened to a post as Afanasi nears her with his black blade.

“Stop!” Equii screams between each tortuous shock plaguing his suspended body.

“Equii, you are a man of ideals. You fought for them once and let them die within yourself for this woman. Is she worth that? Is she worth not knowing the reality behind what you’ve seen?!” Afanasi’s armor swells with each word, and his eyes show through his helmet to Equii. Pointing his sword at Equii, “What say you? You see the power of one who had not stopped for the comforts of marriage or forsaken his lofty ideals.”

“She... she... she was worth it,” Equii humbly mumbles. His pride leaves him, and he looks deflated. He grasps at his flesh recklessly, not realizing that Afanasi’s attack is on his soul. He falls headfirst to the table. He moves unconsciously, from being crumpled on the table one second to springing towards Afanasi the next. His sword flies toward him and finds his hand in a downward slash over Afanasi’s head, but instead of blocking Equii’s swipe, Afanasi cleaves Mariela through the chest as he takes a gash across his left eye from Equii. The blow to Afanasi throws Equii to the back of the tent, and his sword falls from his hand. Knowing his chances, Equii looks and longs for his wife, and, as he reaches for his blade, he tears a hole in the tent and runs towards the forest.

A Week Later

He abandoned four men. Equii ruminates on that fact, still incapable of thinking of his wife. The archers and soldiers he had placed in the woods had stayed at their posts and saved him against the few soldiers that had chased after him. Aside from the debriefing time, Equii is not visited, and his door is never open. The army had retreated a day after his return, falling ever deeper into their own territory. Afanasi’s power could be felt erupting

from the fight with Equii. During the debriefing, Matoya said he had sensed rejuvenation within Equii; however, Equii blew up at his general and friend to the point where they each had a black eye. His treatment wasn't because of fighting Matoya but from a self-imposed exile and the soldiers' fear. The picture of his wife lays broken on his table by the book he always carried. The sword he had struck Afanasi with still gleams with a dark red following the edge of the blade to the hilt. As Equii thinks once more of the men he has abandoned, Matoya opens the flaps to Equii's tent and kicks him awake.

"We've bigger obstacles to worry about than 4 men," Matoya drops to a knee beside him.

"Revenge is yours, if you want it." Equii, turned over, glares at Matoya as he sits up.

Matoya drops a new commendation into his lap.

"What's this? Equii growls.

"I thought you deserved one for your information on Afanasi. It's just for show. As for the plan of attack, we'll send your whole unit to Afanasi while he is disjointed from his main army."

Battle After Equii

Equii hadn't seized the idea of revenge or facing Afanasi again, but felt that he should take this command. The first battle isn't against Afanasi, but a smaller fort directly on their way to him. The plan is drawn; they are to attack at dawn. Gonzalo will lead the attack to the left and Guillamo to the rear. As they march through the plains, Equii senses the world less and less as he travels on. He feels distant from himself, not lost in thought over his wife or

anything from that night, but backed away from his perceptions. The sun beats straight down on them here, but Equii is unaware of the heat, the sweat, and the wavering shapes ahead of him. Gonzalo and Guillamo had grown close with him on their travels, and Equii needs their strength.

Equii pulls on his reins and calls for his two friends. They dismount as the army moves on.

“I feel as though my consciousness is being drained from me,” he says, stopping short of telling them the complete story of that night with Afanasi. The extraordinary events quickly helped him make his mind up. “The heat is making me mad,” Equii smiles.

Gonzalo asks, “Would you like to rest? We can lead the men on.”

“That’s alright, Gonzalo. Guillamo, how are the men doing?”

“They’re fine, sir, a little worried about you, though,” Guillamo replies. “They understood your leaving the few men you did, sir, and appreciated the concern. Now, they think you’re just dwelling on it too much. They think it might hinder you in battle.”

“Nonsense! That’s my chief concern,” he retorts, his voice lost to coughing.

“We can carry out your orders, Don,” Gonzalo says, lifting him back up.

“There’s no need,” Equii says in a lowered, unusual voice. A light fades in his eyes, and his physical demeanor diminishes. “Stop the army. Let’s rest tonight and go over the plan; we’ll attack at dawn.”

Equii lies down on a barely prepared mat; Gonzalo and Guillamo huddle around their campfire.

“Do we really need to go over the plan more?” Gonzalo asks the older man.

“No. I’m just worried about Equii,” Guillamo replies. “Did you hear what he said and how he looked before going to bed? ‘His consciousness is being drained’? Even stranger, he looks exactly like his spirit is being drawn out.” Gonzalo let the scene and doubts creep into his mind. Most of the troops are asleep by now, a few keep guard, and some tried to over-hear what their two commanders are discussing. There is an uneasiness pervading these two men and the camp.

“What should we do?” Gonzalo questions.

“Well,” Guillamo starts, “The fort will be easy to take down. I say we let the Colonel get a few days rest, and we take care of it.”

“Who will lead the middle force?”

“I assumed you could. . . . while I keep my command and let Eguala take the back. The plan is solid enough to work.” Gonzalo takes a piece of grass and chews it over. Eguala wasn’t a bad soldier, and Gonzalo felt valiant enough to lead the army himself, although, he always sensed a strange power behind Equii’s leadership.

While wondering if he had that same force behind him, Gonzalo asks Guillamo, “How do we keep Equii out of the fight?”

Guillamo replies discreetly, “I’ve already given him a powerful sleep agent.” This frightened any worry of the necessity of their leadership out of Gonzalo and himself.

The Morning

Gonzalo readies the troops just as Equii would have – with a short, decisive speech and a cheer for their country. Before this, Guillamo, as the trained warrior veteran that he was, spoke to the men in groups of five or ten about Equii’s decision to leave this fight to those who were more prepared than he was. Of course, this is a lie, and the two loyal men hate to tell it, but they truly believe this is the best plan of attack. Eguala, too, is in on the plan as he has a little more than an ambitious nature. An hour before daybreak, the legion is on the move. The troops are still proud to serve under Gonzalo, and, in efforts to show their Colonel their gratitude for his confidence in them, hasten their pace and clutch their swords with extra fierceness. As the sun throws its first rays over Fort Pasnea, Gonzalo has the troops line up on all three sides of its prey. Guillamo guards Eguala to the right as the latter slips into the tree line at the back of the fort. Gonzalo takes out the sentries on his arrival, and now waits until the sun shows its full face. Meanwhile, Eguala sneaks into a dense forest behind the garrison. Despite the sunrise, he cannot see a hundred yards into the woods. He is well-hidden, and dares not go farther back. Gonzalo’s horse neighs and the charge begins. Like his mentor, Gonzalo leads the attack from the front. Guillamo, likewise, leads his troops to batter the sides and scale the walls. While Gonzalo attempts to break down the door, he notices an influx of Kievan Rus soldiers to the front.

This many troops, he thinks, has Eguala not led his charge?

Eguala has been delayed. Since his troops were ordered to keep as quiet as possible for secrecy of their attack, Eguala never hears them being slain until he was the last alive.

“Afanasi!” Eguala exclaims. Nevertheless, Afanasi’s blade comes down on him, without even a sparkle of the blade to warn Eguala. Afanasi charges with his men to engage Guillamo. Only a few of his troops have made it over the wall as Guillamo notices the surprise to his right. Afanasi is now unmistakable within their legion, and Guillamo rallies his troops to the new threat. The surprise-advantage has already overwhelmed Guillamo. Half Guillamo’s troops perish while the rest are turning around. With some men already lost over the wall, Guillamo realizes his lost cause. He manages to bring what troops he could and retreats to Gonzalo’s position.

Gonzalo manages to tear holes in the wall and begins fighting inside the stronghold. Fires are used to take care of the upper walkways, and Gonzalo feels more confident. His horse has caught an arrow, and he has been forced to fight on the ground.

“Gonzalo! We need to retreat!” He hears Guillamo yell.

“Guillamo?” he says. With the perplexing question of Guillamo not being at his post, reality sets in and Gonzalo gets a slash across his shoulder, cleaving his arm from his body. His scream is not of agony, but a celebration of luck, as his sword hand, still attached, thrusts into his enemy. He takes his last looks at his arm and falls back along with his men. They are now encircled between the fort and Afanasi’s men.

Afanasi grins as he speaks, “There are no more options. You will all die here today.” As Afanasi’s horse whinnies and Gonzalo finds his way to the middle of his troops beside Guillamo, Equii emerges from the trees. His appearance heralds a cheer from the enclosed Volvec army; Afanasi isn’t deterred or slowed, and as Equii storms onto the battlefield so, too, does Afanasi. The remaining troops

under Gonzalo and Guillamo hold strong and stall the enclosing army as Equii cuts his way through the crowd.

He is exhausted, and the strength that had disappeared from him the day before had not been regained in his long sleep. Something awoke in him, though; a shock to him in his sleep, a dream of a battle between four men on a snowy mountain, and by then it was late in the morning. He heard the battle cries from his camp, and the same alarm that had awoken him, compelled him through the forest. The scene was grim, but he refuses to let Afanasi take any more of his men prisoner.

Afanasi heads straight for Gonzalo, a weakened man now, and makes quick work of the few men in front of him. From his horse, Afanasi already holds the advantage, but Gonzalo raises his sword to disperse the force of Afanasi's blow. The strength of it almost knocks him down; he manages a quick roll, and makes it under Afanasi's horse as he sliced through its belly. The horse rears its front legs and stays upright until Afanasi has time to dismount. As he does, Guillamo attacks him from behind. At the height of his slash, Afanasi catches the veteran's hand and looks the man in the eye. Guillamo smiles at Afanasi as Gonzalo rushes him. Afanasi glares back, and his lips hide an emerging smile. Guillamo's horrified expression captures the unfolding scene while Afanasi continues to stare at him. Gonzalo's sword was downturned at his hip, ready for a strike, as he ran; it drops as his hands clutch at his head as he is lifted into the air. Gonzalo's screams stop the battle momentarily, and all watch as the limp body hits the dirt while the shrieks continue above them where a green specter, in the form of Gonzalo, writhes and twists in unnatural ways, then bursts. Equii finally fights his way through and manages to see the disposal of his Captain and

Guillamo at the same time. Guillamo's appearance hasn't changed, and as Afanasi's sword slides into his ribs, his eyes remain fixed on the now empty sky where Gonzalo's soul had been. In Guillamo's now vacant place, Equii stands unafraid of Afanasi.

The last of Equii's men are being cut down.

Afanasi asks, "You dare come back after what happened to your wife?"

"You hold no sway over me, Afanasi. I'm here to end that power you possess." The two men clash swords, while the rest of the army looks on. Their movements mimic each other's; their swords clang together.

"Do you think I don't remember this scar across my face?" Afanasi motions to his face and continues to parry Equii, who remains silent, focusing on the carefully timed spin-kick that catches Afanasi across his brow. Equii pounces, raising his sword two-handedly over his head.

"This isn't how it ends!" Afanasi screams, catching Equii's blade on his. The sharp edge of Afanasi's blade fails and shatters; Equii breaks through his guard, and Afanasi has to use his hand to recapture the blade. Dropping his destroyed sword, Afanasi attempts to use his power as he had on Gonzalo and Equii's wife. Equii feels the tug beneath his skin, as he had in Afanasi's tent, and backs away. It takes his full concentration to block this imperceptible attack. Afanasi, realizing his attack's futility, rushes Equii, knocking his sword away and knocking Equii to the ground.

With Equii's throat in his hands, Afanasi says, "Do you finally see? We are living in the wrong place, in the wrong body? We are meant for more, and I wish to speed destiny along." Equii, as a last resort, reaches out to Afanasi, under his skin, feeling for the soul that

had killed his wife. Afanasi releases his grip. The tyrannical general holds onto his armor, squeezing it to his body. He screams in agony. In his final throes, Afanasi's unseen power lifts all the nearby soldiers off the ground. Seeing this, Equii loses his concentration and his grip on Afanasi. Equii watches his own sword fly past him; for the first time, Afanasi's opponent sees the blade that kills them glimmer in the sunlight.

Interlude – With Afanasi

Afanasi looks over the sword. The hilt and blade are shorter than his old one. He has it dyed black. His wind finally returns to him as he hands the sword over to one of his captains. A survivor of Fort Pasnea had hurried back to the main Volvec army, and word spread from there back to Afanasi that Matoya has retreated to Volvec's neighboring country Getae. Afanasi is satisfied. He sits back in his chair. In a few more minutes, his councilors would come for their routine after battle meeting, but, for now, he could savor his surprise attack and victory. The first night after battling Equii in his tent, he summons his Pontiffs. That was the first time he had used his unseen power, though he had known it was there well before that. It had taken these twenty years to fine-tune the connection between his physical state and his soul —the part of him that inhabited this body in every cycle of the world. What had begun as simple sorcery had turned into an understanding of the world, physical and metaphysical, by him and him alone. The night in the forest, at Algarrobo, was the first time he had seen a mortal frame transcended. Even though it had only been for a moment, he had caught a glimpse of an unhindered body and understood what needed to be done. This world was cycling; every choice was made again and again, while the gods laughed and watched. Afanasi wanted that power. Before he concluded his thoughts, the Pontiffs came in and knelt in front of him.

"Sire, you have conquered Volvec, and the stories the men are telling about you. . ." the Chief Pontiff's voice fades.

"It's unbelievable," interrupts another.

“Yes, it is,” Afanasi raps his fingers on his chair and lets the silence linger.

“Should we. . . should we discuss this power, master?” the Chief Pontiff asked.

“No, not for tonight. I need time to think on it. . . But we are going to invade Getae. Leo should not have given those Volvecans a safe home.”

“That’s what we’re here for, sire,” the newest Pontiff cuts Afanasi off.

Afanasi glares at him and retorts, “As I was saying, no, we will all dine tomorrow and discuss it. Tonight I need rest.” With a wave of his hand, the Pontiffs leave the room. Afanasi knows he will sleep well thinking of their deaths tonight.

Afanasi’s Dream

Afanasi wants to go to bed early, and with the guards stationed outside his tent, he writes his last few pages for the night and makes his way to bed. The thoughts come late into the night. He isn’t awoken, but stirred enough to know he isn’t fully asleep anymore. Equii comes to him all of a sudden, and with a flash of his sword, he is gone. Afanasi’s body jumps. He realizes what is happening. His soul is giving him a vision, but Equii was here instead of a desecrated ditch miles away. He looks at his body from the blackness that surrounds his soul. Then, Equii appears again, this time with two others, though, their faces are hidden. Equii wears a grin as he steps closer to Afanasi. He unsheathes his sword and stands ready. Afanasi raises his hand towards him, and Equii disappears, as do the other two. Afanasi’s body springs awake, and the spirit world fades away. He stays awake the rest of the night pacing his room.

Chapter Two – Vlanci

Prologue

“Am I enlightened, Father?” Vlanci asks.

“What do you mean, son?”

“I was reading today, and the book said something about being enlightened and the soul.”

Leo, his father, responds quickly, “There is no soul, Vlanci, but you are as enlightened as any young prince could be.”

Vlanci looks dissatisfied with this answer.

“What happens when I think so much, I can’t feel my fingers?”

“It means you are thinking too hard, my boy. Now, let’s meet your uncle for dinner.”

He holds the young boy and puts regal clothes on him. They hustle downstairs where Vlanci notices his uncle and Afanasi’s Grand Pontiff already seated.

“Good evening, cousin,” his uncle Afanasi says to Leo. Vlanci runs and jumps in Afanasi’s lap. Afanasi always has an electric air and his Pontiff surrounding him. Leo sits down and ushers in the caterers so they can eat. Leo and Afanasi have always had a rival animosity between them, but they share a common goal. There is a lively discussion at dinner, but most of it goes over Vlanci’s head. He knows they are talking about him; the words “soul,” “cycles,” and everything else are too much for him, and his questioning of

these words in relation to him go unanswered. Then, he notices all three men staring at him.

The last thing he hears is, “Diego will meet us there.”

Algarrobo

When Vlanci awakes, it is dark, he has a cloak on, and he is encircled by fire.

“Daddy? Uncle?” He rubs his eyes, and, as he draws his cloak hood back, he notices four men surrounding him with swords; they stand whispering for a second, letting fear sink into Vlanci, then his father unmask himself.

“Vlanci,” he asks, “how do you feel?”

He feels disconnected, still tired, but he isn’t concerned about that. He sees that his uncle and the Pontiff have withdrawn their hoods, too. Afanasi has a horrified look on his face as he stares at his nephew— who has just leveled a forest unconsciously.

He holds his arms up to his father, “Daddy, get me away from Uncle. Where are we? I want to go home.” He shoves his head into his father’s shoulder, and feels a sudden dread for Afanasi.

Then, Vlanci falls from his father’s arms. Leo reaches for his sword and blocks Afanasi’s attack. The Pontiff and the other man Vlanci didn’t know look on as the two cousins duel. They go back and forth, neither gaining the upper hand, until Afanasi attempts to jump over Leo and the fire. Although he jumps over Leo, his sword swipe cuts his landing short. His cloak catches the edge of the flames, and the fire quickly consumes him. Afanasi uncloaks,

but the flames engulf his head as he pulls it off. Afanasi rolls on the ground, while Leo snatches Vlanci back up, and they ride into the darkness.

Vlanci Gets a Battalion

Vlanci, now twenty-eight, has just finished military training for the day and is returning to his room. His father is there waiting for him.

“Son, I hear you’ve been doing quite well at training. You know how important the war is now; we need you.”

“I know, father, Uncle is on his way, but. . .” Vlanci hesitates.

“Yes?” his father wonders.

“Don’t you have any contact with him? Can’t we stop this?”

“I’m afraid not, son. We haven’t talked in twenty years.” Vlanci sighs, barely remembering that night.

“Vlanci,” his father snaps to gain his attention. “To show you how much I believe in you, I’m giving you command of the first airship battalion.” Vlanci’s face drops. The airship is experimental at best, now it is his, he thinks.

“But Father, I barely know how to get to the cabin, much less run one with a crew!”

“Vlanci, Getae and the army need you. This may be our most formidable weapon against Afanasi. I need someone at the helm who commands respect and knows how ruthless Afanasi is. With your fieldwork, name, and strength, you are the perfect man.” Leo

throws the Admiral's badge at Vlanci, wishes him luck, and walks out. Proud as his father is of him, Vlanci knows he hides something from him, but does not know what it is.

Getae has inherited all the dispossessed military men from the other nations as Afanasi's rule continues to spread. Vlanci has been among the first to issue military commands to the foreigners so allegiance to him is widespread. Many have petitioned for him to take a command post for months, but the king strongly protested until today. Vlanci is proud, but has never been in a battle before. An airship command was the last thing on his mind, but he quickly decides on his subordinates and goes to check on his new vessel.

Vlanci's First Expedition

Vlanci stands at the nose of the ship with his hands behind his back. The new uniforms for the air navy look good on them; they are deep red with a light blue trim, nearly a perfect match for the newly christened Vauquelin. There is a hitch at takeoff when the stern rises before the bow, but once they all huddle into the cabin for safety, they get it to level out and take to the air. Vlanci's first mission is a scouting mission to test out the ship and crew. He returns to the bridge to watch the men at their work and to gain a better understanding of how the ship operates. It takes ten men to fly it with another forty to fight on it and maintain it. Vlanci feels comfortable with his small scouting team. The Vauquelin has no weapons, except for shooting arrows from the sky, so it is meant for quick-drop strikes and fast evacuations. Still, it is a formidable machine, and, Vlanci hopes, it will terrify Afanasi's army. On the first day, they are to sail to the outer edges of Getae's border. Nearing the

river that separates Volvec from Getae, Vlanci notices the smoke and carnage littered through the land.

“Volvec was certainly crushed,” Vlanci says to his pilots. He checks their altitude and fuel levels. The engines should last for days, if not weeks, on their current storage so he decides to venture a bit farther. Upon crossing the Alzette, Vlanci feels a sudden dread, as if secrets are swirling around him. He can sense and see them, but not from sight or sound or anything perceptible. It is a strange sensation, one he has felt only once before—after waking up in Algarrobo.

“High alert,” he commands in a calm voice, though his feelings are stirring inside him. All the men look at him before assuming their respective duties. Their hesitation at his first orders annoys Vlanci, since they didn’t sense what he is sensing. The night darkens as they near Murcia, a Volvecan city that looks deserted. His dread has peaked, and Vlanci orders the ship to turn back. With the Vauquelin’s stern to the city, another vessel rises quietly from the ashes and darkness of Murcia.

Traveling at night has eased Vlanci’s worry, as has the hour’s passing. He is out on the deck again, trying to survey the tips of the mountains very few had ever climbed. It is a magnificent sight, one a peaceful world could paint, he thinks, until he feels a whizz brush past his ear. He turns towards the stern of the Vauquelin to notice a deep black mass blocking the view of the snowcaps. He slowly walks aft, his head and eyes straining to get a better look, when he catches a gray point speeding towards him. Vlanci quickly steps aside and sees an arrow land quietly on the plank in front of him. Alarmed, he hurries to the bridge and orders all units to stand guard inside the ship. He informs everyone with him of

the attacker following them. Vlanci senses their fear rise. He races through maneuvers in his mind.

“Lower our altitude, but speed up to ignite our engines,” he commands. The sound of his voice quells the fears of the pilots, and they do as ordered. Vlanci raises his viewfinder slightly and notices the other ship has lowered itself as well.

They must have been trying to assassinate me since they haven’t started an all-out attack yet, he thinks. He speaks into the receiver.

“Men, line up at the bow, stay hidden behind the bridge.”

He watches as they creep up from below and crouch low on the deck. Vlanci steers the Vauquelin between the two sides of the mountains that are close together. It is a narrow space to fit through, but his strategy depends on it. As they are now low enough to be hidden by the mountains if they turned sharply after getting through the gap, Vlanci puts his plan into motion. The bow slips into the crevice, and Vlanci brings it around counter-clockwise so the stern has enough room to fit. The mountain hides them just enough so that they are parallel to the mountain, but perpendicular to the enemy vessel. He notices the edge of the other ship also breaking through the small opening and orders his men to board. As they jump, the other ship comes to an abrupt stop. The Vauquelin isn’t quite even with the enemy ship now, and the soldiers who jumped almost fall short of their target. With the last of the boarding soldiers now off the Vauquelin, Vlanci turns the bow towards the other vessel.

“Full power to the engines, aim to their aft, try to disable their engines,” Vlanci yells. The Vauquelin powers ahead, and Vlanci prepares to make the boarding jump himself.

There is a thunderous sound from the collision of the two vessels, and Vlanci is thrown overboard, luckily landing on the deck of the enemy ship.

Meeting with Auriane

After he lands on the enemy ship, a gruff man quickly picks him up. He notices his troops' uniform on the man and finds dozens of bodies scattered around him.

"We've made short work of them, sir. Apparently, they were all archers meant for quick assassination strikes." Vlanci looks around, and meets the smiling soldier's gaze.

"I'm glad I told the pilots to hold off on a second ramming." Vlanci smiles back, and the few soldiers around him chuckle.

"We do have one survivor for you, admiral." The soldiers motion for him to follow. They make their way to the black-trimmed vessel's command center.

"She was standing at the helm when we made it back here. She says she's the captain, and thought the ship was going down so she stayed here."

The ship looks like it's ready to crack in two.

"Good job," Vlanci says. He feels at home with his soldiers and addresses them informally; also, he is just as young as many and younger than others are so he doesn't think of them as his subordinates. "Let's get back to the Vauquelin with her. This is about to break apart."

Vlanci hails the Vauquelin, and they cross the drawn walkway to the Getae ship. Vlanci leads the captain to his quarters so they can speak. He stations some guards outside to be on the safe side. As Vlanci offers her a chair, she speaks.

“My name is Auriane. I am the Kievan Rus captain of the Vikhr. We were sent specifically for you, Vlanci.” Her eyes pinpoint Vlanci, and he feels a shiver up his spine.

The Ride Home

She is slender, semi-tall, with her hair tied under her cap and small glasses that barely stay on the end of her straight nose. The all-black uniform Afanasi has just issued makes these features even more prominent. Vlanci has gotten comfortable enough to take her cuffs off; she has promised to tell him the origin of the Vikhr.

Auriane begins, “I was one of Afanasi’s first captains assigned to the new air navy post. Only a few of us had ever heard of an airship; fewer knew of its capabilities. Apparently, Afanasi had had the foresight to set up an engineering team twenty years ago or so; he said he got the idea from a family member.”

Vlanci turns away and reddens at the thought of his father and Afanasi collaborating.

Auriane questions, intruding on his thoughts, “Something wrong?”

Vlanci turns around to see her puzzled face cocked sideways at him.

“No, no,” he says, “continue.”

She leans back in her chair. “Well, Afanasi picked me to oversee the engineers about five years into my career, and I’d been doing that until we got the Vikhr functioning.”

“And how long has that been?”

“Only within the past few months. It was inoperable for the Volvec invasion.”

“Where did your tactics come from? Do you have a handbook or anything?” Vlanci asks, interested in keeping the conversation alive.

Auriane nods. “I’ve been helping plan that, too. As you can tell it’s incomplete; plus, we had never had an actual airship enemy to combat.”

Vlanci notes the grace of her voice; she is willing to tell him the truth as her dignity demands, but even divulging this much makes her voice shake and stutter. Without any other pressing questions on his mind, Vlanci meets her downward stare and keeps it for a moment. He steps towards her as one of his guards knocks on the door.

“We’ve arrived back at Getae City, sir.” Not breaking stride, Vlanci removes his gaze from Auriane, leaves his room, and heads for the bridge.

Getae City – What to do with Auriane

King Leo meets Vlanci as he steps off the ship. Leo is especially pleased to see his son and the Vauquelin in one piece but is not expecting the surprise that follows behind Vlanci.

“I’ve never seen a palace like this. Afanasi let me see the Kievan Rus capital only twice.”

She looks fascinated by the castle.

Leo pulls Vlanci aside after he has the guards cuff Auriane.

“Vlanci, is she a war prisoner? And you let her come back to the castle unrestrained?” Vlanci doesn’t have any convincing words to soothe his father. They take

the woman away while Vlanci follows Leo back to his room. Leo sits on Vlanci's bed and asks him questions about his first command. The battle went well, and the Vauquelin handled well, Vlanci told him, but Auriane occupies his mind.

Leo sees his unenthusiastic report and asks, "What's with that captain, Vlanci?"

"I don't really know, Father. She told me a little about her command, Afanasi, and, well, she's a beautiful woman," Vlanci lowers his head, assuming his father would laugh at him.

"That she is, son, but what do you suggest we do? We can't have her roaming the castle."

"Let me have a little time with her, maybe work some more information out of her. Don't keep her chained up either; she's shown no hint of hostility at all."

Leo gives in to his son's wishes, but hopes Auriane didn't know or divulge too much about Afanasi.

The Night on the City

Vlanci has compromised with his father about their prisoner of war. They keep her under lock and key, but Vlanci gets to make her talk in his own way. His first thought is to take her on a tour of the city; he has noticed how she gaped at the palace as they landed earlier and thinks she will open up to him more. Auriane is given a royal dress, and she and Vlanci exit the castle gates. Their immediate view is of the marketplace and university tower. The street is lined with vendors in front of the bigger, grandiose stores. Vlanci takes her through

a couple of them, but Auriane is most excited to see the observatory tower. As they make their way to the west side of the city, Vlanci tries to start a conversation.

“How do you like our city?” Vlanci asks. She is silent, still taking in the city, he assumes. He lets the desire to talk to her go until they arrive at the observatory tower.

Her mouth drops. The observatory isn’t much different from the university tower, though it holds the greatest array of astronomical equipment in the world. Now, he thinks, is a better opportunity to talk, but she speaks first.

“I’ve always been fascinated by space,” she says, her words rush together. “Back at home the moon is always full, and I’m always sent on missions without a view.”

“Where have you been to?” Vlanci asks.

“All over in Kievan Rus. My mission was much too secret to leave the protection of the city. I did get out once to have a dinner with Afanasi. It was about my last mission actually, and, after dinner, we stayed under the sky to discuss it. So beautiful, I thought.” They reach the top level where the telescopic lenses were. Vlanci has them open the roof, and they sit alone staring at the almost reachable stars.

“I was sent to capture you,” Auriane reminds him with her eyes fixated on the heavens.

Vlanci remembers but asks, sounding startled, “Why?”

“At that dinner with Afanasi, we were alone except for his newly-appointed Grand Advisor. He told me he know a secret about you, something, he said, which very few people knew, not even yourself.”

As Auriane talks, Vlanci's gaze wanders from the stars to her, but her look never strays from the sky.

“What do you think awaits us up there?” Auriane asks.

“I’ve always been on the side of the soul,” Vlanci confesses.

“What do you mean? We fly up there after death?”

Vlanci laughs. “Not necessarily. Just. . . there are things that await us that are completely unknown. That is what’s up there.”

“Monsters waiting to tear into our souls?” Auriane mocks.

Vlanci's face hardens. “Not what I meant. In the unknown, our soul has a place to be free, unlike in the body.”

Auriane nods with a downturn of her eyes. Without speaking, thoughts flash through Vlanci's mind about Afanasi’s war.

<A scene plays in Vlanci's mind that shows Equii being killed at Afanasi’s hands, showing his connection to the other men.>

Vlanci sits up and tells Auriane it is time to go.

“Did he tell you what the secret was?” Vlanci questions.

“No,” Auriane gives him a knowing smile. “He only asked if I had heard the rumors and read the reports about Volvec. Of course, I had, and he told me not to think about those reports as his power, but yours. He said you surpassed anything I might have heard about him.”

Vlanci looks down; he has heard some of the rumors as well. He stands, grimacing, and declares, “It’s time to find some answers.”

Later That Night

Vlanci hates to force her away from her first view of Getae's stars, but her story and the secrets that swirl around his father whenever he talks about Afanasi urge him to confront Leo. When they walk back to the palace, there is a noticeable change in her perception of Vlanci. Auriane stands close to him and begins the conversation. This time it isn't about military procedure but Vlanci's childhood. She asks him how it was growing up as a prince, what his favorite memories and games are, and if he has any idea as to what Afanasi was talking about. All this serves to make Vlanci reflect on his past relationship with his "Uncle" and what had actually happened in those woods twenty years ago.

Once they reached the palace gates, Auriane again marvels at the sight of Getae's rich kingdom. Vlanci stands behind her staring at the palace he has lived in his whole life.

Auriane turns to face him, but the guards show up and take her away immediately.

Shocked, Vlanci watches her struggle a little in the handcuffs; then, his mind shifts to his father.

Vlanci knocks lightly on his father's door then opens it without waiting for an answer.

Leo is sitting up in bed turning his light on when Vlanci questions him, "Why did Afanasi attack you in Algarrobo?" Leo doesn't shun the question.

"Son, it's complicated."

Vlanci waits for his father to continue, and when he doesn't immediately, Vlanci crosses his arms and leans against the wall. Leo stands up and put on his robe.

“We were. . . are cousins; we grew up together, and we were very close. We were inseparable even as we became kings, but we fought ferociously over ideals. As we sought to secure and enrich our domains, we began differing on the ways to go about it. I had a contact in Volvec who said he uncovered an ancient text that told the history of the world. And of an unimaginable power. Afanasi, too, learned of this book, but had carved his way to it using his army. Being cousins, we came to a mutual understanding and searched for it together. We eventually found the book.”

Leo takes it from a drawer and holds it up to Vlanci —*The Indwelling God*.

“We could only read about the power because the history part was too cryptic. Afanasi decided we needed to seek this power. I agreed because I couldn’t let him alone have it; so, we compromised and selected you as our test subject.”

Vlanci, listening intently, moves closer to his father.

“What exactly did you do to me?”

“Nothing, son, you were perfect for the experiment, but nothing came of it,” Leo replies.

Vlanci thinks of the rumors about Afanasi and bursts out, “What about Afanasi now? He has this power, doesn’t he?”

Leo nods. “Yes, and you do too, son.”

Vlanci's face drops. “What?”

Leo sits down again. “That night, when we drugged you, you exhibited this power unconsciously. You leveled the trees and Afanasi was terrified of you. I couldn’t let him kill

you so we went our separate ways.” Vlanci stands motionless, and then rushes out of the room. Leo doesn’t call after him.

Vlanci's Next Move

Vlanci doesn’t head for his room. Instead, he goes to see Auriane. He needs her if he is going to strike at Afanasi. His airship is a great asset, and, with him and Auriane at the helm, it would be a bird of prey feasting on Afanasi’s army. He doesn’t know how he will win her support, but he has to try.

The guards do not question him coming to her room, but he has to disable them to get her out safely and secretly. Even though he is silent, Auriane stands waiting for him as he opens her door.

“I’m leaving, and I need your help.” Auriane smiles and nods. He grabs her hand and runs toward the Vauquelin. The ship is always on standby, but there are guards and scientists monitoring it all day and night to deal with. As they make it to the dock where the Vauquelin sits, and other airships are being built, the two hide around the corner and discuss the plan.

Vlanci thinks aloud, “My troops are loyal to me. If I commanded the Vauquelin to leave at once, they would be onboard in minutes. I don’t think my father would shoot at me, but if they see you, they will think you kidnapped me.”

Auriane blushes at her inclusion, nods agreement, and says, “I’ll sneak aboard while you arrange the takeoff.”

Vlanci, too, nods but thinks, solid plan. Now, how am I going to divert their attention from an enemy captain sneaking aboard our prized secret?

He stands up and enters the dock, commanding the attention of the scientists and military salutes from the guards.

“I need my ship, gentlemen.”

The guards whistle so all inside know to come up from below deck or to get off the ship, and the engineers begin the ignition procedures.

As they all scurry to their respectful positions, a new scientist walks up to Vlanci, brushes a hand over his neck, and walks into the bridge of the ship. Vlanci follows her lead but stands at the bow of the ship to watch the troops board. As the last of them hustle onto the vessel, Vlanci feels lucky to have these men. A power deep inside him stirs as he waits for the line of pilots to find their seats in the cockpit, but none sit down. Vlanci notices Auriane, her scientist garb replaced by a Getae uniform, standing at the controls of the bridge.

“Sorry, I just wanted to get a feel for it.” She blushes while the rest of the crew slowly turn to Vlanci. The Vauquelin is in the air by the time the alarms rang out from the palace, and Vlanci now has to explain the situation to his crew.

Guerrilla Tactics

Auriane gives Vlanci the locations of Afanasi’s first invading scout troops. He leads the Vauquelin to the borders of Getae and repels most of the small Kievan Rus squadrons with

quick strike-and-retreat missions. He has only lost a few men in the first battles, but after the fifth or sixth strike, the men learn their positions and the maneuvers to perfection. Vlanci himself leads most charges, and, at night, he and Auriane hold meetings for their next target. Besides these two, there is one other man, Didier, who has shown himself to be a pure leader. However, this battle is different. They are running a quick strike, but this one is taking too long.

“We have to gather our men and retreat,” Didier tells Vlanci.

He is already worried since Auriane is leading the troops, but he does not want to retreat.

The Vauquelin turns around to retrieve the soldiers on the ground. It lowers so the men can board, but Vlanci cannot find Auriane.

“Where is she?” he asks with growing alarm.

“Sir, Auriane’s been taken. She was too far ahead and we could not get to her in time.”

Visibly frustrated, Vlanci lets loose an angered cry, and then calms himself.

“We’ll get her back. It’s my turn to lead.”

Getting Her Back

Vlanci takes the day after the battle for his men to recuperate. Now, they have a plan, and Vlanci is in the lead. He tells his captains he refuses to leave her, which is enough for them, but he also feels something strong for her. He can’t leave her in the hands of Afanasi’s army, even if she has been there before.

The Vauquelin swings low over the Kievan Rus camp. Their army is already on the line.

Vlanci is the first to jump over the deck. Scanning the field for Auriane, Vlanci clears a path for his men. Finally, he spots her at the back of the Kievan Rus line guarded heavily.

He can hear her screaming, "Run!" but he continues.

As the battle turns in his favor, Vlanci makes it to the guards holding Auriane. A sword swings over Vlanci's head as he ducks out of the way. The guards release Auriane and retreat. In their place stands a monster of a man. He is two heads taller than Vlanci and double the width; Auriane is still screaming to turn back, but Vlanci stands valiantly to save her. The battle rages as Vlanci and the giant circle each other. Vlanci charges and the man bats him aside. Before Vlanci can get up, the giant swats his sword away. He lies defenseless against the other man, and as he strikes at Vlanci, Auriane runs into him and knocks him over. Feeling a power swell inside him, a connection with Auriane that resonates between them visibly, he summons the power that had long been dormant inside him. Vlanci reaches for his sword, picks it up, and slays the monster through the belly as the giant strikes at Auriane. When Vlanci looks at her to help her up, the fear falls from her face.

"How did you find me?"

"I could sense you even with the violent battle, as if you were calling to my spirit."

She kisses him on the cheek. Vlanci leads her through the won battlefield to the Vauquelin.

Finding Strength

Didier speaks first, "I think we should strike back at Afanasi, take the battle to him in Volvec."

Vlanci looks to Auriane. "What do you think? Do you know his location?"

She thinks for a moment. "Since he already had his scouts in Getae, he will probably start mobilizing soon. We should look around the cities where I followed you. I'm sure he would like to search for my missing airship, if possible."

"We're all agreed, then?" Vlanci questions. Didier nods, as does Auriane.

Didier leaves but Auriane remains to help Vlanci. He pulls out the book he stole from his father, *The Indwelling God*. Auriane takes it from him and turns to the last page they have worked on. Vlanci has secretly been reading the book, and, with Auriane's help, he is trying to let loose the power that had awoken in him unconsciously at Algarrobo and manifested for a moment in him while saving Auriane. Their first few tries hadn't been very successful, but as they near Volvec, the effects of the trances induce strength, liveliness, and awareness in Vlanci. Auriane sits down and places the book between them. She folds her legs and falls into meditation. Vlanci mumbles the incantations from the book and Auriane does likewise. An hour passes before Auriane opens her eyes; what she sees astounds her. Not wanting to startle Vlanci, she quietly gets up and examines the furniture and artifacts that are levitating.

"Amazing," she whispers; but as her lips close, Vlanci awakes, and the room crashes to the floor.

“What is it?” he asks her.

Auriane looks at him, “The room was off the ground. Everything was in the air. Those crashes didn’t bother you when you broke from the trance?”

“No,” he hesitates. “I sensed something in you, fear or shock or something.”

“Vlanci, your power! Of course, I was shocked,” she says, still in amazement. “We need to work on this. Do you think you can do it while you’re conscious?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t feel anything except you just then, though I did feel a connection between us.”

“Good, good. Use me, then. Try to levitate me or control me,” she says as if she has seen this power before. Vlanci deepens his thoughts and motions to Auriane. He holds his hand out towards her, closes his eyes, and makes a rising gesture with his outstretched hand. At first, nothing happens. Then, almost unnoticeably, Auriane rises. She shrieks as she rises higher in the air and breaks Vlanci's concentration. He frowns at her, throws all his concentration into his hand and her, and makes her fly above his head. She frantically kicks her feet, but Vlanci laughs at her and flies her around the room faster.

“Is this the extent of Afanasi’s power?” he jokes. “Flying women around his room?” His mind wanders to what exactly Afanasi can do, but Auriane lands in front of him gracefully.

“Now we need to find out if this is the extent of your power,” she smiles at him. Vlanci's isn’t thinking about that. Instead, he grabs her, pulls her in, and kisses her.

Vlanci's Next Airship Battle

Didier came up with a good offensive plan, and they decide to attack the largest city in Volvec's western half, Argel. They are within a day of the city, but Vlanci wants to wait another day, to hopefully put the threat of the Vauquelin out of Afanasi's mind. Auriane says she doesn't know if Afanasi or an airship would be awaiting them. Any distrust Vlanci had towards her had left him when they took the Vauquelin, but his troops don't share his opinion. They have quit being disgruntled over her presence, though they never turn their backs to her. The crew spends the day prior to the offensive prepping the ship and going over plans. As daybreak comes, the Vauquelin is already speeding towards Argel. When they can see the city in the distance, the troops ready themselves on the deck. The pilots angle the Vauquelin in low but stay high enough to get over the western wall of the city. Argel looks deserted from his post on the bridge, but Vlanci still wants to be cautious. He walks outside the bridge to get a clearer view of the battlefield and feels something not quite right; this feeling is even more overpowering than the one on his first expedition. The Vauquelin drops nose-first over the wall and runs into a massive army awaiting it on the ground. Auriane comes running to Vlanci.

"Afanasi isn't with them," and as the last words come out of her mouth, the Vauquelin jolts to the side. She falls into his arms, but Vlanci lands hard against the guardrail.

Confused and disoriented he yells, "What was that?"

All his troops, however, have followed the plan and leapt to the ground. Vlanci regains his balance only to have the Vauquelin yank to the other side. This time he gets a full view of what has happened, until Auriane lands on him and his vision goes blurry.

“Oh, no,” she says and covers her mouth. “Cannons.”

“What?” Vlanci yells, still dazed.

“They’re like a bow and arrow that shoots metal balls! It was our defense in case Getae made an airship.”

“Thanks for the warning,” Vlanci says sarcastically. He sees and knows that the Kievan Rus army is too much for the squad he has. They are outmatched five-to-one against a well-trained and experienced legion. Vlanci runs back to the bridge.

“Auriane, take the Vauquelin out of the battlefield and fly back around in fifteen minutes,” Vlanci commands.

He runs to the bow and jumps into the middle of the fight. Vlanci begins rallying his remaining troops around him, fending off attackers as best he can. As he yells at the men to form up, he notices the Vauquelin turning back around.

“Auriane,” he sighs with relief. Then, he hears engines. They are too loud to be the Vauquelin’s, and he turns around to find three massive black airships coming at him. Vlanci is the last aboard, and he watches the cannons turn back in the direction of the Vauquelin. He hears Auriane yelling something as she runs towards him.

It sounds like, “The airships have cannons, too!”

All his troops are below deck when he hears the booms from all the cannons fire at his ship. Vlanci feels Auriane tug on his arm while he sees the balls come at them. He holds his

hands out. At the moment when the cannonballs should have blown through the Vauquelin, Vlanci closes his eyes.

Saved

Vlanci awakes in a familiar setting. His bed. He notices the writing on the walls.

“You did great, son.” The haziness still surrounds Vlanci until Auriane's voice shines through it.

“You did it,” he hears her say.

“What?” Vlanci's voice breaks.

“You stopped the cannonballs. Then your father brought the new airships and saved us from the battle.”

He begins remembering the last moments of the fight. He sees the cannons fire, sees himself grabbing Auriane, and then sees the cannonballs stop suddenly in midair. Leo sits beside him.

“Son, you did it.” Leo reaches for the book and says, “You have half the power; I can show you the part you’re still missing.”

Vlanci sits up in his bed. “No. I know it. I mean, I’ve felt it. I connected with it before I went unconscious. It’s my non-physical self, right? My soul that connects to everything in the world.” Vlanci looks down at the book in his father’s hands. “Let me see that.” He flips through every page hurriedly. “Auriane, I understand now. The world, what’s happening to me.” Before he finishes his thoughts, the alarms ring.

“An attack,” Leo says, running out the door.

“I need to get up there, to the docks,” Vlanci tells Auriane. She puts her arm around him to help him out of bed. “We have to get to the Vauquelin.”

They raced as fast as they can to the watchtowers of the castle and see the colossal warships approaching.

Auriane says, “There will be a ground team, too. The airships will blow a part of the wall away, and they will come through unhindered.”

“Still, we have to get to the Vauquelin.” Vlanci tries to walk to the stairs to get to the docks but falls when Auriane doesn’t walk with him.

“Vlanci,” she confesses, “It’s too late.” His eyes pierce through her. “You can’t win. Afanasi knows everything about what has happened.”

He raises his hand to stop her from speaking any more. Then, he leaves her standing there, mouth agape, as he clutches the wall to support himself down the stairs alone.

Final Battle

Vlanci meets Leo at the door to the docks. “Where’s Auriane?”

“She. . . gave us away,” Vlanci says, looking down in disgust. Leo immediately sends guards up to her room.

“Son, it’s time for you to get to your post aboard the Vauquelin; your men are waiting.” Leo picks the downtrodden Vlanci up under his shoulder and carries him to his ship.

Didier waits for him, and, without questioning him about Auriane, says, "The bridge is yours, Admiral."

"Thanks," Vlanci replies, "Get ready for takeoff."

His crew is undermanned; none of them minded because they saw what Vlanci can do. The Vauquelin is the last ship in the air, but Vlanci urges the pilots to move them to the front of the charge. While he was bed-ridden, they had outfitted the Vauquelin with the new cannons that the rest of the fleet had. It is a welcome addition, though Vlanci lets Didier take charge of them because he knows nothing of their capabilities.

Vlanci hears Didier yell, "They're in range!"

"Fire at will, Lieutenant," Vlanci says, giving the only order he would about the cannons. The Vauquelin fires, as do the rest of the fleet, and Vlanci feels the shock under his feet from the force. However, they are stopped; every cannonball hangs in midair, then, Vlanci notices, they begin heading back towards the Gataen fleet.

"Afanasi," Vlanci growls. He reaches out for the cannonballs, feels them come to a halt, and releases them to land outside the city walls. While his eyes are closed in concentration, the lead Kievan Rus ship breaks from the pack and heads for the Vauquelin. Vlanci compels his pilots to push the Vauquelin forward.

If he could battle Afanasi one-on-one, Getae would have a much better chance to win, he thinks. As the two ships power closer to each other, neither commander seems willing to break his course. The Vauquelin strikes first. Its metal bow spears the other ship almost directly at its foremost point. Shards of wood fly around the Vauquelin. Amidst them is Afanasi. He uses the force of the collision to launch himself directly at Vlanci. A piece of

wood pierces Vlanci in the shoulder but does not hinder him from catching Afanasi with his newfound power. Afanasi, caught unaware of Vlanci's realized power, begins flailing his arms, but Vlanci lowers him to the deck. There are soldiers all around Afanasi, just in case Vlanci loses control of him.

“Hello, Uncle,” Vlanci smiles as he says it.

Afanasi, not wanting to show any more surprise at Vlanci's power, smiles back, “Vlanci, I see you’ve finally tapped into your potential. With help from my captain, no doubt.”

“Of course, he knew,” Vlanci says to himself. His gripped tightens, and he sees Afanasi buckle under the pressure. “You shouldn’t have started this, Afanasi,” Vlanci says enraged. The thoughts of Auriane, Algarrobo, and his family ties swirl around him. He walks closer to Afanasi, tightening his grip with each step.

Afanasi clenches at his throat and says, “Your father was the brains of that scheme at Algarrobo, Vlanci.”

“I’ll deal with him if the time comes.” Vlanci's mind flashes.

<The world darkens around Vlanci; it is only he and Afanasi. Vlanci's hold apparently loosens on Afanasi as he stands up. Afanasi’s spirit rises out of his body as he edges closer to Vlanci. They seem to resonate with each other and Vlanci’s spirit leaves his body as well.>

The world around them stops. The airships and soldiers come to a halt.

This is Afanasi’s doing, Vlanci thinks. Then the events from his vision play out. It is only Vlanci and Afanasi, the Vauquelin, and darkness. The two men’s souls harken to each other.

Vlanci attacks first as he notices their two limp bodies lying on the Vauquelin deck. Vlanci tries to use his invisible power as Afanasi charges at him. It has no effect on Afanasi as he lunges at Vlanci. Afanasi grabs him, and they roll onto the deck, still surrounded by night. Without his power, Vlanci's confidence wanes and his mind loses focus, but Afanasi does not let up. Without hesitation, Afanasi grips his throat and repeatedly punches Vlanci.

“Even if you were the first, I will be the last and greatest!”

Vlanci grunts and holds up his hands in defense as Afanasi continues to pummel him. Vlanci feels like he can't take anymore when Afanasi stops. Then, Vlanci opens his eyes and sees his father holding Afanasi's physical body with his sword. Afanasi immediately withdraws, and the world resumes as both men fall back into their bodies.

As Vlanci's senses began flowing into him again, Leo screams, “Vlanci, hold him!”

But his words are obscured by the fighting around him.

Vlanci, meanwhile, surveys the battle. He has been stuck on the aft side of the ship, and as he looks around, notices Afanasi and his father struggling on the port side. His father can't last long against Afanasi, Vlanci knows, even with a sword to his uncle's neck. The ensuing battle slows Vlanci's frantic run to his father's aid. He has to draw his sword to fend off a few Kievan Rus soldiers and shove his own men away to get to his father.

“Vlanci, hold him down.” Vlanci's senses pour into his power, barely containable.

He throws his hands out at Afanasi and sees Afanasi's entire body constrict.

“Well, brother, it seems your game is at an end,” Leo snarls. “Call off your army and perhaps you will survive.”

“Never,” Afanasi answers, his voice high and faltering from the tight grip Vlanci has on him. As Leo raises his sword, a gleaming spear shoots through his chest.

“Father!” Vlanci screams, loosening his grip on Afanasi. Auriane stands behind Leo as his body falls to the ground. Vlanci stutters as he sees the betrayer.

“Auriane,” Vlanci cries, falling to his knees. Afanasi grips him as he had in the spiritual realm.

Auriane lowers her spear and cries, “Vlanci, I was aiming for Afanasi!” But Afanasi cuts her off and sends her flying to the back of the ship. Vlanci feels all his power swell inside him and unleashes it. It is a pulse of energy that spreads to the edges of the battlefield. Each ship in the air shudders under the impact and some are downed. Afanasi stands his ground.

Vlanci gets up, sword in hand, and prepares to battle. But, Afanasi begins laughing and holsters his sword. Vlanci immediately rushes him. Afanasi steps aside. Vlanci cannot slow himself in time as Auriane springs from behind Afanasi and spears Vlanci as she had his father. Vlanci hangs on the end of the lance as Afanasi uses his power to raise him off the ground.

“You will feel what I will never embrace; but, Vlanci, you showed me the way. It’s all thanks to you. Now, to set my path, you must die. It is my destiny to control this world, not yours.” With those last words, Afanasi tosses Vlanci over the side of the Vauquelin.

Interlude 2 – Entering Getae City

Afanasi rides the Vauquelin through the city gates with Auriane commanding the ship.

Afanasi walks from his post on the bow to the bridge to speak to Auriane.

“You did well,” he says as he kisses her on the head. The battle after the death of Leo and Vlanci was over quickly. Afanasi could have crushed the rest of Getae’s airships but let’s his army do the work. Vlanci’s body hasn’t been found; that is Afanasi’s least concern. He now has to control the city.

A demonstration of power, he thinks, should suffice.

Afanasi checks over the Vauquelin’s reports and controls, and tells Auriane, “I’m going to retire to my new quarters. Meet me later.” Afanasi walks into Vlanci's room for only the second time.

“This is more Leo’s room than Vlanci's,” he says to himself. Many of the artifacts from his expedition with Leo are here. Most of them contain clues to the location and story of *The Indwelling God*. Surprisingly, Afanasi hasn’t found the book anywhere. It is one of his main reasons for beginning the invasion so soon, but at this time, he is too tired to be concerned. As he sits in Vlanci's chair, enjoying the luxuries of Vlanci's life and adrenaline of battle, Auriane rushes through the door.

“We’ve done it. The castle is ours, no country poses a threat, and this is the perfect seat for your new world.” Auriane is exasperated from rushing her words.

“Yes. All is still going according to plan,” Afanasi replies, getting up to examine the ancient ritual dagger of Getae’s old kingdom. Auriane repositions herself in the chair. “I will have to make you a new spear, I suppose,” Afanasi says without looking at her.

“Yes, you will,” she smiles delightedly. Her mouth opens to say something else, but a dagger silences her. It strikes through her throat, and Afanasi holds his hand out to her; he can feel her spirit draining from her body.

“You’ve done well, Auriane, but I don’t need your assistance any longer. Don’t worry your pretty eyes, though; we will meet again, eons from now, and you can play your treacherous game again.” Auriane’s eyes close and her head slumps as the Vauquelin lands at the dock.

First Morning in the Castle

Afanasi wakes to a fever. He has had the same dream as when he’d killed Equii; yet, Vlanci's face is now revealed to him. Of the three men that haunt his sleep, two are dead and the third is cloaked in darkness. Afanasi flies into a rage.

He screams from Leo’s bed to his guards, “Alert the army, fuel the airships; we are going to find this masked phantom!” I had intended to make a public display of his full power to the city, he thinks, but it will run fine with Rekin at the helm until I return with this ghost’s shadowy head.

“Must you really do this? There is hardly anyone left in the world, and you’re searching for a single man?” Rekin asks, rushing into Afanasi’s new room.

Afanasi replies, "Rekin, you know nothing of this power. Imagine every being subservient to your will alone. Whatever you wish, they do; except this one person. I cannot sleep until he is found."

"Afanasi, you have the greatest army in all of history, and you still wish to fight these battles for yourself. I would think, if you didn't command this army, you would fight against them all for the sake of this power."

Afanasi stares at Rekin across the room from his seat on the bed.

"I would."

Rekin scoffs, "And you think you would win?"

"There is no doubt." Afanasi grins, regaining his composure.

"Afanasi, be sensible. I could command the army and beat a single man."

"We'll have to test that one day, but I have a search to begin."

"Of course, but one day you will not be able to depend on that power. Do not use faith where reality suffices."

Chapter 3 - Rekin

Prologue

Rekin follows Afanasi everywhere he goes. He has just been appointed to the Pontiff position, but Afanasi takes a quick liking to him. Afanasi has also wanted Rekin to be his eyes on the Pontiff Council as well as his trusted advisor. Rekin is a slender man with thin muscles and an aquiline nose. He packs as much strength as he can onto his frame, but his new duties urge him to rely on his wits and deception rather than the brawling that occurs at some of the lower levels of his office. This particular mission is to Afanasi's cousin Leo's palace in Getae City. Since their family was prominent before Afanasi or Leo were born, the two men easily found favor within their countries as rulers, but Rekin always thought Leo had gotten the better deal.

"Getae City is beautiful," Rekin marvels as they ride through the gates. He has been here a few times and has met Leo and his son, Vlanci, a couple more than that. Rekin likes the family and is congenial, but the longer he and Afanasi stay, the more rambunctious Vlanci becomes. They make it just in time for the dinner as they see the cooks awaiting their arrival, though Leo is still absent. Diego, the president of Volvec, will meet them at Algarrobo later in the evening because he doesn't want to be seen with men who solely rule their kingdoms. Rekin has only met Diego once before, while they were discussing this mission, but they had had a lively discussion on religion then. Despite being a Pontiff, Rekin

isn't troubled by piety, just power, but Diego and his country are. Afanasi seats himself as Leo bursts through the door holding Vlanci.

The action should begin soon, Rekin thinks, and waits for the young boy to pass out from the sleeping powder they have given him. Since all the guards and attendants have been dismissed, Rekin, being the lowest rank, has to carry Vlanci to the carriage. They all put on brown cloaks and ritual swords, which all happen to belong to Leo. Afanasi and Leo sit in the carriage compartment while Rekin speeds the three-horsed carriage to Algarrobo.

Algarrobo – Plans and Conspiracies

Rekin lies Vlanci down on the ground in the middle of the ritual circle. The book Leo and Afanasi captured planned each detail of the ceremony down to the site. Their cloaks and swords are from the age of the book, and, as Diego arrives, they begin practicing. It only involves a few chants, but they have to be precise. Once Diego is ready, they begin. Each man takes his turn falling into the trance, and, after a few moments, Rekin feels an energy connecting them all, including Vlanci, together. Then the energy leaves him. Vlanci's body trembles, rises, and unleashes a furious blast that levels the surrounding trees. Rekin breaks from his trance to see a glimpse of an entity burrowing into Vlanci's body; then he hears the bushes rustle behind him. Without hesitation, he draws his sword as everyone else does.

“Diego and Rekin, find out what that was,” Afanasi says. Diego motions for Rekin to follow him, and they search the nearby paths. They see a flash of metal and catch glimpses of two

men running away on horses. Rekin begins running after the trespassers until he hears shouts and metallic clanks. Rekin looks at Diego, and they rush back to the ritual site to find Leo and Afanasi dueling.

“What should we do?” he whispers to Diego.

“I don’t know; this is a family struggle. And seeing what I just saw with Vlanci, I don’t think I can carry on with this. Did you see what came out of his body?” Diego asks, as his voice grows quieter.

Rekin hesitates, “Yes. But they won’t let you simply quit.”

“I know, I know,” Diego responds. “But I’ve been working on something. They don’t know about it, and seeing those two sentries from Volvec, I have an excuse to lay low.”

Rekin thinks about this. “Yes, but what if they saw you? And what are you planning? A conspiracy?”

“One of the men had a very distinct medal. One that only a few would have for winning a battle almost single-handedly. I will go to our camp tomorrow, spot him, and send him to the country with a nice wife. As for my plans, you will be included as they unfold, I assure you.”

Rekin sprints to Afanasi lying on the ground, writhing in agony. Leo and Vlanci are nowhere in sight, and Diego jumps on his horse and tosses his cloak aside.

“Let’s get you home, sir,” Rekin says, as he picks up Afanasi.

Getae City – Under Afanasi and Rekin’s Rule

Rekin has become a master spy over the years. From uncovering the Pontiff Assassination plot on Afanasi to becoming the new Grand Advisor to Afanasi since the Pontiff’s disbandment, Rekin has dealt with people repeatedly on ranges of issues, often switching sides, and always coming out the victor. Now that Leo is dead, Rekin is the most knowledgeable man about Afanasi, and, for now, the ruler of the Getae province. A message has come specifically for him as Afanasi’s airship leaves the city. He opens and sees that it is from Diego. The president had fled Volvec at the start of the war, and Afanasi’s best scouts had come up empty on him. The message is cryptic; it only gives a time and location with Diego’s signature.

With Afanasi searching for hidden enemies, it would be the perfect time to meet him, Rekin thinks, and hides the letter in his robes. Despite his apparent undying loyalty, Rekin is more political in his role as advisor and keeps all his options open.

“If Diego was smart enough to avoid Afanasi this long, he has to have a few tricks up his sleeve,” Rekin thinks aloud. He dismisses the guards to do their rounds.

Though not Afanasi, Rekin has become a noticeable figure himself, and with the best Kievan Rus troops keeping the city under control, Rekin feels as powerful as Afanasi. Rekin decides to meet Diego; the place isn’t far from Getae City, and he can slip away at night without notifying the guards. Rekin sits up in the throne and looks around the room.

Meeting with Diego

Rekin wears a cloak like the one he had worn at Algarrobo. He doesn't know how much Diego knows about him, but playing his old Pontiff role helps him be less conspicuous to Diego and any onlooker. The meeting is only a mile outside the city walls, and Rekin arrives a little early. The desolate area provides little cover, but the night hides everything that isn't within a body's length. Diego sneaks up behind him.

"Hello, Rekin." Diego wears the same kind of cloak as Rekin, but has the hood drawn, and his eyes pierce through the darkness as Rekin turns to look at him.

"You've been living well, Rekin," Diego says sitting alongside him. "Being a Pontiff was a guise, then?"

Rekin replies, "More or less, but I did grow up in the church."

"I'm not that concerned," Diego cut him off. "Rekin, we must stop Afanasi. He's become too dangerous. I thought Vlanci might have been able to defeat him, but we know how that played out. Now, I have to intervene." Rekin looks at him questioningly as Diego unveils a book to him. "Auriane smuggled it to me before she died. It belongs to people like us, Rekin. We allowed it to be misused before; now we have to stop him and make things right."

Rekin listens to him carefully and asks, "What would be right? Why is Afanasi wrong?"

Diego shakes his head. "Rekin, look at him. How do you think this will end?"

Rekin looks away.

“He won’t stop until this world and all of history is under his control. Haven’t you read the book?”

Rekin shakes his head again. “No, Afanasi won’t go that far.”

Diego sighs, “It already has. He’s killed his cousin, nephew, Auriane; he only needs to rid the world of the rest of us.”

“What exactly does that book say?” Rekin asks. He has never been able to look through it, and merely followed Afanasi’s orders about the ritual at Algarrobo.

“In short, it’s a prophecy on the renewal of the world. The starting over of life, but with a blank slate so people could make new choices. As it is, we are stuck in this cyclical world where everything happens just as it already did. We were supposed to invest our future in four souls, as the book says, who would survive the cycle of the world.”

“How could anyone survive the end of the world?” Rekin asks.

“You’ve seen it,” Diego replies. “Afanasi and Vlanci displayed their soul. That keeps their consciousness alive, as well as their body, and only another one as powerful as them could destroy Afanasi. They can then restart human history with the knowledge and advancements we already have.”

“Why can’t Afanasi do this? No one else can rival him; why don’t you believe Afanasi would start civilization off right?”

“He wants to enslave us all,” Diego says with each word rising in volume. “But,” his voice softens, “you can stop him. You’re close to him, and much more importantly, you have his army inside the city.”

“What exactly are you saying?”

“If we could make you as powerful as Afanasi, perform the ritual for you, you could defeat him and start the world right.”

Rekin stands up. “Let me think about this.”

He turns to leave, and hears Diego say, “Rekin, there’s not much time. It has to be you—and before Afanasi returns— so you can raise the army in his name.”

Later That Night – Vlanci's Room

Rekin sits alone in Vlanci's old room with the book Diego gave him. Most of the time he knew how and where to maneuver to gain an advantage, but, now, he is at a crossroads where the choice is his alone. Afanasi had always helped his career along, and now it was time to advance himself. He flips through the pages. Rekin will soon be fifty years old; time, he thinks, to stop living for someone to give him his next promotion. When Afanasi had left on his paranoid trip and given Getae over to Rekin, Rekin had never felt such power.

“No, I don’t care about my power over others. I wasn’t a bad Pontiff; I helped many people. It’s not for me only that I have to do this. I can start the world anew and show all men how to live!” Rekin’s thoughts burst from his mouth. With a look of embarrassment, he mumbles to himself, “Quiet, quiet. I must keep my ambition unsuspected.” He sits and reads his new book to learn of the deeds he would soon accomplish.

Ritual with Diego

Rekin sends a message to Diego through his trusted courier to detain Diego and bring him to Getae Palace. It is the simplest way to get to Diego without any more secrecy. Of course, Rekin thinks, it would be known to Afanasi within the week that Diego was alive, but my plan will be complete if Afanasi decides to return right away. Diego is kept under tight security, and only under Rekin's orders is he allowed to do anything.

Before the night comes, Rekin decides to run a military drill to see how well the army will listen to him. As Grand Advisor, Rekin had kept up with military protocol and knew where most positions would be stationed. He sounds the invasion alarm. Although most armies would be startled by this after winning such an important war against another nation, the Kievan Rus army doesn't linger in its duty. The newly refitted airships are in the air within minutes; archers and infantry are along the wall and gate, and his personal guards garrison him in his room until he tells them it is a drill. As he goes around the palace and checks on the bulk of the stationed units, Rekin notes their precision.

"Maybe because Afanasi isn't here, they're trying to show him how devoted they are even without his leadership," Rekin says, hoping a few of the men will overhear him. He commends several units for their speed, and heads back to his quarters, pleased with the drill's results. After the bells chime midnight, Rekin decides it was time to free Diego. He has to sneak throughout the castle to get to Diego, but getting him back to his room is more difficult. He has to subdue the guards himself.

Rekin finally makes his way to the dungeon unnoticed and says to Diego, "Are you ready?"

Released, Diego replies, "Yes, I'm glad you chose to do this and not leave me hanging here for all eternity." As Rekin takes out a few of the guards while Diego remains hidden, they retrieve the swords they had used at Algarrobo from the storeroom and make their way back to Rekin's new room.

"Do I have to be unconscious this time?"

"No, I don't believe so. In here, you need to control it right away so you don't break down the castle. We'll go into the trance; that should be enough," Diego replies.

The two men write the ritual signs on the ground and begin falling into the sacred trance. As their chanting progresses, Diego's voice begins to get noticeably louder as Rekin's drifts away. Then, the green light appears, and their eyes open. Rekin's body crumples to the floor as Diego watches in silence. Rekin, not totally in control of his spiritual self, begins to fill with power. His apparition expands and looks as if it is going to burst.

"Stop! Calm yourself, Rekin! You must control it," Diego exclaims. The ghost expands once more, then, Diego hears chuckling. He looks up to see the barely visible face of Rekin smiling.

"This power, Diego. Well, let me show you." Rekin uses his new-found power to pick Diego up and fly him around the room. "I must be the last of the four, then, Diego. Right?"

Diego is lowered to the floor as he answers, "Yes. I saw it in you. Equii, Vlanci, Afanasi, and now you, Rekin. You are the four I foresaw start the world."

Diego's appearance begins to change. He changes from a president with an elegant suit and well-cut hair to a robe-wearing, gray haired mystic. Rekin flies back into his body.

"You're the prophet of the book?"

Diego nods. "Yes, I've been alive since the beginning to oversee and protect the bearers of the light of man. I have failed thus far, as Afanasi has taken matters into his own hands. But you and I, Rekin, will make everything right for you to start the world over." At the end of his words, Diego vanishes.

Rekin Commands an Army

Rekin sees the whole of history unfold in front of him as he waits for Diego every night. When Diego shows up, they plan their strategy against Afanasi and beyond. Rekin hasn't heard a word from Afanasi since he left. It has only been a week, but with Diego's surprise return and the nature of Afanasi's trip, Afanasi should have sent orders by now. Since he hadn't, Rekin stalls his plan until it is perfect. They decide to show off Rekin's power and portray it as Afanasi's. If the city and army believed it, Rekin would control Getae City, half the Kievan Rus army, and his own power. Since Diego didn't seem to be showing up that night, Rekin goes to bed with images of the future flashing through his mind.

That morning, Rekin sends out a message to the public that Afanasi would speak later in the day. Rekin fully arms himself in the image of Afanasi. The palace has a balcony that

overlooks the plaza in front of the castle. As he opens the doors to the balcony, the crowd stops their whispering and watches his movements.

Rekin puts the visor down on his helmet and exclaims to the crowd, "Getae! I am Afanasi; your new ruler." The crowd begins yelling.

Rekin raises his arms, "Behold the power that your rulers could not control but will allow me to save you from complete destruction. There is another, an imposter, who wishes to annihilate you, as you believed I once did." Upon hearing his words, the crowd grows silent. Rekin retreats from the balcony to unveil his power, and Diego appears there.

"It's all going according to plan, Rekin. You will win their support with this showing and Afanasi will be on his knees in no time." Rekin looks into himself and lets his soul flee his body. The apparition appears above the crowd.

"People of Getae, I will lead you against the monster who calls himself by my name. Will the citizens of Getae march with me?" Rekin's voice booms from the silhouette of a specter. The crowd hesitates for a moment, but seeing the phantom above them and hearing him speak, they are swayed to his side. One after another begins shouting for the Afanasi-clone. Rekin falls back into his body and follows Diego to his quarters to plan the assault against Afanasi.

Readying for War

Afanasi has finally sent a message to Rekin announcing his return. Afanasi had one more suspicion to overturn, and he left Rekin his location. Not waiting for Afanasi to return to the

city and ruin his deception, Rekin readies the entire city for war. Many commanders come to him asking about Afanasi, but Rekin tells them he had needed to get away to rest and clear his thoughts from the previous battles.

What will the men think when they see their own colors fighting against them? How can I keep them believing they are fighting for a new cause? Rekin thinks, sitting in the throne room.

The new decorations are complete. They make the palace much more inviting to Rekin. He notes the disgust on the Getaen people's faces when they see it because all remnants of Leo's kingship have been torn down. Rekin finishes entertaining the last of the requests for the day as Diego appears before him.

"That's quite a trick, Diego," Rekin says.

"Rekin, the men will not stay under your influence for long if they know they're fighting against their friends and countrymen."

"Yes, I know, and they won't openly defy Afanasi either. They've seen his power. They know what he is capable of." Rekin stands and paces around the room.

Diego thinks for a moment. "But wouldn't they if they knew his end goal? Wouldn't every man fight to hold off Afanasi's dream?"

"Should I tell them? Do you think they will believe they can win?"

Diego sighs and says, "The airships are ready, and the men are prepared. It's your choice, but with their hostile spirit up, now is the best time to get them to fight." Diego heaves another, heavier sigh. "Nothing is as I foresaw."

Then, he vanishes. Rekin, left alone with his thoughts, begins writing the speech that would make him a leader or an enemy.

Speech Against Afanasi

For the second time in a week, Rekin prepares to address the Getaen population, this time with his soldiers listening and without the disguising armor.

He stands on the balcony and proclaims, "Citizens of Getae. I am Rekin, the Grand Advisor to Afanasi." Rekin hesitates for a moment. "The threat I warned you about is none other than Afanasi himself. He wishes to annihilate you, even the Kievan Rus soldiers, and take the world for himself. As you have seen, I possess the same power as he. I can stop him. We can stop him from the genocide he's been committing. It is not as a ruler that I ask this of you, but as a man who wishes to remain free for all eternity."

Perplexity sweeps through the crowd. Even the soldiers look confused.

"Are you with me in defending the lives we hold dear? It is not just for ourselves today that we fight; it is for the next generation and the eons to follow that we must stop him."

Rekin slams his fists down on the balcony and unleashes a massive blast of energy. The people cover their heads, and when they look up, Afanasi and the Vauquelin are above them.

Afanasi's Return

Rekin hears the rumbling of the airships engines and notices the crowd looking up. The Vauquelin docks in the castle while the rest of the fleet hovers above the city. Rekin runs into the throne room where Diego waits for him. The multitude stand appalled as the soldiers take their posts.

"Rekin, you are the last one. You are above mankind, Rekin, you are our hope and future."

"No, Diego, I first have to talk to him. We started this war for noble reasons. We can end it that way as well, and Afanasi will never have to know about the power in me."

Both men look tense as they await Afanasi's entrance.

"Diego, hide and let me talk to him alone."

As Diego walks to the door to leave, Afanasi bursts through.

"Diego?" Afanasi stops and stares at the unwelcomed man. "Rekin, what is he doing here?"

Diego answers before Rekin can. "I've come to unleash in Rekin the power that you both have."

"Afanasi, this war has to end. There is no one else to defeat. One man cannot stop you; even if I contain this power, I would be no match."

Afanasi answers, "If you believe that, help me destroy Diego. His vision is as washed away as he is. I have already done away with that dream, but together, Rekin, we can start our own history."

"Not if the history will begin like this. Diego offers nothing, let him go."

“No, his death will signal the new beginning to my reign.” Afanasi grabs Diego’s throat with his power and raises him off the ground.

With Diego choking, Rekin pleads, “Afanasi, your reign is not now. Let him be; he may even have a new vision of your rule.”

“No,” Afanasi growls, clenching his unseen fist around Diego’s throat.

“Help,” Diego implores.

With a growing whirlwind of colors and debris, Rekin cries, “I said stop!” Suddenly, Rekin’s power manifests, and he sends a shockwave through the room. Afanasi’s connection with Diego is broken, and Diego dashes from the room.

“Is this your will, Rekin?” Afanasi asks.

Rekin stands up and stammers to find his words. Afanasi, not having any sympathies for his second-in-command, charges after him as Rekin retreats.

“Face me!” Afanasi demands.

Rekin stands still and reaches for a dagger. Shaking, he hurls it at Afanasi, but it is batted away. Afanasi draws his sword and moves closer to Rekin. Suddenly, Rekin feels a surge of courage, and when Afanasi strikes at him with his sword, Rekin holds it at bay with his power. With increasing confidence, Rekin knocks the sword out of Afanasi’s hand and forces him backward with a push of his hand. Afanasi, dismayed at his advisor’s strength, falls to a knee and skids backward. Rekin does not wait. Afanasi’s blade flies into Rekin’s hand while he leaps at the black-armored man. The sword falls loudly but harmlessly on Afanasi’s shoulder as his attempt to stop the blade fails. Rekin swings again. This time he misses his target as Afanasi ducks and rolls away. Before he can get to his feet, Rekin has

control of him. Rekin throws Afanasi against the wall and holds him in place among the crumbling stones. Rekin's hidden dagger pierces Afanasi's stomach.

"Where did this power come from?" Afanasi asks, gasping.

Rekin points the blade at Afanasi's throat and says, "From watching you destroy the world. I have to save it from you."

Rekin thrusts his sword, only to hit stone. Afanasi has vanished from his grip; then he hears the alarms sound.

His guards rush into the room.

"Sir, Afanasi's airships landed after Diego told us what was happening. They've sided with you, as have we all. However, Afanasi himself has taken the Vauquelin."

The guards stand breathing heavily.

"Has he left the city?" Rekin asks.

"I'm afraid so, sir."

Rekin breathes a sigh of relief and sits on his newly acquired throne.

Searching for Afanasi

The city has quieted down from the day before. The generals and commanders have a meeting with Rekin telling him about what Afanasi had been doing on his excursions. They inform Rekin that Afanasi also has new powers.

Such as vanishing, Rekin thinks.

And, they said, Afanasi had brutalized every settlement they came across single-handedly. This, the commanders tell Rekin, they cannot allow or live with, and so their allegiance is to Rekin and his embodiment of freedom.

Diego appears the night after the battle with Afanasi. "You have the army's trust. That's one less battle you have win."

"Luckily for me," Rekin replies. "The battle against Afanasi alone takes an army." Then, Rekin's doubt sets in. "Diego, what is all this for? Am I the man that can create a new world?"

"Rekin, you are who I foresaw as the leader of Equii, Vlanci, and even Afanasi," Diego says weakly. "The others had strength, devotion, and ambition, but you have the desire."

"If I fail, the whole world will collapse under the boot of Afanasi. If I succeed, it is my responsibility to rule the world. It's too much for one man."

"No, Rekin, the world was made for you four. It could not lend itself to everyone being gods so you four, and now just you, must suffice. You must overcome this sense of futility if you are to be the man you're capable of being; the man humanity needs you to be."

Diego begins to disappear as Rekin yells after him, "And what does that entail? How do I become this man? How do I know the way to begin civilization?"

Rekin slumps into the throne, burdened by the uncertainty of the future.

Finding Afanasi

The airships are in the air, and the civilian guard stands at the city gate. Rekin sits on the bow of his newly fitted airship, the Arminius. The men take to him over the few days they have together. He holds a meeting with a few of the generals to make sure they know the circumstances and the plans. At Rekin's request, Diego shows up in the middle of the meeting with his prophetic book. Diego explains what Afanasi plans to do with the world. From there, word trickles down through the ranks about Afanasi's deceit and morale is high as Rekin and the army set out to find Afanasi.

The last known location of Afanasi was near the Southern Seas. So, Rekin plots a course for the coastline and prepares to search the entire continent for the rogue tyrant. The plan is for Rekin and the Arminius to take on Afanasi solely, unless they need backup, to minimize casualties. Rekin trains for his personal battle with Afanasi after the plan is made as well. Afanasi was a true soldier, being the prime example of perfect fighting skills and instincts, so Rekin needs to be prepared. Apart from the daggers he hid in his robes, Rekin learns to use the sword.

A week into the journey along the coast, Rekin spots a monstrous wall of water standing in the middle of the sea. The water sprays like a fountain at the top, showing a glimmer of the Vauquelin.

"There it is," Rekin says, squinting to see. It is a marvel. The water spirals to the tip of Vauquelin, which makes the ship look like a fortress suspended in the sky.

“Push ahead; break through the water,” Rekin commands. The Arminius leads the charge by itself. Rekin wasn’t going to endanger the other ships in case Afanasi had a devious plan. As Rekin and his crew near the massive water wall, a shot bursts toward them. It is a direct stream of water that makes the Arminius dive away to miss it. Unluckily, the shot rips through two of Rekin’s other airships.

“Already losing men and we haven’t even seen Afanasi,” Rekin whispers to himself. “Do not let him get another shot off!”

Rekin can feel Afanasi’s presence grow as they near the Vauquelin. The mountain of water collapses, leaving the airship hanging alone. A light emanates from the ship, and Afanasi can be seen rising above it into the sky. As he rises, the waters below him churn then rush up to cloak him. Rekin sees Afanasi’s arms reach outward before the whole sea speeds toward him and his army. At the last moment, Rekin extends his power over the Arminius, but he isn’t strong enough to cover every other vessel; the rest of the fleet is hopelessly lost. The onrushing water smothers and crushes the Kievan Rus army. Only Rekin and his crew remain to confront Afanasi.

Showdown

Rekin doesn’t turn around to see the destruction; instead, he narrows his eyes and wields his sword.

“Pilot! Ram through the Vauquelin. I don’t want a shred of it remaining.” The Arminius jolts and charges towards the Vauquelin. Its ramming head splits the side of Afanasi’s ship,

though Afanasi is still suspended in the air. The Vauquelin falls in two on either side of the Arminius.

“Fire the cannons at the splinters,” Rekin commands. With the sounds of the cannons going off around them, the crew of the Arminius fails to notice Afanasi falling silently into their midst. His mere presence freezes the troops. Without his sword, Afanasi looks less menacing, but the paralyzed troops are proof of his remaining power. Afanasi strides through the Arminius without a single scuffle. Rekin still stands on the bow when he hears his name called from behind.

“So, the Grand Advisor thinks he knows more than the king, does he? Remember, Rekin, the king is the holder of secrets, not the adjunct,” Afanasi says. Rekin’s whole army still stands paralyzed behind Afanasi.

“This battle is between us now. You and I for the world. I think it’s unfair that you carry my sword.” Afanasi reaches for his blade, and it finds his hand. Rekin barely has time to react before he is left defenseless.

Afanasi is slow with his movements. Rekin stands watching Afanasi, not wanting to strike at the wrong moment. Afanasi feints toward Rekin to test him. Rekin overreacts and nearly loses his hold on the railing. Afanasi takes the momentary lack of control to grab Rekin.

“What makes you think you can stop me? Equii, Vlanci, Leo, all failed. Are you better than them?” He shoves Rekin across the ship amid all the troops. As he summons his power, Afanasi lets loose a burst of energy that levels everyone aboard except Rekin.

He looks at his fallen comrades for a moment and says, “Afanasi, you can’t do this. This isn’t why each Kievan Rus soldier followed you.”

“This is for me,” Afanasi bellows, walking in front of Rekin. “The world isn’t meant for armies; it’s made for individuals, and I mean to be the first among them. Anyone can control an army, but to control the civilians and kings who think for themselves is true mastery.” Afanasi reaches back and unleashes a single burst of energy at Rekin.

“Sorry, brothers,” Rekin says as he uses the dead soldiers around him as a shield. He is able to edge closer to Afanasi.

“Have you not realized the extent of my power? You can’t win.” Rekin throws the bodies at Afanasi who bats them aside. Then, Afanasi breaks free of his flesh and tears through the sky. Rekin weakly tosses the last of his soldiers at Afanasi, then focuses. Rekin’s flesh slowly peels away, and he finally follows Afanasi into the sky. The battle above boils the sea below. Afanasi circles Rekin who is noticeably uncomfortable as a spirit.

“You’ve become strong, Rekin, but the world is yet for stronger men. You have overcome mortals, but you have not surpassed gods.”

Rekin waits patiently. “Afanasi, do you see what you’re doing? Do you realize what will become of the world?”

“Of course, you fool. I have transcended every facet of our species. I have surpassed the whims of those mortals and refused to allow them any demands on my immortal spirit. Now, you will too.”

“I can’t let you do this. Diego foresaw me beginning the world, not you. I can destroy you.”

“Diego’s vision is as dead as he is.”

Rekin is taken aback. “What do you mean?”

“Diego’s dream is tied to him. With your death, the last of his vision will be the end of him.”

“No!”

A sea-wall rises around them, then Afanasi strikes. He passes through Rekin like a ghost.

As Afanasi stops on the other side of Rekin, he says, “There is no one left, Rekin. What are you fighting for? Some civilians who aren’t your countrymen? Stop this, and I will let you remain my Grand Advisor.”

Rekin ignores him and feels the strength surge in him as it had during the throne room battle. He reaches for Afanasi just as he had then and feels the small tug. Afanasi tries to loose himself of his captor, but Rekin slowly moves forward. Face to face with Afanasi, Rekin remains steadfast as Afanasi continues to struggle.

“I can and will beat you. This is my world now,” Rekin growls, tightening his grip. Afanasi suddenly begins coarsely chuckling through the ever-tightening hold on him. Realizing what he said, Rekin lets go of Afanasi. Rekin backs away as if understanding the complete story.

“That wasn’t my voice,” he says, looking up to Afanasi. “It was yours.”

Afanasi nods, stroking his free neck. “That’s right. We’re all connected, Rekin; I’m surprised you haven’t learned that. If you did, you would know you could control me, too. But since you can’t. . .” Afanasi motions with his hand, and Rekin’s hand mimes his. Afanasi smiles as his hand slowly goes to his throat. Rekin’s face drops and goes pale as he is compelled to continue imitating Afanasi.

Beginning to choke, Rekin says, "You let me take hold of you; you wanted me to chase you with the army."

Still smiling, Afanasi nods again, manipulating Rekin's movements.

"Do you understand now? This is my world. I can control everyone like this, Rekin. And, each soul I encounter strengthens me. So don't think of this as the end. You will be a part of the strongest man in all of history."

Rekin feels the life draining from him until Afanasi lets go of his throat. He motions with both hands at Rekin who is flung back into his physical body and then stretched to the breaking point, physically and spiritually. Rekin is spread to an unrecognizable extent, then blown into infinitesimal pieces and swallowed by the sea.

Interlude – Afanasi

Afanasi enjoys the lonely ride back to Getae aboard the Arminius. He has a few surprises in store for the surviving civilians.

“Maybe I’ll use them as puppets or have them fight each other for enjoyment,” he says to himself. Afanasi goes below deck after the course is set. He finds *The Indwelling God* and flips through the pages until he dozes off. This is the third time he dreams of Equii. Vlanci appears again as well, but now Rekin reveals his face.

In his dream, Afanasi says, “So, I didn’t have to leave my inner-circle to find the third masked man. Do your worst, dead men.”

Equii, Vlanci, and Rekin remain silent. Afanasi withdraws his sword to tempt them, but they stay quiet.

Feeling the fury build within him, Afanasi explodes, “You’re all dead. I’ve killed you and spat on your bodies. Bury yourselves if you wish but stay out of the living’s way!”

He slashes through all three, and they disappear as if vanquished by the metal sword.

Afanasi awakes to find himself standing with his blade, the room a mess of sword slashes.

Then, while awake, the men appear before him. Agape, Afanasi drops his sword and slinks into his chair.

“Afanasi,” Equii says more confidently than ever. “You above all should know that you merely rid us of our flesh.”

Vlanci, looking sullen, chimes in, “Do not think we are finished with you yet.”

“Our bodies are scattered for the fish, Afanasi, but have we materialized before you as bodies? No, we have reached the higher plane, and you are meant to join us,” the recently deceased Rekin joins in. Their spirits fade into the air, and Afanasi falls back asleep.

Chapter 4 – The End of All Beginnings

Diego's Vision of the Future

These are the words of Diego, the prophet, as spoken in *The Indwelling God*.

“Here is what I saw when the world restarted itself: Four men walked over a hill with a bright new sun rising behind them. All had swords drawn but not against each other. It was a new day, the first. The world was desolate aside from beasts, and the whole of humanity rested on the shoulders of these men who had already lived through so much. They were emblazoned with their respected titles: two of birds of prey with golden plumages, one with the body of a lion, and the last carrying the symbol of humanity on his chest.

The discussion on how to begin the world never came. Each man played the part that was required of him. The Age of Beasts came and went, and the two plumaged men, Equii and Afanasi, led the way with strength and forged the way for humanity. The beasts dared not attack mankind for fear of Equii and Afanasi, but the growing people were not frightened of these men. They were the keepers of justice, and in the kingdom, no man committed any offense for fear of their justice. They were of equal strength to keep order between them and the whole of civilization.

Vlanci headed the faithful and hopeless alike. He was the teacher of morality, courage, and devotion. Mankind learned how to live, work, and enjoy themselves from the example Vlanci set. While each new man in the kingdom learned from Vlanci, they were set upon their own path in the world. His was the symbol of a lion. Though strength was the duty of

Equii and Afanasi, it was up to Vlanci to display the courage with which humanity was to tackle its fate.

As for Rekin, the symbol of humanity, he was not merely the leader of humanity, but of the four immortals as well. Though he did not rule as a king, he pushed the reaches of mankind past its boundaries. With Rekin at the helm, humanity had no intellectual or physical limits. He is the reason the four men struggled to become immortal and outlast the world. He could hear each soul's cries and desires and satisfy and ease them because he was supremely connected to each one. He left no man wanting as each could, in a moment, call to him and he would answer. There was but one kingdom, one rule, and one humanity. None were rulers, yet all were leaders. The world lay open for each man to live as he saw fit, and the four immortals assured each man achieved his goal."

Equii

The world is hazy around him, as if everything is made of swirling fog. A tinted mist shrouds the actual world and cuts him off from the body he sees on the ground.

"Equii," a slow sound makes its way through the fog, which moves to clear a path to the named body.

"I am he," the substance says, heading towards the dead Equii. The memories begin coming back to him. It seems as if an eternity had passed while the flashes through his mind replayed his life. He notices a familiar body, then another.

“This is my army,” he recalls. “But why aren’t there any like me? Am I still alive?” Equii looks around. He is the only spirit in this hazy world; the multitude of corpses said he shouldn’t be alone though. He feels a pull against the mass that he identifies with himself. It is the same pull he struggled with against Afanasi.

“A... Af... Afanasi,” Equii mumbles, struggling to remember while being pulled. From his waking moments in this form, the world decays, and the bodies vanish before him. The magnetic pull gains strength, and soon, Equii flies through Volvec into the Getaen mountain range. At the snow-covered peak, Equii’s spirit comes to rest. He is alone as he watches the sun slowly fall with only a hint of light.

Vlanci

Vlanci has wandered alone for some time. After the battle and Auriane’s betrayal, he came to this spirit form shortly after Afanasi left. He can clear the air around himself with a whisper momentarily. The first time he does this, he notices Auriane lying bloody on the ground. He watches her body until it rots away. Vlanci barely notices the landmarks around him, but he has no place to go. He wanders the countryside until he hears a soft murmur and feels a tug. Vlanci allows the force to drag him along because he has no dissent left in him. He watches the world he knows fade away, but remains silent. He hasn’t had an interrupting thought since he was killed. His conscience is too full to open himself up. Vlanci has figured out what he was at the start. The spirit that broke free of his

flesh was what he now was in death. That doesn't matter to him now. He manages a peek of Afanasi's Getae kingdom before he is rushed to a mountaintop. Another mass is there. Neither acknowledges seeing each other, but Equii says, "Hello. We await another." And the third to last sun falls over the horizon.

Rekin

Rekin is aware of every molecule of the ocean. It is only a blue haze to him, but the feeling of pressure and water is there. He has been alone in his last moments, and being surrounded is redeeming. Rekin feels more than sees the soldiers' bodies around him until fish and time get to them. He relives that last battle and every wrong move he made repeatedly. When there is nothing else around him except for his memories and the sinking sea, he feels a slight pressure urging him out of the water. The misty coastline expands in front of him, and he speeds past Getae as the force pulls him quicker and quicker. Rekin's mind flashes thoughts of himself as king, first as a tyrant then as a just king. The purple and white fog, of the Getaen Mountains, swirl around his shapeless self.

The days are darkening, he thinks as he meets the other two men. "It appears we have only one more sunset left for us."

Equii nods, and they stand on the mountaintop awaiting their numbered days.

Discussion and Ending

The day breaks with a grey sun. The three spirits stir. The fog that usually surrounds them is almost gone, and with the world more perceptible, the men are able to see each other for the first time. Vlanci seems the most shocked but doesn't speak.

Rekin says, "Vlanci, I can see your body as you once were. The rest of the world is still slightly hazy, but I can see you clearly."

Equii replies, "I can see you, too. The world is still mist around you, but you are whole again."

Vlanci breaks his silence, "As are you, sir. Is this what was meant to happen? Are we awaiting the return of the world on this mountain?"

There is a similar quality in each man, a return of joy. Their previous experiences of death and grief wane from their formless bodies until Vlanci speaks again.

"Should Afanasi be here? Weren't we four to recreate the world?"

Rekin replies, "Maybe the penalty for our failures is to watch Afanasi create a kingdom. There was almost no one left alive when I died."

"It would be a just sentence, I think," Equii consents. "I failed in stopping him when I had the chance, but I refuse to let that sentence pass if I am to watch the re-beginning of the world."

Vlanci nods. "It is, but not as it was supposed to. We weren't meant to die."

Equii asks, "What does it matter that we did? Are we not alive now?"

“No,” Rekin answers as he swiped his hand through Equii’s immaterial body. “We couldn’t stop Afanasi if we tried.”

Equii steps back. “I know you,” he says, pointing at Rekin. “You were at Algarrobo performing that ritual.”

Rekin nods. “Yes, as was Vlanci. He was just a boy then. And Diego, too.” Equii doesn’t reply but looks as if the truth of the world, his marriage, the war, and country, has crushed him.

“What’s happened to Diego?” Equii questions, still standing away from them.

Rekin answers, “He told me before I left to take on Afanasi that each of your deaths weakened him. He could no longer see the future by the time I met him. I think he was connected with his vision, with us.” After a pause, Rekin continues. “He died with me.”

Vlanci speaks quietly, “So, our dream isn’t dead?”

The other two look at him questioningly.

“What do you mean?” Equii responds.

“Diego’s dream of the future may be gone, but we’re still here, even if in spirit form. Maybe we still have a role to fulfill.”

The three men stand in silence for a moment. A blazing fire through the sky and its subsequent sound blast distracts them.

“What was that?” Rekin says.

Equii and Vlanci shake their heads. Afanasi then appears in their midst.

Leveling Afanasi

Vlanci, Equii, and Rekin immediately take guard positions. Afanasi, too, looks surprised to see them. He wields his sword and armor while the other three are barely distinguishable mists. Equii charges at him and before Afanasi can pull his sword, passes through him. Both men stand shocked.

Vlanci says in a remorseful tone, "We can't stop you Afanasi, do what you will."

Rekin, too, looks as disappointed as Vlanci, but Equii refuses to give in.

"No, Afanasi, you will not win. You may have doomed my physical body, but not my spirit. We are still here to stop you." Afanasi dismisses him with a wave of his hand.

"The world needs a beginning, ghosts, and that is my duty. The people of the world will be mine. They will no longer torture me with cries of despair and hope from their souls. I will quiet those headaches, and they will be puppets to serve me in my worldwide kingdom."

This is the first day without the sun as the universe begins anew. The world glows in the eerie green haze of the four men.

"I will see you in a few generations when I control the flesh that you called home. Isn't this true freedom? Where we can look to loftier goals than those that are hindered by physical decay? Yes, and those goals and my will are the same."

He begins walking down the mountain until Vlanci yells, "Yes, it is, Afanasi, but you don't know it yet." The fire of his devotion and belief shown in his eyes as his convictions returned to him. "We know the true freedom; you're merely flesh."

With those words, Vlanci extends his obscure form of an arm and grabs Afanasi's spirit.

"How?" Afanasi cries.

"You've been preaching this since we started at Algarrobo. I think it's time you found out what you mean about freedom," Vlanci bellows furiously.

As the other two men look on and Afanasi tries to mimic Vlanci's tactic, Vlanci shouts, "Help me, Rekin! This isn't just my battle!"

"Equii, you too," Rekin commands, when he realizes his strength alone isn't enough. Equii, unlike the other two spirits, is a warrior like Afanasi, and his strength is brutal. Vlanci holds the belief and devotion to his power, Rekin contains willpower, but Equii has the fighting spirit. He can match strength for strength with Afanasi and holds him in place. All three men together are too powerful for Afanasi to keep his soul in his body. He tries torturing Equii's spirit, unleashes a devastating blast at Rekin, and strikes with his sword at Vlanci, reminding each of them how they were killed, but none of Afanasi's powers prevail, and the three souls overwhelm him. Afanasi's flesh crumples onto the snow and rolls down the mountain.

"Now, Afanasi, we will see whose determination is strongest," Equii says, remembering how hard he fought for his wife, Gonzalo, and Guillamo.

Afanasi takes a moment to get used to being without a body, but stands resolute not to lose his grip on the creation of civilization.

Showdown at the Beginning

The three men circle Afanasi. The power he has wielded is balanced by the three spirits opposing him. Afanasi does not begin the fight.

He raises his spirit above the others and speaks, "Stop. We can destroy each other and the world, or you can hear out my plan. We were already meant to be kings in Diego's vision.

Instead of worrying about those petty concerns of those peasants, we can be gods and fulfill every whim of our higher order. It is for us this world should be made. Their pitiful cries only serve to bring us to their level and it drowns us in the rush of mortal life."

Equii is the only one not troubled over the possibilities. He quickly launches himself at Afanasi, and the two forms become entangled. Vlanci and Rekin look on. The fighting men are indistinguishable.

"Rekin, I can get to him. I have the power. Can you stop him?" Equii and Afanasi continue to struggle.

From their mixed up mess, Equii yells, "Men! We can defeat him and get our lives back. This is the moment that you choose how you want the world to begin. Serve him for all eternity or stop him and create the world that you want." Equii's determination flows into Vlanci.

"Now is the time, Rekin! I will get him way from Equii." Vlanci jumps into the fray. Rekin stands watching as the new dawn sparkles over the horizon. The land that had frozen over from lack of sun has begun to thaw and show the seas and woods for which Volvec and

Getae are famous. Equii is suddenly expelled from the fight. He is more defined but slow to rejoin Rekin. Meanwhile, Afanasi and Vlanci battle with each clearly discernible.

“Rekin, it’s your turn to fight for what you believe in! We can’t do this alone. We need you to push us over the edge. You are the tipping point!”

Rekin looks at Equii.

“You’re right. His dream is not mine. Vlanci, hold him!” Vlanci tumbles with Afanasi, and then stretches out his soul to encompass him.

“This is your only chance. Rekin, Equii, destroy him!” Afanasi squirms, but Vlanci's power blankets Afanasi’s will.

“Rekin, are you ready?” Equii asks weakly.

Rekin’s and Equii’s arms become more and more prominent as they reach out with their powers toward Afanasi and Vlanci.

Rekin hesitates. “What about Vlanci?”

“He has made his choice,” replies Equii. “Now, we must handle the consequences.”

Rekin looks hesitant, again, but continues. Afanasi screams in anguish as Equii and Rekin wrap their power around him and begin pulling his spirit apart.

“Do it! I will meet you in a different world!” Vlanci cries selflessly. “You must destroy him now!”

Equii pushes his power to its limit, and the light emanating from him blinds Rekin for a moment. Then, Rekin unleashes a small blast compared to Equii, but one sufficient to overwhelm and finish Afanasi. A small smile crosses Vlanci’s face as he and Afanasi are torn apart and scattered by the mountain wind. Equii collapses onto Rekin.

“The world is ours, friend,” Equii says as he passes out from exhaustion.

The Talk About the New World

They regain their physical bodies. Rekin and Equii sit awaiting the birth of the human race, still unsure of the consequences of their actions. They see where it is all set to begin – Algarrobo.

“Should we be kings, gods, or mortals?” Rekin asks Equii.

“I liked my life. I was a man of convictions, and I would like to give my wife a chance to meet me on our own terms.”

“Yes, I suppose I will get to start a new life as well. I followed Afanasi for so long. I barely know what to do with this new freedom.”

“It’s a mystery,” Equii replies. “That is why I’m not choosing. I will fight when I must, but the tricks of government are not for me. I will leave it in your hands, Rekin.”

With those words, Equii vanishes. The budding world takes the place of Equii’s figure, and Rekin wonders if he will see the man again.

“In my hands,” Rekin says aloud, and walks to where the first city will be.