

## *Decadence*

By Dorek

Two beings hurried through the darkened corridor. They walked softly, assuredly, their moves belying their extreme power.

"We should have predicted this," one said, indicating the roar of carnage and combat that seemed to be coming from all around them.

"Our job is to protect and provide, not to predict," the other one replied. "The Element Lords did exactly what they were supposed to: govern the land. Their arrogance and territorial nature were entirely unforeseeable."

"Their burden was ours to bear, and you know it," his companion retorted. "We cowered from our responsibility, our destiny, and this is the result."

Silence filled the tunnel, oppressively stifling all; the war itself could have stopped.

"Our duty is to protect this planet, and that is what we're doing... however we can."

The next question was quiet, almost hesitant. "Then you think Heremus is right?"

The second let out a short bark of laughter, a sound that seemed like it would perforate every inch of the tunnel, but reached only the ears of his companion. "No. Let Heremus tinker with his machines. I believe Angonce; the great spirit of this planet will live on."

The two Great Beings rushed through the corridor to their destination, their minds on the task ahead, the war outside nearly forgotten.

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Tarix parried blow after blow from a Jungle Tribe soldier. It had been a simple plan, he reflected. The Ice Tribe's finest battalion, led by the famed commander Certavus, had recently defeated several Sand Tribe units that had been preparing to attack them and steal the mysterious silver liquid that everyone coveted. The campaign had taken them across the plains of the desertic Bara Magna region, which meant a long trek home. Expecting to be hailed like heroes, the Ice Tribe band was ambushed by a small Skrall platoon, and demolished. Excellent leader as he was, Certavus managed to save the majority of his warriors from death, but was forced to hide in the dunes to avoid any major confrontations. Despite their best efforts, the news was leaked almost immediately, and the Ice Tribe was forced to triple their security. Tarix, regarded as one of the most elite warriors of the Water Tribe, was assigned to the unit in charge of taking advantage of the Ice Tribe's absence of power. Not that Tarix was happy about that.

*It just didn't make sense, he thought, driving his blades into the joints of two soldiers, crippling them. Everybody else will be doing the exact same thing. Why not wait until the other tribes have had a shot? They fail, we take advantage of the weakened defenses, they win, we ambush them. It's the most pragmatic solution, and one that will result in the fewest lives lost.*

He could have been preaching to the ocean itself. Which, in a sense, he was. The Element Lord of Water, leader of Tarix's tribe, believed in absolute domination.

"Muster up all your strength, and overwhelm in a single force," Tarix was told, in lilting tones. "If you fail, simply retreat, regroup, and attack again. That is the flow of combat."

*Politics, Tarix thought. No, worse than politics. Naked greed and ambition.*

A small nick in between his armor told him it was time to turn around. Standing there was Vastus, field commander of the Jungle Tribe. Sitting there in his hands was a very nasty looking scythe. Tarix felt his left arm numb almost immediately.

"Venom," Tarix spat. Soon the entire side of his body was senseless, and he sank to the ground.

"Is this really how it ends, Tarix?" Vastus said wearily. "A shuddering, crumpled heap on the ground? I know you. You're better than this."

Tarix grinned, a lopsided sneer made almost sinister by the unresponsive side of his face. "Better than you, certainly. What happened to the Vastus I know? You didn't even use all of your venom. The war getting hard on you?"

A small shadow passed over Vastus' face. Tarix didn't catch the microexpression, as he was too busy being smacked in the face by the flat of the scythe. "You're in no position to argue, Tarix. I hold your life in my hands now. What's to stop me from taking it?"

Tarix attempted to muster up a laugh, but it only emerged as a gurgle. "You would have killed me long ago if I didn't have something you need." His expression softened a little. "Enemies as we are, please. I have something that you need, and the last thing you want to do is kill me. We can help each other." He raised his one functioning arm in the air, as a show of peace. Vastus lowered his scythe almost eagerly. He offered a hand to Tarix to help him up.

"So..." Tarix mumbled, propped up by the Jungle commander. "How about an antidote?"

Vastus laughed. "What use would the venom be if I had an antidote?"

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"A secret tunnel?" Vastus asked.

"Yes," Tarix replied. "Rumor has it that the Element Lord of Ice initiated the construction of several of these tunnels. Apparently, the idea was to expand the entire territory, and the underground tunnels were the first step. They ended up abandoning construction after one of the tunnels collapsed."

Vastus walked to the mouth of the cave, and peered out. A larger cavern greeted his eyes, lit with hastily constructed fires. After they had agreed to a truce, the two commanders had established a single base inside the large cavern. The Water Tribe had originally attempted to camp in there, before they discovered that the Jungle Tribe was lying in wait. The fighting had spilled out into the surrounding area, and both sides were fairly well matched. Vastus saw several soldiers from each tribe mingling in the others camp. Despite all the atrocities, all the suffering, their warriors were willing to put that aside and interact. A small smile graced the face of the Jungle Tribe leader, if only for a moment.

"What makes you think there is still a tunnel remaining?" he said, returning to their campfire.

Tarix continued. "A few weeks back, we took in a small unit of Ice Agori. They said they had been survivors of the tunnel cave-in, and we nursed them back to health. The Ice Tribe negotiated their release, but they were grateful; they told us about the tunnels."

Vastus nodded, impressed. "Where is the tunnel?"

"Several days march from here," Tarix said, pulling out a map. "The path we will take follows the edge of the Great Forest, and through several glaciers. The tunnel entry was hidden, but there is a marker there; we'll know it when we see it. We have to hurry though. We delayed the release of the Agori in order to get a chance to... act on the information, and mobilize the troops."

A laugh emerged from Vastus. "You sound bitter. What's the matter? It's a sound enough plan."

Frowning, Tarix muttered, "That's what bothers me."

Still chuckling, Vastus continued. "And when is the optimal time to strike? Assuming that they inform their leader right away, there's a very small window. When should we head out?"

It was Tarix's turn to laugh.

"Yesterday."

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A small bird, native to the ice region, alighted upon a rock. A moment later, the bird spread its wings and took off, feet still smoldering where the rock had burned them. The bird was understandably confused; this was the land of ice. Ice meant cold. So how could a rock like that burn with such intensity? The bird spotted prey, and was soon engaged in the hunt. The rock was the furthest thing from its mind.

In Tarix's mind, however, the rock was very present.

"It's an invention of the Fire Tribe," he explained. "Similar to the darkfire torch, it was designed to give off heat without alerting enemies to its presence. The heat is very self-contained, and rarely affects the surroundings. You have to touch it to know what it is. The Ice Tribe managed to acquire several of them, and were trying to reverse engineer the process."

Vastus gave a non-committal nod of the head, only half listening. Tarix was worried about him. They had been traveling through the Great Forest the previous day when a Fire Tribe squadron had passed by them, led by Malum. The two tribes had managed to hide themselves before being spotted, but one of Vastus' warriors was rather clumsy, and made a small noise when perching in a tree. Malum could not discover the source of the noise, but it didn't matter to him. He ordered his troops to burn the forest down, and watched the trees blaze. Vastus lost three soldiers in the inferno, and the destruction of the plant life was almost too much for him to bear. He had been subdued ever since.

Before Tarix could say anything more, he noticed the glacial formations.

"Halt!" he cried. The two armies stopped, and began looking around.

"Is this the place, Tarix?" Vastus asked.

"Yes," Tarix replied. "The heat rock is around here somewhere. The entrance to the tunnel is located directly beneath it."

Vastus nodded. "Fan out!" he shouted to his troops. The Jungle army sprang to life, and began searching the area, hopping over snow banks and swiftly climbing the cliff walls.

"Wait," Tarix said. "Do they know what--" he stopped. Voices were coming from the woods behind them. Loud voices. Tarix motioned for his troops to take cover, and scrambled up a hill with Vastus. The two found a cropping of rocks, and took shelter behind it.

From the woods emerged the Fire Tribe squadron they had eluded earlier, Malum in the lead. One of the soldiers approached his captain. "Are we sure they went this way, sir?"

"Oh, they went this way," Malum assured his warrior. "I heard them. I can smell them."

Behind their shelter, Tarix turned to Vastus. "What do we--" Vastus silenced him. He then held up one of Tarix's blades. Surprised, Tarix reached behind him, and only found his other blade. Vastus backed up, to a small space in the rock. He raised the blade. Suddenly, Tarix knew everything that was about to happen.

"Don't do it," Tarix said. "Please."

A sad smile appeared on Vastus' face. "Sorry," he said. Then he brought the blade down. A powerful stream of water whipped out, striking Malum and a soldier. Vastus sliced the base of the rock, sending it tumbling down the hill. He tossed the blade back to Tarix, and then he was gone.

Malum sprung back to his feet, sword at the ready. He saw Tarix standing there, blade in his hands. His fingers tightened around the hilt of his weapon. "Water..." he growled.

No other choice remained to Tarix. He understood what Vastus had done. Malum was by no means an experienced leader, but he had assembled warriors with enough brute force to crush anything in their way. Even with their combined forces, they would have been hard pressed to claim a total victory. Any way the battle went, they would have been in no shape to continue an assault on the Ice Tribe. Vastus had acted out of self-preservation, and Tarix was left to clean up the mess.

"CHARGE!" Tarix roared. Azure warriors of all shapes and sizes emerged from their hiding spots. Taken unawares, many Fire Tribe warriors were struck down, and hastily retreated a distance. Tarix leapt from his perch and threw himself at Malum, grappling with the Fire warrior. The fighters brutally hacked at each other, neither landing a damaging blow. Tarix spared a look around. Thanks to the surprise assault, they were gaining the upper hand. The Fire Tribe were attempting to gain ground, but his soldiers were not letting up. Well timed elemental blasts and Thornax shots were keeping them from breaking the ranks. If they could continue to hold the formation, they could press the Fire squad into a retreat; retreat would mean they could continue their mission. Could it work?

Tarix parried a blow by Malum's blade, and triggered his own weapon, shooting an overripe Thornax into the ground in front of them. The explosion knocked them back several paces.

"Give up, Malum?" Tarix called into the haze and smoke.

"I would rather die on my own sword than forfeit to yours. Surrender is not an option." Malum responded. He meant the words; chances are he would live long enough to see them come true. His army was strong, but undisciplined. Tarix's army was tightly knit. They had the upper hand.

"Bravado is impressive Malum, but it doesn't provide an edge in combat. Maybe--" he stopped short. Arrow's embedded in the shoulder tend to have that effect.

Tarix couldn't really grasp the situation at first. He reached up, and touched the arrow. It looked real. It felt real. The pain hadn't come yet, but it would. Probably. Should he pull it out? No, no, that would be even worse. What about the source? Yes, the source would be a good place to look. Avoiding future pain is vital in self-preservation. He looked up.

Certavus looked down. He met the eyes of the Water Tribe commander, and smiled. He handed the bow back to a dumbfounded soldier, who took it without a word. Rumors of Certavus' natural skills in battle were plentiful, but seeing it in action was a different thing entirely. Several soldiers behind the first one snickered. This one was new to the squadron, and had yet to see the commander display all his skills, and weapons proficiency. A simple shot from a bow had left him speechless.

"A-amazing shot, sir. Why didn't you go for a more damaging blow?"

"The idea is not to kill, but to avoid being killed," Certavus replied. "If we can force them to retreat, it conserves the energy. We can't afford a full battle. Not yet. It took us a long time to reach here; we need to keep moving."

Down below, Malum had also tracked the arrow to its source. Certavus. The legendary warrior, master of every known weapon. Malum raised his hand. His warriors stopped their combat instantly. Not out of discipline; out of shock. It was an order of retreat, something the fighters had never seen. Malum backed away from Tarix, never taking his eyes off of the commander.

"Good luck," he whispered. He turned and fled into the trees, his army following suit. Tarix gingerly tested his arm. The pain had come, but it was bearable; leaving the arrow in was the annoying part, but removing it would do more harm than good. The looming threat of the Ice Tribe unit was also a problem.

One of his soldiers ran up. "Commander Tarix, what do we do? The Fire Tribe unit is gone, but so are the Jungle Tribe members. Should we keep going?"

Tarix looked up again. Certavus and his unit were gone. Would they stay gone?

"No..." Tarix said. "No, we don't have enough power. Without Vastus and his squad, we couldn't succeed. We need to retreat. Pass the order; we're leaving. Go."

The soldier ran off to spread the word. The Water Tribe began filtering out, and eventually vacated the area.

As he later found out, Vastus had already planned to escape. He had reasoned that the tunnels were too risky of a plan to work, and outlined their retreat ahead of time, and at the right moment, they abandoned their water allies. Tarix was officially rebuked for his failure to succeed in the mission, but it did no lasting damage to his career. He couldn't even be sure the tunnels really existed. No other intelligence report gathered had indicated the presence of them. The Agori they released could have simply lied. Not that it really mattered. Their world shattered several weeks later, and such matters seemed trivial. Had the tunnels actually existed, they would have collapsed during the disaster. Tarix and Certavus, along with several others, willingly put aside their differences

and created a new social construct, to avoid any more fighting. The avarice of the Element Lords had literally ripped their planet apart, but they could rebuild. They had to. They would.