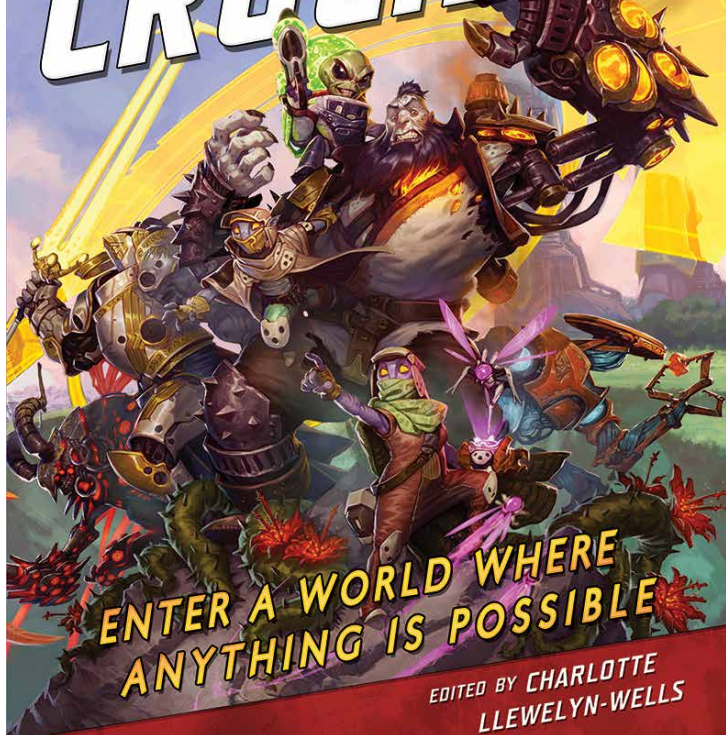


KEYFORGE

TALES FROM THE CRUCIBLE



**ENTER A WORLD WHERE
ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE**

EDITED BY CHARLOTTE
LLEWELYN-WELLS

This is an excerpt from

TALES *from* *the* CRUCIBLE

A KeyForge Anthology

EDITED BY CHARLOTTE
LLEWELYN-WELLS

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*Take a whirlwind tour to the incredible planet of a million fantasy races, the Crucible, in this wild science fantasy anthology from the hit new game, **KeyForge***

Welcome to the Crucible – an artificial planet larger than our sun – an ever-growing patchwork of countless other worlds, filled with creatures, sentient beings and societies stolen from across the universe by the mythical Architects. Across this dizzying juxtaposition of alien biospheres, the enigmatic and godlike Archons seek to unlock the secrets at the heart of the Crucible. Everyone else is just trying to survive... Explore nine tales of adventure in a realm where science and magic team up, of discovery and culture clash, featuring mad Martian scientists, cybernetic surgeons, battle reenactors, elven thieves, private investigators, goblins, saurian monsters, and the newly arrived human Star Alliance.

Featuring these Extraordinary Stories

Contract – Tristan Palmgren

The Apprentice – Cath Lauria

Extermination Examination

– Robbie MacNiven

The Librarian's Duel – M K Hutchins

To Catch a Thief – Thomas Parrott

Useful Parasites – M K Hutchins

The Perfect Organism – C L Werner

Wibble And Pplimz, Investigators For Hire

– M Darusha Wehm

Vaultheads – David Guymer

Cover by [David Kegg](#)

CONTRACT

Tristan Palmgren

I perched atop a widower tree, half a centimeter from a tangle of razorvines.

Sometimes the best place to hide is where anyone else would be foolish to follow. Not even a niffle ape, with their preternatural wilderness senses, would be up here. Sometimes preternatural wilderness senses come second to *common* sense.

I didn't have common sense, or I wouldn't have taken this job.

It's hard to miss a battle between Archons. Sure, there's the screaming, the chaos, the clash of swords and the hissing of a hundred different kinds of ray gun – but this is the Crucible. That kind of nonsense happens all the time. It's easy enough to find if you want it. I don't. No, what really sets these things apart is the spectators.

Some of them come in person (or in energy-cloud, or in spirit, or in whatever-corporeal-or-incorporeal-embodiment they call their own). They set up their picnic mats or gambling

booths, and, *maybe*, if it looks like they're about to get vaporized, move out of the way. But most vaultheads watch from afar, where the only (admittedly, considerable) danger is the postgame riots.

Anywhere would have been safer than here.

Before I'd left Hub City, I had not waited for the head of my shadowguild to find out what I was up to. I went to her office, tucked inside an old æmbrew warehouse, to tell her myself. Better that she heard it from me.

"You accepted a contract against Ponderous Url." The first sign of danger was that she was already showing her markedly chilly elvish smile. "The Archon."

"No other Ponderous Urls," I replied.

She said, "You could have found a simpler way to announce you had a death wish."

"I'm not afraid of Archons," I said. Fear would mean that I had something, anything, I wanted to hold onto.

"You're new to the Crucible," she said. "You don't understand." *Everyone* knew Archons couldn't get killed. But I didn't believe in immortality.

I looked her squarely in the eyes. "I understand."

"Then telling me this of your own free will is just as suicidal," she said. "I can't countenance this bringing attention back upon us."

The death threats had come out before I'd even told her that it was a demon of Dis who'd offered me the contract.

She tried to kill me, of course.

It was all expected, all *pro forma*. It was polite, even in an assassins' guild, for an employee who had announced they were leaving to stay for an exit interview. I had just given my

interview and would have been a fool to go in there without my escape route set. Her blade swept through empty air as the dazzling lights of my stolen Star Alliance teleporter swept over me.

“It would have been a mercy,” she said, as I dematerialized.

It had not been the first time I’d given up everything, but it *was* the first time I had done so by choice. It almost felt good.

For two hours now, the spectator drones had been swarming above the widower trees, dodging the lashing razorvines. I figured the vaultheads knew something I didn’t. I was right.

Sudden movement focused my attention. An azure halo of plasma fire crowned the foliage. Widower trees screamed as they caught fire.

Opening salvo in the contest.

Judging from the tenor of the screams – not all from the trees – first blood as well. As one, the drones flocked toward the chaos.

I braced for impact, and dropped. My widower tree, somehow stirring from the botanical soporific I’d administered, shrieked. It lashed a razorvine at me.

Panic, dull and distant, coursed through me. The other widowers’ screams must have jarred it awake. I landed, rolled, and sidestepped, but too late. The razorvine struck through my boot sole. A crimson flash of pain lashed through my foot.

I ran, hobbled and bleeding. I’d been lucky. I’d lost, at most, a toe. It could have been a foot, an Achilles tendon, or worse. My sense of balance compensated with elvish alacrity, keeping me nimble in spite of it all.

I’m what most beings on the Crucible would call a Svarr elf. I had the ears, the gold eyes, and the conniving, at least,

to blend in among the assortment of gangs and thieves' guilds who called themselves Shadows. But blending in isn't the same as *fitting* in.

I didn't come from the same world as anyone else in my guild. I'd been ripped from my home. Years ago, in a flash of alien magics, my city had been transported from my world and reappeared in the Crucible – another victim of whatever power was stitching the Crucible together out of patchworks of stolen worlds.

Things made sense where I came from. I knew what I was. I was Vira Tirandel Agrulikhan – executioner, enforcer, third niece of the Lord Mayor, and god-aunt of the heir to the city. After we arrived on the Crucible, my people and I tried to hold to our center. But the Crucible might have been better named Centrifuge. It'll rip you apart. Nothing you had before can last. No belief, no ideal, no self-conception.

Until we arrived, my people had thought we were alone in the universe. Just coming here was violence enough to us. But that had been just the start. We'd materialized on the border of martian territory. It hadn't taken the martians long to sense our disorientation and weakness. In hard-fought battles, we turned away their saucers and tripod walkers, but not a single one of our buildings was left standing. By the time the Brobnar decided to hold one of their (literal) death concerts atop the rubble, we scattered.

It's been years since I've seen anyone from home. I'm not sure we would recognize each other if we did.

A flock of silverwings erupted in the far distance, and fled skyward. Silverwings were deaf birds, apparently evolved on a world awash in tremendous thunder. The foliage would have

hidden movement. Those birds would have budged for one thing only: vibration. Big, ground-churning, root-snapping vibration.

Ponderous Url was a mammoth of an Archon – an adamantium-skinned golem even heavier than he looked. Ponderous Url was not reputed to employ any Brobnar giants or other creatures that could shake the earth. I had to gamble that Ponderous Url's opponent didn't, either – or that they themselves weren't as large as Ponderous Url.

Everything's a gamble when it comes to Archons. The Archons can be small as a faerie, or so big as to be mistaken for some dead king's vainglorious monument. But they have a few things in common:

One – they're all interested in cracking open vaults of ancient knowledge, treasures, and secrets left behind by the Crucible's even-more-mysterious Architects. They will fight each other, and recruit retinues of the Crucible's inhabitants to help them, for the privilege of opening a vault. Two – Archons all have the power to take care of their private armies. They heal traumas. They raise the fallen. But bystanders, let alone infiltrators like me, get no such guarantees. Sure, sometimes you'll get lucky with a do-gooder Archon who will expend their precious energy resurrecting those caught in the crossfire. But Ponderous Url wasn't that type of Archon.

Three – they never explain where they came from, their relationship to the Crucible's Architects and what they ultimately want. Not under any level of duress. Most people believe that they *are*, somehow, related to the Architects, but they will never say so.

The bulk of the fighting seemed to have shifted up a shallow

crater ridge, where an ironwood forest bordered the widower grove. Ironwood was one of the few species of tree strong enough to resist the widowers. I wouldn't have been surprised if someone planted them here to contain the widowers.

I bolted into the borders of the ironwood forest, ducking the errant swipe of a sentry widower's razorvine. The razorvine gouged a hole in the soil behind me. Plasma smoke and the coppery scent of spent æmber rolled down the ridge. The pain in my leg had faded to a background scream.

My elvish instincts took over. I leapt from a boulder to an ironwood branch to a trunk bent at just enough of an angle to offer good footing. I was moving too fast, counting on the chaos of the battle to protect me.

A sword cleaved into the trunk just behind me.

I was already mid-leap. In the fraction of a second of instinctive panic, I jabbed my good foot out and smashed into the helm of an armored knight.

Smoke curled from the ironwood's trunk. The knight's sword flared like a sun. The wood glowed red-hot. But all that power wasn't enough to saw through ironwood. I bounced off the knight, flailed through the air, and landed hard on my bad foot. But, even stumbling, I still moved faster than the knight could free his sword. I left him snarling some very unchivalric curses behind me.

Ponderous Url employed a mix of untamed barbarians, martian soldiers, and a handful of demons. The knight had to belong to Ponderous Url's competitor. The two Archons' armies had been drawn from every corner of the Crucible. Good. More chaos. The more chaos, the more opportunities. The only thing you can trust on the Crucible is chaos.

Something *will* happen, but you can never predict what.

I don't think creatures like us are *capable* of understanding the Crucible. We're bacteria flattened underneath a microscope slide. We don't have the tools to process what's happening to us.

I have no place here. I don't *want* a place here. Everything I had is gone. There's no ground – no stable ground, anyway – worth standing on. For years, ever since I'd arrived on the Crucible, even the brightest colors only render for me in shades of gray and ash.

That was why I'd taken the contract.

The towering, silver-eyed demon who'd offered me the contract on Ponderous Url's life hadn't given me any information about it. It had just handed me the page.

Glimmerings of shadowy magics whorled over the lettering. Contracts like these have power beyond their wording. I had no guarantee the demon was even acting of its own accord – though I couldn't think that anyone would trust delivery to a demon.

I couldn't find any loopholes. I signed. It was what I wanted, anyway.

The Crucible's Architects need to pay for ripping me, and so many others, out of their homes. But they're beyond my reach. The next nearest thing to them are the Archons.

A ray gun bolt sizzled through the air in front of me. I ducked and, trying to dodge, picked a direction at random: the wrong direction. The ray gun hadn't been aimed at me.

I stumbled directly between two combatants. Now their weapons *were* aimed at me. The first: some kind of hypertuned Logos massacre-rifle, loaded with scopes, underslung grenade

launchers, and stabilizing gyroscopes. The second: a drawn bow and arrow held by a hide-clad barbarian with a beard and mustache so stained with filth I couldn't even tell what its original color had been.

In the space of an instant, I realized that the only way I would escape would be to pretend to be on one side or the other.

It was no choice. I ducked toward the barbarian.

A fraction of a second after the barbarian released the bowstring, his arrow shimmered. With a *pop* like a cork flying out of a bottle of æmbrew, and the distinct guano-and-pine-needles stink of druidic magic, the air fractured. Colors spun like a broken kaleidoscope. There were five – no, ten – no, thirty – iron-tipped arrows in the same space.

They struck simultaneously. Even some of the arrows that visibly missed shattered. Quantum entanglement can get a little messy when you're pulling from parallel universes. But not as messy as the results. The kinetic energy of those dozens and dozens of arrows, and surely more, was focused on a single point in space in *this* universe.

The simultaneously unleashed energy ripped both the Logos rifle and its wielder apart. A searing hot shockwave knocked me flat on my side. My head struck dirt.

I lost myself for a while.

The first thing to learn about the Crucible is to leave your prejudices at your world of origin. If you see someone facing down military tech with a flint spear – be *very afraid* of that spear.

The second thing to learn is to keep your thoughts about what's better than what to yourself, because they will get

you killed, expelled, or put on trial by half the factions in the Crucible. The other half will evangelize you until you *wish* they were killing you. Everybody has their own opinions, and the ones who are sure about them are the worst.

When I take contracts, I don't ask questions. Sometimes the answers come anyway. "Sanctum Prelate Kyranos betrayed our fortifications to the demons of Dis, and though his death is mandated by justice and righteousness *it must be kept quiet.*" "Martian Supreme Warcommander Xot, Slayer of a Hundred Thousand Pacifist Protesters, Conqueror of the Seven Broken Cities, has been sneaking through the front lines to attend Brobnar death concerts. He must be made an example." And so on. They say it for themselves more than me. Those who are more secure with their reasons for hiring an assassin tend not to say anything.

I reassembled my wits fast as I could. The man with the bow still stood above me. He wiped soot from his bow, grinned, offered me a hand. I accepted, and, in exchange, helped him pat out the fire still smoldering somewhere under his beard.

Then I smashed his head into an ironwood trunk. He flopped to the ground, limp as a gorged snufflegator.

No "friends." No risks. I couldn't take the chance that he would tell his friends about me and realize I shouldn't have been there.

No doubt some vaultheads, watching through the drones, were going ballistic right now. But it's a rule of honor among vaultheads to never interfere with the matches.

The ironwood forest was a safer place than the widower grove, mostly. But it also offered less ground cover. The foliage was thick as sheet rock. The surface layer might as well have

been a cave. Nothing besides mold, fungi, and the creatures that fed on them – and the creatures that fed on *them* – lived down here.

Once my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I saw that the ironwood trees grew in bundles, their limbs locked together, a frozen frame of a centuries-long battle for dominance as they tried to shove each other out of the way of the sunlight. I could not help but stare as I ran.

More free advice: don't let yourself get lost in the "grandeur and majesty" of the Crucible. In my moment of distraction, my ankle snapped through an invisibly thin tripwire strung between two trunks. In a burst of stinking druidic magic, I found myself surrounded by a glimmering of faeries.

(Yes, I know the proper collective noun for a group of faeries is a glimmering. I studied plenty of the Crucible's languages. I said I didn't fit in here, not that I didn't *try*.)

I instinctively reached for my dagger. I could cut a swath through faeries, but there were too many of them. More than dozens. Hundreds. The largest among them was smaller than my palm, but faeries were as ruthless as they were tiny. They could cut me to ribbons.

So I held up my hands, and took a step back. Surrender. Simple mistake. We were all on the same side. Friends, yes?

Friends, no.

Their short, but wickedly sharp daggers came out. I laid my hand on my knife's hilt, but, in the space of another instant, there was a sound like a distant chime of bells.

At once, the faeries scattered. They vanished behind a curtain of whatever magic had summoned them. Before I could take two breaths, I was alone.

There was no sign of whoever, or whatever, had made the sound.

It's a mistake to try to understand the Crucible's chaos. Looking for reasons for everything that happens to you is how you end up ripping out your hair and marching off to join the Untamed. It's why the Logos, who *did* try to understand everything, were so unbalanced. The whole incident still left me unsettled.

There were two more tripwires in my way, taut and humming with faerie magic. I stepped over them. Then, ahead, I caught my first glimpse of something huge, shiny and silver. It was Ponderous Url.

I couldn't be sure if his skin was organic or artificial. Or both. Ponderous Url's flesh was shiny and smooth like metal, but supple. Flexible. Muscles rippled under his shoulders. Even after he tromped through this forest, felling widower trees and scraping past gods-know-how-many ironwoods, he was unblemished. No scrapes, no tears, no bruises. Not even any tarnishing. A Star Alliance handscanner might have been able to tell me more, but more likely it would have just raised more questions.

I'd done plenty of research before hunting Ponderous Url. Not even the most dedicated vaultheads could tell me what his body was made of. Archons were reputed to be able to control how they appeared. This was how Ponderous Url wanted to be seen.

Well, he had his secrets, and I had my surprises.

I sucked air through my teeth, picked up speed. All the pain had left me, submerged underneath a tide of adrenaline.

This was the only thing I really chased after now – this

cocktail mix of panic and exhilaration. Good and bad chemicals swilling together in my brain. They buried everything else. It wasn't much to keep me going, but I wasn't prepared to give it up. It was the last thing I had, and so it was the only thing I couldn't part with.

I'd seen plenty of people who *had* given up their last thing. New arrivals who couldn't handle the culture shock. Adventurers, monks, and mystics who'd learned one secret too many. Logos scientists addled by the Crucible's absolute refusal to be studied, probed, prodded or understood. Knights who'd betrayed their vows. In some parts of Hub City – the kind my guild trafficked in – you could hardly move without stepping over the wreckage of what used to be a sentient being.

The Crucible is, among other things, a place for people with strong beliefs and high ideals. For the rest of us, well... There's just this feeling. Adrenaline. Panic. Terror. Exhilaration. All mixed together.

Ponderous Url turned. His eyes were solid white with cherry-red irises and no pupils. No veins, no discoloration. Nothing, anywhere on his face, of the minor asymmetries that marred beings who had grown naturally.

I would have sworn, to any god that was listening, that he looked right at me. And then he turned away again, uninterested.

He must have noticed me. Some of the adrenaline dripped away. The pain came back. He couldn't have made me any smaller if he'd stepped on me.

A barbarian witch with a flaming red peaked cap stood near him. She held up her hand. Something in her palm glowed

gold. Even from this far away, I recognized æmber. There was enough of it there for Ponderous Url to shape into a key, one of the three he needed to unlock his vault.

Was this Ponderous Url's first key? His third? I had just gotten here, and already I might be too late.

I drew my prism knife.

The flat of the blade gleamed red, then gold, then a hot white-blue, like a sun. Hints of intangible depths swam beneath its surface.

Don't ask me to explain the prism blade. It was an artifact, stolen from the vaults of a saurian senator who had, until now, been my most challenging target. The saurian left no information about it. The only thing I knew for sure, with a deepness and surety I couldn't justify, was that it was ancient. The Saurian Republic was the oldest civilization on the Crucible, with a history stretching millions of years.

The knife was the size of a dagger... most of the time. Its edges were indeterminate. It wasn't an object as much as it was an absence. It was a hole in space, a gateway to other places. It only "rested" in its scabbard because the scabbard was a magnetic field generator, keeping the hilt – the only physically real part of the weapon – suspended.

I recognized the bow-and-arrow's interdimensional magic because it hadn't been the first time I'd seen it. The prism knife, too, was a gateway.

Instead of bringing things in, it gated them out. Slice by slice. I didn't recognize any of the places on the other side, but I had never seen one that looked hospitable.

It did not matter what Ponderous Url's skin was made of. I was going to pierce it. I was going to *make* him notice me.

Only a few dozen meters past the Archon, a battle raged. Plasma bolts blasted trunks apart in great clouds of razor-sharp ironwood chips. A four-winged angel hovered over the horizon, almost certainly a magical illusion meant to draw fire (sure enough, a few of those plasma bolts passed harmlessly through it).

I hardly noticed the fight. I had learned my lesson about distractions.

Ponderous Url stooped to pluck the key. Assuming he was vulnerable in all the places a normal humanoid was vulnerable, that meant I had a plan. A leap to a stout rocky prominence – to the crook of an outstretched ironwood limb – onto Ponderous Url's back – scramble toward his neck...

But the second after I took my first jump, pain lanced up my leg.

The shock overcame the adrenaline. I did not have a chance to register seeing the iron-hard ground before I crashed into it. My prism knife slipped from my palm. I curled my two smallest fingers around the hilt, retaining just enough control to smash it into the ground.

The agony in my leg grew in urgency until I could think of nothing else. I fought against it, scrambling forward on my hands and knees. Something sharp dug even farther into my leg, yanking me back.

This time, the pain splintered my mind. The agony made me light-headed. It took real effort to keep from fainting. I twisted around, trying not to move my leg.

A bony whip, molded in the shape of a spine, had lashed around my leg. The whip coiled past my knee, up to my thigh.

Spines ran down its length like vertebrae.

As if this all were not dramatic enough, flashes of red ran down the spine's length, either magic or electronics or both. The spines had not actually gone very far into my skin. No blood marred my leggings. But the red pulsing was obviously the point of this production. Pain jammed through me in sync with the lights.

This whip was unmistakably of demon manufacture. Sure enough, at the other end of the weapon stood a cloaked, red-and-black-armed demon. It stood three times as tall as me. It gripped the whip's handle with seven-fingered hands that were, even for its size, grotesquely out of proportion.

I had not seen a demon since the creature who had offered me this contract. The demons of Dis are among the Crucible's many mysteries, and best not looked into. No one who's found any answers among their subterranean warrens has returned to the surface.

There are only a few things worth knowing. They thrive on eliciting emotions from other beings. Most of the time, this tends to come from pain and torture – but they've also been sighted lingering on the sidelines of parties, weddings, and Brobnar concerts. They'll even join an Archon's retinue, apparently to feast on all the chaos and carnage and high emotions.

The other thing to know is that demons never, ever communicate. Autopsies of dead demons have shown that they have fully formed vocal cords, adapted for speech. But they've never used them. Same goes for their guts and digestive tracts – in autopsies, they're always empty. The only things they seem to consume are the emotions of others.

The pain was a snake coiled around my leg, biting into the base of my spine. A spasm of agony ran up my back like an electric shock, jamming my nerves. But if I had not already had my hand around the prism knife's hilt, I wouldn't have been able to draw it.

My instincts alone were kicking me along. I plucked the knife out of the ground and, in one swift stroke, I severed the whip between its vertebrae.

The lights along the whip died all at once. I fell into the dirt, and was left only with the "mundane" pain of the lash wrapped around my leg. Steel glinted around the base of the whip. Shiny little filaments had extruded from the bony vertebrae and wrapped around my leg. They kept the whip tightly bound to me.

That alone was enough of a shock to keep me from standing until, in three long strides, the demon had closed the distance between us.

Its outlandishly oversized fingers wrapped around my chest, dug into my skin. My ribs *popped* as it grabbed me, and then lifted me.

When I say that demons do not communicate, I don't mean in just language. It also did not snarl, or hiss, or growl, or make any noise that I might have been able to imbue with some kind of meaning. My weapon hand was pinned. I had just enough freedom of movement to drive the prism knife into its palm, but it gave no indication that it even noticed.

Then it tossed me toward the still-raging battle.

I've leapt from rooftops to passing trains, shimmied across the sensors and telescopes above Logos laboratories and danced through the brawling pits of a death concert without

getting injured. But agility can only see you so far. Once I was in mid-air, there was nothing I could do. There was no way I could twist or contort myself except to curl up.

I landed hard. I tumbled across the packed dirt, accumulating scrapes and bruises, and rolled into an ironwood trunk.

For several seconds, I could not breathe. Only after I forced air into my lungs did I realize that I was not resting against an ironwood trunk.

It was a Brobnar giant's leg. Its ugly, ogreish face looked down at me with something between amusement and annoyance. Ponderous Url's opposition *did* employ giants, after all. I had been lucky that the silverwings led me in the right direction.

This giant held a club, scarred and pitted from numerous ray gun and plasma bolts. The moment I looked up, the giant raised its club.

I used to get angry very often. I can be ruthless, and I can be cruel, but those are calculating. Anger is a symptom of attachment. It had been a long time since I had felt strongly enough about anything to rouse myself to rage for it.

I was angry now.

It was almost refreshing. There was a real point to my being now. And that point was to hurt. I was tired of everything I faced being larger than me.

The prism knife was small, too, but it still penetrated deep into the giant's ankle. I twisted the knife and yanked upward. The prism knife flared colors, greedily absorbing parts of the giant and removing them from this world.

I rolled out of the way. I didn't see the giant fall. I just felt

the impact reverberate through the packed earth. I staggered to my feet. The whip still dragged with me. I must have gotten disoriented in mid-air. I couldn't see any sign of Ponderous Url or his demon.

If the demon had wanted to kill me, it could have crushed me, or tossed me into a tree. It should have pursued me. It wasn't even here to feed from me.

A trio of violet-skinned Brobnar goblins bolted past me, running from a torrent of ray gun fire. Rage overcame me. Without thinking, I swiped my knife across their path. I struck one of the goblins. They folded backward, almost casually. None of its companions seemed to notice. In another flash of battle-chaos, the remaining goblins were gone.

Ordinarily, I prided myself on not harming anyone but my targets. The goblin and the giant would be healed at the end of the battle. If they died, they would be resurrected. But that was rationalization. Not justification. I had only thought of that after the fact. Back home, I had often been angry, but never uncontrolled. The part of me that had attacked that goblin was not a part of me I had met before I'd come to the Crucible.

A growl welled deep under my throat. Up ahead, a tall, crouched silhouette had taken cover behind an ironwood root. In my battle-rage, I hallucinated Ponderous Url. It was not until I'd climbed onto it and dispatched it with my prism knife that I saw that, no, it was just another of those cursed giants.

I was doing a good job of clearing out Ponderous Url's opponents for him.

The ogre had been digging. No doubt searching for æmber.

Ironwood roots were attracted to æmber deposits. I'd already seen Ponderous Url collect enough æmber to forge one key. The battle couldn't last for much longer.

Hobbled by the weight of the whip still bound to my leg, I staggered on.

A blast of green-white light blinded me. It overwhelmed all of the plasma bolts and martian ray guns. It was so bright that, for a moment, I didn't realize I'd been deafened, too. The noise of the blast had been too loud to hear.

When the afterimage faded, half of the martian ray guns had fallen silent. Whatever the blast was, it had silenced a large part of Ponderous Url's army.

Not wanting to see, I turned.

The six-legged mechanical titan stood just underneath the next layer of ironwood foliage. It must have been built to order, made just for this particular place. The bits and knobs grafted onto it reminded me of the rifle I'd faced down minutes ago. It could only have been Logos technology. The Logos loved to tinker and redesign. Their robots and cyborgs were hyper-specialized. Every part had its specific purpose.

Any of its pincer legs could have trampled a martian tripod walker. There was nothing on the battlefield of any size capable of opposing it. When I looked where it was headed, I saw a familiar glint of silver skin.

Point of professional pride: a kill was not a kill unless I performed the deed myself.

I bolted after the walker, fast as my bad leg would carry me. That was just fast enough, as it turned out. The walker's size was its biggest weakness. Though its spiky legs surmounted roots and ruts with ease, it had to navigate around the

thickest bundles of ironwood trunks.

A plan trickled into place. Whether there were other huge vehicles around or not, I would be a fool to assume Ponderous Url had no other defenses. All of Ponderous Url's retinue and remaining weapons would be directed at the walker shortly. They would not notice me until I was ready to *make* them notice me. All I had to do was make Ponderous Url's job a little easier, make sure the walker didn't *actually* harm him ...

I ducked between the walker's pincer legs. A point-defense gun mounted on the walker's side swiveled toward me, too slow. My prism knife flashed, afterimages of colors behind it. Some kind of defensive shield flared over the walker's skin. Not enough. The prism knife passed through it like air.

The tip of the walker's pincer legs dug into the ground as it walked. The next time the walker tried to lift the leg I'd struck, it ripped off as if it were paper. My ears were still ringing, but even through that, I could hear a terrible metallic screeching.

The walker fell to one of its many knees. Perfect. It was an open target. And if any of Ponderous Url's allies had seen me, they would think I was on their side.

All I had to do was get out of the way fast enough.

That was too tall an order. It was not the pain that caught up with me. It was exhaustion. I was winded. My vision blurred. My body felt like it was at a great remove, and I could not move like I needed.

One of the titan's remaining pincer legs thrust into the small of my back. It propelled me forward, slamming me into an ironwood trunk.

My vision mottled red with agony. The pincer leg pinned

me against the trunk for a moment, and then withdrew. I fell.

Scores of plasma bolts seared the air, all aimed at where I'd left the walker. From where I lay, I could not see what had become of it. All I knew was that the pressure had lifted. But I could not breathe. I could not raise myself to twist around and look.

Eventually, the plasma fire stopped.

I could not hear anything besides a deep-abiding hum behind my ears. It was not even ringing. The malfunction was deeper than that, in my brain. Millions of neurons, overwhelmed with pain, misfiring.

I had had my breath knocked out of me plenty of times. This felt different. I was not fighting with my lungs. I could not feel them at all.

The red blotches had not gone away. Now they were piling in from the fringes of my vision, racing to fill up the center.

I drove my fingers into the dirt. Pulled myself forward. If I didn't force myself to focus on something, I was going to be lost.

Somewhere, at the far end of the red tunnel, I saw Ponderous Url. The foliage-dappled sunlight glinted across his silvery skin.

There was the demon beside him, still holding its half of the severed bone whip. It should have been over here. It was missing out on an emotional feast. It was offering something to Ponderous Url. Æmber glowed between its claws. A vault key.

The demon's hood fell as it raised its head.

I was not so far gone that I did not recognize the demon – it was the same silver-toothed demon who had offered me

the contract on Ponderous Url's life.

I still couldn't breathe. I was quite beyond laughter.

The rest of my vision disappeared into the tunnel. I wished I could have convinced myself that I was hallucinating, but I was still lucid enough to know otherwise. One more way the Crucible was laughing at me. One more mystery I would never be able to solve.

I still felt the soil under my fingers. I clung to the feeling as long and as hard as I could. Eventually it, too, faded away.

Of course, I didn't stay dead. I'm here talking to you.

I woke with a cool feeling emanating from deep in my chest, spreading through the rest of my body. The bow-wielding barbarian stood over me, his torn fingernails aglow with strange magic.

I gasped and coughed, more from the shock than because any of my revived parts were working incorrectly. I rolled away, forced myself to stand on shaky legs. I reached for my prism knife, but only grabbed air. In fact, the whole magnetic sheath had been taken from me.

There was no pain. I wasn't dragging a severed half of a whip with my leg. Even the damage the widower tree had done to my foot was gone. I could see my unbroken skin through the boot's torn sole.

The barbarian grinned, but gave no sign that he recognized me. I *had* hit him on the head pretty hard. Or maybe, and more likely, he just didn't care. It had all been in the spirit of good fun.

He moved on to his next patient. A line of dead and wounded fighters was arrayed next to me. There was no

guano-and-pine-needles stink of druidic magic this time, so I doubted the magic was his.

We were still under the gloom of the ironwood foliage, though I didn't recognize this part of it. I must have been dragged here. All around, Ponderous Url's fighters wandered amongst the fallen. Their hands glowed like my barbarian's.

Ponderous Url himself was not difficult to find. He sat with his back to a bundle of three trees, his legs folded. Luminous strands of magic emanated from him to his healers. As if he had called a council of war, he sat with a golden-skinned elf, a martian war-commander and a cloud of faeries. The demon who had hired me lingered nearby too – no doubt soaking in the ambient emotional energies.

I didn't care. I charged toward Ponderous Url, scattering the faeries with a wave of my hand. "This was a set-up," I told him. "You hired me – you wanted me to try to kill you."

Ponderous Url considered that for a long time. He hadn't gotten his name for nothing. Finally, he raised a silver finger. "I wanted you to fight," he said.

For all his size, Ponderous Url's voice was incongruously small. No deeper than an ordinary human or elf's. He even spoke in an accent that tickled an ancient memory. It was the accent of my home.

I was aware of the demon abandoning its meditations, stepping closer to me.

For the rest of Ponderous Url's retinue, even intense fighting was all in a day's work. Acclimation dulls emotion. But my rage and despair were boiling over.

Once again, and now not for the last time, the Crucible had bested me. At least if I had died it would have been over.

It was no accident that I had tangled mostly with his opponent's fighters, or that the demon had tossed me at the Brobnar giant and the goblins. I had, in some twisted sense, been doing Ponderous Url's work.

"If you had taken a moment to consider," Ponderous Url said, with another weighty pause, "then you would know demons can't communicate with your species. Not even in the form of the written letters of a contract."

Ponderous Url held out his hand to the demon. In a blaze of green fire, the contract I had signed appeared in the demon's hand.

I said, "*You* seem to have no trouble communicating with it."

"Archons are special in that way." He took the contract. "Among others."

No doubt now – that *was* the accent of my home city. I wondered if the others here heard the same thing, or if they heard their own childhood tongues.

If this was how Archons communicated, no wonder even the demon got along with Ponderous Url. "Are *you* part of what made the Crucible?" I swiped at my eyes, clearing the blurring away. I fought to stabilize my voice. "Are you part of what brought me here?"

He considered that question very carefully. For longer than even usual.

Then he shook his head. "You already know I cannot answer that question."

My hands trembled. I had never hated anything like I hated Ponderous Url. Never experienced this much rage, not

even when I'd thought I was dying. I summoned all of my sense of authority – the voice of the executioner, enforcer, and third niece of the Lord Mayor, and more. "I demand that you tell me."

But it was a hollow voice for a hollow threat. I had no power to enforce anything. The person I'd been no longer existed. Even if I'd had my prism knife, I was now under no illusions that I would have been allowed to draw it.

Ponderous Url scanned the contract.

The letter of the contract stated that I would try to kill Ponderous Url until either he or I fell. That had seemed much simpler when I'd thought I'd still stood a chance of killing him, and certainly before I knew he intended to resurrect *me*.

By the contract's terms, I would be following Ponderous Url forever. Or until he decided to stop raising me.

"Do you mean to enforce that?" By which I meant to ask: *are you going to enslave me?*

For once, he did not hesitate. "No," he said, and the contract evaporated in a burst of multi-hued fire.

It happened so quickly that I did not have the time to avoid the ashes as the wind caught them. They stung my eyes.

Relief was, in its own way, more debilitating than pain. For a long time, I could not speak. I did not know what I had done to deserve the awful things that had just happened to me – or to have just been released from the contract.

"Why did you do this?"

"You're a skilled infiltrator and assassin. I would think that your value in an Archon's retinue would be obvious. You disabled a Logos titan."

"You could have *asked!*"

“You would have said no.”

That was true. I hadn't quit my old guild just to sign up for another gang. I wasn't about to be tied down to anything on the Crucible. “You didn't have the right.”

Silly thing to say, and we both knew it. Ponderous Url did not dignify it with an answer. “It could have gone much worse for you,” he told me. As if for punctuation, he dusted the ashes of the contract off his palm.

“If you're asking me to thank you, you can—”

“You made a mistake,” Ponderous Url interrupted. “You did not take the time to think through all of the outcomes of accepting a contract with a demon. You only focused on what you wanted.”

“And what do you think I wanted?”

“To give up,” Ponderous Url answered.

I took a long time to answer, and not because I was pondering. The demon was hovering closer.

I said, “Contract or not, I could try to kill you again.”

“Did you expect to be able to?”

Stupid question, and the answer made me feel stupider.

Ponderous Url said, “If you had, by some twist of circumstance, assassinated me, do you think you could have taken your pay and retired?”

That had never remotely been a possibility. If I had somehow, miraculously, killed the Archon, millions of vaultheads would have watched me do it. The rest of whatever life I'd had would have been spent hiding from fans, bookies, and any other unknowable vengeance that would have been coming my way. Even if I had been left alone with just myself, I still could not have found any peace.

“Either outcome would have been the end for you.” Ponderous Url raised a gigantic finger to tap his head. “You people do not take the time to think about why you make the choices that you do.”

“Whatever it was, it should have been *my* choice,” I said, with a snarl. “You took it from me.”

“If you’re ignorant of both the causes and outcomes of your choices, did you really make one?”

“We can’t help being ‘ignorant.’ We have no idea why anything happens in this place.”

“If that’s what you need to go on,” he said, “then I would give up now.”

He shifted his bulk. With great slowness, he began to rise. I saw, at the back of his waist, a magnetic-suspension holster with a familiar hilt. The prism knife looked outlandishly tiny on his body.

Had he tricked me into this because he wanted my services? Had he been after the prism knife all along? Even now, years after, I couldn’t say.

The other members of his war council were already gone. He was leaving. I was running out of time. I had a thousand questions, but only one that could make it. I hated the way I sounded. “Then what do you think I should do?”

He paused, and once again turned to me.

He said, “The Crucible is the opportunities you’ve been given.” After reflection, he added, “I *can* tell you that’s as true for me as it is for you.”

I let him walk off. This time, he did not look back. His council of war followed him, and, once I was out of earshot, resumed whatever plans they were hatching.

Like an ironwood tree slipping down a mudslide, I fell to my knees.

Minutes later, still feeling the vibrations of his footsteps in my bones, I stood. His retinue had finished their healing rounds. They were already striking camp.

I had no guild to return to. I was *persona non grata* in Hub City. If any one of my guild's numerous spies found me – not even I could avoid them all – they would report me to my old boss. My life would be over. She would kill me.

If I followed Ponderous Url, I could wait for an opportunity to steal my knife back. But even if I succeeded, my life would still be over. I would have been, at best, back where I started. More likely, I would have just been dead.

Not a life worth continuing.

Ponderous Url chose his words very carefully. No matter what I did, I would have given in, or given up, to something. I couldn't keep trying to be who I'd been before. That had been taken from me. It was never coming back.

There are no right choices, not in a place like the one where I'd ended up. The hardest thing I ever had to do was force myself to make this one.

Once I'd come to the Crucible, no path I took was going to end with me keeping my life – whether I was alive in body or not.

What I chose shouldn't be any great mystery. I'm still here to tell you about it, aren't I?

I had to run hard to catch up to Ponderous Url and his retinue.

I've learned a few more things since I joined him. He was wrong about at least one thing – the Crucible *is* more

than a sum of its opportunities. Much, much more. But the opportunities are a good place to start.

I had to let go of the smallness of everything I'd been, to seize what I'd been given.

And so do you.

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