

ELEVATOR QUEST



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Emmanuel M Arriaga

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DEDICATION

To my mom, thank you for sacrificing so much for us growing up.
Love you always.

Join my email list

at www.emmanuelarriaga.com

I don't normally send emails, but hey... if I do, you'll be the first to get one! It'll be awesome, I'm sure. Oh, and I don't share email addresses, because that's some evil nonsense.

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Chapter 1

Autumn sunshine painted the floor of the large lobby, the décor old but impressive. Crowds of people were hurrying to elevators, ready to start a day's work. Arnold sighed as he walked through the double doors of the office building that had become his second home. His muscles were still sore from his heavy workout the night prior. Arnold subconsciously rubbed his arm, his gaze coming up to meet that of his personal assistant, Ann Richards.

The older, brown-haired European woman was waiting for him at the entrance to the elevators. Without a word, she fell into step beside him. They hurried into a waiting, packed elevator. He buttoned the top button of his exquisite black suit as he glanced around at the other people, many of whom eyed the large African American curiously. He returned their stares with a broad smile.

A young Brazilian woman looked up at him from near the elevator control panel.

"What floor?"

Her expectant gray eyes immediately caught Arnold's attention.

"Twenty-seventh floor please," he said. Arnold presented her with a dashing smile, which she returned, blushing slightly.

Pressing the button, she looked down toward the floor as the elevator doors closed.

Tasha watched the whole scene from the back of the elevator, a low sigh escaping her lips. She glanced from Arnold to the Brazilian woman, her stomach tightening.

Shaking her head, she muttered under her breath.

The words weren't clearly audible, but if someone had listened closely enough, they would have heard a short rant about black men and light-skinned women. Tasha glanced at her own reflection in the elevator wall. There was insecurity in her gaze. Her gaze lingered on her own dark brown skin. Tasha noticed a Japanese American man watching her from the other side of the elevator. Suddenly caught, he glanced toward the ceiling, feigning innocence. Letting out another sigh, Tasha pulled out her smartphone and turned up the volume to her earbuds. The elevator started to rapidly ascend.

Arnold leaned back against the wall. Thoughts of his busy schedule filled his mind. He would be giving a presentation to the CEO in an hour, and he felt that he was just steps away from being appointed the next managing director of his firm.

A crackle of electricity could be heard from above. A few people glanced around, seeking reassurance. The lights in the elevator began to flicker. Gasps went up from throughout the packed metal box.

"What in the world?"

Glances of concern were exchanged.

Arnold pushed through the crowd toward the control panel. The elevator began to slow before eventually coming to a stop. Arnold glanced up at the ceiling. The sounds of creaking cables caused his heart to skip a beat. Looking around with a controlled calm, his years of service in Iraq rushing back to the forefront of his mind, Arnold went into emergency mode.

"Everyone remain still!" he shouted. His booming voice pulled the attention of everyone in the elevator.

Tasha hit pause on her smartphone.

“What’s happening?” the Japanese man asked. He locked eyes with Arnold, the two immediately in tune with one another. The elevator suddenly lurched as it dropped down a few feet. Screams filled the elevator.

Arnold moved to the door and clawed at the gap, his powerful arms slowly inching the doors apart.

“We’re all going to die!” yelled a younger black man. He ran to the door, trying to help Arnold pry it open. Another lurch sent a few people stumbling to the ground.

Silence permeated the elevator. No breaths were heard as they were caught in throats. Cold sweats broke out. The rhythmic drumming of heartbeats filled the metal box. A tortured shriek of metal twisting and tearing blotted out all sound. A loud snap echoed throughout the elevator like thunder. Air whooshed by as its horrible howl sung their impending demise. Lungs vacated as screams filled the cabin.

“Oh Lord, I’m going to die a virgin!” Tasha shouted. The woman dropped to her knees, clutching her head, tears streaming down her face. She experienced weightlessness. Arnold and the other black man were knocked off balance. They lost their grips on the door, prompting it to slam shut.

Arnold took in a deep breath. He closed his eyes and mouthed a silent prayer.

Laura screamed as she watched the numbers rapidly tick down. The Brazilian woman clutched hold of the tall white man who had anchored himself into the corner of the elevator.

“Where are the emergency brakes?” shouted the younger black man.

Arnold shook his head.

“This building is too old,” the Japanese man replied. The floor indicator hit 11, then 5, then B2. Everything around them exploded into a storm of dust and metal. Their bodies were thrown all around as they came to an abrupt stop. A film of dust settled over the area. The sudden silence caused a ringing in their ears. The elevator’s speakers let off a dinging sound. The doors struggled to open, the twisted metal scraping against the tracks.

Arnold tried to get his bearings. The metal box was a mess with crumpled metal everywhere and bodies strewn all around.

“Is everyone ok?” he shouted.

The voices of twelve people replied, everyone still very much alive. Quickly getting up, he checked himself for injuries and then smiled at his good fortune—nothing but minor scratches. He moved to the door and peeked his head out. A frown plastered itself across his face.

Chapter 2

“I don’t recognize the area,” Arnold said.

“Never been to the service level before?” the Japanese man replied.

“I’ve done my share of exploring.”

The man moved to look outside. Pushing past Arnold, he caught sight of an earthen corridor stretching out on both sides of the elevator door.

“Ok, I don’t recognize this area either.” He looked at Arnold.

Arnold carefully moved to exit the elevator. The man followed, and they both stood outside in silence, evaluating their situation. Arnold looked the other man up and down.

“US Army?”

“Marines.”

“Arnold Stetson. Retired Army Major,” Arnold said.

The two men locked arms in a handshake.

“Captain Jiro Sato.”

“It looks clear. We’ll need to scout.”

Both men glanced back into the elevator. The rest of the people looked at them with fear etched across their faces.

“You. What’s your name?” Arnold nodded to the young black man who had moved to help him earlier.

The man glanced around. He pointed to himself, mouthing “Me?”

“Yes, you.”

“James Cooper...” he responded hesitantly.

“I want you to come with me. We’re going to scout the area.”

“Scout the area?” James asked. Fear crept into his voice. He slowly stepped forward.

Arnold nodded and then looked to Jiro. The marine was already moving to hug the rocky wall opposite the elevator entrance.

“Look man,” James said. “I’ve never served in the military... I’m not sure what I can do to help.”

“Just follow my instructions and you’ll be fine,” Arnold said.

“What about the rest of us?” Tasha asked.

Arnold glanced back at her and then to the other people who shuffled nervously inside of the damaged elevator. Arnold glanced at Jiro as he made the corner and then quickly turned back to Tasha.

“Hold tight,” Arnold said.

He motioned for James to follow. The two approached Jiro from behind.

“Hold tight?” Tasha said. She glanced around at the other people in the elevator, its lights flickering in the darkness. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means stay put and keep quiet,” a tall European man near the corner of the elevator said, watching her.

Tasha looked over at him.

“And you are?”

“Damon...” he responded. “And I’d listen to Mr. Army if I were you.”

Tasha moved back into a crouching position. She glanced down at her smartphone. She had no signal, only empty bars telling her that music wasn’t an option. Clicking the

photo button on her phone, she switched it to the forward-facing camera and snapped a picture of herself with a pouting expression.

Laura caught sight of the action and pulled out her own smartphone. She angled the camera up high to capture herself in the destroyed elevator and snapped a picture of her own.

Damon rolled his eyes.

Jiro shook his head as Arnold arrived next to him. Both men exchanged hand signals. James looked between the two, his brow furrowed. He sighed. With another motion from Arnold, Jiro headed out of cover and disappeared around the corner. Arnold moved up, watching the marine slowly investigate the area. After a few tense moments, Jiro returned to the two men.

“It’s clear in the immediate area,” Jiro said. “There’s a door up there. No telling what may be waiting behind.”

“Waiting behind?” James said. “What exactly do you guys think is going on here?”

“I don’t know,” Arnold replied. “But I do know that all of this is wrong. I’ve been over every inch of this building, and this area doesn’t exist.”

“Agreed,” Jiro said.

“Are you saying this is some kind of terrorist attack?” James asked.

“That’s always a possibility,” Jiro replied. “It’s best if we move as a group. Let’s go round up the others.” Jiro turned and started heading back toward the elevator.

“Agreed.” Arnold fell into step behind Jiro.

James watched the two, his jaw clenched tight. His heart was beating a mile a minute. He imagined terrorists waiting behind the door up ahead, the bastards just itching to gun them down. Gulping hard, he ran to catch up with the two vets.

Chapter 3

“Alright people, we need to move,” Arnold said in a commanding voice. “There’s a door up ahead, we should scrape together what we can to make weapons and go for it.”

“Weapons? You can’t be serious,” an East Indian woman countered. There was raw disbelief in her voice.

“I’m afraid so, Ms... Ms?”

“Anusha, Anusha Banerjee,” the woman said. Her light brown gaze jumped from Arnold to Jiro, seeking confirmation. After a brief second, her gaze swept across the rest of the people in the elevator, gauging their responses.

Tasha glanced up at Arnold from her seat on the floor. Fear clawed at her insides. She quickly pocketed her smartphone.

“Wouldn’t it make more sense to just stay here until help arrives?” Tasha asked.

“Not necessarily, Tasha.”

“You know my name?” Tasha stared at Arnold, her face scrunched up.

“I know the names of all of the high performers in my organization,” Arnold answered.

“Your organization?”

“Yes, I’m Arnold Stetson, your boss’ boss’ boss.”

Tasha’s face went as pale as a black girl’s could. She stared at Arnold as her heart sank—here was the Senior Vice President and she hadn’t even recognized him!

“If this was a terrorist attack, chances are we’re still in danger,” Jiro chimed in. He glanced down the earthen corridor, expecting a band of jihadists to round the bend with weapons blazing at any moment.

“Or maybe they just plan to drown us...” the tone of James’ voice caused almost everyone to tense up.

Every person turned to face the young man. He stared off toward the other end of the earthen corridor. James pointed with a hollow gaze. Both Jiro and Arnold turned to see water seeping in through a series of new cracks in the wall.

“Let’s move people!” Arnold shouted.

He motioned for everyone to get out of the elevator. The water was now gushing in.

“Where are we going?” a shorter, white man asked.

His black hoodie hung down past his waist, partially obscuring the top half of his khakis.

“Follow me, Jiro take up the rear!”

“Yes Sir!” Jiro shouted.

Arnold barreled down the hallway, a trail of water kicked up with every step. The group filed out of the elevator.

Anusha froze, the water now up to her knees. She closed her eyes, memories flooding in. She began to shiver.

“It’s ok. Just take my hand.” Jiro moved toward her.

Anusha opened her eyes slowly and glanced from the water back up to his hand. She slowly reached out and took hold. He gingerly pulled her along. They exited the elevator. Within seconds of them clearing the small, metal box, the door sounded its characteristic “ding” as it quickly shut its doors behind them. Jiro glanced back with a furrowed brow, but forged on, pulling Anusha right behind him.

Arnold rushed up a set of stairs toward a large metal door. Pressing his ear against the door, he strained to hear any sound on the other side. The thick door made his job harder, and the sound of splashing feet made any quiet noise undetectable. Jiro quickly moved through the crowd and onto the steps, joining Arnold with his ear against the door. Arnold motioned for everyone to be silent. The water was up to the waists of those near the bottom.

After a few moments of trying, Jiro shook his head. He glanced at the door and then back at Arnold, both men unhappy with the situation. Reluctantly nodding, Jiro slowly pushed the door open. Pausing for a moment, he peered through the slit, his breath frozen in his throat. He saw a clear open area surrounded by more earthen walls. Slowly, he pushed the door open wider.

Arnold moved past him and through the door, motioning for James and the rest to follow.

Jiro glanced back at the water, hurrying the others through. Finally, he slipped through, closing the door behind him. As soon as the seal was in place, a mechanism began to shift within the door, and Jiro heard the telltale sound of a lock falling into place. Jiro frowned. He realized that they now had no option for retreat.

The door was locked.

Chapter 4

Grey stone walls and white gravel floors greeted the crowd. Their eyes adjusted to the darker surroundings, the ambiance akin to a cave dimly lit by moonlight.

“It’s locked...” Jiro said.

Everyone in the group turned to see Jiro shaking his head. He tried to move the door again, with no luck.

“I guess there’s no going back.” Arnold looked over the group.

“Because drowning was totally a viable option,” the young man in the hoodie said. His voice was filled with sarcasm, his attitude not sitting well with Arnold.

“And you are?”

“Oh, is this the part where we all get buddy-buddy and learn each other’s names?” He let out an insincere laugh. “The smart move back there would have been to open the top of the elevator and ride the water back up.”

“Chill bro,” a young Korean man said. He motioned downward with his hands. “So why didn’t you suggest that then?” Jiro countered. He crossed his arms and his eyes narrowed.

“Hold tight! Follow me! Blah blah blah, military BS,” the man in the hoodie replied. He began to walk away from the group. “It’s hard to get in any suggestions when you’re barking orders.” He turned back around to face them, expecting to see nods of approval from others in the group. The eyes of every person were locked on him, many with masks of concern. Several backed away.

“Don’t move,” Arnold said. He held out his hand, his gaze looking past the young man.

Before the man in the hoodie could hear it, he felt it.

There was an ominous presence behind him, the feeling thick in the air. Then he heard it—the sound confirming his deepest fears—heavy breathing rasping somewhere just beyond his ear. The hairs on the back of his neck were already standing on end, a feeling of dread rising from within his gut.

Arnold began to approach him slowly.

The urge to turn around became overwhelming for the young man in the hoodie. Not heading the advice of the veterans who motioned for him to remain perfectly still, he cautiously began to turn around. His eyes gradually took in the sight of matted white hair, sickly pale skin and black rotten teeth. A throaty growl erupted from the monstrous creature. It lifted its rotten club and charged at him.

The fact that the creature was a foot shorter than the man in the hoodie didn’t negate the terror that now paralyzed him. He stumbled backward and fell to the ground. With a smug look of joy at such an easy kill, the creature began to bring its club down.

Arnold launched his entire body forward like a missile. The giant of a man connected squarely with the chest of the creature. Both bodies went sprawling to the ground. Surprised by the unexpected move, the monster thrashed on the floor as it punched at Arnold furiously. It grabbed Arnold by the shoulder and threw him toward the opposite wall with surprising strength.

A short, blond-haired man rushed at the creature as it began to rise. It caught sight of him too early. The creature brought its club across in a powerful whack. The weapon

connected squarely against the side of the man's head. A sickening thud echoed throughout the area. The blond-haired man collapsed to the ground, unmoving.

Turning its attention back toward its original prey, it met James' fist, the surprise attack connecting with the monster squarely in the eye. The force of James' strike sent the creature stumbling back a step.

James followed through with another punch, his years of street boxing coming back to him in full force. The quick jab connected with its throat. The dirty strike sent the creature gagging for air. Enraged, the monster swung its club in a wide swing that cannoned into James' stomach. He reeled backwards, pain assaulting his senses. His vision blurred.

The creature loomed above James, smiling horribly through crooked teeth. Then Jiro arrived, landing two solid blows on the creature's weapon arm. The creature shrieked and dropped its club. Jiro followed up with a flurry of blows against its chest. Each hit sent the monster back a step. Jiro continued his onslaught, his military combat training sending him into a rush. Adrenaline surged through his veins.

Moving its arms to block, the creature absorbed a few of Jiro's punches. Seeing an opening, it lunged forward and went for his throat with its black teeth.

Tasha was already in motion, rushing forward, deftly scooping up the downed club. She spun and slammed the weapon into the head of the creature. The impact sent it flying hard into the wall with a sickening crack. A yelp escaped from the monster. Tasha continued to swing repeatedly at its head, green blood coating the club. The creature's body went slack. Tasha ignored the fact that the creature offered no resistance, her assault unopposed. She continued to beat in its head. The creature was long dead when a firm hand on Tasha's shoulder stopped the woman mid-swing. Labored breaths emerged from Tasha. She glanced back to see Arnold looking back at her. Tasha took in a deep breath, her gaze following James as Jiro helped him up.

Arnold turned from her and moved toward the young man wearing the hoodie. He came to stand next to where the man sat on the ground, his eyes wide. He stared at the dead creature a few feet away from him.

"Lance... Lance Simon," the young man breathed. He glanced up at Arnold, the black man extending his hand to help the young man up. Lance stared at the hand for a moment before grabbing hold. "I work in IT," he continued. Lance found himself walking toward the dead creature in a state of shock.

Laura stood with her smartphone out. She'd filmed the entire fight. Damon glanced at her with a raised eyebrow. She blushed, pocketing her phone quickly and turning away.

Chapter 5

“I don’t feel a heartbeat and he’s not breathing,” Ann said. She was kneeling next to the body of the blond-haired man who had taken a club to the head. Blood was streaming from the horrible wound that now took up the left side of his face.

“Oh god, his skull is caved in,” said a young man in a heavy Jamaican accent.

“He’s dead.” Ann closed the eyes of the man with a motion of her hand. Blood from the ground had stained her pants and was now on her hands. She rubbed it off on her white shirt with a quick shudder. Her former life as an EMT rushed back to her.

“Harold...” Tears began to well up in the eyes of the Jamaican man. He slowly knelt next to his friend.

“I’m sorry, Omar,” Arnold said. He moved to the side of the Jamaican man and put his hand on his shoulder.

Omar Williams whimpered. He glanced up at Arnold.

“Sorry boss man, I just...”

“There is no need to apologize to me,” Arnold interjected. He turned his gaze to his chief of staff, the older European woman solemnly looking down at the corpse. “There is nothing you can do Ann?”

“Looks like his skull was smashed in. Most likely severe brain damage. My professional opinion is that he was killed instantly.”

Arnold nodded before patting Omar on the shoulder.

“What in the name of Krishna was that thing?” Anusha stared at the dead body of the deformed creature. “I’ve never seen anything like that.”

Arnold glanced at her before turning to the monster’s corpse. Green blood pooled around the body, its damaged head leaking like a melon.

“I don’t know...” Arnold conceded. “But if I were a betting man, I’d say that there were more of those things waiting for us ahead.” He glanced down the dimly lit hallway, the pathway too dark to clearly see the end. For a brief moment, the walls appeared to close in around them, the path taunting them, bidding them forward.

Jiro shook his head. He moved alongside Arnold, his gaze locked forward.

“We have no weapons. We’re lucky that there was just one of those things,” Jiro whispered. He looked over at Arnold, the man nodding in agreement.

“Hey man, I wouldn’t call this lucky,” Omar shouted. Anger rose up in him. He rushed over to the corpse of the monster and kicked it for good measure.

Reluctantly, Jiro turned around to face the rest of their group.

“If we come across a group of those monsters, I don’t think we’ll survive.” Jiro glanced over at Tasha as he spoke. The woman was tightly gripping the club and staring at the dead creature. Taking in a deep breath, Jiro silently came to stand at her side.

The distraught woman didn’t even register his presence. Her gaze was locked onto the creature, tears streaming down her face. After a few moments of silence, Tasha threw up all over the ground, falling to her knees and retching. She spat and slumped, the luster gone from her eyes.

“I killed him, oh Lord I killed him,” Tasha whimpered.

Her voice was barely audible. She began to shake.

“Good,” Omar whispered.

Jiro put his hand on Tasha's shoulder and she jumped, startling the group. She looked at Jiro with panic etched across her face. Finally, her eyes seemed to focus.

"I'm... sorry." Her voice bordered on cracking.

Jiro embraced her. She cried into his chest, dropping the club. She struggled to stand. Jiro slowly led her back to the floor and sat there, holding her body in his arms.

"I doubt it would be crying over your dead body." The cool words came from Damon. The tall, white man stood near the back of the group.

Tasha looked up to meet his gaze.

"Don't you get it? I just killed a man. There is nothing chill about this." Bitterness welled up in her voice.

"The murderer deserved death," Omar chimed in.

"That thing wasn't human," Damon replied. He approached the dead body, bending down over the corpse as he examined it.

"If it wasn't human, what was it?" Arnold said, moving up behind Damon.

The taller man shrugged.

"Don't know." Damon stood up, quickly dusting off his pants. "What I do know is that humans don't have green blood or facial features anything like that thing."

"It looks almost like a goblin, what do you think Min?" Lance made his way toward the dead creature.

The Korean man nodded his head and moved next to Lance.

"Definitely a goblin."

"A goblin? You mean the creatures from fairy tales?" Anusha almost laughed. She too moved toward the gruesome scene. "And how exactly would you two know what a goblin looks like?" She moved to stand next to them.

Lance shook his head, moving to rest against the wall.

"It was just a thought." Lance turned away from Anusha and looked back down the stony corridor. Min-Jun Kim scratched the back of his head and looked down at the ground, his face reddening.

Arnold sighed as he watched the exchange.

"Well, considering we don't know what it is, calling it a goblin is as good as anything else." Arnold's gaze slowly moved to the tall white man who stood a few feet away from him. Their gazes locked. Arnold took a measure of him.

"What's your name?"

"Damon." Damon glanced back at the goblin's corpse.

Arnold nodded. His gaze shifted to Tasha, Jiro now helping the woman to her feet.

"You ok?"

"I'll be fine..." she avoided Arnold's gaze.

"Hey guys," James called out. "This thing is doing something!"

Everyone turned their attention to the goblin's corpse. The body began to rapidly decompose. A horrid stench wafted out from its shell. Everyone quickly moved to the other side of the hallway. James gagged, caught in the terrible stench.

"Oh, that's foul!" James tried to hold in his breath. He quickly made his way to the opposite wall to join the others.

"I guess that's our sign to keep moving," Jiro said. He glanced back toward the sealed door. Shaking his head, he moved to pick up the club and took point.

"We can't just leave Harold here," Omar said.

“We’ll send someone to come get him once we’re out of here,” Arnold replied. “Let’s move out,” Arnold caught himself. “Unless anyone has any other ideas?” he glanced at Lance as he spoke.

The young man shook his head.

“Sounds like a good idea.”

Chapter 6

Jiro stopped suddenly in his tracks. His eyes opened wide. He took in a sight that left him speechless. The floor was covered with streaks of blood leading to mutilated human corpses strewn all over the room.

James bumped into him, his gaze quickly diverted to the ground. He took in a deep breath and shook his head. The sight of bloody gore tore at him. Memories flooded back, his mind flashing with images of his dying brother in his arms, the blood covering James' clothes. A small tear formed in James' eye, but he quickly brushed it away.

"This can't be good," Arnold said. Arnold and the rest of the group had entered the open room.

Jiro made his way over to the closest corpse and quickly inspected it. He made note of the wounds as he studied the body, his hand searching for a pulse on the neck.

"He's dead." Jiro shook his head.

"The missing body parts didn't give it away?" Damon asked. The tall man moved toward another corpse. He bent down and picked up a solid spherical orb that warmed immediately at his touch. It began to glow as he stood up, the object letting off a subtle warmth that felt pleasant to the touch.

"What's that?" Jiro stood up.

"No idea..." Damon glanced at Jiro. "Catch."

Damon threw the orb to Jiro, who caught it deftly. The glow immediately faded, and it became cold. Damon smiled as he walked toward Jiro.

"Guess it doesn't like you."

Jiro returned the orb to Damon, and the object immediately returned to its prior state. The soft glow caused a few in the group to shift nervously.

"Yo hombres, there are weapons over here," a short Mexican American man shouted. He was in a finely pressed suit. His face sported a meticulously maintained goatee. All eyes turned to him as he bent down and picked up what looked like a very large hammer.

"Is that a... warhammer?" Lance moved toward the man. The shorter stocky fellow performed some deft movements with the heavy looking object.

"A what?" Arnold prompted. The group moved closer to the short man.

"A warhammer. It's a weapon that dates to the mediaeval period," Lance said. The Hispanic man set the hammer's head down on the ground with the shaft facing up. "It looks like it weighs a ton." Lance moved closer. "Mind if I try... uh... I didn't get your name..."

The man laughed.

"The name's Samil, mi amigo, and help yourself." Samil motioned toward the weapon and backed away.

Lance wrapped his hands around the grip and lifted. With a grunt, he struggled to raise it a few inches off the ground before finally giving up and dropping it. "Ok, that's a lot heavier than it looks," Lance conceded. The young man eyed the hammer suspiciously.

Arnold walked up beside him. He looked from the hammer to the young man.

"May I?"

"Be my guest." Lance backed away.

Arnold took hold of the grip and lifted it with a grunt. The weight surprised him, and he gently set it back down. Glancing from the warhammer to Lance, he shook his head.

“You’re right, it is a lot heavier than it looks.”

Samil glanced between both men and shook his head before stepping forward and grabbing the warhammer, easily lifting it over his shoulder.

“I guess I’ll take it then,” he grinned. Samil motioned off to the side. “There are more weapons over there.”

The gazes of both men moved away from Samil to a couple of bloodstained corpses a few feet away. A large double-bladed battle axe was stuck protruding from the ground in the same spot where it had apparently severed a man in two. Arnold frowned. Reluctantly, he moved to the battle axe and quickly took hold of the grip, a sudden yank dislodging it from the ground. Expecting the same weightiness as the warhammer, Arnold was pleasantly surprised to feel how light the weapon seemed in his hands.

Lance stood watching him silently. His gaze wandered to one of the other corpses, a pair of daggers protruding from the back of the body. Shaking his head, Lance backed away. He glanced from Arnold to Samil.

“There is no way I’m picking up something that was used to kill a man!”

Samil glanced back to Arnold who let out an understanding sigh. Arnold moved to stand next to the stocky Mexican American.

“They’re better in your hands than in the hands of one of your goblins,” Anusha chimed in. She walked past Lance and over to the far wall, where a cluster of bodies lay strewn in a pile with a multitude of arrows filling the corpses. She reached her intended target and picked up an ornately decorated bow along with a quiver packed with silver arrows.

Ann followed her and kneeled to examine a large sword lodged into the back of another corpse. Gripping the handle tightly, she flexed her muscles. The woman was well-toned and in impeccable shape, despite her age. With a quick tug, she ripped the weapon from the corpse and righted it in her hands. Ann caught sight of the weapon’s sheathe a few feet away. Doing her best to clean the blade off on the clothing of the corpse, she picked up the sheathe and slid the greatsword into its housing. Quickly strapping it on, she moved to stand next to Arnold, the executive nodding approvingly at her choice.

A tall, lithe Samoan woman in a long black dress and silver blouse, silently waddled into the area Ann had just left. Her eyes scanned the mound of corpses until finally settling on a corpse clutching a massive tower shield almost four feet tall. She moved to the body.

“Need any help, Miss?” Arnold called out.

“No thank you.” She bent down and pulled the shield from the corpse. A large sword clattered to the ground as she lifted the shield into the air. “And my name is Natia...Natia Lotomau.” She picked up the sword with her free hand. Holding the shield on her left arm, she noticed a scabbard for her new weapon within the tower shield itself. “There is something else over here.” She scrunched up her nose involuntarily. Her eyes caught sight of a small, ornately designed rod.

Omar walked over to where she stood and pushed aside another corpse to fully reveal the weapon. It was a dark red rod covered in golden markings with a solid gold skull at the top.

“Totally creepy, mon,” Omar said. As his hand clasped around the grip of the weapon, he felt the breath ripped from his lungs and then forcefully pushed back in. Omar stared at the weapon in confusion before turning back to face the rest of the group.

“Holy crap, your eyes!” Min blurted out.

“What?”

Natia held up her tower shield for Omar to see his reflection. Glowing red eyes stared back at him. Omar dropped the rod. His eyes immediately returned to normal.

“That’s some serious voodoo.”

Min walked over to the rod and picked it up. Nothing happened. He disappointedly held the rod back out to Omar.

“Guess it only likes you.”

Omar reluctantly took the rod back from him. His eyes immediately changed back to the dark red they were mere moments before. Min pulled out his phone and held it in the air. He moved in right next to Omar while staring up at the screen. Tapping a button on the side, he patted Omar on the shoulder before pocketing his phone. Omar stared at Min confused and then annoyed, before letting out a sigh.

James casually walked past the group to the center of the room, where several badly beaten bodies lay in a circle around a pair of leather gauntlets with balls of metal studded on the knuckles.

“This is oddly convenient,” James said. He stepped over the bodies and picked up the gauntlets. “Here we were talking about needing weapons and lo and behold, we walk into a room filled with them.” He slid the gauntlets onto his arms and shook his head. “Of course, they fit perfectly...” He glanced back to Arnold.

The larger man watched him silently for a few moments, before he turned to look back at the other members of their group. His gaze fell on Tasha, the woman still in a daze, her gaze wandering over the gruesome, corpse-filled room. Next to her stood Laura, her eyes downcast. She slowly rubbed her arm.

Walking over to the pair, Arnold extended a hand.

“What’s your name, Miss?”

The Brazilian glanced up at him. With a confused expression, she eyed the massive battle axe at his side. She forced a smile.

“Laura... Laura Almeida.”

Arnold took a step back. He set the intimidating weapon on the ground.

“Nice to meet you, Laura.” Arnold tried to give her a reassuring smile. “I know you’re probably still taking all of this in, but we should all probably arm ourselves for the worst-case scenario.” Arnold glanced at Tasha as he said the words.

The black woman looked at him as if in a trance. Her gaze was slowly drawn from Arnold to Jiro, who was in the act of bending down to pick something up. She caught sight of a glint of silver as Jiro spun what appeared to be a sword in his hand. He glanced back at her and the two locked gazes briefly, a slight smile playing on his lips. He looked back down and picked up a large metal shield. It wasn’t as large as Ann’s, but it was still formidable.

Tasha found herself walking toward him. She stopped in front of him and her gaze was drawn to a golden mace partially obscured by a dead body. Jiro caught sight of the

weapon and quickly used his shield to push the corpse over. Tasha glanced from the weapon to Jiro and then back to the weapon. She bent down and picked it up. Immediately, her mind cleared. She regained her senses, her gaze moving from Jiro to where she'd been standing a moment before.

"How did I get over here?"

"You walked," Damon replied. He casually tossed the orb into the air, catching it each time in his hand.

Arnold held back a laugh and shook his head, his gaze going back to Laura. She took in a deep breath and quickly scanned the room.

"Is there anything left?" There was a hint of concern in her voice.

"There's something over here." Anusha motioned toward an object hidden behind a row of dead bodies. "Some kind of weird walking staff..." She sent a quick glance Laura's direction.

"That works!" Laura replied. With a sigh of relief, she rushed across the room, almost tripping over several corpses in the process. "There is also a book over here." She bent down to touch it. A shock of electricity sent her staggering back. A frown crept its way onto her face. Laura tapped her new staff on the ground in defiance.

"A book?" Min perked up at her words. He quickly made his way over to her side. He knelt and picked it up, without incident. It was a large, elaborate black book, with various etchings and golden designs covering it. A solitary latch sealed it shut. Min quickly unlatched and opened the book. "This is a spellbook!"

Anusha groaned.

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