



Sample file

He was Subarto of the Opal Court, and he'd been up and down and to Creation's black heart and back. He'd supped with the enemies of his people and come away with stories of the wickednesses he'd performed upon them. He was a noble of the first rank, with all his Graces intact. An Eshu, he was a survivor and an entertainer. Once a creature of the frozen Northern waste, he still affected its fashion. He styled himself a fighting poet and went about in otter and wolf furs in all sorts of inappropriate circumstances.

The current moment was arguably such a circumstance. At this point, the Opal Court marshaled beneath the gaily colored branches of the Far East. Self-billed as the foremost outpost of the Balorian crusade within the Marches of Rakshastan, the Opal Court prided itself on a certain military air. Prince Japhthia was the heir of Balor, he claimed, and he tried to project an organized appearance that Subarto's folksy splendor seemed at odds with. The hobgoblins that milled about the court's encampment were dressed in the green-and-brown dappled uniforms of forest rangers influenced by Seventh Legion training.

But Subarto was not entirely without awareness of his location. He had shed his antlers and wore a martially sleek wolf's tail and ears instead. The warband of tiny, drunken manikins who paraded behind him performing skits to slyly mock the unspoken social tension in any given situation had been banished away. He still wore furs and wool, but they had a military air, and he looked like a general who had spent too much time among the hill men and given up civilized dress. Or rather, he looked like a faerie prince pretending to be such a general. No mortal general, not even a Dynast deep in some decadent playacting folly, could have found such an array of furs, for they were conjured from the Notional.

This much he had changed, and he would change no more. An appearance was, after all, a thing meticulously cultivated and carefully maintained. Just as the Opal Court's air of purposeful military bearing, its baroque uniforms and its thick combat jargon were all deliberate parts of the court's airs, so his barbarian image served Subarto well. In addition, Subarto was one of the senior officers at the court, reporting only to the prince himself, and his Cup Grace served as the Glory of their current Freehold realm. He would look how he pleased.

"I am the greeter for the Opal Court," the Eshu prince said to those who came to the Freehold's front gate. This was a duty he relished, and none in the court could excel him at it — in no small part due to his role as Glory. As a rule, there were three kinds of individuals who came to his gate. The first were individuals who were there to live in the martial splendor of the Balorian sway. These he welcomed to the brotherhood of arms and sent on to the Opal Court's ever-growing bivouac. This was the most common sort of visitor by far, as the Opal Court had quite a reputation for its militant undertakings.

Of course, there were also nobles and their retinues. Alone or in small groups, nobles of Balorian persuasion or simply those desiring a martial air made their way to the Opal Court. These, the Eshu greeted gravely, for their substance would increase the might of the court. Even if the nobles' retinues were quickly torn apart by the stresses of the court, their possessions would still enhance the armories and panoplies of the court and its attendants.

Not that Subarto generally volunteered the last proviso.

But these were not the only warriors who came. Many commoners who had not awakened to free will arrived also, drawn by the court's influence resonating with their own natures. This was one reason for the court's constant circulation — by encamping near bivouacs of troops lost during the Balorian Crusade, the court could draw them into its influence and swell its ranks. It was a gradual matter, but it had paid off in terms of the muster strength of the court's army, and readiness and combat power were always foremost on the Opal Court's agenda.

This was a trick that Subarto himself supervised, and he was, to no small degree, quite pleased with himself, even if his miracles did draw wolves and lions and other strange creatures sprung wholly or somewhat from the Wyld. They rolled and pawed before the gate, drawn by the same dreams of blood and strife, and Subarto directed them to the kennels as gravely as if they were faerie princes.

Also drawn like the animals were those martially inclined beastmen, Wyld-mutants, glamour-addled outcastes and other such unlikely creatures. Some came to serve, harkening to rumors percolating in the Wyld of the Opal Court's terrible might. Others were recruited directly by the malevolent whispers of Subarto's dream-broadcasts. Less beautiful of line than natural predators, these once-mortal creatures were used as playthings, training dummies and cannon fodder of the first degree, fates to which they were generally agreeable by the time they met Subarto, and if not, then shortly thereafter.

Another kind of visitor were those refugees and starvelings that fortune threw to the court's front gate. The Opal Court was a mighty assembly of heroes. Those with especially fierce enemies but unimposing means of defense and those who had nothing and could not defend even that could come to the court and find positions as menials or servants. Some might even rise in rank some day and become warrior in the legions of the court. However, most would stay thralls for the duration of their stay, which might be as long as forever or as short as the distance a hobgoblin need leap to deliver savage bites and blows when it is accidentally offended.

There wasn't much difference between the newcomers and those who came to add themselves to the lower ranks of the court's military, to be honest. Subarto gave those who came to him the position they asked for. Those who needed refuge were given succor. Those seeking service were given whatever uniforms were fashionable at that time.

But there was a kind of visitor that was, in Subarto's opinion, the best. These came to demand war. Most came as a result of the court's generous policy regarding fugitives and refugees. The Opal Court was not just willing to defend those who demanded shelter beneath its eaves, it was *eager*. Those who trailed behind their quarry often exclaimed that their words meant war and that the lords of Opal might gain little from the issue.

Unfortunately for such emissaries, it was the policy of the Opal Court to provide shelter for the very reason of prompting conflict. If one accepts enough criminals, the Opal Court's thinking went, then eventually, someone worthy would be drawn forth to do battle in the process of securing their fugitives.

This policy generally summarized the workings of the Opal Court — and of much of Rakshastan. Years of effort spent recruiting hobgoblins to carry forward the Balorian Crusade would be sacrificed without hesitation on an afternoon battle over the disposition of an escaped concubine. This attitude was not only normal, but commendable.

And currently, it seemed as if Subarto was about to get one of this favorite sort of visitors. He felt the creature approach from quite some distance away with his glinting eyes. A noble, and not a small one, with a contingent of hobgoblins riding along behind her.

He apprehended her making her way around the scattered obstacles, through the trees and up the long gradual slope before the front gate, but he did not peer closer. Better not to spoil the moment of the meeting with foretastes and premonitions. Nothing would change regardless of what Subarto learned or when he learned it. That was the glory of living one's ideals to the fullest. All that was required of Subarto was to see which of his personal library of responses and archetypal poses the visitor prompted.



Emerging from the last bend of the forest before the gates, she was quite the impressive creature. She was young, weaker than he, but still, she had a strong enough Essence to demand a certain wariness. Subarto glanced at the belt her body wore and noted the vast power upon it, then took in the rest of his visitor, while never letting his attention wander far from the awful might at her hip.

She strove in every way to embody the Southern raksha noble, and she was a marvelous Cataphract. Her gryphon reeled as it strolled up the road with the forced, perfect gait of the created or recreated. Its legs were held outward in the peculiar style of gryphons made to walk far too much aground, so who knew how long she had been riding it, yet it was a healthy and well-fed beast and showed no tattered feathers or dull fur.

The Cataphract's own frame was as harsh, lithe and perfect as her riding beast's, forged from the fiery Essence of the South. Her white robes were embroidered with endless tracteries of scarlet thread that rolled and ran like liquid blood, the embroidery on the hem spelling out spidery threats against the loved ones of the reader in shockingly specific detail.

Subarto had seen its like before. They were an armor and a common enough miracle in the Southern reaches of Rakshastan. Within the infinite variety of the writhing, whirling thread, there would be a few sorcerous tendencies embedded. Now, the cloak was in a clearly defensive configuration, the diagrams switching from one starburst-and-circles pattern to another in an iron wall of flower-blossom, pond-life mandalas. There might also be hypnotic or elusive patterns in the robes, but those that combined multiple functions became increasingly difficult to obtain. The Opal Court greeter doubted it could perform more than one other miracle.

The saddle boots the Cataphract wore were a pale, almost yellow, leather, and beneath her white and scarlet-embroidered cloak of glory, she wore gray pants and a white belt that ended with soft, round heads the color of a rainbow. Her skin was the warm brown of polished mortal wood, and her hair was an elegant drapery of thick raven tresses. She wore a sleek helm with fine, slim lines and a plume of peacock feathers whose iridescent blue-and-violet eyes blinked in a commonplace reminder of Rakshastan's enigmatic character. It could be that the helm was in some fashion enchanted, but it seemed more a mere ornament.

Then, Subarto's eyes turned back to the noble's girdle. From the belt dangled a calabash dipping-gourd and a slim sword of Chiaroscuran glass or some substance so similar as to be indistinguishable. The sword was nothing more than a weapon for her body, a fine enough possession but neither adamant nor especially miraculous. The gourd was another matter, and Subarto eyed it carefully. Perhaps it contained a powerful oath or magical spell, but whatever the case, it was a veritable fountain of power — probably more powerful than the noble herself. If it was an oath, Subarto thought he would be better off negotiating directly with it.

Her retinue numbered in the dozens, loping lion warriors from the Southern savannas. They were simple, bestial creatures, clothed only in load-bearing harnesses and fighting with their talons and teeth. There was no evidence of wings on her minions, so perhaps she had ridden all the way along the vast route from the South to here? If so, they had left a trail of butchery, for the lion warriors looked sleek and battle-ready.

Subarto stroked his chin and considered that. The travelers looked fresh, but it was Rakshastan. Looks were merely another way to lie, and distance was merely a formidable illusion. Resting his body's hand on the hilt of his sword, Subarto smiled and quickly considered his mode of introduction. She was definitely tribal in nature — not the sort of traveler one met with a demand for identification and an appointment with the base commander. He bowed with a flourish, his body's hand still on its own sword. "I am the greeter for the Opal Court. I am called Subarto.



Oh, traveler from the Southern sands, what brings you to our humble forest encampment? Surely it must be hard on the constitution of your magnificent beast.”

She fixed Subarto with her own piercing violet eyes, and the many eyes of her helmet’s peacock plum mirrored the angry glance. The Eshu closed his feeding maws tightly in case the strikes against his soul began. Her glittering eyes narrowed, one of her body’s hands lifted, a finger raised.

“I will fight any duel required of me, if I can but win my way into the service of Prince Japhthia.”

Subarto relaxed. One of those. His smile broadened, but his ears stayed back. “I am his gatekeeper and his chief herald. Many fighters come to sit at his table. Why don’t you show me what you have to give me an idea what bench you should start out on.”

The fighter nodded, looking Subarto over, as he apprehended her. She grimly said, “To the death, then?”

Subarto nodded, “By way of introduction, yes.”

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Veronique whipped out her glass blade, the greeter readied his own weapon, and after a few quick passes, the Cataphract found her excellency wholly inadequate to compete with the Eshu’s own mastery of the combat arts. Then, Subarto twisted his sword-tip left instead of right and muffed a parry. Veronique’s icy blade slipped through the armhole of his gossamer protection, and he died.

Clearly, he had thrown the match, and she waited, surrounded by her snarling lion warriors at full ready, for whatever sort of assault might befall her now that the guest-right had been violated and blood had been spilled — or whatever other ban the matter sought to circumvent. But the hobgoblin guards at the gate calmly continued their vigil, and after a few moments, Subarto stood up and dusted himself off. “I’m sorry, that was probably quite disconcerting.”

She nodded almost imperceptibly. She asked him, “You are that protective of your technique?” and studied him for his response. Would she be a junior rival? A romantic pursuer? An obsessive? No? Subarto’s smile, which had twinkled out with his death, was suddenly back again. “You are not?”

He was a noble, and ancient, at the center of a court, subject to who knew how many vexations and feuds. His power was great, and his willingness to entangle her in his story was obvious. She was burdened with the power that hung around her like a curse.

Veronique said without expression, “Perhaps I should have been. I am a creature with many enemies. I see to shelter behind the hem of your lord’s robes, as well as sit at his table.”

The wolf-eared Northman’s ear’s pricked up and forward. “Your display is adequate, of course. You will be started in the middle rank of nobles serving the court. Take that news to the herald at the court, and he will announce you and get you settled in.”

She nodded. “That is all?”

The Eshu called Subarto cocked his head, the smile flickering across his lips again. “What else is there? You’re part of our story now. Get on well, and they’ll make you an officer immediately. Be well, and use my name to assure yourself hospitality in petty matters if you wish.”

Subarto’s smile was the smile of a wolf, and Veronique forced an icy smile in return. So, she saw, there would be no evenness to this at all, only clients and patrons and debts that could never be repaid.

Her finger caressing the crown of the calabash on her belt, the faerie princess strode forward through the gate, and the hobgoblin troopers saluted her.