

A Job Well Done
Written by Ryan Meier

A dull, metallic scraping echoed through the cavern as a dark steel blade dragged against a large whetstone. They weren't the quick, rhythmic strokes of a butcher sharpening his knife for slaughter. They were the slow, deliberate strokes of an artist honing his tools for work on his masterpiece.

The cavern, once a small cave, had been excavated and widened - converted into a crude workshop. It was protected by ancient magic, old as time itself. It couldn't be found, nor could anyone who hadn't been invited be capable of entering. It laid in the belly of the world. Some of the most powerful magic users alive had tried to enter and failed, costing more than one of them their lives.

The chamber was lit by standing torch lamps, strategically placed only in areas where the light was required. Three burning lamps surrounded the man with the knife, bent over his plain stone workbench. Three others surrounded the wooden contraption in the center of the room. Jilnas stood in the shadows, watching the demon-like shadows flicker against the walls, clinging onto his composure and resisting his urge to run.

After one final, grinding swipe, the man lifted the dark metal weapon and inspected it in the firelight. The light gleamed off of the blade, shooting tiny glimmers of light against the Cavern's stone walls. The beams danced, moving wickedly around as the blade rotated in the man's large hands.

The weapon was simple, not elaborately adorned as Jilnas had expected. The dark steel knife measured about 18 inches from blade's tip to heel, a plain black leather handle sitting

underneath a wide bolster, fashioned after a sword's hilt. The thin blade of the knife had a flat spine with an upswept tip, giving the end of the knife a fluid curvature. Even in the dull firelight he could see the glyphs etched into the side of the blade. Glyphs written in the language of magic.

Satisfied with his work, the bulky man placed the knife down on the stone table and dipped his hands into the large water basin nearby. He soaked and rubbed them, moving slowly and methodically. Once clean, he washed the knife as well, carefully rubbing it in the water to remove any metal dust. Every action this man performed was with a meticulous precision, leaving Jilnas with a sense of awe that distracted him from his terror.

When he had first arrived, Jilnas asked the man if the rumors were true, if he was truly a god. The man replied with a grunt, stating plainly he was nothing of the sort. Just a man; a man with an obligation.

"Jilnas." The man's voice thundered through the cave as he gestured for the man to come out of the shadows. "Before we can begin, I will need to verify your consent; to seal our agreement."

Jilnas tongued his dry mouth, forcing down a gulp. He nodded and approached the workbench with small, tentative steps. The large man withdrew three small gemstones from the centered pocket of his apron. These were not the polished and cut gemstones that men in cities squabbled over. These were raw, jagged gemstones that wore their natural cloudy coloring and uncut shape. One was a ruby, one a peridot, and one a zircon. He offered all three to the man, Jilnas accepted them with a shaking hand.

"Jilnas Gunepop are you here upon your own free will?"

He nodded.

“No.” The word boomed through the cavern, reverberating off the stone walls. “I need you to verbalize your responses.” The large man asked again. “Jilnas Gunepop, have you come here under your own free will?”

“Ye-. Yes.” His voice was weak, cracking slightly as he spoke. The ruby glowed red in his palms.

“Have you come to me with the intent of giving your life to the evolution of an artifact of my choosing?”

“Yes.”

The peridot glowed a pale green.

“Do you willingly sacrifice your life essence to the benefit of this instrument?”

“Yes, I do.” The final stone, the zircon, glowed a faint, oceanic blue.

The large man, known only as the Artifactrian, held out his hand and the man returned the three glowing stones. The muscled man wore nothing other than a dirty pair of animal skin shorts underneath a thick, work-worn leather apron. His muscled form gleamed in the firelight as he moved around the side of the wooden contraption, lifting open a large chest that sat discreetly at its base.

He placed the stones in the single front pouch of the apron, before opening the lid of the chest. Thick, dark green smoke billowed out, rolling out in supple waves, falling heavily to the floor. The smoke didn't rise into the cloud Jilnas expected; instead the strange, dark smoke slowly evaporated as the Artifactrian reached into the chest. He reached in carefully,

withdrawing an item gently. A gleaming black metal amulet shined in the darkness, adorned with a glossy finish that reflected even the smallest bit of light.

Chills ran up Jilnas' spine, the urge to run coursing through him again. He breathed heavily, his gasps quickening, his chest heaving. The cave was hot; no ventilation other than the small path that led to up to the mountainside. Jilnas thought about how he would never taste a deep breath of cool air again. It brought tears to his eyes. He forced his thoughts towards his sick daughter, Helize, who could soon be healed of her ailments. Healed at the only price Jilnas could afford to pay. Healed in exchange for his life.

The muscled man walked slowly towards the wooden structure, designed exactly like L-shaped gallows with two subtle differences. The small square-shaped base was hollowed out and covered with a thick metal grate. This allowed the Artifactrian to work while ensuring blood and fluids could drain beneath the platform and out of the cavern through the hole in the floor. The second difference was a pulley in place of where the noosed rope would normally be tied.

Jilnas closed his eyes as the Artifactrian climbed the small set of steps to the gallows platform, the wood creaking under his weight. His body shook in panic. He muttered whispers to himself, reaching out for the magic he had always used to protect himself. Reality struck; he knew quite well that his magic was inaccessible in the cavern. He reached again, hoping against hope, but his magic wouldn't come.

He wished for a quick and painless death; an easy transition into the afterlife. But Jilnas realized neither of those requests were likely to be granted. This would be a painful process, and he would be alive for the worst of it. The only hope he had was that the gods would grant him strength, gifting him a better outcome in his next life.

The Artifactrian placed the shimmering black amulet down on the platform's grate and began working the rope at the end of the pulley into a proper knot. The man paid no mind as the same grayish green smoke poured from the amulet at his feet. Jilnas felt bile rise up in his stomach.

The large man gestured for Jilnas to join him on the platform. The wooden steps, stained a deep red from the spilled blood of previous sacrifices, nearly drove him mad. He forced himself once again to think of Helize, his sweet little Helize. Always smiling, always curious, and always sick. Soon that would be over; soon it would all be over.

Jilnas stepped around the amulet's smoke, concerned it might harm him. The irony behind the thought made him laugh, but it wasn't unfounded. There was something terrible about the artifact, something inherently evil. He stared down through the grate on the edges of the smoke, looking down at an endless pit below. Unable to hold it in any longer, he bent down and retched into the darkness.

"Jilnas Gunepop," The large man spoke, ignoring his vomiting, "disrobe so that you may free yourself of worldly bonds. There can be nothing to interfere with the transfer process."

The man nodded, his body seizing in fear. He pulled off his dirty tunic in a ragged, jerking motion. He used it to wipe the vomit and sweat from the front of his body before slipping out of his trousers, exposing himself in full. Urine leaked down his legs, but he was far too scared to feel embarrassment. The Artifactrian took no notice.

The large man held the noose like knot near Jilnas' feet, allowing the man to step into it. With a swift yank the knot closed around ankles, locking his legs tightly together. Jilnas looked at the man with pleading in his eyes. Not for his life to be spared, he knew that wasn't a

possibility. Instead, he sought some acknowledgement of the pain he was about to suffer. Some glimmer of mercy. There was no emotion in the muscled man, who returned the look through cold, dead eyes.

“P-. P-. Please. Please tell me again my little girl will survive.”

“Our arrangement will be upheld as promised. I cannot break my vows, it is not possible. The agreement cannot be violated.”

Jilnas slumped in relief. Helize would be safe. The Artifactrian withdrew a thin piece of rope from the front pocket of his apron, walked around Jilnas as he shook, binding his hands behind his back.

“Can’t you knock me unconscious? Gag me? Suffocate me before the worst of it?”

“Jilnas Gunepop,” The Artifactrian’s voice was chilled. “That cannot be. You must be alert as your life essence spills. That is part of the cost.”

The man retreated down the stairs, leaving a despondent Jilnas nervously eyeing the artifact’s smoke. It billowed and evaporated, moving in waves. One second it appeared it would continue to grow and overtake him before suddenly waning.

The Artifactrian lumbered around the backside of the gallows and without warning pulled hard on his side of the noose rope. Jilnas’ legs yanked out from under him, slamming him to the ground. He struck the grate hard, his head momentarily swallowed by the smoke. Slowly, he was hoisted into place, hanging upside down a few feet above the amulet.

Jilnas swung slowly from side to side. His ankles screamed in pain, likely broken from the violent pull on the noose. His head and shoulder throbbed from the fall. He looked around the cavern, desperately trying to acclimate himself to his new upside-down point of view.

The Artifactrian made his way to the workbench, carefully arranging the three glowing gemstones on top of a large tome. He lifted the blade and fingered the edges of the dark steel knife, confirming its sharpness. Jilnas wiggled on the end of the rope, desperately trying to slip free. His efforts were in vain. The wizard reached out for his powers again, straining and pulling to no avail. He changed his mind, he couldn't do this, he wouldn't die like this. His terror had pushed away thoughts of his daughter, his animalistic instincts seizing his mind and body.

The man ignored Jilnas' thrashing at the end of the noose, moving with a slow and steady gait, the calmness only increased Jilnas' panic. The three gems had been placed into the hilt of the blade, each shimmering in the firelight. As he approached, the Artifactrian mouthed words Jilnas couldn't hear, words he wouldn't have understood if he could. Words of magic.

A slow whistling wind blew through the cavern, the torch lamps flickering with the small gusts of wind. Jilnas started screaming.

"No! Please God, no. I can't! I can't! No! No! No!" His words twisted into a whimpering, finishing as indistinguishable blubber.

Tears and snot leaked into his eyes, blurring his vision. The Artifactrian didn't react. He continued his low, whispered chanting as he approached. The grayish green smoke from the amulet blew around underneath his head, leaving the amulet momentarily uncovered. It shimmered a deep black below him, echoing the whispered chant.

Through blurred vision Jilnas could see the dark form arrive, deep, menacing incantation. The wind increased, blowing in a circle around the platform, created a cyclone of air and dust in the cavern with the gallows at its center. The torch lamps around the outside

walls of the of the cavern extinguished, the windstorm sparing only the three closest to the two men. A low rumble came from below the platform, a crescendo of deafening howls.

An explosion of energy rushed out of the hole in the cavern floor, streaking up and around Jilnas, swirling into the twister around them. Haunted sounds echoed throughout the cavern, as coalescing shadows joined the dirt and grim circling the ceremony. The Artifactrian raised his voice into a scream, bellowing his chants in hopes of being heard above the rush of winds and sounds of torment around them. Then, with a final roar, he plunged the knife into Jilnas' belly just below the waistline.

Pain erupted and Jilnas' body shuddered at the sudden thrust. Blood spurted out, quickly transitioning to a steady leak that coated his stomach and chest. The hot, thick liquid ran down onto his face and into his mouth and eyes. The blood dripped onto the black amulet below, chasing away the swirling, grayish green smoke as it landed.

The Artifactrian, who had stopped his chanting, now concentrated on the task at hand. He leaned with measured weight and surgically slide the knife down Jilnas' abdomen. The dark blade ran straight down, coming to a forced stop at the man's sternum. Jilnas' screams were stifled as he choked and coughed on the massive amount of blood, struggling to clear his mouth and nostrils. The large man withdrew the knife, and with a final horizontal slice across his stomach he disemboweled Jilnas. He reached in and spilled his organs and entrails out and they poured down the man's front as he hung there.

Jilnas let out a final, gurgled scream. He hung and bled, choking on his insides as the life drain from him, liter by liter. Through his blurred vision he saw a world of blurred shadows and

spirits spinning around him. His last thought before darkness took him was the pulsing and grayish green glow of the amulet below him, bubbling wildly in his own blood.

The Artifactrian's serene face stayed steady and emotionless amid the chaos; after all, he was a well-practiced hand at the evolution ceremony. But even a being such as he couldn't help but feel a slight bit of something inside, an emotion he couldn't quite explain. Today's rite was different than most, different than the many thousands before. There were few times throughout the centuries of an Artifactrian's life that one had the opportunity to evolve an item to its tenth, and final, phase. Creation of a relic was unique, even for one such as he.

The last bit of life essence bled from Jilnas and onto the amulet, releasing him from this life. The Artifactrian did not feel guilt, nor did he feel sadness for the man who had sacrificed himself. Jilnas had made the choice, and this was his duty.

The winds slowly receded and the howling quieted. With a final sucking pop, the swirling energy draining out of the room through the hole in the center of the cavern floor. The amulet, now noticeably bigger than it had been, began leaking its grayish green smoke once again. It pulsed with a power that filled the cavern, emitting an energy that felt penetrated like a magnet on your soul.

The man picked it up in his large hands, unphased by its newfound power, and returned it to the chest on the side of the gallows. He made his way across the room to the stone table, thoroughly washing the knife and his hands in the water basin. Once completed he removed the stones from the knife's hilt and put away the ceremonial book.

With a sponge in hand he filled a bucket from a small subterranean stream that surfaced in the cavern's far corner. On his hands and knees, the Artifactrian scrubbed the stairs and

gallows' platform, pushing the chunks of Jilnas' entrails down into the hole beneath the grate. Once satisfied he emptied to the bucket and headed back to clean his hands once again. It wasn't clean, it didn't need to be. The stains on the wood stone would never leave this place, and this certainly wouldn't be the last of the sacrifices he performed.

In no real hurry he allowed Jilnas' body to fully drain before cutting down the corpse. The man did it with little regard, but his callous treatment wasn't out of disrespect. The Artifactrian knew the man's essence, his spirit, had left during the ceremony. What remained was merely a sack of meat and bones, an empty receptacle. He viewed it as a vacant box, a waste product needing to be disposed of.

He dragged the body out of the cavern and over to a firepit at the edge of the forest, a short walk away from the cave's mouth. Once roaring, he tossed the corpse on top of the blazing fire, sitting down on a log to watch it burn into the night. The smell of burning flesh and human hair rose all around him, a scent the Artifactrian had smelled hundreds, even thousands of times before. It was the smell of a job well done.