

Eldritch Science



September 2026

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Eldritch Science

Editor – Steve Condrey

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Editorial Address:

Steve Condrey/*Eldritch Science*

60 Garfield Lane

Glenwood, IA 51534

Email: steve.condrey.tnfff@gmail.com

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only distributed electronically.

Editorial

First of all, allow me to offer my apologies over the QR code on the cover of the last issue. I did not realize that it was a temporary code. I have since found a persistent QR code generator which I will be using for the front cover from now on. In any case, there will always be a traditional weblink to [Eldritch Science Online](http://EldritchScienceOnline.com) here in the editorial column.

(Funny how we can use 'traditional' and 'weblink' in the same sentence now...)

The channel seems pretty well-received so far. In addition to updates to *Eldritch Science*, I will be posting book and media reviews. Currently I have two book reviews up: a nonfiction review of Annie Jacobsen's new release *Biological War: A Scenario* and Harry Turtledove's upcoming release *Don't Breathe*. I am also continuing my somewhat tongue-in-cheek reviews of the 'classic' 1973 Canadian science fiction series *The Starlost*. If you feel a craving for a nice big hunk of cheese, this will fill the need!

Anyway, on to the current issue. Alex Chouinard concludes his six-story 'adventurers in a tavern' cycle with *What Happens Underground, Stays Underground* and *Death of a God and the Birth of Misery*. Sometimes eliminating the great evil in the world only results in another one replacing it.

And now for something completely different: MacArthur Gunther has shared with us *A Cosmic Sun: An Astronomical, Spatial, and Multidimensional Portrait of a Chinese Revolutionary (Sun Yat-Sen)*. This poem has been published elsewhere and Mr. Gunther was very gracious to share it with us. In addition to the poem's ties to Chinese astrology and history, Sun Yat-Sen has a tangential connection to fantastic fiction. (continued pg. 64)

What Happens Underground, Stays Underground

by Alex Chouinard

“Wizard! Please bow before the Queen of the Final Pride, Lioness Chasna!” the kobold herald announced. His voice echoed throughout the hall.

I recognized the order with a tip of my hat. A wizard never bows. My blue robes shimmered along with the gems that inscribed the murals of days long gone, their meanings only half understood. The floor was much newer, jade from the dragon kingdoms, compared to the seemingly elder wood.

“There is no need for that Hormus. You are dismissed,” the mighty sovereign commanded. The servant made his last bow and marched out the gilded door.

Chasna was a slender creature and was a few inches shorter than me. She was a bastet with silver fur and a white undercoat. Her face had a shorter snout than most. She wore bright yellow and purple robes, golden jewelry, and broken golden eyes. I knew those eyes, as they were the eyes of one who is always worried and waiting, the

eyes of a typical politician. Chasna approached the elaborate palace banisher and looked out at the vast clay cityscape and the swooping savanna below. She tapped her claws on it.

The queen then looked over at me. “I am troubled by a dream,” she spoke with a tired voice despite her young age. Despite being a lion bastet, she sounded like a cougar.

Of course... This is going to be some wild goose chase over nonsense, at least that is what most people would think, I thought to myself. “Tell me about this dream.”

“It is about a hole in the savanna... a deep, dark hole. It is close to the Battle of Claws and Iron; from this hole crawls an army. This horde was born from the dark, and it is just as vast. They hid under cloaks to hide from the star; they wielded alien weapons and unholy magic. I saw them coming to my city. They forever blighted the sky with their smog, poisoned the water with their waste, and ravaged the land with their trash. Even though the vision could be nothing, I would like you to investigate the area. If you need a better incentive, I would be willing to let you have free access to anything in this city for a day... within reason.”

Hmmm... This would take a while, and I- OH BUT A TRIP TO THAT SPA WOULD BE AMAZING! I didn't really need much time to think to make my choice, "I will take the deal."

For a second, I could tell she was caught off guard by the sheer simplicity of my answer. She has probably used wagering and bartering with her political rivals, so it felt good to be an easy man to please.

"Very well. The Battle of Claws and Iron took place west of here. We were never able to recover the equipment. So, follow the smell of gore birds and rusted metal." She spoke very slowly, making sure not to trip on a single word.

"Ok bye!" I declared as I rushed over the banister.

Chasna gasped as I grabbed the banisher with one hand and threw myself off. The air rushed to greet me and spun me around. I then let out my second chant of the day.

Was this a bad idea? Yes. Do I really care? No. To a mortal ear, it would sound like *Jaska Salmer*. To me, it simply meant a Wind Funnel. I felt a

great and sudden updraft which canceled my downward plummet.

"Ja-Ja-Ja," I muttered under my breath as I started to descend from my elevated position slowly. I looked back at the palace. This never gets old.

It was a vast series of towers made of dried mud that reminded me of wet beach sand. Despite its seemingly primitive technology, the Kingdom of the Final Pride was a fabulous empire, able to work with what it had. The windows were stained glass showing off the Queen Prides' symbols.

I finally landed with a hint of grace onto the city's street. The cat folk guards who rode atop their antelope were stunned. One reached their ax and tried to denounce my mischief, but they must have realized that they would most likely never be able to catch me if I didn't want them to take me. They were right after all, the last guard who tried ended running for so long he threw up, poor guy.

"Now, by the order of the queen... Can you please take me to the spa!" I asked as I now realized how much energy the spell had taken from me.

...

The spa was one of the finest places I have ever been to. It had fine cuisine; the pools were natural flowing hot springs rather than those stuffy forced spas with those heating runes, and the people were friendly and made conversation. The place was full of ornate sculptures depicting the history of the land. After thanking the owner of the spa and giving me a small tip, I began to make my way onto the village streets, which had many mud huts and small tents. The people wore little of anything except loincloths and bras. I couldn't shake the feeling that they only did it because they knew that other species would denounce them.

I finally made my way out of the un-walled city into the vast savanna. The place provided a sense of quiet, a glorious contradiction to the hustle and bustle of the city. The grass was a dull gold like the color of wheat. Sadly, I was forced to shield my eyes with my hat as I walked the plain. It seemed that a few agreed, since I saw a few mystics minding their own business outside of the city, just meditating in the fields.

I traveled for two nights from the city to the battlefield. Those days were pretty uneventful. Sure, I was almost attacked by those lions, but that was also last Tuesday and Wednesday. My journey ended when I saw a gentle spiral of vultures and

green-feathered gore birds flying below the cloud cover and above a large dip in the hills. I noted their high number and strange reluctance to dive down for a bite. This was strange since gore birds were known to be brutal scavengers and would gladly turn up a grave or kill a few guards for the taste of a fresh corpse. The bastet of the region believe the creatures to be divine and that they are tasked with bringing souls to the stars upon death, and don't bother to bury their dead at all. I then saw a hyena run past me, whimpering. It carried the smell of burnt meat with it. It was at that moment that I could tell something was up. Even more reasons to keep pushing forward.

I crested the hill to be nigh smothered by the overwhelming stench that entered my nose. The field below must have been a league wide. It was riddled with corpses and broken weapons. The dead were still fresh; their wide-eyed faces still recognizable. How long ago did battle happen anyways? I had heard the war was started by the bandit kingdom. The war was instigated by outside forces that wished to colonize the region, but that seems to have failed terribly. I noticed some small shapes fighting in the distance. I could hear their clash of power from hundreds of feet away.

The first was a large crimson brute. It seemed a

dozen feet of arms were as big as its boulder-thick legs. The monster seemed to brandish a large bony scythe that kind of just stuck out of its arm, adorned with the faces of many leering skulls. It swatted with wild abandon at its nimble and holy foe.

The second was a four-legged creature that glowed like a second sun. It seemed to be surrounded by geometric shapes. It fired radiant beams into the abomination.

Finally, something to make this long hike interesting.

I decided to take a closer look, and I began to creep my way through the mounds of corpses. I felt my heart race with excitement and terror. I noticed that neither seemed to be making progress on slaying the other. The four-legged creature's beams were trivial against the monster's writhing mass. The monster's large and clumsy blade was simply unable to connect with the nimble creature.

When I got closer, I began to understand what was happening. It was a battle after the battle. They were a rare variation of a phenomenon that happened after great events, which resulted in the

manifestation of spirits. Grand festivals spawned devils. The signing of new laws and great acts of charity rallied angels. Hate crimes and acts of misguided might be called the Zelhare. Vile acts of meaningless sin dragged the demons into this world. The act of war was one of the few things that summoned multiple of them at once. One's sense of honor, blood lust, mercy and hate clashed in their soul. The final result, a brawl. This event is called battle rapture.

I then ducked under an overturned stone big enough to hide me from the supernatural combatants. I finally got a good look at them. The brute was a beast made of writhing tentacles that somehow looked like roots and muscles all at once, and its head seemed to vaguely resemble a skull. Its arm ended in a scythe blade adorned with skull cravings. The other was a golden lion with groovy horns and runes spinning around him. His bronze mane shined like a second sun.

I decided to test my luck with the angel. I leaped from my hiding place, pointed my finger at the behemoth's skull-like face, and spoke the word "Haskcha," or fire. I closed my eyes for a moment hoping that the magical word functioned in the way I intended. I then heard a roar of unnatural pain.

I opened my eyes to see that the monster was being reduced to its individual strands of burnt flesh which were flung all around. The golden lion took its chance, pounced, and finally started to rip and tear the abomination at its very seams, allowing for the occasional bolt to help undo the creature's insides. I would have stood back and just cheered it on if I had not looked down at my arm to see that it was on fire.

"Oh, dear! Crap crap crap!" I yelped in panic as I slammed myself to the ground and began rolling on it to slay the ever-hungry blaze. Luckily, that had allowed me to preemptively dodge the demon's final swing of the blade. Instead the bone cleaved the ground and withered the grass around the scar, like it was trying to wound the world.

Finally, the demon collapsed into a meaningless mass of fleshy, root-like tendrils and spit on the ground... It was quiet. I marveled at the savannah grass in pain in my burnt arm. *Why the hell did I use that one! It always catches my robes on fire! I could have used plenty of other words but I had to use the dangerous one and the so-called 'cool' one! AHH!* I cursed in my mind. *I swear the gore birds began to caw louder as if to mock me, or maybe they were just getting hungry.*

The angelic lion approached me and addressed me with a firm, calm and kind tone. "You seemed to have harmed your arm while aiding me. Let me repay you."

I wasn't surprised by the fact the angel spoke. Most angels had the ability to speak. I had seen strange things talk, like a rock, which is a great story I can tell later...

"My name is Leohardauggnuskmorvald, or Leo. And yours?" the lion asked.

"Chocxie... please, help me," I replied with a pained voice.

The lion nodded and apologized for his foolishness. "Oh, of course...I forgot that you mortals had that thing called pain for a moment."

He lifted his paw off the ground, and a vast helix of glowing runes formed around my arm. I then winced at the harsh but effective healing magic that took place. I took a moment to look into his eyes. They had pupils which held reason and kindness.

"Well... Leo, it seems that we are even. Have you seen a hole around here?" I said with a smirk on my face.

He would have responded, but then one of them rose. The dead body seemed to slump itself up on its own spear and then jerked the spear out of the ground with a snap. The corpse was a half-rotted Bastet with rusty armor and a broken shield. A long tendril of flesh pulsed and seemed to puppet the body. The eyes were prided open, revealing blood red orbs with crimson tears. Its jaw was agape as it shambled forward. Then a second came back from the grave off in the distance, and then another, and another, and another. We both exchanged nervous looks; this fight had only just begun.

The gore birds, however, were tired of this cosmic nonsense. All at once they seemed to dive down onto the possessed corpses. They were all ugly beasts, dark, sea green, oily feathers, yellow eyes that seemed some more goulash than the rest of it, huge talons that could crack a man's head open, and a bone-white beak painted brown with dried blood. It was as large as a horse and had the right to go with it. The first wave of the monsters was able to crunch the corpses into the ground and devour them with little effort. The undead thralls could do nothing against the assault.

The lion let out a heralding roar which echoed across the land. The angel's geometric pattern formed around the gore birds, denouncing the dead's attempt to resist them. The slaughter took about a few minutes to complete. Only a single corpse managed to even begin to stagger close to us when the lion dismissed it with a wrathful ray of light from its glowing runes. The beings were blasted limb from limb. I decided to reserve my energy and simply eat some trail mix.

"Thank you again, mortal, for aiding me in that terrible battle. As a reward, I shall act as your guardian for a day," Leo said as he bowed his head with reverence.

"I am just trying to find that hole or something. It's about an 'army of darkness,' it will probably be nothing," I answered shrewdly. While I appreciated the gesture, I was concerned about bringing him along.

Angels can be very strict, and working with them against the forces of 'evil' can severely limit your options. They might demand violence when peace is needed or honesty when white lies are best. However, if I died because I decided not to take him along, what kind of idiot would I be? Probably a damned one.

“Very well, a great protector. It will be a journey into the dark for us both. May we gain glory and riches for the heavens!” I said as if I was a great, pompous knight. I couldn’t help but snicker, and he couldn’t hide a smile. Suddenly, we were laughing our tails off at nothing at all.

Once we recovered from the giggles, we found a hole in the roots of one of the withered trees that were nearby. The prophesied hole was a small thing that had to be climbed down with the roots being dry as bones. This climb could be very dangerous if done poorly.

“Ok, I will go down first, and you will go second,” I said.

“Very well, human, be careful,” he said as he nodded and backed away.

With nothing more to be said, I traveled into the hole.

I first placed my feet onto a large, dry root. It let loose creaks as it reluctantly accepted my weight. I then placed my hands on another root, it was a lot less stable, with dried mud and dust falling from the wall at the slightest movement. I

removed my foot to go further down into the depths; my handhold finally betrayed me and broke off. “NO!” I managed to catch myself in that split second of freefall with another barely living stick.

Leo looked on in horror, unable to help since he lacked hands. I managed to barely grab onto another root, only for it to break off in seconds. I felt the air abandon my chest as panic took control. *Wind funnels wouldn’t be able to save me in this enclosed space. Which would leave at the mer-* my thoughts fell off as I found myself screaming into the darkness.

...

I woke up freezing in a vast, cold cavern of mud. The only warmth was the licks from Leo trying to wake me up.

I waved around in panic and confusion in the darkness. I ranted to myself, forgetting I was not alone, “No, no, this is not what I had planned. I should have never trusted the Queen! Never trust politicians- ”

“Calm down, dear wizard!” Leo shouted with an authority that only that divine being or one’s mother could have. I found myself silent and calm.

I grabbed onto a boulder and hoisted myself up after a brief struggle from the mud. I nearly fell down again thanks to the throbbing pain in the back of my head.

“Yeah, you're right, panic will only kill me faster. We need to find that army, and maybe a way out of here,” I muttered.

Fear from my mortal times started to crawl back. However, Leo's light helped ward away the darkness that would rush toward my eyes and heart. The dismal, cavernous world that I was trapped in seemed like a better and brighter place; even the mud had some type of beauty to it. All thanks to Leo. We looked around our surroundings, trying to figure out what on Animus or under Animus we should do.

Currently, we were on an elevated point in the cave that oversaw paths into the winding depths. The passages twisted and turned, up and down, left and right, uncaring of logic or life. A small sliver of light that goaded us with the idea of freedom, shone down from above. You could even see the branches of the dead tree that guard the hole. It would be better to wander these bellowing pits of darkness rather than try to climb up something I couldn't even fall down correctly.

“We should go left. It will be less steep, and it has a higher chance of leading to a way out,” Leo mentioned.

I agreed without a fuse.

It was a slow and unpleasant slog. Mud had invaded the fibers of my clothes and ruined them. My head throbbed with pain, despite the healing that Leo tried to perform on me, and I could swear the darkness would've somehow killed me if I strayed from Leo's light. We took ramps of mud and stone which conspired to drag us deeper into the abyss. The edges always seemed to be wetter than the rest of the cave.

“Chocxie, look at this!” Leo cried and tried to motion me towards him. We found that a part of the cave wall had been carved out by some sort of mighty claw.

“Chocxie, do you have any idea what did this?” Leo asked, his voice trying to hide concern.

“I have no idea what could have made claw marks this big while living here with such little food. Whatever it is, I doubt we will want to meet it,” I muttered with that same sense of dread. Things that mark their territory are always

ferocious.

We continued to make our way into the depths of the cavern. We saw more signs of the mystery beast: claw marks, bones, and tracks in dried mud. Their frequency grew the farther we went into the cave.

“Can you use your powers to scout ahead, so we will know if something is really down here?” I asked nervously.

I didn’t want to offend it with such an obvious statement, but I was not one to deny myself such an option.

He seemed surprised, but his face quickly turned into a cold calculation. His pupils dilated, and he purred with suspicion, “Well I could use my roar to see the cavern ahead. The issue is that if something is here, it will be able to find us. We would abandon a chance of not fighting it at all for a pitched battle.”

I paused, thought about it, and responded, “Well, I would prefer that we fight it on our own terms rather than be ambushed. We are on its turf, and judging the size of those claw marks. An ambush could be lethal,” I replied.

“So be it. Let’s keep our eyes open for a good place to fight the beast,” Leo replied.

...

We spent a few dozen minutes finding the perfect spot to fight the beast. We decided to make our stand upon a natural bridge that went over a large canyon. Its ground was dry and stable. It could easily be defended from both the front and the back thanks to us being a duo. We even had an escape route in case things went wrong. I lit a torch for myself to ensure that I would be able to see it. My cloak’s torch pocket was right beside the wine opener and the 1000 year old cheese from my... ‘acquaintance’ Ale Odin. As wizards and an angel, we felt invincible.

We were not.

Leo let loose a roar. The sound was like a dictate of heaven. Its sound waves glowed with golden light as they traveled into the cavern, bouncing inward and outward, spitting apart and returning to Leo. The entire time, he kept his eyes closed, and his face was twisted into a snarl. This lasted for a few minutes. Finally, he stubbled back, the task draining him.

“There is nothing, nothing at all,” the lion took

a moment to collect himself.

We then waited and heard a screech in the distance. We had considered a lot of things the creature might be able to do: breathe fire, echolocate, or use magic. But as we heard its screeches grow closer. When we realized it was coming from above us, we realized there was a very important idea we had not properly factored in. *What if it could fly?*

The 'thing' all of a sudden slammed between us and let out a deafening scream. I turned to see an eyeless beast of translucent skin and bat-like wings that wielded huge, crystal claws. The thing's head had an oblong shape, the tip of the snout looking like a rhino horn that had been made of blunted flesh. Its teeth were made of that same crystal that the claws had been made of. Its hind legs and lower body were much smaller than its upper portions. I know it by no name, but if I had to call it something, I would call it a cave dragon. Leo turned around to face the beast only to be swatted backward by its lightning-fast tail. *Where did that come from?*

It came barreling at me. Its teeth were ready to color themselves red with my blood. I pulled out my short sword and tried to take a few swipes at

the cave dragon. My strikes were pathetic, but I still managed to somehow nick the creature. It reared itself back and barked at me twice. I felt goosebumps from what was like a planned move by the beast. Yet, its clear skin taunted me with its vital organs.

"JASKA FIG!"

My pointed finger launched forth an arrow, propelled by the winds. The moment before it could slash into its heart, the beast flapped back. The arrow hit the stomach. The monster ripped out a piece of earth and launched it at me with full force. The rock shattered itself and my chest on impact. I staggered my back and spat out blood. The thing barked at once more and waited a second to throw its next rock. Suddenly, a holy snarl turned the creature's attention to Leo, who had managed to get himself back onto the bridge. He unleashed beams of light at the thing's chest that barely seemed to sizzle the creature. It seemed the magical roar from early was stained. I knew that he could've fought so much harder if we had just taken a better approach.

The creatures tried to throw a rock at the angel, only for Leo to leap out of the way and deliver a second counterattack. The cave dragon let out two

barks once more. With Leo in mid-air, it whipped him with its tail that had hidden in the shadow. Leo yelped in surprise and flung across the cavern, far from the bridge.

“NO!” I cried. I helplessly watched Leo’s form flew like a fading comet. After what felt like forever, he fully fell into the shadows. I then heard the creature let its barking cry towards me. *So, this thing sees through sounds right? Well, if I were to eliminate all sounds. Deni RA! (No sound.)*

Suddenly, there was a dreadful nothing that overtook my ears. The ‘cave dragon’ let loose a bark, and then it stopped, confused. I charged forward, letting loose a silent scream. I felt stupid about it, but it felt right. Weaving past the thing’s swaying head was easy to work, and so was stabbing the blade into the cave dragon’s heart. I stared entranced for a moment, watching the stained blood wash through its chest, under the skin. It was beautiful.

I felt intense pain in my arm. I turned to see that the thing had bitten through my bicep; bones shattered without effort. My scream suddenly manifested from silence. My spell’s concentration was broken by pain. It yanked me from its underside along with the blade, freeing the blood

to spill on the ground. Its jaws still locked onto my arm; it began to wobble, and then it fell.

I screamed along as we tumbled from the ledge. I tried to wrestle my arm from its mouth to no avail. It had found the meat it craved and would not let it go. I then felt its eyeless gaze on me. It knew now it was doomed to die, but it would not be alone when it did. Suddenly, a huge stalagmite impaled the dragon, stopping its fall, along with my arm. I, however, kept falling. The rocky ground slammed into me, and then I felt myself slump into the water. For what felt like days, I drifted further down the river and closer to death. In my last waking moments, I saw a specter approach with a lantern that bathed the cavern in a white-blue glow.

...

I woke up in bed. I was slow and sluggish at first. Suddenly, I then panicked, remembering the fight. I put both of my hands to my head, wait a second... I turned to see that my left forearm was now a collection of black metal bones and yellow veins in the shape of an arm. I realized that I was in a terribly strange place.

It was made of soulless, smooth, white stone. No torches lit the room; instead, the ceiling held panels of glass that veiled light that shone into the

room. Occasionally, this light would completely flicker out of existence and return in the blink of an eye. They also buzzed as if alive and hungry. The bed that I was in was made of that white stone, or maybe it was wood, for this stone was oddly smooth yet strong. My body was probed and pierced by sorts of wires and small, clear pipes that seemed to invade my flesh without causing pain. The tubes ended with bags holding chemicals, blood, and these strange black tablets, filled with numbers and swaying lines. They had their own unknowable choir of beeps. For a second, I tried to rip out the wires that groped me.

o stop! You need to remain calm. Whatever this place it's not simple gallows. Otherwise, I would have been left in the river. They must be kind people, unless that is they want something out of me.

I took a moment to try out this new 'arm' of mine. Its motions were slow and jolly, but strong. I doubted that magic would flow through it. It obeyed me, but it was not a part of me. The door opened for a man in a mud-brown robe, the perfect color for blending into the muddy caves. While the hood covered his face, his torso and legs displayed countless artifacts and gadgets strapped to his black, skin-tight suit. The man sat down on a stool by my bed. I didn't speak; I

needed to figure out what this guy's motive was.

There he spoke with a sweet voice that carried a sense of strange pride, "Hello silly little wizard, how have you found your way so deep down into the dark?"

"Why do I find such strange people living in it? Why do they give out metal arms, and why do they stick wizards full of tubes?" I asked back. He wanted to wax poetry? Oh, I can wax poetry too.

"Strange are the least hurtful of words that you call us up there, blinded by the sun."

I don't like where this is going

.

"We have been called many things: first thaum, nightmare, heretic, and finally alchemist," the living legend said as they removed their hood. He was young, with red eyes and red hair. He had light skin that was flawless. His teeth were white as snow.

"No, no, that's impossible! Malnor is a myth, you are the legend, a scary bedtime story, you are made up," I pathetically squealed, "an army of darkness." *The queen's vision was not so wrong after all. Now I wish this journey were boring!*

Dammit! My panicked thoughts heralded panicked words, “No, no, no, what is your goal monster? What is your objective heathen?!”

Before I could mutter a word of power, I found a hand covering my mouth and a strange weapon pointed at my head. It was made of the same black metal as my hand; it looked like a crossbow but without a bow. Its cold, metal, hollow barrel seemed to stare eagerly at me. I instantly felt a chill down my spine and knew that this could kill me in an instant. *Mind your matters dammit!*

The Alchemist spoke quietly like a parent talking down to their child, “Wizard, as an explorer and studier of strange cultures, I must ask that you remain calm and allow me to explain myself and my people to you. We gave you that arm after all. Would it be a simple request for you to at least take a tour of our humble station?”

I looked over at the metal gauntlet, letting each finger slowly flex and unflex. They were the alchemists, committers of unspeakable crimes, masters of evil, users of strange gadgets, tuber pokers, and defilers of the gods. Yet before me, I saw one that deserved the title of gambler, savior, and giver of metals arms.

“Why did you save me? How could it benefit you?” I asked with a righteous tone. If they had a darker reason to save me, maybe they would let it crack here.

“Because saving others means we have not fallen to the level of the gods. Come, our machines or ‘magic items’ tell us you are to move your body. Let me show you around... The name is Charlie by the way,” Charlie then raised his hand to shake mine. I smiled weakly.

Fair enough. Besides, he had a very good handshake.

...

We spent the next hour exploring the alchemist's hideout. It was a small outpost manned by a few dozen souls. They dressed in their skin-tight uniforms. They all seemed to have a sense of vague distrust of me that they hid under a mask of nervousness. The place was full of strange technological marvels, things I could hardly understand. They, however, seemed strangely uncaring towards them. They said that things didn’t have access to the ‘internet’ or they had nothing but military rations. Personally, I didn’t think the rations were that bad.

The ‘Station’ as they called it was composed of five different rooms. The room I was in was an infirmary; the things that were hooked into me

were used to both keep me alive and to monitor my health. The devices had strange names like ‘IV bag’ and “heart monitor.” They were also a part of a larger group of machines called ‘electronics.’ The common trait of these devices was the fact that they used lightning to power themselves instead of running water or manpower. Truly fascinating.

The second room was the “living room.” It has these strange chairs called recliners that were comfy, and with the push of a lever, they could change themselves to ‘recline’ you.

The third room was the bathroom, which held perhaps the strangest device of all of them. This device was called the ‘toilet.’ It was a garderobe that instead of using gravity, would conjure a whirlpool that sends your waste to places unknown. Much to Charlie’s dismay, I couldn’t help but ‘flush’ it for the sake of it.

The fourth room was the bedroom. It was the most normal out of all of the rooms, being a series of small bunks with places to store rations. The thing that was truly odd about this room was the materials it and the beds were made of, but that was par for the course.

There was a fifth room that was guarded by an

iron door, but I wasn’t allowed in there. My guess is that it must have been some sort of armory or lab.

After a little tour of the base, Charlie and I sat down on a pair of ‘recliners’ in the living room. *Such a weird name.*

“Would you like to be reclined?” The alchemist asked.

“Sure?”

He moved a small lever and I shifted positions. I was now reclined.

With a moment of silence between us. I decided it was finally time for the alchemists’ side of the story.

“So, Charlie, what makes you think that you have the right to challenge the gods?” I asked.

“What makes you think they have the right to rule us? We were here first,” Charlie answered with a smirk of arrogance.

“They made us.”

“Oh? You people still believe?”

“If the gods did not make the universe, then what did?” I tried to ask with indifference but I failed to hide my morbid curiosity towards this new forbidden idea.

Charlie smiled at me. I hated his smile. Sure, he was a ‘nice guy’ I guess, but that smile just felt so smug, almost bigoted. Like I was a brat who was about to be taught a lesson.

“The Five Sparkes. First, there was nothing then the First Spark was struck and launched forth infinite matter across infinite space. Laws of gravity and heat forged the raw materials of the universe into great spheres of fire and around them small little balls of dirt formed. The universe was made, but it was empty.

“Then upon one of these lifeless rocks, the Second Spark was struck breathing life into small little pieces of bacteria. By the laws of life, air, and water, these things mutated and changed adapting to every environment imaginable, plants, animals, and fungi. Life was made but had no meaning.

“One day, an ape had the third spark go off in its brain giving it sentience. The ape spreads its

seed. Its children evolved into humans and other creatures, like dwarfs and goblins. The universe was meaningful but had no wonder.

“Then, the first wizard was reborn with the first words of power, which was the Fourth spark. The spark of magic. The elves came around this time, an entire species that devoted themselves to traveling the world to gain the powers of wizardry. Their ears were pointed to help seek the words of power in the air. While many have settled down, they retain their ears. The world was free, but it was soon shackled.

“The final spark occurred not by chance, but by the folly of us all. It happened when people’s ignorance, sloth and desire to understand the world so they created idols. Their belief forces these petty abominations into existence. These things tried to hide away the sparks and the laws behind them. We knew what we had to do: we had to kill the gods.”

“How would such a blasphemous act be committed? To kill a god.” I asked. I didn’t know what to think. Did Charlie have a point? It could feel like the gods changed unnaturally. No, they have good intentions. They have protected and managed an unstable world. They also have been

indifferent to suffering even suffering caused by them. But of course, the Alchemists would believe such thing easily. They have the Idols' eternal scour, not something that they gain without effort-

"GUYS! THERE IS AN ANGEL HEADING OUR WAY! THIS IS NOT A DRILL!" one of the alchemists cried. He held a tablet with a beeping light on it.

All the alchemists slowly turned towards me, slowly drawing what I now knew were 'guns.'

"Chocxie? Did you lead this angel here?" One of the alchemists asked with a sense of dread.

"I didn't mean to. We were traveling together-"

One of the alchemists drew their weapon on me and tried to fire. Charlie slammed into them, causing the shots to harm only a wall.

I continued trying not to let my terror show from the weapon's mighty roar, "Listen, I didn't know about any of this! I will try to steer him away from here! Both you and he have saved my life, and keeping you apart is my way of paying both of you back. So, are you going to let me?"

They nodded to each other in both agreement and reassurance. Charlie, who seemed to be the leader at this point, spoke up, "We have no real choice. Let's give you some gloves for the metal arm and your clothes back. Mike! Your attempt to kill the Wizard was reckless and stupid. We will discuss this later."

The alchemist who I now knew as Mike bowed his head in shame, "Yes sir."

You know I never remember him mentioning that he was an officer.

Charlie continued to show his leadership skills.

"Chocxie we need you to bluff the angel into getting off our tracks. Can you do that?"

"Yes, of course I can." *I have to.*

In under a minute, I had gotten back my old, ruined robes and a pair of gloves to hide my robotic arm. With wishes for good luck and a few threats, I was sent through barge of light beams, and then I was in the cave as, if nothing happened.

"Chocxie? Chocxie?" Leo called into the dark.

I saw his aura slowly crested the horizon like a morning to signal the end of days. I gulped and muttered two words of power. *Deni Tyr (No truth.)*

With that, I slowly started to limp toward him.

“I am in here, Leo! Here! I am safe and sound.”

This was a lie. Yet I called towards that star; it felt like it was the truth. I mumbled a truth under my breath, “I like... women,” it felt forced and unnatural, like a complete lie. *I swear it is true. So, when I lie it sounds like the truth, but when I tell the actual truth, it sounds like I am lying. This couldn't possibly go wrong.*

Leo bounded over the hump in the cavern that separated up. The angel jollyfully rushed over and tried to hug me. Yet, he could not, for he had no hands, so he nuzzled my lower chest and stomach with his forehead. I petted his mane with my hand, enjoying the moments when we could be so-called friends, no lying involved.

“Chocxie, I am so happy to see that you are alive,” Leo cried with joy. I had never seen such joy from angel, normally they were cold, hard and serious.

“I am happy that I was able to meet you, too!”
Sure I was happy to meet him, anytime but now.

Tell me, are you in need of healing?” The angel

asked.

“No...not at all?” I sheepishly responded. *No! I said something is true! I can only lie!*

“Are you sure? Your arm seems to smell funny, like metal.”

“Well, I just had some mushroom juice on my skin!” My lie rolled off the tip of my tongue like it was nothing.

“Well, I am happy you are in one piece. I assume nothing noteworthy happened after we were split up?”

I paused, not sure how to respond. He squinted with a suspension.

“Yup... sorry, I had an innocent little brain fart,”
I was telling a lie. I had a panicked brain fart.

“Very well, want to get out of here? I think I found a way.” Leo pointed into the great ravine behind him at the end of which there was a small beam of light.

“No...” I then gave him a huge dumb smile. He then started letting out this mix of a roar and a laugh. My dread started to fade away. I started to

laugh as well. We left. My friends on both sides are better for it.

...

"That is my tale," The wizard says with a smile on his face.

"You know that is... a great tale, if it were true. The Alchemists were wiped out long ago, and you should remember that" Nactay says with his sense of discomfort hardly hidden.

"No the tale is just a..."

He then excuses himself and storms upstairs. Your blood goes cold, realizing that a holy man was listening to one of the heretical tales of all time. This place always had a habit of getting juicy stuff out of people. Somehow, it never occurred to you that that could be a bad thing.

"...prank." The wizard's voice falls off, realizing that he might have been too desperate to one-up everyone at the table.

"Did some DARE TELL A STORY WITH OUT MY APPROVAL?" a thunderous voice rings throughout the tavern.

Harda readies herself with a fighting stance, Alphonse screeches and falls out of his chair, Hennlic readies to throw an engraved ruby, but Chocxie is unphased and so are you. You know that voice, and you have the world to thank for it.

A pair of huge sapphire paws reach out from the bowels of the tavern. They pull a much larger shape into the common room. It is a large, simmering, feline body that is gorgeously covered with emerald feathers and sapphire fur. Its holy wings are folded in such harmony and were so shiny that one could see their reflection in them. Its face is that of a lion, yet it smiles in a way that only a bastet ever could. Its eyes glow gently blue. The black pupils are almost cast a shadow. The tail of the beast ended in a lazy cobra. He is a mighty sphinx. They are the source of *The Drunkards Riddle's* fame and wealth. Most of all, he was your best friend, Rethkaszan.

"I have a tale that will enthrall you all," Rethkaszan spoke with a slow, soft, and yet authoritative voice. The voice was almost magical. It has been honed over a million suns; it is tuned to lure the greedy and warn the wise. Despite its drama, you have grown used to it due to exposure.

You always knew him as someone with little

fuel to socialize. He would request a bright mind from the tavern to attempt his trial. He used to come up to defend the place in the early days, when crime lords saw it as a piggy bank. These days, he never came out of the “basement” peacefully unless there were interesting imports, either material or mental.

“Well, I was enjoying your tales, and I hiked up here to finish the night with my own,” he slowly explains as he paces back and forth through the room. He was always uncomfortable doing so, but he normally managed to only occasionally nudge the furniture out of place. He then got wide-eyed.

“Silly me,” he says before he then shrinks in size and slowly to the size of a house cat. It didn’t seem painful; it seemed perfectly natural. He then suddenly fell in your lap. Well, you’re not moving for a while.

He settled down and sighed. “Ahh that’s better,” is all he bothers to say. Everyone in the group including you is stunned. You knew Reth possessed magic beyond what a humanoid dream to attain, but you never knew this was possible.

“Oh right! I need to tell you all a good story! Well, for this one I want that faithfulness here. I

know that he would be the most fascinating. Would you mind fetching him?” He asks you. You nod your head yes. Wait, you take a moment to think. “Hey Alphonse, can you do us all a favor?”

...

After a long argument and the use of dessert bribery, Alphonse managed to lure Nactay from his room back to the table. His fishy face blushes green with embarrassment. He calmly sits down and apologizes for souring the mood, but he stands by the fact that the wizard’s tale is either a lie or propaganda. The wizard nods, and he also admits fault for not reading the room. They shake hands, a firm and cold exchange, without love, only compromise.

“Aahhhh, now about the story, ever heard of the Black Mud War?” Rethkaszan’s voice is heaped in sarcasm.

Your ears perk up. *That war happened like what, nine hundred years ago?* This would be the oldest of the tales.

Nactay snaps to attention as well, “The war that gave birth to them...The Hobgoblins.” He looks up at the angelic being and smiles with morbid fascination.

Harda squeaked, "I heard about that, when a god..." She pulled a hand to her mouth, knowing that it was considered taboo to say his name. You were still too shocked to speak; this was a huge deal. While it was one of The Four Terrible Wars of Kiffer: The Folly of Malor, The Black Mud War, The Ice Age, and the Blight Blood War. There was very little known about the Black Mud War, even though it was almost ten centuries ago. This was a huge deal.

Alphonse was the last to react to the news; he shrugged. The Sphinx looked around without there being any sort of objection, he began his tale... the final tale.

Death of a God and the Birth of Misery

by Alex Chouinard

This tragedy befell the world when Kiffer had not long ago forgotten the evil alchemists. The land had been almost completely united under the flag of the Renmay Empire. They had overtaken every other nation by quill and sword. It was a glorious place of trade and culture. They worshiped many gods. They always made sure to give their offerings to many gods in steady moderation. The goblins were primitive and were the first to delve into witchcraft, magic that

controls the elements. Their relations to the divine was a chaotic and ever-changing thing.

These tribes and the empire were able to coexist in peace only because they had other things to worry about. However, once they were no longer distracted by other rivals, there was a tension that slowly built between them. The armies of Renmay and the tribes were becoming restless and paranoid; both were ready for war, but neither wanted to take the first shot. One day, a diplomat from Renmay came to the goblin tribes to negotiate with them. She returned on her horse without a head.

Renmay sent its legions into the jungle where the legionaries found a terrible stalemate. While the goblins were able to defeat the legions much larger than them with ambushes and traps, they would always be overwhelmed by the legion's war machines and fires. The gods took the side of Renmay, and they managed to slowly nudge the legions of bronze through the deathly jungle. The goblins began to lose their fighters as a rapid rate. They began to lean more on faith and strange magic. They spent hours praying and turned to sacrifice. First animal and then human. No god listened, except Yargabel the war god.

The goblins' ranks swelled with faith. The war would be lost, but not without many more massacres. Once the rumors of the sacrifice had reached the emperor's Tiberius's ears, the war effort doubled. This was no longer just another power play. It was now a moral war, one of good and evil.

The war was fought for twenty years. The war's final battle was fought on the waste lands of Unnasmor. It had once been a vast jungle; now it was nothing more than a hellscape. This is where I was, at that last dreadful battle.

Our means of transportation was a colossal walking fortress called Final Judgement. It was a mighty beast of dark gray stone and blue glowing rune work. Its innards were comprised of the countless barracks, meeting halls, and storage rooms that were needed to run an army. Its eyes were dozens of windows and small turrets that graced its stone hide. Its single mouth housed the great drawbridge that was located at its front. All of this carried on top of eight stumpy legs that make ponds and creeks in its wake.

I looked out across the vast legion we had stored inside of the gargantuan structure. There was a total of a hundred thousand of them, clad and armed with bronze armor, blue cloth and maces. The twenty thousand archers, all trained with the short bow, were masters of quickly unleashing volleys of arrows. The cavalry was five thousand men strong. They had only light armor and long spears. There were also the rune lords who were elite soldiers who used runes either given to them by thaums or that had they infused themselves. Each one had a unique way of fighting. They were the smallest division, only being a thousand strong, that was more than enough. The Paladins numbered in about six thousand or so. They served all the Idols and were from almost every denomination. Except Yargabel of course; his worship had been banned.

My counting of the legion was interrupted by a low, sharp, buzzing voice, "The battle will begin shortly, I hope you are ready to prepare."

I turned around to see Aleodin, the War Wizard, the general. His hair was a fiery red that rolled along his scarlet and white robes. His one good eye was hazel, so was his eyepatch. His face was contorted into a frown. In one of his skinny arms was an iron rod that was almost as tall as him. A large piece of sunset amber sat upon the rod, radiating power, beauty, and righteous malice.

"Ah, of course, General. I imagine we are heading to the foresite chamber?" I asked with an exaggerated interest.

He shook his head no and responded, "I must ensure that we have the power of action before we gain the power of knowledge. For knowledge is worthless without action, and action is dangerous without knowledge."

Obviously.

He then slowly waved his hand towards the legions as if he was showing off a beautiful piece of sculpture or a dazzling painting. It made sense for this man saw war as grim, but also as beautiful art. He then turned around and started to make his way to a stone out cropping for addressing troops. His staff made a slight ringing sound. Then silence reigned.

He then whispered in my ear, "Come, young sphinx, we have work to do."

It might be hard to believe, but I was very young back then, only two hundred years old. He was, in fact, slightly older than me. My body had the youth of green legs, face and chest.

The elf gently tapped his staff once more. The outcropping of rock we were on slowly began to rise from the outside. It began to make its way into the center of the legion. The soldiers stared up at us in awe.

I gave a curious glance to the opening that allowed us to see the outside. There was a sea of dead, withered trees and our target, Unnasmor, the capital and last city of the goblins. It was impossible to properly see through, thanks to the mighty giant spikes that guarded the city.

I sighed and spoke under my breath, "Yargebel, how far you have fallen." I then turned my attention to the legion. We were in the center of the chamber now.

Aleodin began to address the legions, "My fellow warriors. We stand at the brink of victory. We have lost many, and we will surely lose more. But, this is for a good reason and this is to protect the empire. For this is not just for our rulers, but it is for our fields, our wives, sons and daughters! Things these monsters can't understand!"

I tried to figure out what sort of strategy he was trying to pull off with his speech only for the legions to roar with approval. *Did Aleodin even have a family, some things just don't make sense.*

We floated back to the balcony of sorts that we were on. With a nod, we both began to travel upstairs. It was a cramped passage. It was wider than it was tall, just big enough to fit me and the War Wizard comfortably at my side. It didn't need lights thanks to the dull blue glow of the runes. The sanctum was a huge chamber filled with planning tables, graphs to calculate finance, and other logistics. In the middle of the room stood a small stone basin filled with silver, swirling, reflecting, liquid.

I flew a little to the pedestal's left. As I approached the pool began to whisper to me. It was calling me to gaze into infinity. I stared into the alluring liquids but was interrupted by that small old buzzing voice, "Before you do this, remind me how this magical process works again?"

"Well, I am an angelic being, a positive incarnation of the concept of knowledge, born from the collective unconsciousness of the world. The Hive Mind Mirror allows one to view other people's consciousness and to telepathically

communicate. Our goal is to communicate with the whole army. However, I am the only thing here that can handle the strain of even a few people, let alone the commanders," I explained with anticipation.

"Very well Rethkaszan, just remember to mind your business, people are nervous about you going too deep into their minds."

"Of course."

With little ceremony, I simply stuck my head in the pool. I felt thousands of senses and memories flush into me. I was seeing through the eyes of countless mortals. In an instant, I understood their gripes, their hopes, and their dreams. I tried so hard to take it all in and process it all of it, but I couldn't, I shouldn't. The sudden rush caused me to chirp, which all ten commanders heard.

"Ah, I see you are getting used to this," Aleodin couldn't help but crack his first smile for the day.

"Yes sir, we have a job to do," I tried to hurry us past my embarrassing mistake.

It was strange to inhabit the senses of another; I was able to fully understand the body but not doing anything in it. The only way it didn't feel paralyzing was that I could change my view very quickly. Every time I did I forgot one identity and learned another.

Aleodin spoke a few magic words, "Hih Voc Nay." I then felt his voice flow through me. "Generals, are we ready?" He asked.

As each of the ten confirmed their readiness, I felt a pit form in my stomach. *But why?* Once the final general confirmed his readiness, Aleodin nodded and gave a single order, "Advance,"

I saw through countless eyes and heard through countless ears, the opening of the gate, its grinding stone and the legion's war cries. The chant would be meaningless due to the fact it is in a tongue that is long since dead. They marched at the beat of a steady drum. *One-two-one-two-one-two*. They had a tiny amount of trouble keeping their orderly formation in the blasted forest. The pit in my stomach suddenly sprouted into vines of regret. *They were going to die. These men, boys, were going to die, all of them. One by one their stories would end, and their lives half-lived. Were these really killers, or just men dressed like ones?*

"They must die, Rethkazan, for the greater good," Alodin interrupted my spiral quickly. He also gave me something, a lie. An excuse to stop myself from thinking. I hated the idea of letting myself see things in such an ignorant manner, but I had no choice. So, I took the lie and carried it with me.

I immediately heard the cries of the goblin horde. They were all barf green creatures that peeked their heads out of the jagged rock formation, and they shot a few dingy arrows. The legions laughed it off. Then the goblin horns blew. The goblins charged from the small nooks and crannies of the spick work. Their salvaged bronze armor made clanging noises as they did. Aleodin sighed before he told his next orders through me, "Send the first and second infantry companies."

I relayed the message.

General Caesar cried to his forces, "First and Second companies, charge!"

I of course could just told all of them, but soldiers might not like the idea of me being the one in charge, at least for now.

"They are holding back their real forces," I sent them to Aleodin. He grimly nodded as a reply.

The ranks were about to clash into each other. The imperial spears launched out of nowhere. The close-ranged volley caught the first wave of the goblins' hoard off balance. The company's back ranks suddenly lent the front ranks their spears in a sudden flourish. It was a favorite tactic of only the most battle-hardened legions of the empire. Maybe I had underestimated the boys' chances of survival.

The melee began to grow properly. It was the organized legions' pseudo-phalanx verses the utter tide of goblins. Most of the goblins' blades could not reach humans' armor. A few of them threw themselves into the spears hard enough to impale themselves into range, and maybe, just maybe they could trade their life for another.

"This is hardly a battle! This is a cruel joke!" Caesar cried.

"Don't get cocky, Caesar," Alodin lectured, "Those have been the last words of many of your officers."

Was this really it? The final battle? This is the hoard that had kept the empire busy for two whole decades? The Hoard From Nowhere, The Ones Who Controlled the Four, and The God Hate? Were these titles granted to such pathetic creatures? No, they were not.

Then chanting began and suddenly bursts of fire washed over the soldiers. There were cries of pain on both sides now. I could taste the soldiers fear in my tongue, so I ordered them to withdrawal before they broke and fled.

"There it is! I knew there was a trick up their sleeve!" Aleodin exclaimed.

Caesar tried object, "You knew about th-"

I cut in, "Quiet! We need to focus on winning right now! Keep your questions for later!"

The back ranks managed to flee, nothing lost except their pride. The front ranks, however, were being slaughtered. There was total confusion, while most troops had started to run, others tried to hold the goblins off while their comrades fled. I insisted they rethink their actions. They ignored me. Those foolish boys died in vain. The lucky ones were killed off by the blades of simple foot soldiers. The unlucky were burned by hex fire, crushed under folding earth, stripped of and drowned by their own blood, beheaded by blades of water, or choked by the air being forbidden to enter their lungs. I saw my various points of view die like a choir of candles in the strong winds. Each one brought us a fraction closer to defeat.

The goblins then advanced themselves into the range of the archers who unleashed a sudden volley of arrows. The witches tried to improvise elemental shields, but they could do little to save their non magical lessers.

"Infantry Companies Four and Five take to the sides! Dwarven Phalanx One takes to the center. This attack is to be supported by the rune lords Cable the Pryo Mangler, Lara of the Sapphire daggers and their teams. I will also be moving the *Final Judgement* around to engage in strategy, *Almighty Noose*. All units, be ready to charge!" Aleodin stayed calm, clear and quick while giving his orders. How he managed to funnel his mind directly to the other officers so quickly, without needing my input, is still a feat I wonder about.

The officers and I had discussed the possible plans we might use to finish the war. While over a dozen different ideas had been drawn up, they all

seemed to fall into two categories. Defense and offense *Almighty Noose* was definitely the latter.

I sensed both outrage and pleasant surprise from the various generals and officers who had received the order. Neither side dared to complain. While he was not known to be a cruel man unless directly ordered to be by those who hired him, Aleodin was known to never suffer the disobedience. Want to make suggestions beforehand? Sure go ahead, but it didn't matter if you were a peasant private or a pampered prince, if you dared to question him in a battle you would be punished, severely.

The *Final Judgment* then moved backward and began to make a counter sundial-wise lap around the city. The commissioned fighting force had been deployed by then. I went into the mind of a dwarven shield bearer. I think his name was Growmald and his former- Nevermind.

The dwarfs bellowed their battle cry over and over, "FIGHT AS ONE! THE FIGHT WILL BE WON! FIGHT AS ONE! THE FIGHT WILL BE WON!"

Goblins crashed against the interlocking shields like renewed confidence. Their weapons and claws tried desperately to get over the wall. *Sure the shields are working but why do dwarves only have them in the front?*

"GIVE THEM THE STORM!"

The backline dwarfs unleashed fails over the wall like thunder. The goblins were then brutally skewered by the pikes in lightning speed.

The second clash had gone much like the first one. This time, the javelins were thrown. The single waves of javelins were not nearly as effective as the sudden storm of arrows. Nevertheless, they drew blood. One in ten of the

goblins were made into a mess on the ground without being given a chance to swing there weapon. The rune lords changed in the first to try to pick off the witches in the ranks. They managed to wound a lot and kill a few, but they had to retreat, allowing the main army to finish the job.

The imperial charge finally ended the first wave of goblins and so the self-exalted and victorious force made their way to the capital proper. In the pandemonium, I was trying to probe one of the goblins' thoughts.

It was a shattered thing, firm ideas of love and honor twisted and broken into mad ravings of zeal and hate. I could *feel* his mind and soul feeding the Zelhare and the Demons. Oh, what a poor little thin-. It was killed in an instant. For the rest of the attack, I would try to infiltrate the goblins. minds, but it would rarely lead to much.

I started to spread my points of view to the second division that was being deployed. It had a few runes lords in the front line with aid from the regrouped infantry companies. With the help of the *Final Judgement*, we dropped off a thousand archers and all of the cavalry since this was the smoothest environment on the field, creating a second flank. This is also when we deployed ranks of paladins who were positioned in the back lines of the army. Their march was not impeded.

"Strange," Aleodin said. It was never a good sign when he used so few words.

We deployed the final force on the northern side of the city where the other two formations were at the southern west and east. This was the most dangerous battalion out of all of them since it was pretty much just whatever we had left organized into a formation and told to advance and destroy.

There it was, all our troops, literally. We had just showed our whole hand. "Are you sure this is wise?" I whispered to Aleodin, hoping he would not lash out against me.

He gave me a sad nod, "I don't know. It may not be the right choice, but neither I nor the emperor of Renmay can afford this to become a drawn-out siege. The taxpayers, poor and rich alike, have been fed up with this war for far too long. There could be an economic collapse if the emperor does not figure out a way to turn a profit from this land and pay his debts. That is definitely unlikely due to the fact that it is now waste. That is all even before we dare to begin to consider the fact that we committed both a genocide...and a mercy killing. The goblins have had to turn to very dark powers to maintain enough strength to stay free from the empire. However, as a result, they found themselves driven mad. So we must attack and destroy them, all of them, now."

About two minutes or so passed with... nothing, just marching from all sides. I felt a strange sense of dread. It felt like a trap was waiting to be triggers or a mine on the brink of crushing all those inside. I needed to let them know, but I didn't know. I needed to know.

I forced a single tether of my perception to weave through the rocky formation. It couldn't really 'see' anything except the electric patterns of living creatures' brains and the vague presence of spiritual beings. I then realized that this battle had only just begun.

There were countless electric networks doused in a crimson mist and countless dark colored orbs, each one the mind of a demon. Most of the demons were minor and pathetic beings probably summoned and formed from a murder or two. Yet, a few were forged from something more like serialkillings and torture. The zelhare's minds

burned to, for they are the living form of spite and vengeance. They formed from the tranny of the humans and goblins.

I managed to send the mental image over to Aleodin, who was just confused by it at first. I tried to explain it to him, but the enemy did that for me.

All of a sudden, they rushed out of the jagged rocks. Demons, goblins and zeahare stormed out of the capital as if they were a nest of hornets. Without organization, motivation, and mercy. The attackers from before were not even a distraction; they were bait.

“By the gods, get the legions to the wall but don’t dare go beyond it! We are in for the fight for our lives! Retreat is impossible! We will have victory or death!” Aleodin cried.

For the first time in knowing him, I had sensed that he was struggling to keep his stoic facade from cracking. The southern west forces were rushed by corrupted goblin cavalry and airborne demons and zeahare overhead. The goblin cavalry was annihilated, but the aerie attacks were much harder to fight off.

I remember cringing while one of my viewpoints was sadistically scooped away from his formation by a vulture-like abomination. It then dropped him on the ground again and left him to die.

The rune lords were the only ones who did any real amount of damage to the regenerating forms of the zelhare and demons. The formation would have fallen if the demons had been more coordinated and proactive in dealing with the runes lords. Instead, they tried to avoid the magic users and their projectiles. The cavalry eventually broke the flank’s formation and even managed to get a few over the shield wall. Yet, this was also in vain.

The cavalry was some goblins with dingy bronze short swords and disk shields. Their mounts were worgs. A beefed-up and almost tiger-like cousin of the wolf. Their green fur was stained with dried blood and thorns. Their limbs sprouted tentacles. Their eyes bleed crimson.

The longer the battle raged on, the clearer it became that the goblins were less controlling their mounts and more of just pointing them at the enemy and hoping it would work out. If they had controllable mounts, they would have tried to flack their foe, to take advantage of the dwarves’ inability to turn. This is when I noticed that they were not only men on their war beasts. There were women and even children being conscripted into this mockery of a final stand. A peaceful death was a lie to these creatures. They knew only about war.

After the last of the cavalry was dealt with, the division stopped and tried to recover. The generals gave rallying speeches, the medics tried to stitch up the wounded, and the runes lord tried to clear their minds, but there was no denying it. They were out of the fight for now. They had lost over half their number and were too exhausted to continue. The captains asked for permission to just hold their ground rather than march on. Aleodin, reluctantly, agreed. He hated the idea of not using his men, but them ruing was much worse. It took only one man running to collapse the armies. He seemed deeply frustrated by the generals' weakness, but I managed to calm down by explaining that they were probably emptying their capital. Which means that the battle would be over soon, just like we wanted.

The southeastern legion was being hit even harder than the last one. Huge waves of goblin infantry and large demons crashed into the attackers’ ranks. Tendrilly Zelhare stuffed in knight

armor fought with the goblins, their fires driving them to madness, to ensure goblin was fighting to its very last. The demons also had wrenches who would explode on death. These would try to sneak to the back lines and explode unaware officers. Luckily, most of the attempts were failures, but the few that managed to do significant damage causing the entire army to become that much closer to collapse.

The paladins' and faithfuls' miracles kicked in as if the idols were timing it themselves. Upon a begging plea for strength, an entire formation weapons became able to harm the previously undying demons. With a song of hope, an elven knight fell from the sky and smited a goblin war chief. By praying for salvation, a great wall of vines entangled a mighty beast and gave the archers enough time to fall back to a safer position. A demand of retribution met with a blast of magma engulfing a zelhare knight.

Infantry of previously routed veterans fought with mighty prowess. They had their honor broken once, not a second time.

The paladins' defense would be legendary. They battled the greater demons and Zelhares one-on-one, and if not two or three on one. Their grit and lesser miracles led them through the abominations and fanatics. They lost many, but they took and persevered in many more lives.

The cavalry finally played a role in the war. They picked off the preaching knights and smashed into the loose waves of goblins. The less fortunate got the roll of leading the charging demons away from allies they could catch. Their numbers were wiped by the end of the fight. While some had simply been dismounted, most were killed.

When the last preaching knight was put into the ground, the division marched to the capital

proudly. They had lost less than a third of their numbers. They had gone against the odds and came out victorious. In their minds, they pictured a glorious feast for when they returned home. They thought they would be heroes. If only they were right.

The northern flank was having a rather difficult time as well. The opponents were primarily demon infantry, goblin witches, and faithful. The demonic infantry was full of pale skinned humanoids with hides that was tied to their bones. They all had their unique deformities, some had horns and claws, others had long fangs and pointless wings, some had faces on their stomachs, and countless other mutations.

The goblin's twisted faithful were all deformed like their demon subordinates. It was possible that they had taken demon dust.

The corruption of Yargabel that ran that deeply? It was impossible...no it was. In fact, that was the only possible reason that so few prayers were being answered by Yargabel. The goblins have fully won him over.

These goblin fanatics chanted their demands for blood and death. Their prayers were answered with a rain of black blades from the sky, the demons being whipped into a greater frenzy, and their foes' blood boiling. The battle was going to be a slaughter.

The impish demons were almost without losses. They clawed their way through the legion's infantry, and they started to spill over and destroy the dwarven phalanx. The few rune lords and paladins the legion had were simply not able to handle the swarm.

The witches were conjuring at sorts of elemental means of murder. Wind viciously peeled

armor and skin. Water bashed people to death. Fire burned and burned through our men's souls and flesh. Earth slammed into fleeing men's heads.

"No! No! I can't lose!" Aleodin screamed, almost whined.

I was more shocked by that than by any of the scenes of brutality that were taking place. I had never seen Aleodin so out of control. Yes, he always seemed to be miffed by something: not having enough troops, the morale was too low, or maybe he had a bad feeling. However, rage, impudent rage, was not something I had seen in him...until now. Each step he took was a beat of thunder and each time his staff slammed to the ground was a lethal lightning strike. "Ummm, sir?" I tried to get a response, but received silence. Not a calm silence, but a quiet tension likely found in a hurricane's eye.

Aleodin could see the entire battlefield with his one hazel eye. The other looked past the pending slaughter zone. A wind kicked up, bellowing his cloak.

He raised his staff to the sky, he whispered three true names, "Zes Haskcha De."

Yanked into the air by a force that he had recklessly unleashed, his body spasmed while orange vapor poured from his mouth and eyes. Forming a massive cloud in seconds. The storm swirled, discarding the limp Aleodin like a used rag. Aleodin, slumped to the ground. I mentally screamed at him to live. The response was nothing more than his eyes absorbing a fraction of light. So, he lived for now.

The cloud hovered above the surging battle. It then shot an arrow made of solid fire. The point pierced a demon's "brain stem," killing it.

Another arrow, another kill. Then a goblin faithful prayer and life ended at once.

Another arrow, another kill. The men drove the monsters back.

Another arrow, another kill. Witches in the goblin ranks were terrified and tried to shield themselves. It was completely in vain. Wind's currents were ignored, fire was bypassed, stone was shattered, and water gave nothing, but a hiss and puff of steam before letting its master die. Another arrow, another kill.

The vapor butchered the final enemy wave like the others. Not one survived. A single soldier let out a battle cry. Another answer. Soon the entire legion was yelling, screaming, cheering, and crying, not because they had won, but because they had lived through twenty hellish years. They were going home.

I played a righteous tune inside their heads to help maintain the strange up-beat clamor. I noticed that one of the dead goblin's minds was still connected to my hive mind. It was not only connected, it had woken up. It was in an other worldly place. It was on land of the dead.

...

I gasped. It was true, the gods did provide a place for their most devoted. A sanctuary from the grasp of Harrow, the God of Death. The goods were good to their mortals. Then I really took the place in.

Whatever Harrow had in mind, it was better than this.

The goblin came inside a ruined feasting hall. The floor planks and roof was rotting. Giant spikes of iron rammed out of the floor. Many of them impaled goblins and other hoisted creatures. It

seemed the utensils had been used as weapons, because they could be found on most of the corpses. All seemed dead, but one impaled goblin weakly reached a hand toward the top of his spike in vain. He wanted to die a second death. The goblin eyes wildly shot about and she armed herself with steak knives, but she slowly managed to 'calm' herself down.

I heard the thoughts in her head as she crept into the hideous place, "He failed us! Yargabel is a worthless god! His prayers are trivial. He was supposed to protect us! HE FAILED! WE WILL KILL MANY TIMES BEFORE HARROW TAKES US! I JASAY CORRILLEN SWEAR ON NOTHING BUT MY RAGE THAT THIS WILL BE MY FINAL BATTLE!" she yelled as she smashed her way through the double doors.

The wood was rotten and blood-soaked. So, it smashed easily. She found herself in a vast field. It was a quiet thing. Only the wind brushed on the metal grass blades, creating a distinct whine, a whirring that made Jasay want to smash and hunks of the land being torn from the ground into the collapsing sky. *This god's realm collapses along with their faith. Harrow will have its due.*

Yargabel was dying, and so was his world. Harrow was coming. Jasay readied herself. "He is across the field...I just know it," she said to herself with gritted teeth. She then began to charge across the desolate field. She even let out a little war cry. I was the only one who would hear it.

Her hunch was rewarded with the sounds of a battle echoing. She now sprinted at full speed. Her breathing became heavy and exciting until she flung herself off the cliff and into a pit.

There at the bottom was less of a battle and more of a mosh pit. Hundreds of goblins were all swarming with a singular figure. A knight in black

rusty armor towered over his assailants. His movements were lethargic and meaningless. His face was hidden except his eyes, which were glowing a flickering red. He carried a large mace that he used to sweep the horde of undying goblins away like a broom. Pity washed over me. Where once there was majesty, there was ruin. Where once was honor, hate, and regret sputtered. Where a god once stood, an empty husk of a creature fought because it didn't know anything else. Yargabel was being killed by his own flock.

Jassay turned her into a surprise attack. Slamming on top of the fallen god's head and puncturing her knives into its eyes. The creature grabbed her and with a grunt, heaved her across the area. She crashed into the wall, and her back broke. She slumped to the ground. She should have been dead countless times over from her fall alone, but the dead do not die twice. Her body was being put together poorly. The ribs and spine were being shoved and melded into jagged positions. Their careless placement cut her muscles causing her ligaments and tendons to weave and rush around the twisting labyrinth of her flesh. Between her breasts and on her back grew tumors. Countless misformed acts of healing harm, each a series of agonies and bodily malfunctions. Her body was a twisted unrecognizable mess of a thing, where her bones were a scarecrow hung with organs. Hobbled, she had become a hobbled goblin. Jassay limped towards the dying god.

Yargabel crawled upon the ground. The deformed mob was slashing and striking all parts of his body. He moaned in agony. Jasay ripped apart Yargabel's lungs. They continued for seconds or maybe years. Time itself was being murdered along with the god. But it was all meaningless when the chill washed over them.

They all looked up in awe and terror as nothing came down. It was a silence beyond the grave it was almighty denial, a final breath, it was Harrow, The God of Death. It had no form to represent death. You do not see him. You feel him. He was lingering there since your first breath. He waits. He lurks, a few times it may seem he is near, and then he is not, but he is not gone. Inally, he is truly there, you feel him. He will take you to the nothing between stars.

“You have fallen, you have fallen, Yargabel. Please, come now before its gets worse.” he said. His voice is not evil, not cold, but chilling. It is normal. Too normal.

Yargabel took the moment to grab his mace and used it as a means to drag himself from the earth. The hobgoblins had paused and just stared at the empty space that meant so much.

Yargabel drew his mace of with him rusted, rotted arms. He spoke with a dire and hateful tone that was thinly masking fear, “I am what feeds you fool! Strike me down we b-” he suddenly spat forth black ooze, stumbled as if he had been stabbed.

The dying god tried to raise but was struck again.

“Time is always on my side Yargabel. You may hasten the process slightly, but it means nothing to me. Please, I wish not to make you suffer like this. Surrender and you and your people will know peace,” the voice kept that same neutral stance. *He didn't take pleasure in taking us away, so why bother? What were his ends?*

Yargabel gave him a look with his hatful and blazing eyes. “YOU MAY NOT OFFER PEACE TO A GOD OF WAR FOOL! I AM THE INCARNATION OF

WAR!” He bellowed. His mace changed into a great sword.

“YOU MAY TAKE ME, BUT MY RAGE AND WAR WILL LIVE FOREVER! THERE IS NO PEACE! ONLY WAR!”

The sword slammed into the god's chest. Black blood and slug poured out of his wound and dissolved his blade.

Harrow first was unphased by this ultimately pointless act of defiance.

Yargabel's body suddenly began to crumple inward, being drawn into a yawning void. Soon his body had fully given way into a screaming vortex. His followers were being sucked in. Yet I could almost hear....the war cries of the legion. He was making himself into a portal back to the living world.

“WAIT! NO! Harrow tried to stop him, but it was too late. Jassay was taken back, and my vision ended.

...

Now back in the land of the living I quietly began to establish the visions that I had lost from trying to experience Jassay's senses. I found that we were in the long process of picking up the victors of the northern front. It took some time since they were weighed by the virtuous task of escorting the wounded and dead, and greedy desire to loot the fallen. These problems were further increased by the fact that both Aleodin, and I were not able to administrate the process. Aleodin was also stirring back to consciousness.

Then, when he realized what had appened, he whipped himself back up straight. “What happened? How badly are we losing? We can't-” he then realized that the battle was over and acted like nothing had happened.

Alodin began to speak "It seems the battle has won. Rethkazan, now we can begin--"

I cut him off, "NO! We need to flee! The Yargabel's bringing the goblins back!"

"Rethkazan, what the hell are you taking about?!"

"Well I--"

Then there was rumbling in the earth and then silence. Soldiers looked around for a moment wondering why an earthquake happened in a place. It then faded away.

Caesar cried, "Victor--"

Then it came.

A monumental blade rammed out of the ground to the panic and confusion of many. It simply came from the ground at an angle. It shuddered and shook the earth causing cracks to dash all over the land. These chasm were three to twenty feet apart and caused soldiers to fall inside. The blade was still moving to attack the sky itself. Most of the soldiers forgot their greed for loot, and some forgot their helpless friends. They dashed into the fort in confusion and terror.

"For the love of--" Aleodin cursed under his breath as he quickly used me to instill orders into the gigantic legion. It seemed he would return order, then the black mud marched from below. A dead god's final curse.

The black mud slowly raised itself to the surface. From it they crawled and writhed, the first hobgoblins. They were naked, scared and miserable. They were pink, black and ghost gray. The green skin that acted as camouflage in the jungle days was gone but so was the jungle. The goblin race was gone to, so was the god of honor and valor, so was the reason this war was fought, and soon, many more lives would be gone.

Why did Renmay become such a warlike and expansive nation? Most historians would say it was because they gained a huge amount of momentum in their early conquests, others think that they wanted vengeance for being pillaged by wild elves. I guess it was probably that and some other things. Wait, why am I getting into politics right now? I pondered to myself.

The hobgoblins started to claim their ancestral weapons and foe. The hobgoblins surged on the soldiers, ready to fight again. But, we had good generals. There was panic and terror, but soldiers

could fight that off. They seemed to be almost joking about the matter.

“Ya think they enjoy the pain of dying?” one soldier asked.

“No, they clearly just enjoy having your company,” another lewd soldier responded. *Were they being cocky? Yes, yes they were.*

A series of smaller blades rammed out of the ground. One of them rammed into a general of ours, killing him instantly. The second rammed into the *Final Judgment's* rune core. Both heralded crags, which coughed up even more of the abominations. The vengeful tide lanks thousands and slaughter them in a matter of minutes. The rest retreated into the fortress. They cried for the gate to be sealed but that was impossible. They then began to make their stand at the door ways that lead to the upper floors. The legion fought hard with what little might and magic they had left. They needed this storm to pass for them to play defense like this, but it never would pass, not in a thousand years.

Aleodin rushed down to his troops, cursing himself while he did, “I can’t believe myself! I allowed myself to be knocked unconscious.”

He quickly got downstairs to destroy the enemy and save his client’s men. I was suddenly rejected by the pool and found myself with thousand fading identities burning in my mind. It was complete mental agony. I felt my thoughts being ripped out of memory. My ears rang with the sounds of battle below me.

David, remember your training. I am not David. I am Amber, no Aleodin? I then noticed my alien body that breathed and made noise. “Oh, I am Rethkanzan.” I smiled for a second taking pride in the simple fact that I remembered my own name.

I looked my form over, covered in its fur and feathers. It was so beautiful, yet it was so strange. I was the desire of knowledge given flesh. I was somehow made of meat and magic, blood and ideas. It was so complex, so delicate, yet eternal and innate. To think I took for granted until now, until I looked through a human’s eyes.

I then remembered that there was a battle to get to, I got and fell down, and I realized that I had forgotten how to walk.

After giving myself a crash course on basic motor functions, I glided to the front entrance.

The hobgoblin horde was still swelling. I prepared to sweep low to the area where Aleodin was making a stand at. My only hesitation was the fact that I would have to get very close to those... things. But, I did so anyway sweeping under the balcony where I had been first counting the legion's rank. With a sudden flap of my wings, I launched myself into the titanic doorway.

At first there were a few hobgoblins who tried to leap for me with their claws and teeth. They seemed to do nothing, but frustrate themselves, until I released one of them that had latched onto me and was clawing my chest.

It screamed in tongues, "I otg ay, ide!"

I brushed the thing off my chest, killing it, with my supernatural claws. There were a few more who tried to jump and slash me, but none able to ever get as close as the original one.

I found Aleodin and his main force holding off the unending tide. They were in the very center of the room. Trying to push forward across the vast stone ruin and to the front door. The only means of survival was retreat. The last ditch effort was a costly endeavor, their number had been reduced down to only eighteen thousand.

Of course, we had no idea how the other two-thirds of the legion were doing. They could either be fine or utterly wiped out. The soldiers didn't bother with words. What was there to say? What was there to feel? Their miracles had been expended in the part of the battle they knew about beforehand, now reduced to normal soldiers. The rune lords were also struggling to fight thanks to their broken and damaged equipment, which became more dangerous and unreliable with each swing and use. Aleodin was using the occasional true name to blast away a large clump of hobgoblins that might have been able to finally break the formation. The greatest thing that worried me was their baggy eyes and their slumped posture. They were succumbing to fatigue.

"Rethkaszen! It is good to see that you have not fled. I need you to lead these things away! That is an order!" Aleodin barked at me.

"Hobgoblins." I corrected him. I found them first, so I named them.

Well, I couldn't say he wasn't glad to see me. I thought of how I could possibly be able to get these things off the survivors' backs while not

becoming the dread tide's trophy. I decided that I would surely need to use some magic of my own. I considered the few powers I had at such a young age. My magic was primarily related to illusion.

I could conceal a doorway, I could make copies of myself that couldn't interact with the world. I could make myself smell like anything I- That could work.

I hung myself on the *Final Jugement's* walls to give myself time to activate the effect. I managed to pierce the wall with all of my claws. Soon, I made myself smell like a creature who is bleeding out. I mainly added blood but also some stomach acids and feces for good measure. I was at first worried that the hobgoblins simply would not notice the odor thanks to more pressing matters, or they would get it mixed up with their own. Yet, the creatures turned towards me and about a quarter of them decided that I would make a better target.

The following chase was honestly pretty anti-climatic. The creatures were hardly able to keep up with my slow flight, and they had no real way to hurt me. Their range of weapons was limited to rocks and each other. The more dangerous part was probably just trying to avoid landing in such a

tight space, since that would give them the opportunity they needed to attack. I carefully glided between the floor and ceiling, occasionally forcing myself to get within attack range of my hunters. This allowed me to kill a few of them off with some swipes and stomps and made sure my pursuers were still invested in trying to slay me. This was not done without a price. My foes were able to get in a few stabs in and few were able to latch onto me like before. Thankfully, I was still able to vanquish the murderous grabbers and I managed to regenerate thanks to my spiritual nature.

It also seemed that my work was paying off rather well. The hobgoblins were not only distracted by me, but also getting into small fights because I was making them run into each other. The survivors were also gaining a tiny amount of momentum. They even began to dare shout cries of hope and encouragement. I also felt my hope rise with theirs.

The formation chugged on for about thirty minutes or so. The battle became a song of sorts: each blow was a pluck of a string, each foot fall a beat, and each order a lyric. This was a song that the soldiers either knew well, so they fought as one. The hobgoblins had might and aplenty but no rhythm, no organization, and so they were unable

to slay their exhausted foes. The hobgoblins had no song.

The push finally made its way to the gate. The only way, the bloodiest way out. The rain of marauders had now become a complete flood of death. They were all armed with weapons of one kind or another and all of them seemed to be hitting harder and faster now. The rhythm was forced to play faster. The soldiers tried their best to ignore the echoes, to ignore the red.

Oh the red, the men having their faces bit off, the soldiers having all of their fingers snapped and ripped off in unison, and the deformed ones making the humans beg for mercy or to 'sing them a nice song', before killing them anyways. It was a terrible thing, a mistake. The hobgoblins were things made of spite and knew nothing else.

I did my best to help in the climax. I tried to taunt, pounce, and goad, but these tactics seemed to be of no help. This was not my story, this was their story. It was Aleodin's story too. It was even Yargabel's and Harrow's. It was war, war is not defined by any one man. It was defined by culture, leadership, technology and magical advancements. Sure, there are figures heads of

these things, but they are still replaceable parts of that machine.

The trodden survivors dredged through the nightmare field. The sound of fleeing panic replaced the song. A few tried to bolt, but hobgoblins ran them down. *What was ahead of us?* I flew upward to see that the god's curse had manifested across the land. If the survivors were too fast we would surely descend into chaos and die. If they were too slow, the land would consume us whole. They needed to be flee, carefully, or they would all surly d-

"WE ARE GOING TO FREAKING RUSH IT OUT OF HERE!" Aleodin's voice boomed. That was an option.

The legion charged across the field, only adrenaline and words of strength from Aleodin fueled their march. The formation was a spear point as if it would be more aerodynamic. Then, front runners found themselves falling as the ground collapsed beneath them. Their screams first rang true only to be devoured by the enemy. Yet, only the tip was slain. So, that was Aleodin's reasoning.

Aleodin then used his thunderous voice to contact me, "I NEED YOU TO POUNCE ON THE GROUND AHEAD OF US EVERY NOW AND THEN TO MAKE SURE IT IS STABLE!"

I also fell from the sky due to how startled I was.

Okay, no need to be so loud.

I lightly landed in front of the troops. The dead and violated ground seemed to be firm. I then took a few bounds forward.

Crack! The ground gave out from under me just like it did before. I managed to leap off the shards and onto solid ground giving out a cat like hiss as I did. The soldiers couldn't help but snicker at my truly heroic efforts. I rolled my eyes, "What's so funny?"

The violent migration continued for an hour or so. The creatures rose less quickly than they had before, and we had once again adapted to the harsh conditions of travel. It was still a long and miserable time. Many were lost to exhaustion and dehydration. We checked to see if they were breathing. If they were, we might've carried them. If not, they were left to die. It was a terrible thing

for us to leave them behind, but we didn't have a choice.

The escape had finally reached its conclusion when we managed to reach the base of a mountain range. We looked back to see that the city and miles away for it had been consumed by a bubbling pool of black bio mass. It convulsed and bubbled with hobgoblins half made who were still looking for something to kill. For now, we were safe, but soon, the world would be in peril.

Aleodin ordered me to figure out if the other two thirds of the army had lived.

I did my duty. My flight was in a breezeless sky. The chamses had formed into a lake that was now beginning to slowly pump out a smog that seemed to be almost poisonous. I found the two remaining flanks had nearly been wiped from existence. One had only ten men left, the other had fewer than a thousand. I informed them of our current status and told them to head to the mountain range. I carried some lost souls there myself. Once they were dropped off, we all headed home.

...

“Well...The rest is history. The Renmay Empire soon collapsed while trying to fight a war of attrition against a foe that needed not rest. The empire split into many smaller nations. Most played out their tale and died, Renfur, Almen, and New Thaum have lasted through the ages.

The Wastes Lands became the Horde Lands due to the hoards of hobgoblins that roam them. It might have been the end of civilization on Kiffer if mountain rangers and dwarven engineers weren't able to erect a defense in time. Well, there's nothing left about this tale. Good night and good morning,” that is what he says, and then he dashes away into the cellar.

Chocie, “This concludes a fine and restless night of tales, for that I thank you!” the wizard gets up to continue his odyssey.

Lennic yet a mighty yawn, “I must admit tonight will ruin my body, but it helps my soul,” he returned to his room.

Harda, “Yeah tonight was great, I forgot that I was rich.” Harda made her way outside and got picked up by a carriage.

“This was a font of encourage in what will be a stressful time in my life.” Alphonse tipped his hat and then made his way out the door.

Finally, there was just you and Nactay. “Thanks, you.”

Wait, what does he mean by good morning? you say out loud. You then realize that the sun had managed to sneak up on your little party.

“Oh No!” You cry as you make preparations for today.

Epilogue

The Alchemist knew this was bad, really bad. The central command needed to know this.

“We should have killed the wizard when we had the chance!” he cursed under his breath, careful to avoid the guards' attention.

The world at large remained unaware that alchemists had survived all these years. The warnings from the few who knew were normally ignored or chalked up as rumors. Sometimes, if the person was of high standing or reputation, they would be given an option, join or die. Smart is always assimilated.

Of course the ONE time we relaxed the policy, the guy just decided to tell about us in a tavern. Worse, a sphinx heard the whole damn thing! The Gods know!

The heretic got onto his horse and rode to the nearest communication post a mile from the city gates. After a few dozen minutes of tense travel, he reached the cave. *If only I had a motor beast.* He dismounted from his horse and sent it into the caverns. The steed would come back to serve when needed.

He then traveled into the damp cave. He spent a few nervous seconds looking for the right cave wall and found it. The cave wall was just a little too smooth compared to the chaos of the caverns. He smiled. This thing has been here for a hundred years, yet now had ever found it. He then walked through the illusory wall into a dark cube of a room when a red light dot appeared on his forehead. Although he knew the laser sight of a weapon could open his head in a second, he was tranquil.

An unnaturally deep voice rang the chamber, "What is your name?" The alchemist answered with trivial concern, "Teacher."

Another question, "What is your duty?"

Another perfect answer, "To free and enlighten."

The final question, the one meant to be answered genuinely, "What's your favorite element on the periodic table?"

Kesper scoffed, "Despite being treated with such worth by most the unenlightened people, we are the only ones who can use for its practical purpose electricity, gold."

With the final answer the laser vanished. The door opened. A woman in a military robe leaned just outside the doorway.

"You know, I always liked your reason for your favorite element ...Teacher," Martha teased.

Kesper rolled his eyes as they walked back into the safe house together and closed the door so the light from inside would not ruin the hologram's delicate illusion that hides the entrance.

"Soo, how is the wizard?" Martha asked.

"He spilled," Kesper peeped.

"So, witnesses spit out stuff all the time...no one believes," Martha spoke with confidence that then faded into nervousness.

"A sphinx heard..."

Martha's breath had been stolen from her. Kesper was motionless too. They then sprinted, first just forward. Something needed to be done. Thinking justified running.

"We'll need to call the capital city!" Martha cried.

"Operation Omi Crawl, begins, whether it is ready to or not," Kesper told himself.

The Idols were either in their dusk or in their dawn of their reign.

...

The Idols sat upon their thrones, upon their worlds, Sollas's paradise of Sun Sail, Baymor's furnace of Tiamat, Ooglazo's aquarium of wrath and splendor Eversea, Sharvoc's Gambling den called Dancing Shadow, Ahmay's Endless Library, Lucia's Raving Glade of joyful lust, Silva's Mighty Forest, and the Repurposed Judgement halls of Normakath. They were the gods.

The rulers existed everywhere and nowhere. They were hands, which guided the world. They

were half-sentient, half-lucid, half-journeyed dreams and lies. They were us, yet well beyond us.

All was well. Prayers beget miracles. A storm was sent away from a noticeably kind and faithful city to an unfaithful one. A prayer for a corrupt king's demise is answered by famine finally bringing the king to his knees. The degenerates burn at stake in righteous justice.

A boy finds his way home thanks to a deer guiding him, and the boy discovers he prays more often. The sacrifice of a single slave finally brings fertility to the queen. The father's daughter is allowed to die in her sleep in holy kindness.

A gambler wins the lifesaving pot with a sudden stroke of dumb luck. A knight stumbles across his love after thinking she was poisoned years ago. The concoction is a gram off and ensures gunpowder will not be invented, in a turn of mystical fate. These are the little things the gods always did with even being fully aware of it. It was breathing. It was natural. It was how things were apparently meant to be.

Then the spark, the alchemists are still alive, they have been for many years.

The cinder ignites the fire. The gods had been fractionally aware of the truth. Their divided omniscience had only put a fraction of effort into destroying them. This was because the only prayers on them were small matters cut off with a gurgle.

These were not a faithless and mortal man's raving words, but the scripture of the sphinx, a creature of absolute truth and reason. This call gathers attention, a shout louder than a thousand mortals. This is the ember that lit the kindling, that conjured the flames, that started the inferno, and the second alchemist war.

A Cosmic Sun : An Astronomical, Spatial and Multidimensional Portrait of a Chinese Revolutionary (Sun Yat-Sen)

by MacArthur Gunther

1

Sublimely
Stirred by the magnificent zenith of the marvelous
Sunrise
Sagas of the Taiping Rebels dazzling and
Subversive aurora borealis display and in the
romantic
Spirit of legendary monster-slayers of

ancient epochs,
Sun Yat-sen was that providential chung
kuo "Morning
Star," a chosen heavenly
Son born on the twelfth day of the
Sterling eleventh month of the "Moon of Falling
Leaves"
Simultaneously the three hundredth and
Sixteenth day and the Forty Sixth Monday in the
Year of the
Siberian tiger in the
Sixty
Sixth year of the nineteenth century in
Synchronous timing with the
Steadfast celestial Leonid meteor
Showers from the eighteen hundred and
Sixty
Sixth Comet one.
Sun was the blessed
Son for the revolutionary
Second coming of a New Golden cultural age
Surpassing the glorious resurrection of the
Stunning Tang new morning to the
Swinging and foot
Stomping
Syncopation of "Down South Camp Meeting!"

2

Spatially and
 Surrealistically dreaming and
 Spacetraveling elliptically through the zodiac at
 Supersonic
 Speed from interstellar
 Space through time warps from the Fifth
 Dimension,
 Sun
 Surveyed the geopolitical landscape from the
 Stratosphere like a mystic
 Seer with telescopic divination equipped with
 Special geometrically
 Shaped kuomintang reflecting and refracting
 lenses in the
 Strategic Four directions and all
 Seminal cardinal points in between. He
 Startlingly witnessed the multidimensional
 cataclysms of
 Social firestorms, political earthquakes, economic
 Sand dunes, military tornadoes, imperial
 Stone
 Showers; Moral Fogs, ethical dust
 Storms, philosophical quicksands, alien principles
 and
 Spiritual maelstroms; monsoons of graft which

Stymied the people with
 Scarlet hearts, patriotic ghosts, religious mirages,
 Sporadic oases of courage;
 Skeptical prophecies, holy apparitions, dissociated
 States, punctured pride, immolated deeds,
 tortured
 Solace, flammable families, lacerated love;
 Slaughtered

3

Silhouetted
 Sects, anemic happiness, anxious Prophecies,
 nether
 Seances, bleeding minds, pilloried peace,
 psychological
 Sunpots, crucified
 Simpleness,
 Suicidal
 Spirits;
 Slim
 Secessions, radical visions, revolutionary
 daydreams;
 Sinister
 Sellouts, hijacked Hong Kong held hostage,
 Slit nobleness, neurotic dynasties, decapitated
 demonstrations,
 Strangled

Sermons, manic manifestos, rash reasoning,
 Strangely feverish delicacies, raped innocence,
 Scapegoated
 Scrolls, hysterical fortitude, delusory discipline;
 Shackled
 Sages, phobic duty, melancholic dialogues,
 Somnambulistic
 Scholars, mangled metaphysics, mythic
 nightmares;
 Skidding
 Shamefulness, tetrorized honesty, hallucinatory
 dignity,
 Selfish
 Scoundrels, pestilehced prudence, quartered
 merit,
 Sabotaged justice, ruptured rights, gorged
 goodness,
 Shanghaied freedom, foreign financial locusts,
 fragile
 Sleep patterns; and
 Screaming
 Souls in deep gorges and rift valleys and on high
 mountain
 Steppes and cliffs and innumerably lucid
 Saffron bodies
 Shaped like white lotus plants and

Straw - hued lakes with bloated and floating brains
 Shaped like yellowish red poppies and other
 bodies and brains
 Simulating tranced
 States with the bodies exhaling and inhaling in
 cycles of
 Seven out of body expeliences in opium
 Streams in an overall general, cultural
 Shock of gas and dust resembling the turbulent
 Solar remnant of a Crab Nebula or like the
 Supervening impact from the
 Serial bombardment of giant asteroids from the
 Senior Oort Asteroid Belt to the
 Solemn
 Syncopation of "Chimes Blues."

4

Sun's cum laude trust, magnum cum laude faith
 and
 Summa cum laude love as mediums
 Surged in a
 Sapphire heart
 Surrounded by a
 Shimmering chrome-yellow corona; and like a
 neutron
 Star pulsated electromagnetic wave messages of

Socialism as naturally nutritious as brown rice
Supported by nationalism as indigenous as the
Stately giant panda and Democracy as
Salutatory and bountiful as the yellow
Sea; and he promised to personally deliver those
 goods
Special delivery to the powerfully earthy and
Syncopated comet rhythm of "Oriental
Strut!"

5

Silky
Smooth with the phantom - like weaves of a
 dynamic
Shooting
Star,
Sun, by a
Split
Second,
Successfully dodged the colossal Qing Asteroid
Swung wildly and
Slyly from the outer limits of the
Stratosphere which originated from the
Space
Satellite
Station in the Union Jack

Solar
System during the "Moon of Changing
Seasons."
Sun presciently perceived it as a
Serene omen for his revolutionary coterie and
Service and Cosmic destiny like an entranced
Son endowed with a
Sophisticated
Sixth
Sense to the honey-combed comet .
Syncopation of the marvelously beautiful and
hypnotic "Sweet Like This."

6

Sun at the revolutionary age of thirty-nine when
Spun numerologically-mathematically according
 to the
Supreme laws of multiple factors equals the
Sum of three times thirteen or three thirteens and
 celestially
Seventy years after the mesmerically
Scenic visitation of the
Sequential eighteen hundred and thirty-five
 Halley's Comet, was
Superbly transformed into a thermonuclear
 photon of

Sunlight accelerated into the magnitude of a
 Supernova and then exploded like a
 Supernova during the relativity of a
 Sequestered Chinese Midnight of Time and
 Space periodically highlighted by the
 Supernal meteor,
 Showers of the Boxer Rebellion and the Full Moon.
 Sacrificial bodies and
 Souls of the May Thirtieth Movement and their
 Sudden astral projection plus the
 Sun flowered
 Shaped
 Solar flares of the May Fourth Movement when
 the
 Sonorous Golden Dragon was lotus - induced and
 nearly
 Swallowed whole into an Octopus - fashioned
 black hole!
 Smoldering from a
 Sinister white-hot Western draft and design. But
 Superenergy from
 Sun at perihelion vaporized and
 Squelched the Anglo
 Saxon concrete highways of the
 Scrofulous foreign taskmasters whose pallid
 gamma
 Space rays alternated between being cooler than

the
 Shadowed
 Side of the Earth's moon and colder than the polar
 ice cap
 Scenes of Pluto to the polyphonic
 Syncopation of
 "Smokehouse Blues."

7

Sun's
 Spacious-vision, as a counterpoint to the Egyptian
 Sun Ra, pointed Magnetically from a
 Singular compass for a
 Sensory independence and ecual international
 Sovereignty for eons on phosphoric
 Sienna blueprint on
 Sino paper as genuine and as beautiful as fine
 yellow
 Silk during the
 Superfine nineteen hundred and twelve morning
 Successfully following the
 Spectral trail in the twilight zone of the
 Sizzling visitation of the nineteen hundred and ten
 Stupendous Halley's Comet in the robustly
 rhapsodic and
 Sacred powers of the number
 Seven exponentially to the boldly

Swinging

Syncopated tenor

Saxophone of "Body and Soul".

8

Sun altruistically and

Splendidly

Shoved aside any

Self

Serving

Silk robes of wealth and

Social

Status and

Spectacularly engineered a Big Bang from a
dialectical

Sun of liberation and life which totally eclipsed the

Shining Confucian model

Star.

Sun's

Sustaining

Solar winds were more centrifugally forceful than

Smoky tons of gunpowder and more

Steadfastly

Spellbinding than the

Spectroscopic tomes of the Confucian nova and to

the

Sorcerous Syncopation of the

Soprano

Saxophone's "Blue Horizon".

9

Sun's timely and timeless

Sacrosanct

Salve was like miraculous acupuncture

Surgery performed with the dexterous

Skill of a master martial artist that revitalized

Salvation for a whole civilization from the

Soporiferous-infested Western butcherknife of a

Slicing and dissecting foreign matter which

Schoolingly

Stung like a

Slaver's rawhide whip and burned furiously like

Sulfuric acid from a

Smoky branding iron on the body and

Soul of the people from dawn time till noon time

till

Sunset time till midnight time

Similar in

Scope to the appearance of a perpetual total lunar
eclipse

Simulating motionlessness in a pitchblende Sky.

The pain of that foreign memory is still a haunting

Spectre, a

Smoldering one like a nightmarish - looking

Scar to the revelatory

Syncopation of "Blue Blood Blues."

10

Sun's legacy of

Superconscience,

Superconviction and

Supercourage which

commenced with his too

Soon passing during the

ⁱMoon of

Snowblindness on the twelfth day which was

Simultaneously the

Seventy - first day of the "Year of the Ox" of the

Sirenic - twentieth century is like a luminous

Satellite perpetually in orbit

Since

Sun traveled at the teleportational

Speed of light and arrived with the

Superlatively mathematical rhythm of the

Summer

Solstice, and in the

Spontaneous - combustible

Spirit of Jeanne D'Arc who was the prophetic

Savior of France, and Ho Chi Minh who was the

revolutionary .

Savior of Vietnam, and Tsali who was the martyred

Savior of the Cherokee Nation, and

Popé, the mystic .

Savior of the Pueblo Nation, and Hemie

B. Lowrie, the firepowered

Savior of the Lumbee Nation, and

Osceola, the revered

Savior of the Seminole Nation; and Louis Riel, the

messianic

Savior of the Métis Nation,

Sun's

Sweeping

Saga will orbit for light years and will be more

Splendid than an ascent to the

Summit of the Changbai Mountains and

Staking them with gems more valuable than Pa

Sapa's gold, more precious than the

South African diamond, more .

Sparkling than the Comstock

Silver and as ageless as the

Seraphic Egyptian pyramids and more majestically

Strategic than the immensely

Studied length, width and height of the Great

Wall, one of the

Seven Wonders of the world to the

Surrealistic

Syncopation of the exuberant

"Sweethearts on Parade."

Welcome Home

by Jean-Paul Garnier

Sara spat, hitting her target on the battle scarred perspex. "What you're doing is evil!" she shouted while waving a placard with the same sentiment.

The soldiers marched on, their parade anything but triumphant. The one she'd hit didn't bat an eye, didn't even glance her way. His gaze looked past the crowd, billions of miles away, devoid of recognizable emotion.

"Shame on you. Life is precious, all life, even alien life." She kept screaming even though there was no response. Many others in the crowd shouted insults as well, but most gave her dirty looks when they realized what she was saying. Letting the placard fall to the ground she stomped her was out of the throng. This approach was getting nowhere.

She locked eyes with several of those in the crowd and gave the signal. Plan B. They would

reconvene in the nearby building staked out before the parade.

...

"We'll have to move quickly. We should have known that peaceful protest wouldn't get anyone's meaningful attention. Everybody, move. We don't have long to pull this off."

Heads nodded all around the group. They looked scared. How could they not? Each and every one of them had sworn to go through with it, but none had truly engaged in violence before. Each moved in their separate directions, a choreography of dissent. Sara patted each on the back as they left. "You got this. You know what to do."

...

The troops all convened in the square. Silent and austere they didn't respond to the flowers being thrown or the cries of thanks from the people gathered. They didn't even speak amongst themselves. This parade was merely a morale booster for the folks they had been protecting, another duty for the tired veterans.

Sara scanned the soldiers with binoculars from the roof of a nearby building. She sensed coldness permeating through the men and women in uniform. *Murderers*, she thought. It would only be

minutes now and the gathered crowd would get a taste of what had really been happening so far from home.

...

In the middle of the group the soldier wiped his faceplate while shaking his head. As if he hadn't been through enough already, seen every abomination possible, human and otherwise. Now the people he had risked his life to protect were filled with the same hatred as the enemy.

A battle-sister slapped him on the back. "Shake it off, buddy. These people don't know shit."

He nodded slowly. He understood the anger but had been through enough already. More than anyone should have to go through. All of them had.

...

Below the street Sara's ramshackle gang set the timer on the explosives. If they had set everything up right the blast should blow the manhole and cut right through the gathered soldiers. *Bring the war home.* That was the idea, anyway.

"I hope we're doing the right thing. I mean, those are people too."

"They're monsters and you know it. It's too late to back out now. Let's go."

They retreated through the tunnels, hoping to get a safe distance before the action started.

Sara spoke into her walkie, "Are we all set. They'll be moving again soon. Two minutes max."

A moment later the reply came from within the tunnels, "Timer set and counting. Right on schedule."

...

Flowers and confetti still rained down on the soldiers.

"Thank God there's no fireworks."

"I think they warned the people ahead of time. I mean, about the fireworks. I'm sure they don't understand why."

"Still, this trash flying through the air is giving me the jitters. Too close to..."

A blast from the brass band cut off the conversation, and several of the soldiers ducked in conditioned fear. They had been ordered to stand

tall, but the crowd and the music was too much. Hectic like the battlefield.

Sara watched the commotion, focusing in on the soldier whose faceplate she had soiled. The name patch above the pocket came into view. Private Peters. Panning up to his face she could see the tears streaming down his cheeks.

Oh God, what are we doing? She reached for the walkie again and screamed into it, "Stop! Call off the attack. We can't do this to..."

Her shouting was drowned out, a crack broke through the sky, and another from below. Severed limbs and helmets spattered through the air above the crowds. Screams accompanied the chaos.

People ran in all directions, those who could still run. The carnage was thick. But the screeching from above didn't stop.

Sara looked down at the wreckage of what had once been the troops. Guilt shattered her soul. And the firing continued. Blue streaks came from above and tore through the remaining crowd. Vehicles and bodies came apart.

Looking up she understood why the sounds of bombs had not stopped. The alien enemy was here.

The Hissing Sink

by Karin Sundqvist

"But mum!" Rachels cheeks were red and hot, and she was sweating from her palms.

"No buts, Ray. It's your turn to take care of the washing up. You know full well what we agreed on."

"Uuurgh." Rachel pulled her green hair and sighed, exasperated and defeated. On the table in front of her sat a number of dirty plates and half-empty glasses. But that wasn't what annoyed her the most. Neither was it the large pot still on the stove, with its hard crust of macaroni bows on the bottom. Rachel had discovered something living in the sink. An unpleasant, cranky fire spirit.

"Stop behaving like a child, Ray," her dad said, looking at her across the table. "You know very well that we all help out doing chores. Tomorrow,

it'll be Ninny's turn."

Well, it should be her turn today, Rachel thought. Not only because it really was Ninny's turn, but also because it was her new boyfriend who had let the fire spirit into the house in the first place. Rachel was sure of it. But how did you tell your parents something like that without getting locked up in the looney bin?

"I think the Prince of Egypt should do the dishes," Rachel said.

"Rachel!" Her mom looked equally shocked and mad. "You will say sorry to Rashid right this minute!"

Rachel stared down at the table and mumbled a nearly inaudible "Sorry."

"Absolutely no problem." Rashid's white smile seemed to make everyone blind. Everyone except Rachel. They were all charmed into a trance by his smooth voice, his chiseled face, the immaculate sports jacket with shiny buttons that he always wore. Rachel suspected that he polished the buttons every night. And she was the only one who saw his flaming, red eyes, and the little puffs of smoke emanating from his breast pocket.

"You are such a loser brat," her sister said. Her big sister Ninny was the blindest of them all. When she wasn't cooking her terrible dinners, or chewed like a maniac on her strawberry-flavored gum, she just wouldn't shut up about how wonderful Rashid was. "Rashid gave me a ride to Uni today." "Rashid gave me this gold locket last night." "Doesn't Rashid look stunning in this jacket, mum?"

"Idiot," Rachel murmured under her breath, aimed at her sister.

"That's enough from both of you. End of discussion. Ray, you will take care of the washing up, and that's that." Her dad actually finished the sentence by putting a dot in the air with his finger. And then he used the same finger to push his glasses further up the nose.

The situation was getting unbearable. Rachel could definitely not do the dishes with that thing lurking about the sink. This morning, when she had gone to mix her orange juice concentrate with cold water, she got boiling hot water in her glass instead, and dropped it. It shattered, and the little pieces of glass melted into black dots all over the smooth steel.

A moment later, the spirit had reared its head through the sink outflow, glaring at her.

“What do you think you are doing, sssilly girl?” A long, flaming tongue poked out between its sharp teeth, and smaller flames were dancing from his red and yellow nostrils.

Rachel felt her face getting hot.

“Wh-wh-what are you?” she stammered.

The creature slithered up through the hole, the scales on its body rasping and scraping against the stainless steel. It hissed angrily.

“What *am* I?” There was a loud snort, and the flames touched the dishcloth hanging over the tap. Rachel stared round-eyed from the cloth to the spirit and back to the cloth again. The fire went out as if it had melted away, and a thin string of smoke rose slowly towards the ceiling.

“Yes, what are you?”

“A sssalamander, of coursse.” Its tongue flickered like a snake’s, and Rachel stared at it. Her confusion must have been obvious, because the spirit snorted again. “A fire ssspirit, dumb girl.”

“Okay. And what are you doing here?”

The salamander had come all the way up through the hole and was now wagging back and forth on its feet. The wriggling tail left sooty smudges on the bottom of the sink, and the fiery eyes looked right at her, right through her. Without even noticing, she started swaying from side to side, mimicking the body of the spirit. In the next moment the front door in the hallway slammed shut and the salamander was gone.

“Do you want the funny pages?” her mom asked and put the newspaper down on the kitchen table. Rachel just stood there, unable to speak and looked from the sink to her mother, and back again.

“Are you alright?” Her mom got a worried look on her face.

“Uhm, yes, sure.” Rachel moved her hand carefully towards the stainless steel. It was cool, the way it usually was, but a thin sliver of smoke rose in a spiral from the outflow, and she knew she hadn’t made it all up.

Now Rashid’s burning eyes looked at her across

the dinner table. Somewhere just behind her nasal bone there was a crack, and Rachel realized he was trying to hypnotize her. With all the will-power she could muster she resisted him. Tiny beads of sweat formed at the hairline, but before they could escape and run down her face, the spell was broken by her father.

“Okay, the rest of us will go to the lounge and watch TV, while you take care of the washing up, Ray.” Her dad’s voice may have sounded neutral, but only if you didn’t know him very well. Those who shared a house with him knew that his tone meant that the subject matter was resolved and would not be discussed any further.

Everyone except Rachel got up and left the kitchen. She threw a sideward glance toward the sink. Dirty plates, disgusting saucepans, and a light hissing. The salamander must have heard that she was the only one in the room. Its glowing scales scraped against a plate, and a glass fell over in the wash basin.

Rachel got up from her chair and crossed the kitchen in a determined stride. The salamander stood with its four legs spread out, pressed against the steel walls, and a disgusted look on its face.

“What is thisss? It stinksss.”

“What do you mean?”

The salamander lifted a burning claw and pointed at the left-over food and the thin stream of milk running from the knocked-over glass. Rachel frowned. “Dirty dishes.”

“Heeeeeech.” The flaming lizard sputtered and retched, retched and sputtered, and slowly made its way up the sink wall.

Rachel just stood there, frozen in place, until an idea formed in her mind.

“Look here,” she said, pointing at the left part of the sink, while reaching for the pasta pot with her right hand. The salamander followed her index finger toward where she was pointing.

“Old stew, porridge, and fish.”

The sight of the scraped-off leftovers made the salamander convulse in horror. Its long flaming tongue shot out and the salamander knocked over two more glasses with its tail.

“Naughty, discusssting human. Filthy girl.”

Rachel tried catching the fire spirit with the dirty pot, but it wasn't easy. It contorted and made impossible slithering movements to avoid her, and if the situation had been different she would probably have laughed at the gymnastics.

The salamander's nostrils were smoldering, and the flames from its tail got caught in one of the oven mitts. It hissed something that Rachel couldn't comprehend. The cutting, screeching sound made the glasses rattle, and all of a sudden Rashid stood in the doorway. His red eyes were still shining, but the rest of his body looked strangely relaxed, almost disinterested.

In a glowing streak the spirit flew through the air and disappeared down Rashid's coat pocket.

"Find sssomeone with a fireplace next time," was all she heard from inside the garment.

A second later, they were both gone.

Hellbender

By Guy Lillian

Call him Quul. It was not the name by which his clan would know him; they had no language of sound or symbol. His distinction, as for all his kind,

came from the unique mix of pheromones his body produced: his male sex, his tribe, his young age, his virility – for he would soon mate – and finally, his self. Any spoken or written name would do, so ... Quul.

He swam with easy but powerful motions of his forefins, cupping river water in three-fingered hands graced with an opposable thumb and webs between the digits. His legs kicked, but the substantial speed of his passage through the dark river was mostly the steady flux of his tail, which extended back fully the length of his body. It whipped back and forth and repeated the motion again and again as he made his way along the muck of the river bottom, fish fleeing before him. He saw them clearly an arms-length ahead, but no closer, farsighted while underwater. On land, Quul and his kind could see keenly up close, in the night.

In the deep channel of the river's center, Quul paused, his tail curling beneath him, holding him in place against the current. Sound travels well underwater, and though he had no ears such as land animals do, sonic waves touch and excite the scales of his skin, the skin which, loosening, has provoked this journey. Ahead and above there was motion, and sound, both betokening the presence

of Men. To discover their direction, Quul hovered, only his tail in motion, and waited. Soon the disturbance of the river told him the men approached from upstream, within a shell. Turning his face upwards towards the boat, he let himself sink further into the dark.

Quul had encountered men before, while feeding and training with his sire on this very river, and in the vast Homewater into which this river ran. He had learned from his sire – call him Dahl, for the same reason as his offspring we call Quul – that if men pass above in their shell of wood, suspended between the world and the air, and do not tarry, all is well. It was when the shell paused, and the Net fell, trapping all life within it ... Once, Quul had been told, the Net had seized and taken a member of Quul's clan. The great Fear had followed, when men and their shells had churned the river and the Homewater deeps for much in the way of time. The clan had been forced to remain in the silt at the bottom of the Homewater, hiding, waiting, watching and sensing for the men to leave their shells of metal and wood, afloat on the surface, and come down into the dark in their smooth diving skins, bubbling air. But the tribe was well hidden at the bottom, and after a passage of time the frenzy of the men had calmed, and the

clan could again swim, hunt, forage, explore, *live* – with care, however, always with care.

Quul saw the shell approach from upriver, heading to the Homewater he had just departed. The vibrations of the hull turned the surface to froth ahead and behind. The shell did not pause, and Quul knew relief. As long as the shell disturbed the river with its motion, the men would not stop. He watched the shell pass overhead. With a flex of his tail and a stroke of his arms, he continued upstream.

He was entering a part of the river crowded by men, and normally he would have kept swimming until he was well past the pilings men had planted by the shoreline to moor their shells and the lines and hated nets strung into the river to catch prey. But soon, he found, he would need to surface, need to find the solidity of land. He had grown too large within his skin; he was beginning to molt. It was a normal thing for all tribe members at the turning of the hot season. His skin had already begun to split down the middle of his face, along the dorsal fin down his back, along his tail finally to be flicked away, recovered, and eaten – a process that took much of a day. During that time Quul could not swim, could not force water through the gills at his throat – so he had to seek

land on which to shed his skin, land on which his lungs would fill, take over, and breathe. Upriver, just past the place of men, in the thick foliage of the jungle – there he would be safe. He swam on.

There was a place on the river Quul had been before, with Dahl, a low slope where he could enter the world of air. It was not without its dangers: the crocodiles used it, too, to move from the river to the land. As rivals for the prey in the water, they were enemies with Quul's kind, and each, Dahl had told him, made prey of the other. From the jungle huge cats came with fang and claw, fury and hunger, tearing at gills and impervious to the relatively tiny claws Quul's people bore at their fingertips. And then there were the tiny hive creatures from the earth which came forth to finish off the spoils of the predators and leave only his people's soft bones. On land, Quul would be weaker than the smallest fish – so his aim was to find a thick bracken, hide in its depths, dispose of and feed on his old skin, then return to the river.

Here it was – the slope of small, broken rocks leading up and out of the river. Quul could not crawl on the sharp, smashed stones; his kind was made to crawl through soft, cool mud. But he had limbs to walk as well. He came to the rocks,

planted his lower extremities on the stones, curled his tail behind him, and unsteadily, ascended.

Walking was difficult, even with his tail providing balance and stability. The body which slid so easily through the river's flow became a thing of awkward weight and bulk. Quul's legs were strong from swimming, but unused to the rhythm of walking. One step upwards, two – his head broke the surface. Impulsively, instinctively he gasped. His lungs shuddered forth a glut of fluid. He felt an urge as strong as life to turn and plunge again into the familiarity of the murk.

No – he had to go on. His eyes registered shapes before him – the flat path of the gravel slope, extending into the blur of the distance, the rising jungle on the road's either side. Quul plodded on, his entire body free of the river now. The new smells of the jungle thrilled his senses, but fear drove him to hurry. He knew the alien sensation of frustration. He tread heavily. His tail seemed to drag him back – a weight only, a useless impediment. And the stones gouged through the scales of his feet.

At last he was away from the river, where the limbs of the jungle hung low and close. He stretched his body and felt his old skin loosen once

more. Already it was peeling from his face. He sought cover, and found low bushes growing a few body-lengths from the roadside. He stepped through the high grass to blessed mud. Quul coiled his tail beneath him and reclined into cool shadow.

It took the night to shed his skin, to struggle it off his head, down from his shoulders, past his arms. Quul had molted three times before, but each time his dam or Dahl had assisted. Shedding was not only a long process, but tiring. When finally the old skin flew free of Quul's flicking tail, daybreak was nigh, and instinct told him to immerse his new skin at once. But the effort had sapped him. He could barely move his extremities, and his tail, not at all. He would sleep, he decided. A moment to rebuild his strength. No more than that.

A sharpness touched his flank. The nictating membrane stretched vertically across Quul's eyeball sprang open, and his other senses came alive. He could not hear the words of the old man quavering above him, but he smelt his astonishment and rank terror.

"What is it, grandfather?" the small man, a male child, said by the old man's side.

The old man coughed and again poked Quul on the hip. "A snake, I think. A big snake. Python! But ..."

Quul raised his head. The sun was noon-high, above the head and the broad covering the white thatch above the old man's roughened face. Quul had seen men before, safely concealed in the jungle with Dahl, but never this closely. And never one who had seen him. The small man screeched and hid behind the grandfather's legs. "It has a face! It has a *face*!"

The old man fell back a step and raised his stick as if to parry an attack. He gasped.

"A snake like a man!" the old man exclaimed. "Run – get the others!"

The boy lit out down the gravel road. Sore from sleep, Quul used his tail and legs to rise. The old man brought his stick down upon his shoulders.

"Damned thing!" he shouted. "Be still!"

The blow did no more than register in Quul's mind. Dizzily he rose to his full height, a third again the size of the old man. "Devil!" screamed the old man. "Monster! Demon!"

Again he slammed his stick onto Quul's shoulder. Though he barely felt it, he smelled the sting of the man's fear and knew it meant menace. Quul hissed loudly and swung a clawed hand at the stick. The old man shrieked again as Quul ripped the stick from his hands.

"Monster! Murder! Help!" he howled, and followed the boy down the road in a leaping run.

Quul watched the man flee in a heat of annoyance and fear. First among the common rules of his tribe was to avoid men, and now through his clumsiness he had let himself be seen by two. Surely more would come. Heavily, he made for the gravel road; only the river meant safety now. He had barely set foot on the rugged stone when the men came upon him.

Quul's eyesight was not as acute during day as it would be at night, but the shapes charging up the road were unmistakably men, and three in number. Taller and younger than the old one, two flanked the boy from before, and when they faced Quul upon the road, they froze. Their terror flushed the air.

"Aii!" one shrieked. "It is so! Look at him!" The other shouted the name of a deity. Quul flexed.

His tail-tip rose to his shoulder. His claws grew and the mucous covering his body became more viscous and potent. He hissed warning.

In a moment more men appeared. In their unwebbed hands they bore sticks with fearsome points, and one, Quul saw with terror, bore a hated net. He raised his arms and spread his claws, bared his teeth and hissed again. He flung his tail towards the man with the net, grabbing at the hated thing with its prehensile tip. The man sprawled onto his back, still grasping the net. They pulled at the awful weapon, Shaken to action, the others attacked, striking Quul, tail and body, with what he knew as sticks – rakes, hoes, the blunt end of an axe. Quul swung wildly with his arms, catching one across the face and leaving a smear of mucous. The man dropped his rake and lurched away, shrieking around the acid secreted by Quul's skin. Quul caught another man's arm and twisted, feeling the hard bone within snap.

Quul pulled fiercely with his tail. The man with the net flew towards him, yanked from his feet, and was batted away with a swing of Quul's arm. Quul flexed his tail again, sweeping the road before him. He sent flying the small man he had seen before. But the man with the axe was untouched. He rushed in close. The sharp edge of

the axe head came down on Quul's tail. No flesh could have withstood its force. Quul felt pain – the most vicious he had ever endured. His hiss of agony caused the men standing to fall back in fresh terror.

He lurched forward, glared back – and found his tail, parted from his body, writhing on the gravel like a wounded eel. Horror sent him flailing away, careening into men too slow to stop him. He found the slope to the river and fell forward into its embrace.

His pain was excruciating, but he knew that it would end. Others of his tribe had lost their tails, to predator fish or battles over a female. But he had never swum without the motion of his tail. Quul had to depend on the sweep of his arms, the force of his legs, and the flow of the current. Lingered in the depths of the river, he half drifted, half swam downstream, towards the freedom of the Homewater. There he knew he could staunch the flow of blood from the stump of his extremity, rest, heal. Rest ... yes, rest ... heal ... he let himself be carried along by the river's flow.

Suddenly, he was stopped. A cursed net had been stretched across the river. He was caught in it.

Quul tore at the entwined ropes, but could do nothing. Arms, legs were twisted within the lines, held tighter and tighter by his own struggles. The roar of rage and frustration within him emerged as an explosion of bubbles. Immediately he felt pulled, lifted, the net being wrapped about him – and once again, his head broke above the water. Men in their boats flanked him – pulling him upwards – and towards the shore. Screaming, their excitement and hatred vivid in the air, the men brought Quul onto the land. One struck him on the head with a stone and he fell into a darkness deeper than the sea.

Consciousness returned, Quul could not move; he was triply bound. About his wrists and ankles chains were wound and locked. His entire body was trapped in the hated net, and all – Quul, chains, net – was locked within one of the large cages men suspended in the river to catch fish. Quul coiled his tail and stood, sensing motion from the men, large and small, male and female, clustered about the cage. Past their gawking faces Quul saw that the cage stood at the end of a pier leading out onto the river. Close by he sensed the expanse of the Homewater.

Some of the small men pushed close to the slats of the cage, pushing sticks inside to poke him. Angered, fearful, he hissed and made a feeble lunge their way.

“Step back there!” A man clad in different skins came forward through the others, evidently their master. The small men shrank away from the cage. The man came close, staring, his pheromones flaring with astonishment. “My God,” he said. “Unbelievable.”

He rubbed his face. “You were right to send for me. He ... is he injured?”

“No,” another said. “Not bleeding and ...”

“Yes,” said the master. “He’s conscious.” His eyes found Quul’s and they stared at each other. “Red eyes ... yellow stripes ... just like ... yes, the 1980 monster. West coast of Sulawesi. Same species, must be.” The master stepped around the cage, keeping his eyes on Quul. “What did they call that thing? ‘Hellbender,’ like the giant salamander in Japan.” He wheeled about. “How – how long has he been out of the water? That first one died of dehydration. Get a hose! Some buckets! And get these children out of here!”

The small men were chased from the pier. Men brought up pails, lowered them into the river.

“Douse him well,” said the master, still gibbering with excitement. “Keep him wet!”

The men cast bucketfuls of water onto Quul. His scaly skin soaked it in, and he felt relief.

“Keep that up,” the master said. “We can’t ...” He pulled a device from his outer skins and held it to his face, pointed at his captive. It clicked and whirred and clicked. “This ... this is the biggest thing ... ‘Hellbender’ ... Yes, you did right to send for me. Your sturdiest boat – we’ll get him to Jakarta in the morning.”

The man turned to face Quul again, looking into his red eyes. “He must be intelligent. Keep him wet.” He hurried away. Two men only remained. They placed two full buckets near the cage. “No one comes close,” one said to the other. They ignited small sticks in their mouths and sat on the pier.

Quul turned to face the river, and slumped down onto his tail. The net was heavy, the chains tight and painful. Beyond the river was the Homewater, and beyond it was the dimming glow of the giver of heat, lowering towards its nightly

nest. The air cooled. As night darkened the pier, the men poured blessed water over Quul. He hungered, aware of the smell of fish alive in the river and dead on the land. Feelings unfamiliar to him came into his mind. His was a species of basic needs and awareness: hunger, the need to mate, the fear of predators, and foremost, the instinctual duty he had known since he was smaller than the smallest eel: to protect the clan and the tribe to which it belonged. Here was a new emotion, a subtle and terrible one: loneliness. He knew he would be taken away. He would always be separate from his kind. His people would be gone from him as he from them. He would no longer hunt with them, he would never mate, he would not protect.

The terrible newness of these concepts stung Quul. He gazed into the dark of night and yearned for the dark of home. He thought he sensed water-treading forms of his people, watching him from the river, but knew they could only be dreams.

At dawn the master returned. The others, on his command, gave Quul fish. The prey was dead, and spoiled, but Quul devoured it hungrily. The master watched him with excitement, but Quul would not meet his eyes. Soon a large boat, whose

hull Quul knew as a shell that floated on the Homewater, chugged to the dock. The men aboard came to Quul's cage and, with fear, lifted it and carried it onto the boat. "Lash that cage!" the master commanded. "Keep it steady! Keep him wet."

The men threw bucketfuls onto Quul. No more free swimming, he realized. Buckets now and forever for him. The boat heaved itself away from the dock.

The land fell behind. Quul had spent his life in the Homewater, but moving over its surface in a shell was a new and unpleasant sensation. Coupled with his ongoing fear and dismay, the pitch and yaw of the craft was dizzying. He welcomed the splash of water from the buckets, but the fish tossed his way made his insides lurch. The master kept clicking his device in Quul's direction. "Greatest thing since ... since ... King Tut!" he said to himself. "New species ... Unbeliev-" He didn't finish his word. The boat's vibration had ceased. Its rough forward lurch gave way to the surface's gentle roll.

The master turned and Quul looked up. The man gasped and came to his feet in quick fright. Dahl stood by the wheelhouse on the prow.

Quul's sire was taller than Quul by half a head, a full two heads taller than the man. His shoulders were wider; his extended claws longer and barbed. His tail curled, but otherwise he was still, staring at the man and cage in the stern of the fishing boat. Grasped in the coils of Dahl's prehensile tail, a crewman struggled weakly as it tightened about his trunk, shoulders, throat. There was a crack, and Dahl whipped the limp man into the sea. With a small cry, the master spotted the second crewman broken and twisted at Dahl's feet.

Abruptly, another of Quul's tribe appeared at the gunwale of the vessel. Quul, already astonished, grew more so – it was Freyl, Dahl's grandsire, elder of the tribe. His age told in his slow and cautious clamber onto the boat deck and the slump of his back, but when he too stood and stared at Choate in his cage, so did his strength. Like Dahl's, his red eyes flared.

The master fell back, behind the cage. His fear before was insignificant compared to the stink of terror he now exuded. He babbled, "I ... I guess .. you want ... him back. Here ... here ..." He pulled keys from his outer skins and rattled them against the cage. It swung open. He opened Quul's chains and as they fell away, he stepped back as Quul

struggled free of the accursed net, and stumbled free of the cage.

"There!" the master trembled. "Free, see? Not hurt at all! Not ... not at –"

The master was within reach. Quul swept his arm onto his face and he flew back, overboard. Quul faced his elders. When their kind spoke, it was in no way that men could sense, but by pheromones and smell and thought. As we give them names, we convey their speech as words.

Father. Great elder. I am shamed.

You were foolish. How were you seen?

Asleep, after a molt. I was hidden. I thought I was safe.

One is never safe where there are men, Freyl, the old one, said. You were seen. You were known. It is as when I was young and Tryl was caught in their cursed net.

The great Fear. Quul cringed.

The men came then, in their crafts. They invaded and despoiled the Homewater. They threatened

the nest. Now they will come again.

I am shamed, Quul repeated.

*Protect the tribe, Dahl said with authority. We shall send this shell deep into the silt. The men who saw you – you know what you must do. **You** must protect the tribe.*

Yes, said Freyl. The nest of men. Remove your shame. Protect the tribe.

Protect the tribe. Quul said it to himself. Return to the men's nest. Be the terror men think you to be. Cleanse the nest. Erase the knowledge. Return whole to the deep. Mate. Continue your kind.

He launched into the Homewater.

(continued from page 2)

As many of you know, Sun Yat-Sen was the godfather of science fiction legend Cordwainer Smith. Smith's father was a legal advisor to Chiang Kai-Shek, Sun's successor as the leader of the Republic of China, and Sun apparently did have contact with Smith as a child and young man, so the 'godfather' appellation was more than a formality. Of course, Cordwainer Smith in his non-fannish identity was a military and intelligence advisor to the US government on China affairs.

This poem is a bit of a heavy lift if you're not used to reading long-form poetry, but it is worth it.

Another author who was gracious enough to share work already published is Jean-Paul Garnier, who contributed *Welcome Home*. It previously appeared in the *Cardboard Spaceship* anthology in 2024. It's a handy reminder that we don't need to venture into deep space to find monsters. Sometimes they come to us, and sometimes they are us.

From Sweden we have *The Hissing Sink* by Karin Sunqvist. The modern world it seems is not a welcoming place for elemental spirits, although perhaps they could be leveraged to bring down our utility bills.

Who really are the monsters in this world? *Hellbender* by Guy Lillian forces us to consider this problem. It is all too common a human trait to fear what we do not understand, and hate what we fear. Perhaps this is a trait among all sentient species.

Anyway, I hope you enjoy this month's content, both here and on the YouTube channel. The November issue is already looking good with two submissions I've received just this week. If you have something you'd like to see either here or on the channel, reach out at the contact information on Page 2.

Until then, happy reading!



Jade Dragon by Angela K. Scott