



SID'S REAL LIFE

BY TOBIE ABAD

AN EXALTED ROMANTIC COMEDY NOVEL

BOOK ONE: INK







SID'S REAL LIFE
BOOK ONE: **INK**



TOBIE ABAD

FOR ROCKY ,
MY LOVE AND MY LIFE.



HEPTAGRAM

**IMPERIAL
MOUNTAIN**

**HOUSE
OF BELLS**





AUSPICIOUS BEGINNINGS

While it was common knowledge, if knowledge could ever truly be common among the Sidereals, for a vizier to live an auspicious life even before their Exaltation, the fact of the matter was this... Hoyd'nis Sid lived a colorful and unpredictable life. So indeterminate was her life that even the Five Maidens themselves were confounded by the threads of her Fate. Sid was quite young compared to most Sidereals, who were old and wizened and typically grumpy old men. She was only fifteen years old. And fifteen-year olds had a very different perspective on what was important. While most Sidereals were preoccupied by the factional infighting born from the arguments regarding the Great Prophecy, fifteen-year old Sid was too busy wondering if there was any chance in all of Creation for her to catch the smoldering gaze of the young dynast lieutenant, Cathak R'sel.

The Sidereal were once known as guardians of destiny in a world where Lawgivers watched over the land. For a time, there was beauty and glorious majesty all over Creation. Cities thrived under the auspice of leaders with unsurpassed skills. Nations flourished from their guidance and charismatic rule. But a darkness eventually came upon the world and its tendrils infected these Kings, twisting them into terrible, vicious versions of themselves.



During this long-forgotten age, called the First Age, the Sidereal were forced to ally themselves with the Dragon-blooded. From this alliance, actions were taken on a final bid to ensure the survival of the entirety of creation. A jade prison was created to trap the essences and a plan of murder was enacted.

It was not the first of many dark choices the world was to make. From attempting to survive the Great Contagion to dealing with the countless legions of the Fair Folk, the Sidereal are forever cursed with the power of foresight and the memory of the terrible choices they knew were needed to spare Creation. It was a burden that many of the Sidereals continue to carry forever in their immortal years.

This, however, was not the case for Hoyd'nis Sid. With her cheerful smile and her bright alexandrite eyes, Sid awoke on the morning of her fifteenth birthday with a strange sensation that something in her life had irrevocably changed. She had always had a colorful life. Though not among those chosen by the Dragons, Sid long suspected it had to do with her tendency to be quite clumsy and her inability to grasp rhythm nor rhyme. When she was fourteen, her mother, Hoyd'nis Mera, tried to teach her how to dance the Holonari. It was a traditional solitary dance which served as a typical offering to the Wood Dragon intended to invoke its blessings during the planting season. Two hours and one broken phalanx later, Mera conceded defeat and after asking her daughter to help her onto a rickshaw by Dragon's Spire, made her daughter promise to never attempt the dance again. It was a painful moment for Sid, who truly wanted to learn how to move the way the bamboo dances with the wind. But seeing all the broken porcelain scattered on the floor surrounding her mother as she nursed her broken toe, Sid sighed ruefully as she crossed her fingers



behind her back and made the promise. That feeling of regret and failure, however, seemed tremendously distant this morning of her fifteenth birthday as she rose from her bed to the sound of a tolling bell.

Kicking off from the sheets, Sid grabbed her robe and slid her wooden sandals on as she hurried down the stairs to answer the door. She heard her mother call out from the kitchen, asking Sid to answer it to which Sid cheerfully replied she was already about to do so.

The door swiveled open without a sound and framed by the dazzling warm glow of sunlight was Cathak R'sel himself, appearing quite the handsome young specimen of a man in his jade armor. The crimson alloy was sharp and jagged, giving the illusion of frozen fire wrapped around the young man's broad shoulders. Thin chainmail curtains hung from the alloy, offering protection to his midsection and providing him adequate flexibility and ease of movement. It was, by no means, a full suit of the magical material, but it definitely identified R'sel as a dynast who had received the blessings of the Fire Dragon.

"Good morning and pleasant greetings to you, Hoyd'nis Sid," R'sel smiled as he spoke. His left hand held a small copper scroll tube. A verdant twenty-two-inch tassel of horsehair hung from its upper end. Sid, however, failed to notice it. Her eyes were focused on R'sel's blue eyes. She gave out a nervous giggle.

"Sid?" R'sel softly repeat, hoping to nudge her out of her seemingly paralyzed state. A hand opened the door wider and R'sel saw Hoyd'nis Mera walking into view with an apron around her waist. Now while R'sel was completely oblivious to the oblivious state of being Sid was currently in, it was not oblivious to Mera whom had learned to recognize those moments of mental



incapacitation that her daughter would find herself when face to face with someone she liked. Or feared. And while there was no doubt in Mera's mind that Sid's current catatonia was caused by the Cathak currently there, there was some doubt as to whether her daughter would break out of the brief borked brain state on her own. And so, like any well-meaning perceptive mother would have, Mera padded away the flour dusting her cheeks and arms, planted her hands onto Sid's shoulders, and slid her gibbering daughter back behind the door.

"Go watch the bread. I'll handle this," Mera declared aloud to her blushing daughter, who thankfully was now out of sight and finally free from her freaked out moment. Sid facepalmed herself for acting that way. Her mother continued calling out from the outside, "Pleasant greetings from the Dragons to you as well, Cathak R'sel. I see you have received the blessings of the Hesiesh."

"You are too kind," R'sel gave a small bow, knowing to still respect his elders, "The Immaculate Dragons can be generous."

"You are too humble," Mera countered, "More so given Hesiesh is one to value reason over compassion. Surely, you earned your Exaltation. How long has it been, now?"

"Nearly a year now. Just a few months," R'sel admitted. From the side, peeking through the gap between the door and its frame, Sid saw R'sel blush. R'sel instinctively raised a hand to wipe his brow, but that merely had the tassel smack onto his face with an audible slap. Sid cupped her hands over her mouth to silence a giggle.



If Mera found it funny, however, she did not show it. Mera knew the pride of the Chosen can sometimes be sensitive, more so a newly Exalted member of the Fire Caste. Their emotions were calm most of the time, but explosive and destructive if fanned into a flame.

“The scroll?” Mera asked.

“Yes!” R’sel extended both arms towards Mera, the scroll case held between his hands. “A message from Dominie Cathak Anio. I had been tasked to personally deliver the message to your family, lady Mera.”

“Just Mera,” she said as she took the scroll case and thumbed it open. The copper tube seemed to resist her attempts. With a calm and smooth motion, Mera slid the tube behind her into Sid’s waiting hands. With her other hand, Mera reached for R’sel’s shoulder and walked up to his side. She gently led him to turn away from the door and face the street, “A personal delivery? Surely the Dominie is being far too generous. What could our family have done to deserve such... prestige?” She continued to lead R’sel away from the door, giving her daughter time, she assumed, to get dressed.

Behind the door, however, Sid was not getting dressed. Instead, she continued to try prying the tube open, but it resisted her attempts as well. With her tongue poking out between her lips, she crouched down and planted the tube between her bare knees. Her hands then struggled to nudge the tube open to no avail. It was almost as if the tube itself expected the young lass to prove she deserved to read its contents.

Outside, Mera and R’sel reached the main street, which was named Dragon Spine given the way the homes looked like the ridges of a great dragon’s tail. Morning



was bright, and people of all sorts navigated down the brick roads eager to get their day started. Some were heading to serve as the Ministers of the Thousand Scales, the bureaucratic heart of the Realm. Whether it was to map out the tax rates for the coming month or to ensure the proper standards for weights to follow, the ministers took their job quite seriously. Others were merchant families eager to set up shop and earn their keep. The occasional Dragon-blooded soldier was there as well, hurrying to reach their post before their provosts notice their tardiness.

Under the shade of a vibrant blooming cherry blossom, Mera listened to R'sel's message. Her eyes widened in shock as R'sel explained what the Dominie wanted. At that same moment, Sid felt the tube sliding open. She was unaware how that very moment a small burst of light emerged from her forehead. A symbol shined in the air for the briefest of moments.

And click, it was open.



NECESSARY ENDINGS

Beneath the shade of the Harmonious Willow of Lost Missives, an old man with sad green eyes stared at the distant horizon. His scarred hands were chalky white, with reddish lines that marked the memory of many battles long gone by. Despite seeming tired, the old man's build concealed a muscular strength that was hidden under folds of meticulously painted cloth. Bronze bands clasped around his wrists, each engraved with dots and lines that the studios would recognize as the constellations upon the sky.

"Tell me the truth," he asked the golden spirit that stood guard nearby, have you ever seen anything so vibrant and beautiful as this?"

The Celestial Lion stared back at him, stoic in its silence. A second lion stayed in the ready. The two flanked the old man, forcing him to keep his attention divided for his own safety. The third lion remained in front of the Celestial Gate, keeping it secure. The old man had long worked under the auspice of the Maiden of Endings. As a sidereal, he had been assigned to assist in the reorganization and optimization of everything that



was assigned under Arcadelt, the God of World-Shattering Events. A massive celestial event which many teasingly referred to as a reworking of reality required many of the offices in the Celestial Bureaucracy to undergo proper streamlining and improvement. Some gods were reallocated to new duties. Others were given new names, new faces, or even new destinies to suit the grand Loom of Fate. These reworkings were of such a scale that made it difficult at times to keep track of everything that was already previously set down.

But the old man knew the truth. With the gods having left most of the workings of the world in the hands of the Celestial Bureaucracy, there were bound to be massive changes that even the five Maidens would have trouble keeping track.

One such thing was the item held in his hands. Called an Apocalypse Scroll, the artifact was a creation that had been crafted by inhuman hands. The scroll case was orichalcum, inlaid with delicate filigree of moonsilver and jade. The lock sealing the tube was starmetal and at its heart, a dark metal that had no reason to exist here in Yu-Shan. Inside, a parchment spun from the webs of Loom Spiders sat. On its surface, something grander than a turn at the Games of Divinity existed. Something that eluded the precise perfect documents of Ryzala, the Lady of Bureaucracy and Paperwork in Heaven. The scroll case pulsed with unmistakable power. The Celestial lions could sense it.

“Surrender the scroll tube, Chosen of the Maiden,” a voice commanded. The old man turned to face the speaker and saw the sentinel emerging from the Celestial Gate. It was a towering figure of tightly knit muscle and fabulous flowing hair. Its body was enveloped in what looked like layers of jade which had been crafted to



resemble the petals of a flower. Instead of a human head, however, the long face of a horse gazed back. In its two hands, a pair of stout hexagonal coppery bars. The old man recognized it for what it was: a Tikbalang. They were once a proud Nation in the East. A people of crafters and musicians who lived in large interconnected communities. But during the events of the Great Contagion, the people assisted in the evacuation of many of the afflicted from nearby cities. The Maiden of Serenity took pity on their selflessness and asked Saturn to reconsider their demise. Of the few that remained uninfected by the Dowager's wicked plan, these tikbalangs were ascended to Yu-Shan and given the task of serving as guardians alongside the Celestial lions. But beyond that knowledge, the old man recognized the tikbalang. For he was one of those who had trained it to handle its new job.

"Forgive me, Da'atu Sen Oirb. I cannot do such a thing. There is far too much at stake and the future of all of Creation may lie in the choices we make this very moment. You stand before me, an obstacle to the Celestial Gate that I must use to leave Yu-Shan. Your lions stand ready to strike me down. Common sense dictates surrender would be the better choice in this moment. Unfortunately, it will not be the choice I shall make," the old man said. He slightly twisted outwards the wrist of the hand holding the scroll case. It almost looked like he was trying to hide it, despite the fact the sentries had already seen it.

"My brothers owe you our lives, Mataris Crow. Please do not force my hand to violence. You were a healer and your great works of medicine allowed our kind to survive beyond the Great Contagion. You cannot win this battle. The lions alone would tear you to shreds. My martial skills would strike you to the ground even before the first droplet of your blood struck the ground. Surrender,



Mataris Crow,” Da’atu Sen Oirb begged. Even as it spoke, however, the tikbalang drew a shimmering spear of gold and bronze from its very skin. The nearby tattoos slid across its skin, as if they were the substance the spear was being crafted from.

The old man called Mataris Crow, however, still did not move. Instead, he reached inwards for the thread of the Resplendent Destiny that held that name and slowly spun his finger around it.

“Why do you steal from the office of Arcadelt?” Da’atu called out, hoping for an answer. Hearing none, the tikbalang signaled the lions. The three Celestial Lions rushed forward, leaping at Mataris Crow from three strategic positions. Any ordinary person would have time to block against one, only to either expose themselves to the second, or if more skilled, eventually back into the third. But Mataris Crow was not an ordinary man. Nor was he, as the tikbalang assumed, unskilled in the arts of battle. Instead, the old man had hoped to evade the sentries and avoid having to deal with witnesses. And doing so began with a kick against the ground.

Mataris Crow leapt upwards, evading the first two Celestial Lions by leaping beyond their reach. As he flung towards the gaping maw of the third, the old man hurled forward the scroll tube straight into the guardian’s gullet. In the same motion, the sleeves covering his arms and chest unfurled, like they were streamers of ribbons that chased after the tube.

The sound that came next was like an echo that shattered against ice. Where the third Celestial Lion was flying through the air, an afterimage instead of it was rapidly fragmenting into geometric shapes that were retracing their outlines. Da’atu and the other Lions stared



in shock at what seemed to be the sole item that could have been the weapon delivering death to their companion: the scroll case itself.

The case began to fly back towards Mataris Crow's outstretched hand. Guiding it was the strip of ribbon from his robe that had looped around the case's delicate filigree, propelling it back in a manner not unlike that of a yo-yo.

"What manner of weapon was that? I do not recognize its craft," Da'atu asked as the tube landed onto Mataris Crow's hand. The old man completed his leap and landed atop a partially shattered pillar, balancing upon it perfectly despite its precariously damaged state. One of the bracers around his wrist began to glow a rich, reddish-brown glow. Da'atu recognized the stone where the light ushered forth from as The Monkey Stone. With their Intemperate Gazes, the Celestial Lions studied their opponent. They now realized they had grossly underestimated their opponent!

"Had you not been accompanied by such perfect watchers, I could have simply avoided you all by slipping my Destiny from your own. Unfortunately, your perfect perceptions have condemned you all to an unfortunate early ending," Mataris Crow sighed. The Celestial Lions caught the tiny rivulet of a tear that slipped past Mataris Crow's eye. One turned to face Da'atu and warned it to leave now and inform the Celestial Bureaucracy of this sudden act of insubordination from one of the Maidens' chosen. Da'atu shook its head, unwilling to retreat.

This delay, however, was the momentary distraction Mataris Crow required to call upon one of his charms. Da'atu watched as Mataris Crow suddenly became indistinct and blurry, blending with the surroundings.



Another shattered echo sounded as a second Celestial Lion was undone by the weaponized scroll case. Mataris Crow yanked the case back, catching its return arc with his foot, then redirecting the flight to spiral around his knee twice before he caught it with his armpit. The last Celestial Lion once more gazed at Da'atu and insisted it leave to warn someone. Da'atu was on the verge of panic, being unable to see where the Sidereal had gone.

Warn the Maidens and their Chosen.

Da'atu hurled the spear towards a direction blindly. The spear struck nothing but the ground and was withdrawn. Pulling the spear back into its arms, Da'atu grumbled, "I cannot see him..."

That is why it should be you that leaves.

"But you have access to all of Yu-Shan," Da'atu cried.

**Warn the Master Hollok. Warn him of this Ronin.
Warn him-**

The Celestial Lion was unable to finish its words. It had to leap out of the way. The scroll case swung in the air where the lion earlier stood. Mataris Crow pulled it back and looped it over and over above his own head. Da'atu finally agreed and spun the spear in front of it in a defensive move to block any incoming weapons. It then channeled all the remaining tattoos onto the spear in its hand. The spear shot outwards, gaining length as it impossibly stretched three, four, five times longer than it originally was. Da'atu used the spear to vault itself into the air and hurry back towards the Celestial Gate. Mataris Crow, however, had other plans.



The old man kicked at a nearby broken pillar and sent the rocks hurtling towards the Celestial Lion. As the Lion swatted the rocks away to defend itself, Mataris Crow ran up the flying debris, treating them as steps to chase after the tikbalang. Da'atu twisted mid-air to avoid Mataris Crow's arrival as the old man caught up to the escaping guardian and attempted to entangle it in his ribbons. But the twist was exactly what the old man anticipated, and as Da'atu completed what it taught was a successful dodge, it found the old man's foot and ankle hooking around its longneck. Mataris Crow's toes punched hard to grab a generous amount of the tikbalang's mane, ensuring there would be some challenge in attempts of escape.

With a growl, the Celestial Lion ran to the area where the two would land and seeing an opportunity, dashed forward to rake its claws upon the old man. Sparks flew as the claws met something strong enough to resist their edges. From the torn ribbons, Da'atu and the Celestial Lion stared in mute surprise as the item revealed beneath Mataris Crow's robes was an official Celestial Travel Permit, crafted in Starmetal. With such, Mataris Crow would have not needed to sneak around to use the gate. Why then all the subterfuge?

Sadly, the Lion will never know. Realizing he had given away more information than he wanted to, Mataris Crow kicked the scroll case ineffectually at Da'atu, who felt the bruise blossom where the tube smashed against his shoulder. The tikbalang snagged the weapon, ripped it free from the ribbon, and seeing Mataris Crow's panicked eyes, resolved to get the tube away from the Ronin. The long spear suddenly splintered into two wide paddle-like shapes, and Da'atu batted the tube away from the Sidereal. Expecting the Celestial Lion to catch it and hold it as evidence, what happened next stunned the tikbalang



to silence. The Celestial Lion caught the scroll case easily with its maw, but within seconds, the mere contact with the case caused the shattered echo to erupt once more as the Celestial Lion was undone. This close, however, Da'atu realized not only were they seemingly undone, but the afterimage that was perceived during their destruction was their material forms being annihilated in a burst of fire unleashed from within.

“What is that thing,” Da'atu was able to muster but Mataris Crow twisted his body to slam Da'atu head first against the Celestial Gate's frame. The tikbalang fell to the ground, unconscious and bested. Mataris Crow took a few seconds to catch his breath and waited to see if any other Celestial Lions would emerge. Seeing none, he walked up to the scroll case on the ground, picked it up, and inspected it for any damage. Using it as a weapon worked only against gods and spirits. Apocalypse Scrolls were protected with powerful magics to destroy any spiritual beings that attempted to touch them. It was this very ward that made serve as a powerful weapon against the many Gods and spirits in Yu-Shan, when they were forced to make contact with it. One touch was enough to be dealt annihilation. Only Gods and spirits with those with specific permissions had the ability to wield these items safely.

Or an exalted.

Mataris Crow realized the typical role as one of the Chosen of Serenity has come to an end. He had splintered the Resplendent Destiny as well enough from this fight to render the identity too contradictory for the Loom of Fate to accept. The old man reached back for the thread of the identity and snapped it free to end it. As Mataris Crow ceased to be, the old man pulled a hooded cloak from some unseen compartment in the



unfurling robes, embraced the other alternate name and form. He slid the scroll case into his sleeve and considered taking the tikbalang's weapon. But then, he realized Da'atu would still have memory fragments of Mataris Crow and it would be best not to leave new traces that would lead any further investigations his way.

He closed his eyes for a moment, and mentally mapped out the events in the area. He walked to the Celestial Gate and activated it with the Celestial Travel Permit he had on his person. He then walked up to the tikbalang and gently prodded the guardian back to consciousness.



It all played out as the old man had planned. Da'atu awoke with a start but then recognized the "newcomer." It gave a full report, sharing how an old associate named Mataris Crow had been caught attempting to escape through one of the Yu-Shan Gates. Da'atu ruefully shared how the Joybringer had stolen something from an office and none of them succeeded in stopping him. The old man promised Da'atu that he will do what he can to track the Joybringer and suggested the tikbalang attempt to recover and get some rest. Da'atu picked up its weapons and submerged them back into its skin.

The old man thanked him and began walking back to the Celestial Gate. Da'atu apologized once more for its failure to stop the Ronin and asked the old man if it could be given a second chance to prove its worthiness. The old man shook his head no and left, leaving the tikbalang to watch him as he stepped through the Celestial Gate and left Heaven.



Da'atu didn't see anything wrong with it. After all, in his memory and eyes, the old man was Voruta, one of Heaven's Soldiers and a Chosen of the Maiden of Battles. And it was his duty to protect Yu-Shan from threats within and without. It was, after all, impossible for Da'atu to even see the disintegrating thread that was once allowed the existence of Mataris Crow to exist.



AND AGAIN

It is said that there are three times in a parent's life when their child brings them incomparable joy. The first is when they are born, and their presence in their parents' life forever changes. The second is when they are married, and in that union, the parent knows the child is no longer helpless and unprepared for the world ahead of them. The third? The third is when they receive the letter confirming that their child has been given a seat to one of the four premier academies in all of Creation. Well, at least that would be how things are for Dynast families.

Hoyd'nis Sid stared at the scroll in her hands and struggled to comprehend what was written upon it: a personal confirmation of her having a spear waiting for her at the House of Bells. The academy accepted only five students each year. Within its walls, students would be taught the 1000 Correct Actions of the Upright Soldier. They would be trained to grasp the complexities of Gateway and learn from the game the strategic secrets one must know by heart to train them for all future battles to come. She read the scroll over-and-over again, struggling to accept it was her name written in its red shiny ink.

Sid scanned back to the top of the letter. The first few lines read:



*Rejoice and be glorious! If these words are before you
then the blessings of the Dragons have touched you.*

She stared at her hands and wondered if the words were true. To be chosen by the dragons was an honor which many a dynasty dreamed to receive. Sid smiled at the thought that the contents of the letter were true, but she had not felt any different than she had earlier in the morning when she woke up. Remembering there was a full-length mirror in her mother's dressing chamber, the same mirror which her mother once used to help her learn the Holonari, Sid rushed there and checked if anything had changed in her appearance.

She remembered the stories of great heroes such as Cathak Cainan, the General of Hesiesh whose body glistens with fire and light. Or of Ragara Myrrun, an Immaculate Grandmaster whose body resembles the most perfect marble. She studied her skin if there were any manifestations that were elemental in nature. Perhaps a touch of leaves emerging from underneath her hair. Or the swirling patterns of stone or fire dancing in her eyes. She also felt horrified at the thought that the manifestation might appear less visually appealing. What if she began to always have wisps of smoke rolling out of her nostrils like a lumbering fire-breather? Or worse, began to have constantly dripping water falling from her armpits. Who knew the idea of exaltation could be so stressful?

It didn't help that her family was not from any of the Major Houses. The Cynises from down the block were clearly wood-aspected, with the constant fragrance of orchids rising from their skin. The Ledaal twins who always made fun of her constantly had a strong breeze blowing out from behind them - which felt quite apt given their tendency to be boastful and cruel. Sid's family,



however, did not have any strong elemental aspects in their lineage. Sadly, even as she turned around and around and tried to run her fingers through her hair and check the toughness of her skin, she found none... unless sweat was just a different manifestation of being Water-aspected. She continued reading the letter:

The Scroll Case was sealed with a complicated mechanism, which could have only been undone with the help of Elemental affinities. Any attempt to forcibly open the tube would have broken the glass vial inside, releasing the acidic solution that would have destroyed this letter.

Sid looked at the intricate lock mechanism and saw the tiny marble tumblers can could have been lifted by an Earth-aspected Dynast. She saw the vacuum chamber which would have lifted the same tumblers had an Air-aspected Dynasty manipulated them. She noticed the secondary chamber that held another solution that would have disabled the acid. It likely would have created a gas byproduct that would have triggered the vacuum as well. She was wondering what the fire and wood triggers would have been but then the door slammed open, announcing the return of her mother.

“Sid! What happened?” she called out excitedly as she rushed into the house. Cathak R’sel stumbled into the hallway after her. The two found the empty chamber with the undone outer casing of the scroll on the floor. The rush of excitement made Mera feel faint. She dropped to her knees as she called out again, “Sid love. Where are you!?”

Sid emerged from the doorway, peering at the sight of R’sel helping her mother to the nearest cushioned seat.



Mera immediately saw her daughter and motioned at her to come closer. Sid did.



"Did you open it?" her mother asked, "Did you succeed?"

Both watched as Sid raised the deconstructed casing up to eye-level. Mera cried out in joy, "You did it! By the dragons, you actually did it! You got into an Academy!"

"It... isn't that big a deal," Sid replied, glancing at R'sel as she said so.

"Actually, it is," R'sel affirmed, "The House of Bells only accepts five candidates each year."

"Five... and you landed a seat. Out of over two thousand possible candidates each year,' Mera wept before engulfing Sid in a tight embrace. Sid could feel her mother's tears wetting her hair. 'If only your father could be here to see all this!"

"Mother, please. This isn't really that much of a big deal. I just wanted- "

"I would have even been proud if you landed a spot in the Spiral Academy. But the House of Bells? My daughter is to become one of the Realm's finest strategoi!"

"Calm down," Sid squirmed out of her mother's embrace, "I'm sure others could have done this as well..."

"But they didn't. You did," Mera laughed, "We have to celebrate! I can invite the neighbors over. I can prepare a feast!"



"I'm afraid there won't be that much time," R'sel sighed, "Recruits to the House of Bells are expected to report immediately. Your daughter must pack up for a trip to Arjuf Dominion at once."

Disappointment immediately set into Mera's face. She had hoped to have a small celebration to show her daughter off to their next-door neighbors. To have them see that her family was not one of failure and shame. Sid unfortunately could see all this in her mother's face. She wanted to help ease the burden her mother carried. She wanted her to be happy.

Sid wrapped her fingers around her mother's hand. She then looked up at R'sel, handsome and charming as he was, and asked, "Are you... to escort me there?"

"Yes," R'sel nodded. He awkwardly glanced back at Mera, who clearly seemed more distraught than before. Gone was her earlier giddy excitement. Mera was eager to see her daughter succeed in life. But she realized that as well was only possible if Sid left the warmth and comfort of the place she had long called home. This was a realization that made Mera sad, despite the celebratory nature of the news. And Mera's sadness had the resulting effect of making R'sel also feel sad. Reminding himself to stay focused on his duty, R'sel added, "We must leave within the hour."

"Mother," Sid stood up and tugged at her mother's hand, "Can you at least help me pack?" Mera looked up at her daughter and nodded in reply.

Sid turned to face R'sel. He instantly saw her eyes and understood she wanted a moment alone with her mother. He nodded and whispered, "I'll wait here."



Mera could still remember the first day she brought Sid to this room. The walls were bare and had holes. The floor was cracked. She had a child to raise and no husband to help her. But she did not give in to her fear. She instead faced the challenge head on and promised to give her daughter the best opportunities in life she can ever give. Sid was two years old and had no inkling of the fear her mother had to carry on her own.

Today, thirteen years later, the room carried all the marks of the years that had gone by. Shelves lined the walls. Books sat on the shelves. Dark patterns marked where lanterns and candles burned on those long nights when Sid would prepare for the academy. Scratches on the walls where Mera used to track how tall Sid had grown.

Mera stifled back the urge to cry. She always wanted her daughter to find success. To make a name for herself. But even all those earlier years were a struggle. Sid was not one of the smarter kids being tutored. Nor was she one of the athletic kids during training. She was clumsy and, at times, slow. She was nervous and flighty and barely knew how to fight.

And yet.

The cabinet slid open with a soft groan. Sid gathered the clothes within and laid them out on the bed for her mother to choose from. Mera quietly began folding select articles together and placing them inside the satchel Sid



was to bring with her. As Sid placed her delicates into a smaller buttoned pack, Mera stepped away to search the cabinet for the boots she knew her daughter would need in the journey to come.

Thirteen years. Such was the time needed to for this moment to finally come.

Mera returned with a polished pair of boots and offered them to Sid. They were simple, pointed toe red boots with square heels. Three buckle straps would lock, giving each foot a snug fit. Turning the boot over slowly, Sid saw the thin metallic ink that marked their house crest on the heel. She realized her mother had crafted these herself. A parting gift made especially for her.

“My dear beloved Sid,” Mera sighed, “My dear, dear, beloved Sid. A future strategoi.”

Sid smiled. All she wanted was to make her mother proud. All she wanted was for her mother to stop thinking she failed in preparing her for the world. She reached out and embraced her mother who hugged her back so tightly, she could hardly breathe. Mera kissed her on the cheek and whispered to her, “Your father was once a student himself. Of the Heptagram. I was never of noble blood. At most, I was merely a daughter of a merchant house. Our family is a humble one, my love. You already have made us proud.”

With those words, Sid came to a new realization. When she took her mother’s hand to bring her to the room, there was something she wanted to show her. There was a secret accomplishment she had been keeping from her mother. But now, having heard Mera’s words, Sid realized the reason she brought her mother to the room was less important than the growing sense of pride



Mera was starting to have not just for her daughter, but also for herself. Sid tightened her hands over the objects she was going to show her mother and hid them behind her back.

“I promise you, mother, I will make you even prouder,” Sid said even as a tear slid down one cheek. Mera reached up, wiped it away, and nodded. Sid could almost hear Mera saying, yes. Yes, you will. And with that, Mera left the room. She knew her daughter would need one last moment in what used to be her room. One last moment in the place she used to call her own.



HEAD START

Cathak R'sel always looked quite older than the seventeen years of his age would have implied. His hair was a shade shy of the color of young corn and his ears were slightly too big for his head. He was tall, and his once lanky form had started to fill from his time at the House of Bells where morning exercise and physical training were daily practices that could not be avoided.

There were, however, things about R'sel which most were unaware of. These were little factoids which the young dynast was more than happy to share with those he trusted – which sadly were as of the late, quite few. R'sel was a popular young man even before getting accepted to the House of Bells, but this popularity was not the sort to immediately transform into trust. Such was a tragic side-effect of having a father who may have gone Outcaste. Cathak Verdug was once a powerful general who stood guard at the Threshold, with eyes facing the threats from the South. But three years ago, while preparing for a battle against one of the Anathema that had set camp nearby. If rumors were to be believed, Verdug fought against the demon of gold and lightning for two days



straight. By the third day, Verdug laid down his weapon, surrendered to the demon, and vanished in an explosion of rumbling thunder and fire. While the official report states Verdug had died, among polite society the impolite whispers claimed he had run off to live among the Anathema. Few were eager to call the son of a possible traitor their friend. And so, the first of these factoids was that Cathak R'sel grew up having very few friends.

The second of these factoids was that R'sel discovered early on that he had a passion for baking. While trained in the ways of combat and knowledgeable in the secrets of violence, Cathak R'sel had to also learn to prepare his own meals. With his father gone missing and his mother long dead, R'sel learned through trial and error the different ways fire could bring about a magical transmutation upon food. Resolve and persistence soon lead to actual edible dishes and a kind neighbor's invention opened the doors of experience to the secrets of the oven. R'sel learned he had a sweet tooth for cookies and a soft spot in his heart for baking.

And an even softer spot in his heart for Hoyd'nis Sid. R'sel first saw Sid eleven months ago, on a bright and warm morning just like this one, while he was walking down the Dragon Spine. R'sel had received the invitation to study at the prestigious House of Bells, an invitation that came not-unexpectedly but quite un-welcomly. R'sel was on his journey to Arjuf Dominion when he had stopped to rest his knees for a moment. He was weighing on ways to excuse himself from being trained to be one of the realm's best when he caught the sounds of panicked



laughter spilling onto the street. Following the sound, R'sel saw a beautiful and clumsy young woman carrying her injured mother to a waiting rickshaw. Perhaps it was adrenaline or perhaps it was sheer will that fueled her, but somehow the young woman carried an adult woman who looked nearly twice her mass onto the rickshaw with more effort in voicing out her frustrations and apologies than in the physical act itself!

The sight inspired him. It filled him with a courage unlike any he had ever felt before. And by the time the rickshaw had left, and the young woman had begrudgingly stepped back inside the door, R'sel felt the rising tide of emotions flow out of him. His life was never to be the same again.

Each day, each week, each month that passed at the Academy, R'sel found inspiration in the memory of that young lady and her unexpected strength. And on the day he proved he was fit for the title of lieutenant, he learned her name was Hoyd'nis Sid and promised himself to seek her out if the opportunity ever arose.

And that was the third factoid that Cathak R'sel had never admitted to anyone. When the Dominie Cathak Anio called for R'sel to fulfill a duty on the Academy's behalf, R'sel could not believe the name he was told to seek out: Hoyd'nis Sid. It was as if the Fates were once again leading their paths to meet. He was more than willing to accomplish the task.



Which brings us to now. Cathak R'sel walked alongside Hoyd'nis Sid as the two made their way to Arjuf Dominion. Sid would steal a glance ever now and then at R'sel, blushing each time he could glance back at her and be surprised to see her staring. He clearly was not used to the attention. He actually began to worry if she sensed him consciously making an effort NOT to stare at her. Women were always perceptive, he recalled his mentors at the House of Bells once warning him. Women always know more than you think they do.

"The House of Bells," R'sel spoke up, in a weak attempt to shift the silence towards conversation and perhaps reduce the repeated moments of catching her eyes. "Not the Academy I'd expect someone like you to be interested in."

R'sel immediately regretted saying that. It felt like the worst choice of words to say. To his surprise, Sid laughed in response. Sid, on the other hand immediately regretted having laughed as a response. The laugh was more an expression of her excitement than a real response to his words. Because the fact of the matter was, she actually failed to catch what he had said.

"Not that I don't think you'd do well in it," R'sel quickly tried to backpedal in his words. "Just that discipline and punishment are like bread and butter in the House of Bells. Broken bones lead to sharper fangs, they say."

"Right," Sid replied again without thinking. She realized R'sel had started to grow a touch of stubble. She liked how it helped define the contours of his chin. In her mind's eye, her mother was walking alongside her and giving her the stink eye. *Stop laughing and talking without thinking. Do not let men every have that much control over you.*



And stop staring at his chin. It is normal during puberty for such facial hair to manifest. Sid quickly tried to look somewhere else.

“I myself didn’t expect to survive the training at the Bells. Admittedly, in many ways I was content at the thought of landing some desk job handing things after a few years of learning at the Spiral Academy. My father was overjoyed, of course. But I guess he always had a more aggressive outlook in life since he survived that battle against one of the Anathema,” R’sel shared.

“The South, right?” Sid happily replied, this time having paid attention enough to realize the discussion was about Cathak R’sel’s father. She had heard of those events after she tried to learn more about the youngest new lieutenant to emerge from the House of Bells. She remembered how she and her mother were at Arjuf Dominion a few months back when they landed a rare opportunity: to be audience to the Ringing Trials, a series of trials where a group of promising cadets were to be tested for the privilege of being recognized and given a formal rank as one of the Imperial Strategoi. While the event was typically reserved only for family members of the cadets, many of the cadets were orphans and tradition demanded that the seats at the arena were not to remain empty. Mera and Sid knew there was nothing to lose and joined the lottery just to see if they could win a seat.

They both did.

There were ten cadets in total vying for the promotion. Eight were from earlier years, while two were from the latest batch of cadets. Most of them proudly wore their jade armor, showing off the inheritance they’re received from their parents or grandparents. Others even showed off majestic weapons of jade. But one young cadet



had neither armor nor weapon on him. Instead, he wore his Academy robes and had his forearms wrapped in bandages. And when the judges announced the cadets' names, that was when Sid first got introduced to Cathak R'sel.

It was like the entire world crumbled away into darkness and in this endless limbo a sole star came into being. It was as if R'sel burst into flames like a young and scrawny star eager to illuminate the world. Sid felt a surge of warmth and excitement and turned to see her mother smiling at her.

He looks determined, Sid remembered telling her mother.

He does, Mera then replied.

Do you think he will win? Sid remembered asking. She could not recall what her mother said back then but what she did remember was how at the end of the Trail, Cathak R'sel alone stood in the arena with his bare hands raised towards the roof and the dancing tongues of flame swirling around him announcing that the Dragons had made their choice. Sid mused how R'sel looked better now that he had jade armor and wondered where he had gotten it from.

"I said," R'sel repeated after realizing Sid didn't respond, "Dominie Cathak Anio gave me permission to use it. He never explained who owned it."

"Oh!" Sid responded, then looked away, realizing she had asked the question aloud. She was now worried what else she had asked, or worse, admitted, during her momentary flashback.



“Nothing else,” R’sel replied.

“What?” Sid asked, started. Did she ask that aloud again?

“I didn’t own anything else,” R’sel explained, “Just the breastplate and chain. I’ve yet to earn my own Bellsword. Do you have any inheritances from your parents?”

“Oh,” Sid shook her head, “Not really. Or was it more... not yet? My father might still be out there. My mother, on the other hand, has yet to hand me anything jade.” She glanced down at her boots and wondered if she should mention those. Did Dragon-blooded ever have Artifact boots? Were any of them ever not jade?

“Not all of them are jade,” R’sel replied and Sid nearly gasped in shock at the thought R’sel did read her thoughts. But then she remembered her last statement was about not receiving anything yet of jade. She lifted one leg to show the boot better.

“I got these,” she said.

R’sel gave no response. That very moment, Sid felt very foolish. What was she doing, showing off her leg to her lieutenant? She quickly brought her leg back down and continued walking without saying another word. She had no idea, however, that her embarrassment was equaled by what R’sel as well felt. He gave no response because he didn’t think it was right that he was staring at her leg.

The two walked in silence, crossing first the Trader’s Bridge and then the Immaculate Temple. By the time they reached the Highroad Station, both had begun to



feel foolish for what they believed was them initiating the silence. And so, it was that they both attempted to shatter it at the same time.

“Hey,” they both said then laughed.

“You go first,” R’sel managed to say before Sid stopped laughing as well.

“I actually just wanted to break the silence,” Sid admitted.

“Yeah,” R’sel sighed, “I’m sorry about that.”

“Huh?” Sid said, “But I’m sorry for starting it.”

The two stared at each other, instantly realizing they both thought they initiated it. The broke down with another bout of laughter. The two found themselves enjoying the laughter, this time. It felt comfortable and warm. And one would even dare say, nice.

“Two tickets to Arjuf Dominion,” R’sel finally managed and told the clerk. “We’re heading to the House of Bells.”



HUSH

The Celestial Door faded back into the background, appearing as the empty frame of a broken door. Voruta glanced around if anyone had seen his arrival and after finding none had, closed his eyes and faded away. Left standing in his place was the old man who had stolen the Apocalypse Scroll from Yu-Shan. With the Resplendent Destiny set aside, the old man folded his hood away and drew out a tattered straw hat from his pouch. As he stepped onto the street, anyone who saw him would recognize him as another one of the many farmers who toiled here at Arjuf Dominion. In his opinion, that would serve his needs quite nicely.

As he wove through the streets, he glanced at the structure visible in the distance. The House of Bells could be seen, crouched behind the high walls that separated the rest of the massive estate from the city proper. The old man reached up and tapped the area near his waist, checking if the scroll case was still tucked beneath his robes. Satisfied it was still safely there, he approached the destination he set in his mind and quietly rapped at the door. The building was a ramshackle of a place with an old door whose green paint was peeling off. A broken sign suggested the place was a perfumery, but the lack of



distinct fragrances clearly suggested business had not been forthcoming.



The door was unlatched from inside and darkness yawned open as it was swung to the side. No one was there to receive him. The old man stepped inside, and the door slowly closed after him. Had there been anyone who could have penetrated the intense Arcane Fate that surrounded him, that witness might have overheard the old man whisper, "I have the scroll." Alas, there was to be no eavesdropper to this pronouncement. Nor any witness to whom the sidereal had come to meet.



As the caravan made its way across the Blessed Isle, both Cathak R'sel and Hoyd'nis Sid felt a new yet familiar bond form between them. And as it was with any familiar ties forming, the two felt the desire to tell the other more about themselves. This was not to suggest that there were no more walls or inhibitions between them. But the careful curation of what can and can't be shared was a dance both felt more and more willing to play. And as it usually was in these instances, neither had reached the point of admitting they were both there. Thankfully, it didn't take long for R'sel to find the courage to open that door himself.

"I have a bag of cookies, if you're interested," R'sel reached into his side pouch and drew out a red cloth sack that hung from his belt. "It's been a few hours since we left. You're probably famished."



“Cookies?” Sid beamed, “Where did you find someone selling cookies? I usually only see them during galas or food markets.” Sid received the bag from R’sel and carefully opened the bag. Inside, a second white cloth sack kept the snacks warm and clean. Undoing the twine, Sid reached in and pulled out one of the flat sweet discs. It was brown and had a crumbly texture. It smelled freshly baked.

“Baked them myself. A little something I like to do for myself when I have the time,” R’sel admitted.

“May I?” Sid asked, holding the cookie up, close to her mouth. She mimed taking a bite. R’sel nodded a yes, despite glancing away.

He didn’t have the courage to admit he had baked it earlier in the morning, knowing he was going to deliver a message to her. And he was deathly afraid, if one could ever have a mortal fear related to confections and snacks, that Sid wouldn’t find it delicious.

Thankfully, she did.

“I can’t believe you made these! These are wonderful! The chewiness is perfect. Its moist and yet just firm enough to not fall apart on first bite. Who taught you to bake these?” Sid asked.

“A secret deserves another secret,” he laughed, not really meaning it. He had no way of knowing that Sid now found herself debating that moment whether or not to share her own secret. In her mind, Sid was back in her room, packing for this very trip she was taking now. There in the secret chamber of her memories, she watched Mera leave the room to give her time to pack. Alone, she then brought out the two objects she hid behind her back



while Mera said her goodbyes. They were two scroll cases. Sid wondered if she made the correct choice of not telling her mother about them. The first was a scroll tube from the Spiral Academy, informing her that she has been chosen to learn how to become one of the Thousand Scales. It was a chance to become one of the satraps and ministers that would help keep the Imperial City, and thus, the Empire, running. The second was from the Cloister of Wisdom, which stated that she had been deemed ready to learn and emulate the Dragons. It claimed her name has been unveiled during the meditations of the Grand Masters. And her acceptance of the invitation is anticipated. Both were fantastic turning points in Sid's life. But neither were the real secret Sid was keeping in her heart.

"A secret," Sid mumbled again and considered what to share. She nibbled another bite of the cookie and decided to admit part of the truth. At least, Sid considered, it was better than lying. "My mother and I saw you during the Trials. We were in the arena, watching as you and the other cadets fought for the title you bear now. We won our seats by lottery and we cheered for you only because no one else seemed to be doing so."

The confession struck R'sel. He smiled and began to glow as fire slowly manifested in his hair. This was completely unconscious on R'sel's part. He did not realize he was manifesting his elemental aspect as he stared back at Sid. Sid stared at his face and only then realized something she had thought impossible... that he could actually appear even more beautiful than he already did.

As she stared at him and smiled, he smiled back. In his mind, he remembered that day at the arena. He remembered wondering how he would ever win against the odds before him, being the sole unpatronized cadet.



In this moment of greatest worry and need, he remembered the resolve he witnessed from a lovely young woman back in Dragon's Spire and drew inspiration from that memory. It was that memory he had of Sid helping her mother onto a rickshaw.

It did more than inspire him. Somehow, it triggered a change within him. It awoke a potential that lay dormant. And while the rest of the world shares the exciting tale of how Cathak R'sel, underdog of the Trials, was Chosen and Exalted by the Dragons as proof that he deserved the promotion, R'sel himself knew deep down the Exaltation began that day because he remembered her.

"That," R'sel smiled, "Was a very interesting secret. I learned to bake on my own. Well, a neighbor owned an oven and allowed me to practice. It was a lot of really bad results before I got better at it."

Something had changed between them. Cathak R'sel and Hoyd'nis Sid both felt the shared warmth and comforting feeling grow stronger. For R'sel, it was the growing hope from a shy young man that he might have found someone he was interested in getting to know more. For Sid, it was the formerly impossible thought of being close to someone she only saw from afar. But maybe, just maybe, it also had to do with R'sel's elemental anima of fire, burning bright as a torch of flames where his hair should be, keeping them warm for the rest of the night as they continued their journey to the House of Bells.



End of Book One: Ink



ABOUT THE BOOK

*"We're past the age of heroes and hero kings...
Most of our lives are basically mundane and dull,
and it's up to the writer to find ways to make them
interesting." —John Updike, WD*

This is the first of what I hope to be a series of romantic comedy novelas set in the world of Exalted. I know this probably isn't what most are looking for when they search for Exalted content, but I guess I just wanted to offer something different and close to my heart.

If you enjoyed reading this, do be kind and leave a review. I hope to share more stories of Hoyd'nis Sid, Cathak R'sel, and the rest of the cast.

Sometimes, the greatest stories aren't about saving the world. They can be about making the world worth saving.

Tobie

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Tobie Abad is a writer based in Manila, Philippines. He is the creative mind behind TAG Sessions and the creator of, ***A Single Moment***, a two-player role-playing game. He has also written for other games such as 7th Sea second edition, Cold Shadows, A World of Dew, Advanced Doll, Prince Valiant, and many other games. He also writes for Talecraft Publishing, having been part of the Master Story Creators Anthologies 1 and 4.



Sid's Real Life

Book One "Ink"

While most Sidereals were preoccupied by the factional infighting born from the arguments regarding the Great Prophecy, fifteen-year old Hoyd'nis Sid was too busy wondering if there was any chance in all of Creation for her to catch the smoldering gaze of the young dynast lieutenant, Cathak R'sel.

Elsewhere, a Ronin Sidereal steals away one of the Apocalypse Scrolls. This leads to a chain of events that may have repercussions upon Creation and mark the beginning of a new Age.

Written by Tobie Abad.

