



SID'S REAL LIFE

By Tobie Abad

An Exalted Romantic Comedy Novel

Book Two: Scroll







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BOOK TWO: SCROLL



TOBIE ABAD

FOR ROCKY,
MY LOVE AND MY LIFE.







THE BARQUE OF VOYAGE



For most of the inhabitants of creation, any vessel which is meant for sailing and has a mast is called a boat, and while that definition is not untrue, it can unfortunately also be inaccurate. Not all forms of transportation upon water are boats just as not all boats are ships. To believe they are so would be a great disservice to the myriad of vessels that have been built to traverse the great seas. Barges, cruisers, canoes, dinghy, ferries, gondolas, jukungs, and ketches vary in various ways that to lump them together would be an insult to the different meandering that meaning can have. Worse, that list was barely half of the tale, with liners, pontoons, rafts, schooners, skiffs, yachts and zille left unsaid. And mind you, dear reader, we haven't even gotten to the ships.

Sailing ships have always been distinguished by their rigging, hull, keep, and configuration of masts. Among ships, however, for the sake of decency and time, we can focus our lens on the barque. Barques, as any sailor of the Inner Sea would tell you, was originally a term intended for any nondescript vessel that did not fit any of the usual categories. But as time passed, the term came to exclusively



refer to ships with three or more masts, fore-and-aft sails on the aftermost mast and square sails on all other masts. Seen as the work seahorses of Creation, barques were desired for their capacity to function with smaller crews. And yet, even with this smaller complement of crew, barques could outperform schooners in maneuverability and were even better at going windward than other vessels. This is why, out of all the possible seaworthy things that existed, it was the barque which won the coveted seat which the Maiden of Journeys chose to bless as her vessel of choice.

None of this was common knowledge, however, to fifteen-year-old Hoyd'nis Sid. She and her escort, Cathak R'sel, were enroute to the House of Bells where Sid was to begin her formal training. R'sel delivered the message to the young lady, completely unaware that same day was her fifteenth birthday. And the day of her Exaltation.

"So, this is a barque," Sid mused aloud as she clamped her hands on the railing and leaned forward as far as she could dare. She was curious to see what was happening where the water met the wood. Buoyancy was still a mystery in her eyes.

"Be careful!" R'sel exclaimed in horror as he turned away from the Captain to see Sid so far forward an inch more and she would have tumbled heels over head into the surf below. With a burst of heat and the swirl of brimstone, R'sel launched the ten yards he needed to traverse the deck and landed just behind Sid. Without hesitation, he reached out and grabbed her ankle.

She gasped.



He blushed. And with a gentle motion, pulled her back from over the edge. He let go of her ankle, ashamed that he touched her skin. He looked away, giving her time to compose herself.

“Thank you,” she said as she straightened up, “I shouldn’t have stepped to close to the railing.” She looked away from R’sel as well. The two stared out at the rolling water. Both watched as the barque cut through the blue like an arrow sailing through the sky.

The two kept their eyes at the horizon, as people often do when standing beside a person whom they admire at a point in time when both are still unprepared to admit their growing feelings. Their gaze remained trained at the distance even as their hands held tight on the railing. Another inch, though, and her pinkie would have touched his. Another inch and they probably would have realized their feelings were mutual.

But now was not the time for that inch.

Not with the other ship that emerged from the waters like a whale rising from the depths as it closed in. It was a ship that was about to ask for no quarter.



ACTUAL BEGINNINGS

The porcelain cups were cracked. Once they were crafted to celebrate the rise of the city of Rathess. Once they were painted with images of the battle against the Primordial armies by a wise Pterok who chose to mark down into crafted memory the day their people last displayed their courage. Now, they were merely remnants of a time that few could remember and not even their owner as one of those.

“You have succeeded in the task as expected,” the figure spoke in a slow, clipped pace. His armored skin caught the light in ways that broke it to a multitude of colors. Despite having fingers that were more like massive reptilian toes, the figure gently picked up the matching teapot from the fire and served the coffee without a single misplaced drop. “Every single step leading to this moment was planned and meticulously prepared.”

The old man rubbed his hands together, as if searching for a way to get the blood flowing back in his pale white skin. His fingers felt numb, like that feeling when one submerged one's hands in icy cold water for far too long. A painful kind of numbness. The old man's eyes scanned



the room and his gaze rested on a crystalline device that sat at one corner of the room. The jagged glass-like edges hummed with a pulsing power that projected outwards as a bluish violet glow. It made the room much cooler than the world outside, where work and mercantilism continued ignorant of the world-shattering matter unfolding nearby.

“It has been a long and winding road of connections, promises, and risks to get to this point,” he admitted, “But I doubt it was any less grand than the journey you undertook, master Anamne. Most have never even heard of, must less seen, one of the Dragon Kings. And yet here I am, blessed to bear witness to your countenance.”

The Dragon King laughed. Its voice sounded like a rumble at the pit of one’s stomach. The old man shifted uneasily in his seat. He knew the Dragon King was a being of intense power.

“We are but all pupils to the lessons that the *Guro* has led us to see,” Anamne said as he raised his porcelain cup and sipped the coffee. The bitter-sweet drink made him smile. “And you, are one of many agents that I have at one point or another helped in this long unfolding plan.”

The plan had taken years. And required many agents to be in key positions to accomplish specific tasks. The old man grinned inwardly, realizing he knew more than Anamne did. What he did not know, however, was the role the Dragon King was to play in the *Guro*’s elaborate scheme. Sadana, the Travel Permit Accountant serving the Maiden of Journeys provided the old man the necessary document to use the Yu-Shan Gates. There was Tahmik, the translator of long dead languages who served the office of the Maiden of Secrets. It was her perceptive eyes had



spotted the resting place of the specific Apocalypse Scroll that they needed to steal. And a few others.

“Is the old teacher dead?” Anamne asked, having noticed the old man has not sipped the coffee, “Was there a hint of betrayal that now keeps you from indulging in my generosity? This coffee has been brewed using ancient dehydrated beans from the southwestern jungles of Ssaaneth. During the Age past, not even the former title holders of your people ever had a chance to taste these things. And yet there you sit, holding your cup as if you have been served poison. I would call out insult if I did not know we both serve the *Guro*.”

“I do not want to drink coffee,” the old man explained.

“What? Is it because it isn’t the watered-down mud that your kind are accustomed to? That dreck they serve in cities like Nexus? Solbucks? Or that other pretentious named one? Coffee, Bean, and Water? Like we need to spell out, ‘meat, lettuce, tomatoes, cheese, bread’ whenever we want one of those sandwiches from the Archgold city?”

“Mataris Crow,” the old man hesitated; knowing the words that would follow his mouth would be compared to the records Fate held of that Resplendent Destiny’s life so far, the last thing the old man wanted was an inconsistency that would alert the Pattern Spiders, and after the Sidereals. But for the life of him, he could not remember that moment if Crow died while facing the Tikbalang. The old man had juggled too many Resplendent Destinies in the last few years. He was starting to confuse even himself.



A Resplendent Destiny, as all Sidereals are taught, is a false identity that was created through the knowledge of Sidereal Astrology. Through these metaphysical masks, the Sidereals are able to blend with the locals and interact with others without having to reveal the existence of their line. These false identities are incredibly flexible with some Sidereals using them to infiltrate organizations as Immaculate monks, Military generals, outcaste rebels, and even Heptagram teachers. But most importantly, this allows Sidereals to interact with mortals and be remembered. As part of being members of the Five-Score Fellowship, all Sidereals are touched by an Arcade Fate. This causes any gods, mortals, and even other Exalted, to almost immediately forget them after interacting with them. On the other hand, to properly fulfill their duties, functionaries that serve the Bureau of Destiny, creatures that exist outside of fate, and the Celestial Gods are not affected by Arcade Fate. They see each other as they truly are.

Or at least, that was what most Sidereals were told.

Additionally, the importance of maintaining a Resplendent Destiny cannot be understated. It isn't just a matter of keeping up appearances or speaking in appropriate character. It includes making choices and actions even while unobserved. If one were embracing the role of Imon Goss, struggling outcaste farmer, for example, not choosing to work on the farm one morning would be quite out of character for that destiny. For those in the know, this is referred to as Resplendent Paradox. Even risking exposing one's Sidereal anima would be further Paradox. And accumulating too much Paradox leads to a visit from a Pattern Spider, an issue with the Bureaucracy,



and a punishing period of suffering from the spider's venom.



But of course, that's not always the case.

Too easily, a few in the know tend to forget the fact that the Five-Score Fellowship includes the Forbidding Manse of Ivy. And the Division of Secrets would have been acting completely against its very nature if it didn't have a few secrets they kept from their fellow Sidereals.

The old man smiled and decided it was best to let go of the Resplendent Destiny. As a loyal servant of Saturn, he understood the power of endings and its greatest truth – that every ending was the beginning for a future ending to come. “Mataris Crow was the thief that stole the Apocalypse Scroll, yes, but he has paid for that accomplishment with his own life.”

“And the Scroll?”

“Is in my hands,” the old man brought it out from inside his robes and laid it on the table. The orichalcum case landed against the table with a solid thud. “And delivered to you as planned.”

A silence hung between them. The two stared at the thing on the table. The thing was made of all five of the Magical Materials – orichalcum, jade, moonsilver, starmetal, and even soulsteel – and contained something that had the potential to change the very face of Creation. The power of what the case contained pulsed with a steady beat, leaving small ripples in the coffee. The circles reminded the old man of the way the Celestial Lions died



upon contact with the case. The *Guro* was quite clear when he explained how the case itself would serve as the weapon Crow could use on his attempts to escape Arcadelt's office. That was the way with those who served the Five Maidens. They always had rules and restrictions that seemed unnecessarily complicated but served a greater purpose.



Finding greater purpose, however, was the furthest thing in mind for Rosevel, a young Dynast merchant who was struggling to make ends meet. When the demands of life force you to focus on the finer details, it can be quite difficult to try to see things with a bigger perspective. Rosevel's shop dealt with tonics and elixirs, from medicinal creations that numbed pain to soothing balms that were meant to work away the stresses of daily living. They were chemical distractions for those exhausted from pain and hard work. Rosevel himself indulged in his creations, and it was quite uncommon for him to not be in a perpetual state of high. And it was that state of artificial bliss that kept his sense of self-preservation from screaming when he realized the figure in his shop was one of the Anathema.

It lay atop the barrels of reagents Rosevel used to make his tonics. It was lost deep in a slumber that it did not react to Rosevel dropping the decanter in his hands. He stared at the swirling silver mandalas that danced around its body, like a ghostly aura that hinted its mind was alive even while its body was asleep.



Rosevel weighed the choice of running out into the street to cry out for help against having a chance to see one of these demons up close. He had heard rumors that these Anathema might not all be terrible and cruel things, and while such talk seemed preposterous here in the Blessed Isle, Rosevel had heard many stories from friends who visited outer cities such as Nexus and Chiaroscuro where the Anathema are said to run amock. He envied such stories. He longed for the excitement of a life where danger and fascination were bedfellows. Rosevel wondered if this was an opportunity for him to live such a life.

His eyes scanned the corner of the room. There, resting against another barrel, was a large metal clamp. It was a tool that made it easier to grab hold of a barrel and lift it to different part of the room. Rosevel wondered if it was strong enough to clamp down against the Anathema's arms and pin it to the ground. Looking around further, he saw a small bread knife that was still on its wooden tray, slab of bread and cheese beside it. With enough force any pointy edge can become a better weapon. Rosevel shook his head. Strength was definitely not his strong suit. He actually paid the neighbors to lift the barrels for him when he needed them moved. Finally, there was the wooden box that hung by the wall. An old friend once told him it was a firewand, an archaic weapon that was worth a lot of jade. The friend joked it still had one last load of ammunition in it. Rosevel wasn't certain if that story was true. And didn't feel like rising his life on a dud. He sighed. The clamp it is.

Oblivious to this was Sisa, the Lunar who was asleep atop the barrels. The Chosen of Luna was a No-Moon and



her gifts included perceptive abilities that allowed her to be an effective tracker. Even this act of sleeping was not just resting. While she laid against the barrels, part of her mind plumbed the depths of dream to review her investigations so far. In her dreams, she could review everything she had witnessed, even if they were details that she did not pay attention to at that moment.

As Rosevel slid beside the clamp, his eyes noticed the sparkle of stars from the white gray fur of the Anathema. Drawn to it, Rosevel leaned towards Sisa's form and stared at the Starmetal permit. He was not familiar with Starmetal nor the permit's appearance. All he saw was a fascinating bauble made of a Magical Material he had never seen before. That close, Rosevel failed to resist the temptations of curiosity. He reached out to touch the item and in his eagerness his sleeve brushed against Sisa's fur. She awoke with a word escaping her lips, "Conspiracy."

Rosevel gasped as Sisa's powerful hand clamped around his throat. With a slow rise, Sisa sat upright and held Rosevel suspended above her. The merchant stared at her flexed muscles and realized she barely strained to hold him aloft. His high very quickly dissipated as fear pumped into his veins. He tried to beg for mercy, but her hold on his throat suffocated any words away.

"The Conspiracy does not make sense," Sisa muttered to herself. Even if she had been awoken by the merchant's presence, her focus was still on the threads of facts she was connecting in her dream. "What would bring an old teacher, a Travel accountant, and a translator to work with a thief? And where would all of them go that Heaven itself



fails to find any trace of their departure? There are facts I am failing to see in this. I need to dream deeper.”

The merchant could see dots. Black dots dancing at the edges of his vision. He slammed both fists against the hand, hoping she would let go. He kicked against the air and tried to squirm but that only caused more pain as it made him twist his neck against her vice-like grip. When he heard her talk about dreaming deeper, however, he realized he could perhaps offer something! Something to have her spare his life. He pointed to the nearby shelf, repeatedly jabbing a finger in the air towards one of the vials. Sisa noticed his incessant movement and was about to hurl him away when she noticed his focus on the vial.

“You offer an exchange?” she asked.

He could not respond in any other way save for more finger pointing. The black dots were now a growing border of darkness. He was feeling numb. Sisa, however, felt his slowing pulse beat for a moment when her question was stated. She sensed his urgency. She understood.

Air came to Rosevel like water to the thirsty. His eyes opened to see the Anathema holding the vial to her nose. He began to see it was a woman, despite the fur, fangs, and that one single yellowed eye. Her other eye was green, and humanlike.

“This will help me dream deeper,” she stated. He realized it was a question and he quickly nodded, even as he focused still on taking deeper breaths.

“Then you may live,” she popped the vial open as she motioned with her other hand towards the door, “And if you are far away by the time I reawaken, then you may keep your life.”



Rosevel's life of adventure and excitement ended with him running away. And to be honest, for the merchant, that was quite a happy ending.



WAVES

The term Lost Egg was a term used to differentiate Dynast children from those who were raised without the proper understanding of their role and place in the Scarlet Empire. While solely intended to refer to Dragon-Blooded who have had exaltations that were not prepared for, either due to distance or the lack of properly trained hosts, the terminology has gained some usage in common parlance to refer to any Dynasts who had been tainted with the “barbaric practices” of the people who live outside of the Blessed Isle. The need for many of the non-exalted Dynasts to raise themselves up in comparison to their outer realm counterparts lead to the corruption of the derisive term.

This, sadly, would explain why Cathak R’sel would end up referring to the pirates of the Pagi as such. The crew of the Pagi, let it be known, were pirates. And that term is used here without judgment for they were smugglers and thieves that targeted the misfortunate ships that happened to be in their path. Today was a special day, however, as the barque presented itself as a suitable target for them. The Pagi had just concluded an illegal delivery of goods to black



market allies when they saw the barque's solitary journey across the massive river.

"Stay close to me, Sid," Cathak R'sel warned as he positioned himself on the deck to receive the coming wave of pirates. The Pagi had flanked the barque after its first two shots struck and damaged the barque's main mast. "They're preparing to board us."

"I'm just as much a Dynast as you are. I grew up learning how to fight and protect myself," Hoyd'nis Sid reminded him as she stood by his side. She planted her foot down, shin against his, and readied herself for a big fight. Around them, the crew of the Asperitas was in near panic. The captain of the barque barked orders upon the bothered men, instructing them to jury-rig ways to keep the mast functioning even while the rest of them prepared to be boarded. Only one of the crew was Dragon-Blooded, that much became apparent to Sid and R'sel. And that was old man Theolo. Theolo was clearly in his senior years, with white hair on both his head and his chest. Numerous tattoos proclaimed his name exploits on his skin, including a lavishly illustrated battle against sea serpents. His skin was somewhat bluish in hue and occasionally bubbles danced in the air as a trail behind his movements.

"You two eager young ones looking for some actions, I see," he laughed and grabbed hold of a blue and silver ring that disengaged into loose connected parts with a flick of his wrist. The ring had become a complex chain of jade and steel links. "Fought on a ship before?"



"It is a barque," R'sel replied, "And no, we never fought on one before." An errant wave had the two clutching each other to stay balanced. "Any tips for us, sir?"

"Don't fall into the drink," Theolo laughed and hurled one end of his chain at the damaged mast. The end coiled around and locked in place, allowing Theolo to use it to pull himself up towards the flapping cloth. Sid and R'sel stumbled to the side, the one the rest of the crew called, "port" and watched as the other ship continued its approach. On the deck of the other ship, numerous men and women bared their weapons and shouted profanities. R'sel glanced around and saw the crew on their ship only had a handful ready to raise arms. The rest were still struggling to contain the damage inflicted on their mast. Sid squeezed his shoulder and gave him a nod. "We got this," she told him. He saw her smile and the fire flickered into life in his hair.

On the Pagi, the pirates eagerly waited for the moment the barque was within range. They knew that a Dragon-Blooded was on board, but given two of their number were lost eggs, they believed themselves more than ready to deal with them. The first was a stern man with sunburnt skin and dry purple hair. One hand was encased in a yellow jade gauntlet that was thicker than his own head. His name was Bethr and his exaltation was a story he openly shared with his crew. They were sailing through a Wyld Storm when one of the Fair Folk enraptured his entire crew into thinking they were pigs. Bethr felt the warm marble embrace of the Dragon Pasiap shielding him from its enchantments. The second was the ship's first mate, and his second wife, Jebel. She was a hefty woman with a hearty



laugh and a deadly aim. She was a child of Sextes Jylis and had bamboo shoots growing out of her hair.

“Surrender the ship,” Bethr called out, “And we will allow you all to swim to safety.”

Sid and R’sel glanced around their deck to see what response their side would make. What no one expected was a response from above. Theolo kicked off the broken mast and swung across the gap. On the last second, he let go of the rope and a sudden wave crested against the Pagi, shoving it a few feet... just enough for Theolo to make it across. The old man landed on the Pagi with a powerful slam, hurling some of the pirates to their feet from the shockwave that splashed outwards.

Bethr and Jebel stared at each other in shock. Both expected to receive a call for surrender. Sid and R’sel grinned and prepared to follow suit.

“The Asperitas has been with my family for over four generations,” Theolo explained as he straightened up and spun the jade chain around him like a robe. It hung on his shoulders and captured the light. “As has this weapon, the Serpent’s Tendril. My great grand father won it in a riddle match against the Fair Folk. My grand father used it to blind a behemoth and save his crew. My mother used it to hold the Asperitas together after a savage Anathema nearly tore it apart. And today, I use it to shove you pirates back into the sea.”

Bethr raised his jade fist and locked his footing in place. Jebel drew a bamboo arrow from her hair and



readied it on her one-handed crossbow. Theolo felt his elemental energies swirl into the jade chain, causing it to glow a blue light.

“But make no mistake,” Theolo added, “Defeating you two ain’t my legendary story. You’re just a passing footnote in how the Serpent’s Tendril was part of my life at sea!”

Jebel gasped, insulted by the remark. She launched the bamboo arrow. It curved in the air, evading Theolo’s first attempt to parry it and curved back for a second attempt to strike the old man from behind. But the old man was not unaccustomed to fighting emerald dragons. Theolo’s foot kicked backwards almost as an afterthought, finding the bamboo arrow’s return. The jade chain whipped across the distance smashing against Bethr’s face and drawing blood. But the ivory dragon had no fear of pain and allowed the blow to strike to entangle the chain with his jade fist. Theolo pulled back but Bethr’s superior strength kept the weapon trapped! Jebel leapt into the air above the other pirates and took the opportunity to launch two more bamboo arrows. Theolo spun towards Bethr, wrapping himself around his own chain to have the links catch each arrow before they reached his skin.

“Ha! Old man like me still got some tricks in me,” Theolo cheered. Jebel and Bethr growled back.

“We have to get there,” R’sel told Sid, “He won’t last long on his own.” Sid looked at the gap between the ships and then back at R’sel. She noticed the pirates were still ready to board. She had an idea. It was all a matter of timing.



“Listen, when the pirates launch their hooks to board our ship-“

“Barque.”

“-Darn it, barque, you can kick me across. It won’t hurl me all the way but-“

“I can use the ropes to leap across,” R’sel understood, “And take the fight to them.”

Sid grabbed R’sel’s wrist to keep him from moving away. R’sel raised his other hand in front of Sid, signaling her to stay put.

“You’re kicking me across,” Sid reiterated.

“I’m a lieutenant of the Scarlet Empire,” R’sel reminded her, “It is my duty to protect you on your journey to the Academy.”

The sound of jade impacting jade caught their attentions. Bethr parried Theolo’s blow from above with a well-timed headbutt. The two Dragonblooded were hurled away from each other to the full length of the jade chain. Theolo landed on his feet but kicked off at the last second to dodge two new bamboo arrows that landed where he just stood seconds ago. A third arrow flew wild and slammed on the railing near R’sel and Sid.

“I’m not letting you go ahead,” R’sel insisted.



"I'm not kicking you across," Sid laughed, then an idea hit her. It was a stupid idea. But it felt like the perfect moment to state it. "We call it then. Shorter straw goes first." R'sel was about to ask what she meant but she reached for the railing and tore the bamboo arrow from the side. She broke it into four pieces, hiding them inside her palm with the tips sticking out. "Choose the shorter straw and you go first. Leave it and you help me get across. Come on, R'sel. You can eventually follow! You can fire yourself up to get across!"

R'sel shook his head even as he agreed with her. There wasn't much time and Theolo clearly needed help. Reaching towards Sid, R'sel closed his eyes and hoped for the best. Sid didn't notice the small hints of light that danced around her as R'sel picked a bamboo shard. He drew it out and held it in front of them both. Sid slowly opened her hand to reveal the remaining pieces.

Of the four pieces, the two other pieces in Sid's hand were exactly the same length as the one R'sel held. The third piece, the one sitting in between the two, was almost a third in length compared to the rest.

"Guess luck is on my side," Sid smiled.

"It better be," R'sel pointed at the Pagi across the port side. The pirates were already launching their boarding hooks. He positioned himself behind Sid, balanced on one foot and prepared to kick. "Now jump!"

Sid soared through the air, propelled by R'sel across the gap. She did not notice the wavy glow of light that



improved her chances for a freak wave that moment to shove the Pagi closer to their ship, shortening the distance she had to cover. As she landed on the enemy ship, her opponents took a step back as they saw the dancing lights on her brow. They realized it was not the usual kind of thing they recognized among the Chosen of the Dragons.

R'sel would have noticed too, had he not tumbled backwards from his kick and rolled down the deck of the Asperitas. By the time he had recovered from his tumble, Sid was already eagerly in battle. She ducked and wove and kicked and swept and the pirates of the Pagi struggled to keep up. R'sel watched her with pride. It welled in his chest and threatened to burst out. And by burst out, small tongues of fire began to flicker out of his nostrils, eyes, and mouth.



DANGER

Wisp Spiders were translucent spiders with a eight inch leg-span. Commonly found in the kitchen, the Wisp Spider would spin beautiful geometric webs that would hang at the corners of cupboards and cabinets to catch pests. They were generally harmless and were even used by some kids to stage mock tournaments as they faced off each other's spider to see which can knock off the other first. Some housekeepers even celebrated the discovery of Wisp Spiders in a household, as it was proof that a place was to have far less pests than usual.

With measured steps, the Wisp Spider slipped into the room of the ramshackle place with the green paint. It slipped between the peeling paint strips and gingerly slid up the wall to the ceiling. To a casual eye, it was just another Wisp Spider searching for a place to call home. But to the attentive, the single feral eye stood out against the seven other black beady eyes. Unfortunately, for the Lunar, the Dragon King knew about the Lunar Tell. This was not, after all, the first time Anamne would encounter one of the Chosen of Luna.



“To what honor do I owe this meeting, Chosen of the many-faced-goddess. I have had many meetings with your kind, and while most of them were in good graces, a majority of the recent ones have not been well-remembered,” Anamne said.

Sisa continued to move across the wall.

“Uh, I was referring to you, little Lunar,” Anamne stressed. “You with the one yellow eye.”

Sisa was taken aback. She usually slipped in and out of places without effort. But this was the second time in within forty-eight hours that someone had noticed her presence again. She wondered if this had anything to do with her recent visits to Yu-Shan. After seeing the wondrous things and beings that resided there, could it be that some part of that remarkable place rubbed off onto her? Or worse, had seeing a place so much better now made what she used to ignore as every day daily grind into something insufferable.

With a flourish, Sisa transformed back into her humanoid form. Her bare feet touched the ground, and her prehensile toes then took grip on the cracks in the flooring. Her moonsilver tattoos gleamed as they found their proper positions in her skin. She stared at the scaled figure and noticed the empty chair on the opposite end of the table. An empty cup waited for her.

“Uh, coffee,” Sisa groaned.



“Everyone’s a critic... Yes, please, sit. I understand why you are here, and I am afraid you have come too late. What you seek is no longer here. Whom you seek has long since left,” Anamne motioned towards the cup then relaxed back into his own chair. Sisa scanned the room for anyone else but not even her empowered senses could find anyone hiding in the room. She immediately sensed, however, the patterns that supported Anamne’s claim. The offered chair has fresh markings on the ground, implying someone was recently there. The table had an almost imperceptible marking hinting something heavy was upon it some time earlier. Sisa had been warned that the prey she was to target had a supernatural means of concealing himself. But she was reminded it wasn’t impossible if one knew where to look. And looked quickly.

“Where,” Sisa demanded.

“Alas, even as we speak, I already struggle to remember. Memory has always been a struggle for me. And perhaps in some ways, that was precisely why I was chosen to fulfill my part.”

“Which was?” Sisa said.

Anamne paused. The way his eyes rolled suggested to Sisa he already was struggling to recall. The Dragon King tried to hide it with witty remarks, but Sisa could tell he was already simply trying to buy the other time to get further away. Ignoring his excuses, Sisa turned away and headed for the door. But at the corner of her eye, she caught the flash of crystal and obsidian and dodged at the last second by transforming back into a Wisp Spider. The



wall where her shadow earlier landed was pulverized into dust and debris. Anamne pulled the sword-club back as he laughed. He knew the Lunar was still somewhere nearby.

“Trickster trickster, where do you hide,” he laughed and swing again, this time at the ground where Sisa earlier stood. The Wisp Spider darted away, rushing between Anamne’s legs to hide beneath his very own shadow. “I will find you, little spy. And I will enjoy destroying you and the masters you serve.”

But Sisa knew better than to be goaded by the Dragon King. Focusing on the telltale traces, Sisa spotted the disturbed areas in the ground which suggested the visitor’s departure and quickly skittered in their direction. As she neared the threshold, however, a great shadow fell upon her once more. With her 360-degree vision as a Wisp Spider, she could see Anamne swinging the sword-club in a circular arc around him. She realized while she was safely outside the strike, the wake of destruction was still going to catch her. In a Wisp Spider form, that was going to have disastrous consequences. She changed, allowing her form to expand exponentially, with the moonsilver tattoos stretching as if to hold her physicality intact even as she impossibly gained mass that did not exist just microseconds ago. The Dragon King tore through the ground around him, perhaps a blind bid to protect himself, or to find her and strike her even without knowing where she was, but in her new form she could not and, more importantly, did not bother to hide her presence. Spreading out to slam into Anamne and the very walls, a massive Tyrant Lizard



decorated with webbed moonsilver markings roared into being and demanded to be noticed.

Anamne burst through the walls and rolled onto the shattered street. A smile spread on his face. His old veins surged with excitement and power. He had longed for a fight that was this... alive. "Olchilike! I was once one of the Chosen! Perhaps the gods that remember my role as their vessel when I show them how I can defeat the likes of you, Nightwitch!"

The term caught Sisa unawares. She hesitated long enough for Anamne to rush forward and grab her by the tail. With his hands holding her tight, earth suddenly ripped out from the shattered street and began to encase the Dragon King, until no sign of his scaled form remained. Sisa's sharp eyes noticed however it was no mere armor. The Dragon King's very substance had become stone! And with the stone was an incredible resilience and weight. She could not pull free from his grasp. Anamne hurled her into the next building and its brick walls were flimsy against her bulk. She crashed through and hit the ground, exposing the family of three who were screaming from underneath their dining table. Sisa, however, could not shake the distraction away. The Dragon King called her a Nightwitch. An old term for her kind. It recognized her more than just Lunar, the Anathema the Scarlet Dynasty despised! It recognized her an actual Lunar!

Sisa pulled her form back into her humanoid self, using her sudden loss of size and mass to slip out of his grasp. She changed, sparing the terrified family from being



crushed under her weight. Leaping onto the table, she raised both hands towards the Dragon King and called forth the mark of Luna upon her. The moonsilver markings on her body erupted with silver light. Her caste mark, an empty circle, shone upon her brow. A totemic image, a swarm of insects, roared into full iconic splendor as she presented herself formally. “Master Anklok, we should not be fighting!”

“The *Guro* offers us a weapon against those who seek to murder the world’s true saviors,” Anamne bellowed, “You and your hidden masters will not stop us!”

Sisa leapt to dodge each successive blow. Rocks burst from the ground with each powerful slam of the sword-club. Anamne’s strikes were missing, but each one was definitely closer than earlier. Sisa realized the Dragon King was far too lost in his rage. She knew the pains of living a life where one’s memories and one’s perceptions seemed to be at odds. Like the world they lived in failed to continue the paradise their memories claimed to have once existed. Her own exaltation to her Lunar nature was traumatic in its own way. And she will always remain thankful for the group of young shifters who helped her find herself. But she heard of stories that the Dragon Kings were not reincarnations. They were survivors of the ages that had passed. And few were able to retain full memories of what they had lived through. It was a punishing way to live.

In some ways, that fact made it easier for Sisa to deliver the killing strike. Shifting into the form of a hematite beetle, Sisa fluttered onto the Anklok’s shoulder and easily



timed her next flight to zip into his mouth as he bellowed. She latched onto his throat and held on, burying her vise-like jaws into the still fleshy meat of his throat. As Anamne trashed and struggled to cough her out, Sisa confirmed she was deep enough to avoid falling victim to his reach. She then spread her body, shifting from beetle into a spiked obsidian tarantula. Her jagged form tore into his throat as she spun a quick and thick web to seal his throat from the inside. The Dragon King staggered as it realized it could not breath and thought it was tough enough to probably resist suffocation for a good number of minutes, its rage led it to further stupid acts. Anamne smashed himself against the walls and the ground, hoping to dislodge the invading pest. And when that didn't work, Anamne began to claw against his own stone skin, reverting back to flesh to rip himself open in a panicked bit to free himself.

The was a bloody way to go, Sisa admitted to herself as she crawled out of the fallen Dragon King, probably made worse by the emotional rollercoaster of panic her own trickery instilled upon him, and it was clearly an effective one. By the time Sisa stood fully humanoid once more in the heart of the demolished block, Anamne breathed no more. And the Lunar faded from view.



SCARS

The battle on the Pagi did not last much longer. Fighting against the pirates, Hoyd'nis Sid saw Theolo distracted by Bethr long enough for Jebel to find a perfect moment to fire two arrows. She leapt, parried the incoming bamboo arrows from the Lost Egg and landed beside the old man. To their surprise, all the assailants turned away. The pirates on the deck all turned to the sight of a vibrant pillar of fire that erupted from the Asperitas. Jebel and Bethr stepped back, bracing for impact from what they thought was a cannon they failed to take into account on their approach. The crew of the Pagi leapt for the ground, seeking over from what they thought was a burst of powerful sorcerous magic. Instead, the bright surge of what almost seemed like the sudden rising of the sun came from the young lieutenant, Cathak R'sel, whose anima erupted as an iconic display that was visible for miles. The image was of a massive structure whose geometry and angles implied a massive keep. Or an immolated castle. The manifestation towered beyond the top of the masts of both ships, and the intense heat threatened to set both aflame.

For the pirates, it was enough reason to withdraw. Cries for mercy could be heard. Some even feared that



R'sel was one of the Immaculate Monks. Jebel called for the retreat. Bethr bowed towards the old man Theolo and grunted, "We are withdrawing. You win this fight."

Theolo could not reply. He was lost staring at the fiery display. Framed by the burning display, Sid turned to look at Theolo and hurried to see if he needed help. What greeted her instead was a question she chose not to answer.

"You didn't tell me you were purebloods!"

She couldn't because there was no such thing. But at the same time, she couldn't because she was trying not to show what she noticed. The iconic display was no massive building of war or iconic bastion of power.

It was an open oven, with its fire roaring strong.



"So how long have you two kids been Chosen by the Dragons," Theolo asked as the Asperitas continued its trek across the winding river. The crew kept their distance now, mindful of the Dragon-Blooded in their midst. For many of them, Theolo was the sole chosen they ever met. Sid was about to answer but R'sel held her shoulder and spoke up for them both. "I am a lieutenant of her majesty. And I am escorting a chosen pupil of the House of Bells."

"The Bell House," Theolo laughed, "Been a while since I was there."



“You studied there too,” Sid asked, surprised. Theolo didn’t look like a proud dynast soldier. He laughed and pulled back his right sleeve to show a tattoo on his shoulder. It was a building with two large structures. And on its background, a massive sad face. R’sel was confused.

“Bad memories,” R’sel wondered, not really asking.

Sid got it, however, and said it at the same time as Theolo, “Fort Misery.” R’sel shrugged, still not getting it. Sid playfully punched him on the arm, “That’s cause you enjoyed training all that time. Others teasingly call the training fort, Fort Misery, given the intense training expected of everyone there.”

“I don’t get it,” R’sel admitted, “I have fond memories of training there-“

“Your boy’s either a masochist or a loyal servant of the Scarlet Dynasty,” Theolo laughed.

“But I am. I don’t get why that’s a joke!”

“It’s okay,” Sid admitted, “It’s a bad joke, I guess. Not everyone likes the idea of being raised to think and act more like a soldier.”

“You’re about to be a soldier,” R’sel said, “The House of Bells boasts a long history of generals, heroes, and battles won. Dominie Cathak Anio sent me to personally escort you back which is a true honor given the school only accepts five students each year.”



“Tell that to the Roseback,” Theolo muttered. Sid instantly saw the shift in R’sel’s face. The lieutenant clearly did not appreciate the reference. Perhaps it was because the officer was tied to the infamous “Red-Piss” legion. Or perhaps it had to do with the rumors that she was on the verge of seizing far too much power and challenging even the standing Houses. Theolo leaned down and rolled up a pant leg. The tattoo on his left shin showed an intricate rose whose stem wrapped around a skeletal arm. The leg showed massive scarring. “She earned her name in the House of Bells, successfully fighting against Anathema and other horrors alike, and in the end, what did they do? They threw her a general post and expected her to disappear under the burden of handling a legion that barely could fight.”

“Are you saying the Scarlet Dynasty does not treat its soldiers well,” R’sel sounded angry. Perhaps he didn’t mean it to sound that aggrieved. But it was too late to say it any other way. Sid could sense R’sel’s frustration and intervened. She stood up and nudged R’sel to walk with her, “Let’s get some air.”

Theolo sighed. He walked after the two and raised both hands to show he didn’t mean to do harm. “I’m sorry. I clearly have unhappy history with the Legions. Felt abandoned one too many times, I guess.” He reached a hand towards R’sel and waited for the young lieutenant to take it, “I apologize.”

R’sel nodded and took the hand.

“I just thought that the son of Verdug would have agreed with me.”

The two looked at the old man and watched him head back to the captain of the Asperitas. The crew assessed the damage on the mast and worked on repairing what they could. R’sel, however, was now uncertain how to proceed. Did he want to ask Theolo what he knew of his father? Or was there just enough scars present that focusing on healing was the better choice to make?



FACTS

For Sidereals, the existence of Arcane Fate was a reality they simply had to find a way around. As was the way things were, new Sidereals relished at the thought of living a life without repercussions. Being able to do things and always get away with it, to have people forget you were there, or what your name was, it was a sense of supreme invisibility that most often was misunderstood to be freedom. The fact of the matter, however, was that it was not freedom at all. Instead it was a perpetual prison of non-recognition. And worse, it meant the only ones who knew and remembered you were the ones who really wished didn't. Because those would be the people in charge.

For Sisa, a No-Moon Lunar who was given the impossible task of tracking the conspiracy behind the stolen scroll case, the facts did not make sense. That seemed to be the more acceptable way to view things given if the facts did make sense, then it was her senses that failed her. Because for Sisa, whose supernatural sense and tracking abilities were at the very edges of impossible, the facts were these:

- a) The Conspiracy was a long con, with people involved in it establishing their roles over the years.



- b) All the said people have vanished.
- c) Most physical evidence of those involved seem to fade or get destroyed if enough time passes.
- d) The trail that still remains is composed of the trail of annihilation that has been left in the Scroll's wake.
- e) The one who retained her to handle the job gave her a Permit to travel through the Celestial Gates.
- f) There were still individuals involved in the conspiracy that she has yet to uncover, with one of them being someone called the Guro.
- g) That person might have been who the Dragon King just met with.

Sisa had heard of the emergence of other kinds of Exalted. Of Exigents, who embody specific traits or domains of influence the way the Solars embody key abilities. For every Solar leader, general, and thief, Sisa has heard of Exigents who embody masks, murder, and even dance. Who knows, maybe this *Guro* was an Exigent of Mystery? Or an Exigent of Being Ignored?

“Why would he come here,” Sisa pondered aloud and looked up to see the House of Bells at the horizon. The Lunar’s ears perked up as she realized something. Among the language of the Tikbalang, the horsemen she spoke with in Yu-Shan, the word *Guro* would have meant, “Teacher.” *Where else would a teacher be?*





The Asperitas reached the docks of Arjuf. Tall banners proclaimed the city the heart of Arjuf Dominion and taller guide towers flanked the walkway. A lighthouse stood at the banks, which lead to the dam which guided the water's descent into the Inner Sea. From the barque, the city of Arjuf was like a wall of corals, with peaks and tall towers jutting out of the mass of buildings, roof tops, and squatted homes. The city was one of the best designed cities, given the economic power that the place generated. The Imperial Merchant Fleet was based here, which explains the attention to function and detail in how the docks were designed. House Ledaal, one of the major Houses, was in charge of the city's development, which relied on geomancy and proper architectural considerations whenever expansion was being considered. Not too far from the city itself was the distant high walls of a second major structure, the House of Bells.

None of this, however, were noticed by the two. Their attentions instead were on the gathering of people at the dock which included bands with instruments, soldiers with spears, and a palanquin which provided shade. Lanterns with colored paper were raised, throwing bursts of hues upon the gathered. Music started playing as the Asperitas approached. Banners were raised and from what could be read of the script, Sid's name was being displayed.

"Did you know anything about this?" Sid asked R'sel. The young man slowly shook his head, unsure how to reply as acrobats suddenly were hurled upwards, leaving dust in their wake. As they fell back to the crowd, they were safety caught then triumphantly posed.



“Looks like this is where the journey ends,” Theolo smiled and motioned for the crew to lower the gangplank. The revelers at the dock cheered even louder as the barque came to a full stop then fell silent as they saw the nearly completely shattered mast that was bound with ropes, hooks, and hammered nails. “We hope your journey with us was a memorable one.”

The animated crowd returned their efforts to show an excited and eager celebratory mood as Sid and R’sel descended from the steps. While R’sel earlier felt the urge to ask Theolo about his dishonored father, such thoughts were easily overwhelmed by the banners and paper fans that were waved around to the beat of the group chanting out Sid’s initials. Sid nudged R’sel from behind and asked again, “Tell me you did this. Didn’t you?” but the face was, the young man was just as lost as she was. It was only after the dancers and mascots stood aside did the two young dynasts get a better idea of what was happening. Dressed in a traditional magistrate’s robe, with the official headpiece encrusted with crystals and threaded in gold sitting heavily on her head, Dominie Mnemon Onuse, walked into view. She was currently the head of the Spiral Academy, the secondary school dedicated to training Dynasts the importance of the Four Great Arts of calligraphy, finance, poetry, and languages. She was shorter than most expected but had a presence that intimidated many to silence with a single nod.

“Hoyd’nis Sid, daughter of Mera. Daughter of Varid It is good to finally meet you,” Onuse held her hand out for Sid and R’sel to take. Both early went close and bowed, with R’sel tugging on Sid to bow even lower. Onuse smiled



and motioned at R'sel that was not necessary. "The Thousand Scales would be honored to have you among our ranks."

Sid stared, dumbfounded. They traveled here to Arjuf for the House of Bells. But now, even the Spiral Academy is making its declarations to accept her.

"There must be some mistake," R'sel spoke up, interposing himself between the Dominie and Sid, "Dominie Cathak Anio personally sent me to escort Sid to the academy."

With a flick of her wrist, Onuse opened a paper fan. Like the rippling of bird wings, the entourage opened their own fans. Then in unison, they all moved, cooling the area. "I understand, the wonderous one is sought by another school as well. But has ultimately not chosen to enroll yet? Meaning, she is still free to decide where she wants to go." The last part was more a statement than a question. R'sel opened his mouth to say something, but then Onuse and the entourage began flapping the fans loud enough to drown his voice away. The generated wind was enough to cause the nearby birds to flutter away. R'sel folded his arms in front of his chest, annoyed at the shushing. With a single snap, Onuse signaled the fans to stop and silence returned.

"There is the additional factor to consider. The Spiral Academy sent a missive nearly a month ago, confirming the fortunate one's acceptance to the Academy. I presume your parents showed you this letter?"



R'sel could not hide the shocked expression on his face. He turned to Sid, hoping she would deny that happened. But when he saw her staring at the ground, he realized she did receive the supposed letter. He reached out towards her, hoping she would take his hand. Sid did not move. "Does this mean you actually wanted to go to the Spiral Academy instead?" he asked her.

"No!" she exclaimed a little too loud, causing the entire entourage to fall silent. They turned to Onuse, hoping she would signal them on what should be their next reaction. The Dominie was too shocked herself to respond. Sid stepped away from everyone, waving her hands repeatedly as if the stress she was feeling would fly away through her motions. She could almost imagine herself turning smaller and smaller, vanishing from the docks. "I'm sorry!" she called out, "I can't talk to any of you right now!"

Someone slipped in the entourage, and this led to a cascade of unexpected things. The man who slipped ended up shoving another man who was holding a bag of fireworks that were meant to be ignited when Onuse gave the signal. The man with the fireworks dropped the flammable things, and most of them rolled onto the dock. A woman with a hooded lantern lost balance, and the yellow covered lantern in her hands smashed into the large musical instrument the burly man beside her was playing. The resulting impact caused a shower of glass that caused a second musician to panic, and in his attempt to block the shards with his drum, he ended up forcing the lantern to crash down onto the dock. This led to sparks igniting the fireworks.



As the entire entourage erupted into a tap-dancing swarm of chaos, both R'sel and Onuse lost sight of Sid who ducked away to find some peace of mind. It would not have mattered how sharp their focus on her was, that moment, as Sid had without thinking slipped away in a manner that would have been impossible for one of the Dragon-blooded. Sid found herself further up the docks, standing near the entrance to one of the nearby taverns. She wasn't certain how she got there. She only knew deep down she wished she had walked ahead rather than stop and talk with the group that welcomed them.

"Oh, this is all gone wrong, all gone wrong," the Dominie Mnemon Onuse bemoaned as she signaled for the group to contain themselves and stop panicking. The fireworks continued to shoot in all directions as they left trails of color and spiraling sparks. She repeatedly called for everyone to stop and used her folded paper fan to smack the heads of those who weren't paying attention. "We did it too soon! We presented it all too soon! She's not even here! Hoyd'nis Sid is not at the docks!"

But even as Onuse exclaimed this over and over again, R'sel knew in his heart that she was wrong. He remembered being with Sid as they thanked the crew of the Asperitas for getting them to Arjuf. He remembered Sid nudging him from behind, asking if he was the one who set the crowd to welcome them. He stared at the entire group of people at the dock and realized none of them seemed to remember what he did – Sid was standing beside him just a few seconds ago. R'sel had experienced many strange things in the past. He had spoken to elemental



spirits, bargained with hungry ghosts, and even rumbled with barbarian warlords. He had his share of encounters with the weird and the supernatural. This reeked of that sort of an encounter. This felt like something beyond the norm was making them all remember things differently.

R'sel had no idea, however, why he alone was not affected. Or more importantly, where Sid was now.



Like a shadow falling upon the stones, Sisa gently landed on the outer wall of the House of Bells without a sound. She scanned the area for any sign of something that seemed out of place. She watched the cadets on the field going through their exercises. She spied on the future strategoi going through their classes on strategy and warfare. Nothing seemed to catch her eye. Nothing screamed out of place to her enhanced senses.

It was, after all, still near impossible for the Lunar to see past the Arcane Fate that surrounded the old man. All Sisa could see was Juris Pevatt, library consultant and occasional teacher in the House of Bells. The old man created this identity many years earlier. Through it, the old man was able to infiltrate the House of Bells and form connections with outstanding cadets and future generals. Juris walked past the classrooms and made his way to the House of Bells Scriptorium. He walked with purpose and waved away any students that greeted him.

And as interesting as it might have been if these two key characters in the story were to meet, the fact of the



matter was, this was not where their meeting was to take place. That was meant for much later in the narrative.



Wait. Yes. There. Sisa's essence-honed senses picked it up despite the impossibility of it being noticed. A familiar scent. The smell of coffee in the air. Sisa looked around for where that faint scent was coming from. It was far too unique to have been a coincidence. And it had no place being in this academy.

Okay, maybe they will meet. Sorry, being a narrator can be tough when you are dealing with beings who sometimes can step out of Fate. And that's another fact you better never forget.



ESCAPE

The Wet Pack was one of the many taverns that can be found along the docks of Arjuf. Given the docks serviced both ships that traversed the Blessed Isle's massive rivers and the vessels that took to the Inner Sea, the opportunities to make coin could not be underestimated. Igaga Muga understood the importance of opportunity and, more importantly, recognized the need to stand out. However, Muga was also a dynast of the nearly fallen House Iselsi. As a child, Muga was aware that her family was part of a dying institution. The Iselsi had no legion in its shadow, nor any satrapies that it governed. And even her parents were forced to handle businesses in secret. The last name, Igaga, was a false one which they embraced so they could become a cog in the economic machine of the empire.

Muga grew up knowing that life was unfair and that survival meant learning to find ways to escape the truth. She embraced her false name and left the family compound to seek out a new name and place for herself. Her journey lead to Arjuf where she realized hundreds of merchants and opportunists squatted on the many areas along or near the docks in hopes of attracting transients and sailors to



spend their coin on their wares. What no one offered, however, was a place to escape from the world. A place to get nothing for a moment and in that period of emptiness, find the time to do what one needed to do

Wet Packs was born.

Muga named the tavern after a fond memory she had of her family once entertaining a guest in the house. The guest was a captain and while Muga failed to remember her name, she remembered her father talking about how the captain was the best navigator of the Inner Sea. She knew the secret currents to take and the best routes to avoid Imperial Inspectors and pirates alike. The Captain once commented, "If you fail to avoid them, the next best thing you can do is to make sure the top layer of your cargo is soaked. Wet packs leads to them believing the cargo is worthless. You might lose some coin in the end, but that's far better than losing the entire shipment." Embracing that adage, Muga created a tavern without the dancers and music. A drinking place with only cold beer and no rum. A bar with expensive rooms and a policy against violence. An unpopular place. Which made it a perfect escape for those who wanted an empty spot to find respite in. And respite was exactly what Sid needed that moment.

As the troubled student walked into Wet Packs, Igaga Muga offered a friendly smile from behind the counter and rang the tiny bell to let Sid know the staff had noticed her. Muga brought out a small tray that held a tall glass of fruit juice, and a small wooden sign that read: 1 Yen. The welcome was already the cost of a day's wages for a worker. The same amount would have gotten another more than



eight times that number in beers or at least two bottles of wine at another place. It was Muga's initial deterrent. To Muga's surprise, the lone student planted a yen down on the tray, took the juice, and sat the chair closest to the fireplace. Muga pocketed the yen and set the tray aside. She was more used to high rollers, self-proclaimed celebrities, and criminal figures seeking privacy. A solitaire student was definitely not among her expected list of clientele.

Sid was oblivious to Muga's surprise. She was far too lost in her own thoughts regarding the invitations she had received. She dug the scroll tubes out from her pack and laid them in front of her. The one from the Spiral Academy was made of bronze and silver, with delicate embossed markings that featured the Academy's four major Arts. The second was the invitation from the Cloister of Wisdom. The case was simple, but its lock was made of five different kinds of jade. The script within was flowing and graceful. It spoke of her name coming to the Grand Masters' during their meditations. That the Dragons themselves have chosen her for this honor. And the third was from the House of Bells. Three grand invitations for a young woman who only wanted to spend more time with a young man.

"Quite an impressive collection," Muga mused as she tended the fire. She added another block of oak into the flames. The fire seized upon the block and eagerly wrapped around it. It took a moment for Sid to notice the pair of beady eyes and its brighter orange maw. She gasped. Muga gave a soft chuckle and slid the fence closed. "It's a tiny



elemental. A friend of the family, I must say. You can keep a secret, yes?"



Sid remembered how the Immaculate Order would have frowned on such fraternizing with the spirits. She then realized the scroll from the Cloister was in full view. Blushing, she quickly reached for them to hide them back in her pack. Muga however motioned for her to calm down. The older Dynast pointed at the fire again, "We can keep each other's secrets." Sid felt her offer was genuine.

"I didn't mean to," Sid began, but quickly realized she wasn't sure what she was about to say either. "I just happened to be at your door. I actually don't quite remember walking here."

"Sounds like you've had a rough time then," Muga walked back to the counter and dug for some things from out of view. Sid sat back down but felt cold despite the warmth of the fire. She pulled her legs up to hug her knees. Shimmering against the fire light, Sid's toe red boots were hard to miss. They were meticulously crafted and had three straps that locked them in place around each foot. Metallic ink marked the heel of each one with the crest of their house. Muga noticed the boots as she walked back towards Sid with a tray laden with bread, cheese, some fruit, and a pair of cold beers. Sid shook her head worriedly, realizing she probably couldn't afford all that given the tea alone was a Yen.

"Stop worrying," Muga said as she laid the tray down on the table, "This is on the house. I recognize those boots. You're Mera's kid?"



“You know my mother!”

“It is hard not to. Mera was quite the character. But I only guessed right because I saw the boots. I recognize her handiwork,” Muga laughed and joined Sid at the table. She slid one of the bottles towards her and opened the other with her teeth. Spitting the cap out, Mera took a swig and continued, “Mera and I were friends once.”

“I guess we merchant families need to stick together,” Sid took a swig and almost immediately spat it out. The beer sprayed against the fireplace, which caused the fire elemental to scream in panic! Muga, however, just laughed. Sid hurried to the fireplace, worried she had killed the elemental but instead saw it flickering stronger to evaporate the beer bubbles in its abode.

“Those guys are pretty hardy,” Muga admitted, “But the fact you were worried about Ch’ko’ho there shows your heart is in the right place.”

Sid however frowned at that statement. She realized Muga was wrong. She had abandoned her heart somewhere out there, by the docks.



Cathak R’sel hurried down the dock, searching for any sign of his charge. Deep down, the young man was loathed to admit it, but the truth of the matter was that he was less worried about having failed in his duties and more worried that he had said something to have made her run away. He



felt he may have pushed her too hard when he asked her about the invitation. He hated the possibility that he had acted as... demanding... as Sid's father was based on the stories she had told of him.

As R'sel peeked into the first doorway he reached, a bottle flew past his head and crashed into the docks outside. A brawl was in progress between a pair of arguing sailors, and the rest of the guests did not even seem to notice, as they continued drinking and joined the shanties that the rest were singing. He shut the door and hurried to the next one but froze upon seeing the blue-skinned woman dressed in the most revealing silks that barely covered her three ample breasts. R'sel actually resisted asking the obvious question and ducked away to a third door that promptly slammed shut in front of his face. A voice from within yelled out, "Members only!"

"She's over there," R'sel heard someone offer and he turned to see the Dominie Menmon Onuse herself standing behind him. The Dominie pointed with her lips, as if she was pouting, "That one."

R'sel immediately dropped to one knee to show respect. These things were hard-wired in the young man. "Thank you, kind Dominie. I shall reprimand her for having disrespected you in that way. She should not have run-"

"Oh enough, R'sel. Enough. Let's stop all these pretenses of title and tradition for now, shall we?" Onuse wrapped an arm around his, pinning him to stand closer to her. R'sel, being taller than her, was forced to walk with



his knees oddly bent. "If I go in there first, she's gonna bolt again. So, you're gonna go in first and let her know I'm coming. And no, I won't force a decision on her."

"Thank you," R'sel began.

"Not when she's already, clearly, made up her mind," Onuse laughed and continued half-dragging R'sel towards a distant building. R'sel scanned the building and noticed its cleaner exterior, its well-painted walls and its fixed roof. He saw the windows had shuttered and none of them were broken. A small chimney even gave off some smoke. Most importantly, each step bringing them closer to it also brought them more silence. R'sel said the first thing that came to mind.

"It looks.. expensive."

"It probably is," Onuse shrugged, "I'm a Magistrate, boy. I got money to burn."

"Burning Yen is illegal"

"Oh shush," Onuse said as she gave R'sel a light jab in the ribs, "You're running the fun." The two stumbled closer to the door.



"Did you ever meet my father?" Sid wasn't quite sure why she asked the question. She had not seen him in years. Most of her memories of him were faint as they were memories she had of him when she was still quite young.



"Hoyd'nis Varid was a good man," Muga began, unawares that Sid was internally dealing with a wave of emotions that she did not expect to feel. It was strange for her to hear someone else say his name. Varid's absence in her life was something she struggled to define. For most people, the absence of someone was like a scab on a wound. Something that was irritating and annoying and picked at until it breaks, and the wounds are fresh again. For Sid, however, Varid's absence felt wrong. She could not explain it, but she just felt everyone had it wrong. Everyone understood he wasn't around. But no one understood that was not an acceptable thing. "He didn't relate with others well, that was a fact. But I feel that might have more been because he was a sorcerer. Aren't a lot of people out there who don't find Heptagram graduates spooky. Not with them turning their skin into bronze and the like."

"There is that," Sid sighed. "I actually have an old memory of him calling a wind spirit or something to carry us into the air. He said we were flying. I was terrified. I kept begging him to put me down. Kept telling him I wasn't having fun." Sid felt like she was there again. In the air. Cold. Alone. Afraid. She pulled her arms around herself and apologized to Muga, "I think I shouldn't have asked you that. Let's talk about something else."

The old Iselsi nodded and looked around the place, wondering what to say. The door opened and they both sighed in relief that something was breaking the silence. The strategoi stepped inside in his red jade armor. Muga worriedly glanced at her fireplace.



"It's okay, he's with me," Sid exclaimed as she hurried to R'sel and gave him a tight embrace. She apologized for running away. For vanishing on him. She did not expect him, however, to apologize back. Before she could ask why he would apologize too, the Dominie stepped into view.

"Hear me out," Onuse told Sid. "And please don't duck away again. While my blessings allowed me to find you, this is still more the domain of Sable Dragons than those such as myself."

"Great Dominie!" Muga gasped as she dropped to her knees, "This lowly one is—"

"Annoying me if she won't stop acting like I'm looking for pleasantries. Maybe you should just serve us something to drink. It has been a long day," Onuse laughed and handed R'sel a few Yen, "Pay her for the kindness of keeping the door closed."

Muga was not about to question her good fortune. She quickly pocketed the money, served a bottle of wine, and made to watch the door from the outside. Onuse snickered at the bottle as she motioned for R'sel to open it, "The old coot clearly forgot to give us glasses. Now, let's get right on to it."

"I'm not going to the Spiral Academy. I do not want to be an accountant for the Empire. I do not like numbers. I do not enjoy calculating taxes and balancing the scales," Sid found the courage to answer the unasked question this time. She found strength in seeing R'sel there, in the room



with her. R'sel smiled back at her, his hair slightly sizzling as his anima leaked out.

“Oh, stop it you two,” Onuse said as she rolled her eyes, “I didn’t expect anything otherwise. The invitation came to you much earlier, but your lack of any response already answered that question. What is more important is that things have changed from when you first received that letter, haven’t they, Hoyd’nis?”

Sid nodded without a word.

“Oh, something tells me things have changed far more than you even realize it yourself,” she glanced at R'sel and ignored the fact he was now trying to pat out the fire in his hair. “Dragons help me but the two of you have a lot ahead of you in this road you’re taking.”

“What do you mean,” Sid was honestly confused.

“What are the four main Arts of the Spiral Academy?” Onuse asked. Sid couldn’t get the words out. She was too perplexed at the sudden quiz. R'sel stepped forward and answered, “Music. Gateway. Calligraphy. And Poetry.”

“Correct. Those are the building blocks of a true nation,” Onuse nodded as she maintained her gaze on the young man. Her wise eyes read more than the two ever realized. “And while people might think all that matters is the food they hunger for and the sword they hope to defend themselves with, those four Arts are what makes the world worth living in.”



Neither of the two seemed to understand. Onuse reached into her robes and drew out a tiny obsidian statuette. Sid received it with both hands. She cradled it as if it were a precious child. It was an onyx stallion, frozen in mid leap, with its mane whipped behind it.

“This is my gift to you, Hoyd’nis Sid. Know that the Spiral Academy is lesser for having lost you. But the world is far better for what you shall someday give back to it.”

Sid could not explain it, but she felt deep down in her heart that this was a goodbye. Earlier, when she stood in front of the Dominie, she could only feel the call of wanting to escape. But now, as the Dominie headed for the door with half a bottle of wine still in her hands, Sid could not shake off the intense sensation that she was seeing the Dominie for the very last time. R’sel was unlikely to feel the same thing, but one glance at Sid’s eyes brought him the understanding of this irrational fear. He took a step to block the Dominie’s departure and asked the question Sid could not find the courage to say.

“Will you be well, Dominie? Are you certain you do not need us? To help you?” R’sel didn’t really know how else to enunciate what he was seeing in Sid’s eyes. Onuse downed a bit more wine, then handed it to R’sel with a gentle push. She looked into his eyes, placed a hand against his cheek, and said it again:

“Music. Gateway. Calligraphy. And Poetry.”



And then she walked to the door, knocked on it for Muga to opened it wide, and left. Sid looked at R'sel and mouthed, *Did I say the right thing?*

R'sel replied back the same way, *You said what was in your heart.*



SHUSH

If any of you dear readers out there ever someday choose to be part of a long drawn out conspiracy, one likely to involve as well numerous organizations, secret connections, sacrificial allies, and a bounty hunter, let it be part of your knowledge that enjoying a cup of coffee brewed from what most likely is now an extinct strain of bean is not the wisest choice of actions if one were hoping to be untraceable. The distinct smell of the Ssaaneth were unmistakable and simply confirmed for Sisa that she had impossibly found the untrackable associate of the dead Dragon King.

Lamp Mice were common in libraries and archives in the Blessed Isle. Unlike their more destructive counterparts, Lamp Mice mingled in such places because they enjoyed the proximity to warm light sources and the dry chambers that came with shelves of books. Urban legends claim they enjoy reading the books when mortals head to bed.

In that case, the legends were somewhat correct. Now in the form of a lamp mouse, Sisa quietly followed Juris Pevatt as he closed each window in the Scriptorium and locked them shut. She was worried that Pevatt was the Guro, the mastermind behind the theft of the scroll. If he



was, then he was likely a being of immense power. Was he a Celestial God posing as a mortal among them? Or a Demon riding the skin of a mortal host? Perhaps he was a servant of the Deathlords? Or worse, a betraying doppelganger from the Fair Folk courts?

As the lamp mouse skittered up the shelf's side to watch from a higher vantage point, Pevatt locked down the last window and plunged the chamber into near complete darkness. Sisa rolled into the shelf's deep recesses in time to keep the weak yet unfading glow of her moonsilver tattoos from being noticed. The teacher groaned about the pain his back and joints were in as he lumbered back towards the main desk where he had left his small bag. Sisa was uncertain if she was willing to engage with the teacher in this room. She could not stomach the possibility their fight would destroy records of knowledge that were marked in the pages. Thankfully, the option to attack quickly faded away when a newcomer came into the chamber. Pevatt didn't seem surprised to hear the visitor arrive. He even stood up to acknowledge her arrival at the sound of her throwing her fan closed.

"Dominie Mnemon Onuse," Pevatt gave a low prolonged bow as he spoke, "I am blessed to have you in this chamber."

"Juris Pevatt," the Domini said, "I was not expecting you, to be honest. I had come here in hopes of checking a specific tome."

"I see," Pevatt maintained the bow, "Shall I find it for you?"

"That would be desired. The book is entitled, *The World-Shattering Habits of an Efficient Artist.*"



Sisa found the title preposterous. She hated how the Scarlet Empire not only proclaimed them Anathema but generalized them to be barbaric and uneducated. And yet, these dynasts and Dragon-blooded would waste their education and academic training with titles that were this pedantic and overblown? She risked a glance at the two and saw the Dominie waiting alone at the table. The other must have gone to find the book.

Barely a minute had passed when a voice whispered from behind a shelf.

"I am here, Dominie."

"Indeed, you are," she replied, "And we do not have much time."

Sisa would have acted then had the speaker not said his next few words.

"The Guro has not made contact with me, despite the original plan of receiving the case at Arjuf. Instead, an associate was waiting for me."

Neither of them was her target. Worse, the Dominie was seemingly aware of this transaction?

"I once knew you as someone I could trust," Onuse admitted, "But now you tread lines that I am not certain I can support. Even your affiliation with this Guro is something I cannot agree with. The Guro may, for all we know, be an agent of the darker forces that threaten the entirety of Creation. Turn away from this path, old friend. Stop this nonsense before things get worse. Return this case to wherever you had taken it."

"It is too late for that," the voice replied. Sisa wanted to risk skittering to the other side of the shelf. She wanted to risk a peek. But she feared that her position may be



compromised. As it stood, she already was gaining firsthand information from the suspects. And even better, they had no idea she was there, which increased greatly the possibility they would have no reason to lie. Seeing the other's face was probably worth getting more factual information. Staying put and remaining hushed down was her best choice of action, for now.

"The Guro cannot be trusted," Onuse repeated. "Tell me you are giving up on this.. plot with him."

"I have spent nearly ten years planning and enacting this plot, old friend. I have to finish it," the voice replied. "The other faction continues to grow stronger. Their hold on both the Dynasty and Heaven makes it harder for us each passing year. What I do now can change all that. What I do now can force them to abandon their vice-grip on society. Can give the Solars a chance to make a difference."

"But at what cost?" Onuse sighed. The next words chilled Sisa to the bone. They made her for a moment question all the time she despised being in service to one from the Celestial Bureaucracy. The servant was waiting in her domain when she arrived back from a hunt. Hanging around her shoulders were the torn limbs of a Buffalo Spider, massive predators that hunted in the far Eastern woods by pretending to be a small cove of trees. The Celestial Agent offered her the Badge, the chance to visit Heaven, and the chance to save the world. "Do this," he said, "And you shall no longer be seen as Anathema. Even the Scarlet Dynasty cannot turn its back on a Heroine which is recognized by Heaven itself." She thought the man to have been one maddened by the Wyld zones that were common in the woods this far in the East. But when the



Badge actually worked and the ancient metal gates actually sprung to life, she realized the man's offer was far from madness.

And the threat to the world was real.

Even the two down below agreed.

"At what cost," Onuse asked again, "How far will you go to force the other faction to weaken their resolve? They believe they are saving the world by keeping the true heroes of the realm from regaining their lost strength?"

"Stop," the voice sounded concerned, "You cannot say such things."

"A small price to pay to remind you of the cost you are risking!" Onuse insisted.

"It will force them to withdraw!"

"Because what you have is something as terrible, if not even MORE terrible than the Contagion itself!" Onuse was nearly shouting. Her voice was raised in anger and frustration. But still contained. As if they still feared Pevatt would return. Sisa wondered where the teacher had gone.

"We cannot risk Creation with something that terrible. How can you trust the Guro without even knowing who he is?"

"I do because the rest of the world deserves a better world. I must go, the Teacher returns."

"No! Damn you, don't go! We are not done—"

A heavy thud hit the ground. Sisa turned towards the sound and peeked. Pevatt was leaning down to pick a heavy tome back from the ground. He looked aghast that he had dropped the old tome.



“Oh dear, oh my, Dominie, I do hope you will forgive me. I did not mean to drop this,” Pevatt muttered, “You sounded like you were talking to someone?”

“No, there was no one else,” Dominie Onuse replied, “No one important.”

Sisa was horrified at the thought that one of the Dominie was part of this plot. But worse, she was horrified that the Guro was not yet anywhere nearby. She realized the coffee scent was fading and peeked to see Pevatt leaving the library. Onuse remained at the table, holding the book in her hands. The Dominie seemed to be trembling. Crying? Sisa decided the Dominie can wait. With a leap, the lamp mouse was gone and a white moth fluttered away from the chamber, its erratic flight following the smell of coffee in its wake.



End of Book Two: Scroll



ABOUT THE BOOK

“There are winds of destiny that blow when we least expect them. Sometimes they gust with the fury of a hurricane, sometimes they barely fan one’s cheek. But the winds cannot be denied, bringing as they often do a future that is impossible to ignore.” – Nicholas Sparks

Welcome to the second book. I do hope you are enjoying the ride. As you probably have noticed, this is a very different kind of Exalted story. A little bit more Jane the Virgin and a little bit less Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon. But still, with an epic level stakes that the heroes, eventually, will need to deal with.

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 love too easily gets pushed aside as something that only matters in romance. We too easily forget that love can be more powerful than anything, for good or ill.

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. He lives with his partner, Rocky, who inspires him every day to be an even better person than he was the day before.



Sid's Real Life

Book Two "Scroll"

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.

But a greater conspiracy is unfolding, and the two might find themselves part of a something that can change Creation forever.

Or destroy it.

Written by Tobie Abad.

