

ADAPTED BY
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FORBIDDEN LANDS
OF
THE
COLOSSUS

REMIX OF THE VIDEOGAMES

'SHADOW OF THE COLOSSUS', 'ICO' & 'THE LAST GUARDIAN'

-1-

“Shadow”

That place began from the resonance of intersecting points. They are memories, of ens and naught.

Etched into stone, blood, young sprouts, sky... and the one with the ability to control beings created from light.

In that world, it is said that if one should wish it, one can bring back the souls of the dead.

But to trespass upon that land is strictly forbidden.

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A hawk flew into the moonlit ravine.

He flew past a young man, riding a dark horse on a narrow ledge.

The horse was named Agro.

Her rider was called Wander. He wore ceremonial vestments, ill-suited to travel.

Clutched tightly in Wander's arms was a body, wrapped in a quilted shroud. Bare feet, pale as the moonlight, dangled lifelessly from the shroud.

They came to a break in the narrow ledge. Agro backed up, ran forward, and made a leap to the other side of the gap.

The living travelers, both man and beast, were weary; but they were sustained by grim determination.

As the cliff gave way to forest, the moon seemed to peer at them through branches intertwined above them. In a glade filled with fireflies, they found a waterfall.

Wander dismounted and placed the shrouded body upon the grass, as the fireflies danced.

He dipped his hands into the silver water of the falls, cupping it. He took a drink from it, and splashed it upon his face. It was icy cool.

The sweat and grime from his face ran in dark rivulets upon his hands, and fell into the pool of water at the base of the fall.

The once pure, clear, crystalline water was soiled, and the corruption spread like wisps of smoke.

Wander, not for the first time, wondered if his heart's desire was wrong, and if he should turn back.

The towering formations of rock and stone ahead obscured all sight of his destination.

Wander stood and straightened. He knew he was already damned.

He lifted up the body of his beloved, and mounted Agro.

There would be no rest for them this night.

They passed out of the wilderness, and into marshland. The dawn light made the moss and grass below awash in a golden color.

The man and his horse came at last to a stone gate, carved in the ancient style of the Forbidden Lands.

It was a passageway through a wall of steep mountains that stretched as far as the eye could see in either direction. Its aperture was narrow, barely allowing the mounted rider passage.

Agro's hooves clicked along the stones as they rode through the gate. Wander felt a strange pressure surround them both, and the sword at his side hummed and vibrated in its sheath. The pressure released, and they rode onto a bridge.

A colossal stone bridge, spanning over a gigantic chasm.

Wander had never seen its like.

Bridges were a rare enough thing where he was from, built to cross over small streams and rivers; seldom were they made of anything but timbers.

This bridge, made of countless stones too big and heavy for the strongest man to carry, would have run the length of his entire village and cast all of it in its shadow.

Wander closed his eyes, breathing in the fresh air that breezed through the vast valley, letting the gentle light filtering through the clouds glow warmly upon his face. He made it.

Looking down at the bundle in his arms, his chest ached and fluttered with hope. They made it; he had to believe that, or else it was all for naught. He only wished she could open her eyes and see it too.

He cast his gaze upon the expanse of the Forbidden Lands as Agro rode forth.

The chasm below was of a depth unfathomable, and Wander could not see its bottom for the mist swirling like a trapped embankment of clouds.

On the other side of the gorge were rolling green hills, trees, and the mountain ranges that encompassed the whole of the Forbidden Lands.

At the end of the bridge a Shrine loomed, beautiful but foreboding.

The structure was impossibly large, reaching into the heavens. He figured it must have taken the work of many laborers many years to pile the stones that high. Perhaps it had taken decades; perhaps it had taken lifetimes.

The bridge led directly into the gaping maw of the Shrine's entrance.

Riding upon Agro, Wander let himself be consumed by its shadow.

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“Apostate”

A lizard, with a tail of glowing white, rested upon intricately carved stones. He was still, enjoying the gentle sun, as the wind blew grass against his perch with a light brushing sound.

A shadow passed over him, and the hawk descended.

It pinned the lizard’s tail to the stone with its talons. The lizard struggled, and detached from its own tail, wriggling and scrambling away into the camouflaging grass.

It was no matter to the hawk; he lifted the discarded glowing tail with his beak, juggled it toward the back of his throat, and swallowed it whole.

Having claimed his prize, the hawk took notice of the humans nearby.

One of the humans wore a mask as part of his shamanistic garb, decorated with accoutrements made of the shells of tortoises and hermit crabs. In his hands he held a map of parchment.

The shaman stared at the hawk. There was something about the hawk that unnerved him; those gold, glinting eyes that could see things he could not.

It was unafraid of their presence. And it was watching them.

The shaman's name was Lord Emon. The masked men who surrounded him, five in number, were his acolytes, resting much as the lizard had been moments ago, in the shade of a small shrine; this shrine was made in the image of the bigger, grander Shrine, which could barely be seen from where they stood, towering a far distance away from them.

They did not possess the ancient sword. They could not pass the gate. This meant that they were forced to take the longer path, to the other side of the Forbidden Lands, where the paths were more treacherous.

Their horses had survived the journey without falling lame, for which Lord Emon was most thankful. The horses were enjoying their respite from navigating dangerous paths and carrying the human riders upon their back, chomping lightly at the sweet grass surrounding them.

Lord Emon's eyes poured over the parchment map, over the symbols drawn in very old ink, by a scribe who died many generations ago. The map was thorough, marking every shrine and forest, every chasm and body of water.

It also contained mask-like faces, marking the places where the old ones dwelt.

Lord Emon sensed the movement of one of his acolytes behind him. He turned around sharply, seeing the man reaching for a ripe-looking fruit, hanging from a tree which grew adjacent to the small shrine.

Lord Emon grabbed the man's arm, stopping him from touching the fruit. The acolyte looked at his master with wide eyes, as Emon shook his head.

The acolyte lowered his arm and bowed his head, in a mixture of shame and disappointment. Lord Emon had warned him not to eat of anything which grew in the Forbidden Lands. All that existed here was tainted, and if they hoped to return to the village with their souls intact, they must not partake.

His stomach rumbled; hunger had made him forget.

Lord Emon understood, and he had prepared. He gave the man his satchel of dried food from the village. It was not the most delicious of rations, but it would stave off hunger while they traveled this cursed land.

The hawk took flight over their heads, causing them to flinch and duck away.

Lord Emon heard a deep, rumbling laughter, both male and female combined, emanate from the surrounding land.

“It knows we are here,” said Lord Emon, quietly.

“What did you say, Lord Emon?” asked one of the acolytes. He had not heard the sound; his awareness of such things was not as attuned as Lord Emon.

“Dormin,” he said. The acolytes stiffened. “I fear we have been tricked into giving it a means of escape,” Lord Emon continued. “Ever it lusts to inhabit a human body, unbound from this land, and now it has lured two. Male and female.”

The acolyte’s breath caught in their throats. These were ominous tidings indeed; for they knew the stories, and from those stories, the nature of the beast known as Dormin. “It will spawn a race of devils,” one of them said, in hushed tones.

Lord Emon nodded. “We must hurry and capture the apostate... ere he dooms us all.” He mounted his horse, and without a word of command his acolytes followed suit.

They rode toward the distant shadow of the Shrine.

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“Dormin”

Wander rode through the stone interior of the grand Shrine. The air was damp and cool, and very dark.

Down a spiral staircase he went, upon Agro’s back. At the bottom of the steps was a large pool. Its still waters reflected nothing.

There was a doorway entrance leading into the belly of the Shrine, and through this door Wander rode.

This temple was larger and more spacious than any place Wander had ever dreamed of, the high ceiling up above fit for giant gods rather than mortal kings. Square stone tiles comprised the floor.

In this ceiling was a circular skylight, letting in the sun’s rays. Although the day was cloudy, and the land outside the Shrine was lit with tones of coolest grey, the light pouring in from the ceiling was gold and thick as honey, forming its own central pillar within the Shrine.

Gigantic statues many times Wander’s size glared and leered outward from recesses in the walls, between the stone pillars, five on either side of the vast Shrine hall. They were grotesque figures indeed, and menacing.

Wander eyed these gatekeepers of the Shrine ruins warily. Each of them occupied a square floor tile, like pieces upon some diabolical game board.

The hawk watched from above, perched upon the edge of the ceiling aperture. It watched as Wander rode through the light, from one square to another.

At the end of the cathedral was an altar of stone, just before giving way to the temple steps and the grass-covered plains. Grey light passed between the pillars here, yet seemed paler than what existed in the land beyond, as if the stones somehow filtered the light into the brightest, purest white.

Wander dismounted. With careful reverence he pulled the shrouded body down from the saddle back of the horse, and carried it up the steps to the stone altar.

Placing her upon the cold stone - for yes, it was a she - Wander parted the shroud to reveal a beautiful, dark-haired maiden.

Her name, in life, was Mono.

Mono's face was as pale as her dress of white, broken only by patterns of faded green and the faintest blush of cherry blossom.

The blush that was now missing from her lips and cheeks.

The life-blood that no longer flowed within her.

The vibrancy that Wander remembered so well, yet now made his heart ache with yearning.

The horse, Agro, climbed the steps gingerly, and approached the girl on the altar. The mare nudged the girl's body with her muzzle, hopefully, as Wander reassuringly stroked her mane.

There was an unearthly sound behind them. An echo, a moan, a sound distortion, as the fabric of reality ripped.

Wander unsheathed his sword, whirling about to face the intruding shadows climbing out of the stone floor, and shambling towards him.

They appeared to be the shadows of men; shadows given depth of form.

Light collected upon Wander's blade: as if all the light pouring into the hall converged upon the edge of the blade, refracting outward as a pale star.

The shadows shrank back, in awe of the blade's power, evaporating into the sunlit stone.

Disembodied voices, male and female joined in unison, boomed from above. Wander looked toward the light-filled ceiling aperture from whence the voices came.

"Thou possesses the Ancient Sword? So thou art mortal..." said the mingled, echoing voices.

Wander took a breath, summoning his courage. "I was told that in this place, at the end of the world, there exists a being who can control the souls of the dead."

"Thou art correct... We are the one known as Dormin..."

Wander swallowed. This is it, the young man thought. He glanced at Mono, his erstwhile beloved.

"She was sacrificed for having a cursed fate," he explained to the god, though he felt somewhat foolish for doing so; after all, was it not likely that Dormin already knew this?

He must not falter or delay, he knew. Not now that he had come all this way.

“Please...” beseeched Wander, “bring back her soul.”

Wander quailed at the sound of his own taboo words. But they were spoken; there was no way to take them back, to unsay them.

The silence lasted for mere moments; but to Wander, who dared not breathe until he heard the god’s judgement on this matter of greatest consequence, every second was an eternity of pain.

Yet the dark chuckle that reverberated through the hall and Wander’s own soul was arguably worse.

Why did Dormin laugh? What did this portend?

“The maiden's soul? Souls that are once lost cannot be reclaimed... is that not the law of mortals?”

Wander bowed his head, sinking under the weight of his defeat. His journey had been for naught.

“With that sword, however... it may not be impossible.”

Hope rekindled within Wander, roaring back into a fast-rising flame.

“Really?!” The word escaped his lips with desperate, childish enthusiasm, filling the hall and coming back to him as a mocking echo.

Wander attempted to compose himself, in fear of losing the ground he had so tentatively gained.

“That is, of course, if thou manage to accomplish what We askest.”

This sobered Wander. He knew it would not be so easy. "I will do as I must," he replied.

"Behold the idols that stand along the wall..." commanded the voices, *"thou art to destroy all of them."*

Wander frowned at them; how he was to destroy such massive stone monuments he knew not, but he instinctively raised his sword nonetheless.

Dormin seemed to anticipate his confusion, and spake to dissuade him from a foolish course of action. *"But those idols cannot be destroyed by the mere hands of mortal..."*

"Then how am I meant to do it?"

"In this land there exist colossi that are the incarnations of those idols. If thou defeat those colossi, the idols shall fall."

"I understand." In truth he did not understand, not in full; he did not know what the word colossi entailed, though it seemed to imply entities of a stature to dwarf the idols.

But he did understand one thing: Mono would be returned to him, if he should defeat these colossi.

And so, defeat them he would.

"But heed this, the price you pay may be heavy indeed," warned Dormin.

"It does not matter." Wander responded automatically, without thought or reflection, for it was a simple and undeniable fact. His life was already forfeit.

"Very well..."

“Where do I find the colossi?”

“Raise thy sword by the light...”

Wander obeyed, lifting the sword high; the streams of sunlight converged upon the blade as before.

“... And head to the place where the sword's light gathers...”

A beam of light shot out from the pooling light, racing out across the open landscape of grassy plains beyond the temple.

“There, thou shalt find the colossus thou art to defeat...”

The sound and presence faded away. Wander was alone.

Except for Argo, and the body of Mono.

He bent down over her, kissed her chill and lifeless lips.

Even with her dead, her soul no longer residing in her mortal flesh, still he was loath to leave her.

He reluctantly pulled away and mounted Argo.

Wander rode out of the temple balcony, onto the stone steps leading down from the Shrine of Worship, down onto the soft, windswept grasses of the lonely plains.

On his swift horse Agro, Wander rode out into the haunted land, sword held aloft to guide his way.

Lord Emon and his men saw the silhouette of the dark horse and her rider on the horizon, following a beam of blue light.

“There he is,” said Lord Emon.

“What is he doing?” asked one of the acolytes. “What is that light?”

“He tracks the Guardians with the ancient sword,” spake Lord Emon in answer. “He means to go through with the wicked sacrifice, it seems.”

Wander did not see them, nor could he hear them.

“Thy first foe... is in the land of the vast green fields... rows of guiding graves...”
rumbled Dormin.

Wander startled, looking about - the voice seemed to come not from any certain source, such as the temple ceiling, but from within himself.

Where are you? thought Wander. Are you in my thoughts, Dormin? Can you hear me as clearly as I hear you? I suppose there can be no hiding from you in this strange land... if you are bound here, as the clerics believed, you are certainly not bound to the Shrine.

There was a resounding chuckle that Wander felt reverberating through his bones. He shuddered. He would get no clear answers from Dormin.

The hawk circled him from high above, watching; from up there, to its keen eyes, Wander and Agro looked small and insignificant, a black dot on the vast canvas of the ancient landscape.

The mountains, the hills, the canyons... everything towered above them, as the human towers above the insect.

Wander focused in on Argo's breath, and the beating hooves, as they galloped toward burial mounds in the distance.

True to his name, Wander's mind began to wander into the murky sea of events past, drifting through its depths and into a state of reminiscence....

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“Broken”

The memory was of his home, a small village built in the shadow of the mountains.

It was a harsh, unforgiving land; the soil was poor, and greenery struggled to thrive, produced only with the great and ceaseless toil of man and beast.

The buildings of that village were made using a patchwork of materials: stone, wood, reed and hide.

Despite the village’s proximity to the mountain, only one building was made completely of cut and quarried stone, and that was the temple.

It was a cylindrical tower of simple design, ten times the size of a man, crowned with windows aligned with auspicious phases of sun and moon, and never were there fewer than two guards posted at its entrance.

Many of the dwellings were, in essence, large circular tents, constructed to be easily disassembled and moved in accordance with the seasons, or to brave the region’s oft-temperamental weather.

It was not thunder which shook the village that day, but the hooves of the returning war-horses as they kicked up mud and grit with every somber step.

One of the few entirely wooden structures - for timber was rare and precious in those parts, collected during arduous journeys from woods far away - was a watchtower with a thatched roof.

Lord Emon rode at the forefront of the mounted war-band, but the procession was not a triumphant one.

The war-horses did not prance, but stepped with weary resolution, as if to the beat of a funeral dirge.

The warriors rode slumped forward in their saddles, quiet and despondent.

But by far the sorriest creature of the group was the black mare, Agro.

Agro walked slowly, head down, the hempen line of her halter led by the hand of Lord Emon even as he managed the reins of his own dispirited steed.

The lookout-guard on duty, perched within the human nest of the watchtower, waved down to Lord Emon below.

Lord Emon raised his hand in acknowledgement, but it was a small, listless gesture, unaccompanied by his usually bright and direct grey gaze, and bereft of his normally reassuring smile.

The lookout took this to be a sign that Lord Emon bore ominous tidings within his hollow eyes, and was filled with cold foreboding; he noticed the sound of whining, creaking wheels, and then his eyes beheld that riderless horses such as Agro were pulling wagons, heavily laden with the bodies of the dead.

With a shaking hand the lookout performed their duty, striking the metal gong thrice, slowly, letting the sound dissipate between the strikes to assure the villagers that this was not an alarm of warning; during an attack or a call-to-arms the gong would be struck many times, in quick succession.

On this day, Wander had been at practice, honing his martial skills for many an hour, until the glistening sweat beaded upon his brow and raced down his neck in rivulets.

Attired only in a rough tunic girded by a belt of raw animal hide and a cloak that was more holes than weave, he hacked at one of his straw dummies with a crude wooden practice-sword.

In the midst of a backwards roll, he deftly replaced his sword-arm's grip to take hold of his father's unadorned hunting bow hanging at his back, shooting an arrow into the heart of another straw-made foe.

Both weapons, wooden sword and rough-hewn bow, served him well for the purposes of training and for hunting small game; yet still he wished to exchange them for a blade of metal and a bow meant for war.

Such weapons were reserved for the use of initiated warriors and clerics of the priesthood only, not for young land-working boys such as he.

When the sound of the gong reached his ear, he ceased his practicing; seeing the figures of the warband approaching the village, he leapt outside the confines of his small farm paddock and hastened to greet them.

The other villagers, possessed of the same idea, emerged from their yurt-tent dwellings, and took pause from their work in the fields.

They thronged both sides of the dirt footpath that ran through the village center, to stare searchingly at the returning men.

And then, when those searching eyes fell upon the wagons of the fallen, the mouths beneath began to tremble and let out gasps of horror.

Some rushed to the sides of the wagons, young and old, male and female, finding the bodies of loved ones amongst the heap, and wailing with combined shock and grief.

Wander, who was orphaned many years before and had no loved ones to find amongst the dead, instead approached Lord Emon.

“Lord Emon,” said Wander, with all the confidence of familiarity toward this village elder of highest authority. “What has happened?”

“The sand tribe has returned to the dunes,” came the reply from his chieftain. “But we paid a heavy price.”

Wander glanced reflexively at the lifeless soldiers within the wagons, knowing full well that they were the price of which the old man spoke.

He then thrust his chin up at Lord Emon, eyes afire. “Will you let me take up arms with you, and avenge them?”

Lord Emon assessed him coolly, before setting his eyes on the path ahead. “You are not ready,” he said simply, in a voice that brooked no argument; he spurred his stopped mount onward, as that was meant to be the end of it.

But Wander would not let this be so, stepping boldly in front of his master’s steed to halt its progression. “We do not have enough men to withstand another onslaught.”

Lord Emon fixed him with a hard look. “We also do not have enough men to plow and harvest the fields, a task I notice you have neglected.”

Indeed, the straw that was Wander’s duty to grow, cut and gather for the tribe’s use as animal feed and weavings stood tall and defiant in the field that

surrounded his hut; what little had been collected had been tied together not in bales, but to construct his practice fighting-dummies.

Wander, unable to fight this accusation, chose instead to ignore it; he knelt upon the ground, offering up his crude sword upon the upturned palms of his hands, head bowed with humble respect. "I have been training. I am young, but strong. I desire to become a cleric."

"Not just a warrior, but a cleric?" Lord Emon's mouth, eyebrows and tone betrayed amusement.

"It is not just my arm that is strong, but my faith," insisted the boy, undeterred.

"I do not doubt this," assured the old man with seriousness, wishing not to discourage the youth. "But a man desires more than to pray and fight. Are you so eager to take the vow of chastity?"

Despite Lord Emon's tiredness of body and spirit, there was yet a teasing glint in his eye as he said this.

Wander was glad that his head was already bowed, so that he could cast his eyes upon the ground without this being an overt gesture; nevertheless, his unconscious scowl gave him away. "... It is a sacrifice I am willing to make, sir," he murmured, feeling the blood flush warm in his face .

Lord Emon regarded him a moment. "...You would need a war-horse."

Wander raised his face to stare in wonder and exhilaration at the old chief at what he took to be words of acceptance. "I will find one!" he exclaimed.

"No need." Lord Emon tossed Agro's halter-line at Wander. "Ride her, and she is yours."

Wander rose to look at the crestfallen horse. Her sorrowful and retiring manner evoked nothing but pity. “But Lord Emon, are you sure she still has the spirit for war?” asked Wander.

“I will know when you ride her.”

Wander tucked his sword in his belt, and took up the rope of the halter.

At this motion, Agro raised her head so that she stood at her full height; it was clearer then that she was a powerfully-built warhorse mare, many hands high, with lithe legs meant for traversing long distances at a fast clip.

Her black ears stood straight up, as if to pierce the heavens; she watched him steadily, unmoving as Wander approached her, drawing up the halter.

The boy placed a hand upon her neck, and she jerked away with an indignant snort, much as a lady might reject the touch of an unwanted suitor.

“Easy girl,” cooed Wander softly, hoping this would help set her at ease. He laid hold of her saddle, and hoisted himself up to climb astride her.

But as soon as he had swung his other leg across her back, Agro bolted.

Agro screamed with rage, kicking and bucking in an effort to get him off.

Within mere moments Wander was thrown over Agro’s fine head, landing with his own head partway submerged in mud. Wander would have been hard-pressed to say which was more bruised, his body or his pride.

Lord Emon dismounted, handing him the halter once more. “Take her to the maiden at the lake,” he commanded. “She may have better luck with the horse... and perhaps you will have better success with the maiden.”

At any other time, Wander would have expected to hear mocking laughter from the assembled villagers; he was spared this humiliation, for the villagers were grappling with their losses and in no mood for mirth. Yet still Wander heard them, chorusing in his own mind.

Wander glared at the horse, who snorted and stamped the ground. He pulled himself to his feet, trudging away, but soon felt the rope in his hand go taut: Agro was not following.

With a heart filled with anger he turned about to deal with the stubborn animal, until he realized that Agro was looking back toward the wagon he had freed her from.

No, not at the wagon: at one particular soldier being carried away from the wagon by his mourning family. Wander knew at once that this man, while alive, was her rider.

Wander's irritation fled, and he softened. "He is departed," he told her, hoping that she could somehow understand his words. "Come now. Let us go and find you a place to rest."

Agro's ears flattened against her neck. She lowered her head, resigned to follow Wander as he led her away.

-5-

“Phaedra”

The Shrine and the Great Bridge were left far behind them in the distance.

Now, Wander led Agro through hills of deep green, shrouded by a cool grey mist that lightly dampened the ground, and danced upon the flesh.

The red-tinged hairs of Wander’s head clung to his forehead.

The toes of his sandaled feet made contact with the chill emerald sward and the colder black earth beneath.

The air was still; the sounds of his own progress, as well as the dull clomping of Agro’s hooves, were muffled and seemingly bounded to the distance at which they could clearly see, which was little more than a few paces ahead.

Yet still the cold and the mist penetrated the meager coverings of Wander’s tunic and vestment, making the skin underneath clammy and sensitive to every movement of air and fabric as he walked.

He shivered.

The appearance of the green hills changed: soon, he could see that they had stone entrances that allowed ingress into the earth.

Burial mounds, he thought, though he did not know from whence this knowledge came; his own people did not lay the dead to rest in this manner, instead offering their bodies as sustenance to the winged creatures of heaven.

In the center of this ring of burial-tombs was a massive, moss-covered stone cairn, the stones piled high and carved in a decorative fashion.

Agro stopped and regarded it with interest, but Wander paid this structure no mind; he determined to venture within one of these burial-mounds, and see what he could find.

Leaving Agro behind, he stepped through the threshold of old, damp grey stone, and descended the sloped pathway into the earth's bowels.

But the mare was not the only thing he left behind, for the light did not extend far within the dark underground tunnel.

Wander felt along the grimy walls with his hands, thinking merely to maintain orientation as he crept forward blindly into the pitch-black dark; however, his groping fingers found a rusted metal fixture driven into the stone.

'Twas a wall sconce, he realized, which held within its grasp a long burnt-out wooden torch.

Wander fished within a small hide pouch at the side of his belt for his fire-stone.

Unsheathing the ancient sword, he struck the fire-stone glancingly against the edge of the blade to bring forth spark upon the torch.

The spark caught hold, and began to consume the wood of the old torch; the flames grew, and illuminated the tunnel with a soft, flickering glow of red-gold.

Having replaced the fire-stone in its hide pouch and returned the sword to its sheathe, he grasped and lifted the torch from its metal fixture, holding it aloft.

From where he stood and further, the walls of the tunnel-tomb were flanked with recesses containing sarcophagi.

Inspecting the nearest of them closer, Wander moved aside the sarcophagus lid, and saw within a mummified corpse in repose.

Wander straightened back away from it, troubled and frowning. He was repulsed that a body could be left thus, stinking of musty old leather, mold and decay; but also there was the worry of what it could portend.

Why have you brought me here Dormin, thought he. Are these sacrifices made to you long ago? Warriors who failed your challenge?

Did these souls not warrant resurrection? You have the power to give life to the dead... yet you show me the tombs of those you denied?

Wander made his way further into the tunnel, until he reached a dead end. There was nothing here: a blank wall of old masonry faced him, and even peering at it closely revealed no holes or secrets.

Water dripped from the ceiling, collecting into a small pool where the ground-stones unevenly dipped.

He was of a mind to turn back the way he came, and was in the midst of doing so, when a stone pillar came crashing through the ceiling of the tunnel with the speed of an arrow.

It pierced all the way through to the ground, where it split and cracked the tiled stone with its tapered end.

The tunnel shook, and both the shock and the tremor served to unbalance Wander.

The torch dropped from his startled hand, landing directly in the pool of water; with a hiss and a last dying sputter, the flame was doused.

Regaining his footing, Wander found his way blocked by the strange stone pillar. He made ready to squeeze past it, but there was no need: for the stone pillar lifted of its own accord, reversing course.

It exited through the hole in the ceiling it had created.

The hole let in the pale grey light of the outside, but not for long, as it was quickly blocked by a new shadowy mass of stone.

This stone contained a circle of gemstone glowing blue, like a giant eye, peering into the tunnel and at Wander.

Wander freed his sword from its scabbard once more, sensing that somehow this was the entity he was meant to defeat; though how he would use a metal blade against such a foe of stone was as yet a mystery.

The blue light of the eye shone upon the ancient sword, absorbed and reflected by its keen edge; the beam refracted backward at the eye with a concentrated brightness.

There was a shrill scream, much like Agro's when upset but magnified tenfold, and with an eerie, rumbling resonance that vibrated through the tunnel and Wander's own body.

The eye disappeared from beyond the hole, letting in the natural daylight.

Cracks formed in the tunnel ceiling, letting loose pieces of stone that fell and barely missed Wander's head. He knew that he must find his way out, and quickly, ere he was buried alive.

Wander ran like one mad toward the light of the tomb doorway.

But then the pillar returned.

Just as it had before, it stabbed straight through the tunnel like a knife made of stone; and this time it was joined by others of its like, all of them piercing through in rapid succession.

These pillars crushed the tunnel just behind Wander, the destruction lapping at his very heels; there would be no going back that way, and the dead would be buried forever.

Wander escaped this fate by a narrow margin, throwing himself through the doorway at the last, as the tunnel collapsed and became no more.

He saw Agro then, wide-eyed and whinnying her terror before bolting away.

It was not he who she feared, but something which lay behind him: the very fiend who tried to crush him within the tunnels, and the same fiend whose steps now pierced and shook the earth.

Wander feared to look upon his foe, but knew that he must: when slowly he turned to face behind-wards, his eyes beheld a terrifying sight.

'Twas the stone cairn, risen to a great height and walking upon four stone-pillar legs shaped like tapered blades that dig into the earth as it walked.

No longer folded in upon itself, it was now plain to see that it was of the same form as the horse idol within the Shrine, though far greater in size and possessed of the ability to move.

Wander, on the contrary, found himself dispossessed of this ability, as the gigantic earthen creature strode toward him, and then of a sudden stopped.

It bent its neck downwards, rocks scraping against each other, dust and pebbles and bits of moss unsettling, as it lowered its head to peer closely at Wander with its two glowing blue gemstone eyes.

Those eyes at first gazed with wonder at the face of the awe-struck boy; who, being a fraction of its size, appeared to it as a mouse would appear to a man.

But although the blue eyes were made of stone and therefore fixed, the gaze shifted to take note of the sword in his hand.

It was then that the blue eyes turned red-gold with anger. It lifted its head to its full gargantuan height, a third measure taller than the temple of his homeland.

Even taller still was the earthen creature when it reared back upon its hindquarters, pawing the air with its blade-like stone forelegs while letting out an ear-splitting cry.

One hundred thousand pounds of stone horseflesh came crashing downward, aimed at Wander.

Fortunate for Wander that his mobility chose this moment to return; for had he not leapt into a sprint to avoid the hoofless stone forelegs, he surely would have been impaled into the earth.

The impact sent dirt flying; the ground exploded, and trembled.

Wander fled, and the horse colossus, whose ancient name was Phaedra, pursued and quickly overtook him; indeed the equine colossus erred, running in lengthy strides over and past him.

Phaedra, seeing that it had overshot its mark, wheeled about to realign itself with the object of its fury, scraping the ground in the manner of a pawing animal in preparation for its renewed charge.

Wander, shaking with the force of the blood pumping within him, brandished the ancient sword high in desperate warning.

Lo, the light collected upon the blade as before, reflecting it as a mirror held at angle to the sun, and the light entered into Phaedra's angry eyes.

Phaedra turned its head sharply away, as if the light pained it, and struck at the ground before it with its forefront legs.

This action cracked the earth, creating a fissure into the snaking tunnel beneath, and in this fissure its forelegs were caught.

Its hind legs could not find enough purchase in the muddy ground to free its forefront kin, and kicked out at the burial mounds around it in frustration.

Wander knew this to be his moment of opportunity, and ran as fast as he was able across the hilltops, circling about Phaedra.

The head and forebody were angled down low into the fissure, and his hindquarters were now much lower to the ground as well.

Surmounting the crest of the hilltop which lay directly aft of the colossus, Wander found himself close above its vine-and-stone tail.

Despite the bucking, kicking legs, Wander took his chance and leapt upon the colossi's tail, grasping the stone ridges and hanging vines tightly.

Phaedra sensed the human climb his tail, and emitted one of its terrible, piercing equine cries. It redoubled its efforts to remove itself from the depression in the ground, managing at last to emerge.

With this task accomplished, Phaedra thrashed its tail about wildly in an attempt to dislodge the troublesome human climber, before launching into a full headlong gallop across the Green Hills.

Realizing that his fast-tiring fingers could not long hold their grip with this constant thrashing about, Wander began to climb the tail as a ladder to reach the creature's back.

Wander clung to the grass that served as the creature's fur and mane; this was a different surface, one that he reasoned a sword might pierce and damage.

The sword he thrust into the colossi's hide, but this act resulted in no bloodshed, nor change in Phaedra; the boy may as well have stabbed a mound of turf.

But accept this he would not, and thus tried again, yielding the same futile result.

Yet in his desperate search for a weak spot, the sword caught the light and reflected it upon the beast's neck.

The light was absorbed into a patch of grass fur, where it set an intricate sigil forged of pure light aflame in blue glow.

Rightly judging this to be important, Wander crawled closer to the sigil.

He placed a tentative hand into the sigil's light, finding it to be warm to the touch but not burning, like sunlight, and humming with vibrations of power; a heartbeat, perhaps, or the coursing of magical blood within magical veins.

The ancient sword in his grasp hummed as if in tremulous anticipation; the resonance between the two was unmistakable.

Wander drew the sword back, feeling the pull of tension as it resisted, and plunged it into the heart of the sigil.

Black blood spurt up and outward from the wound, in a geyser that drenched Wander.

Phaedra screamed one last time, this time in agony more than anger, swaying deliriously and then falling over. Its gargantuan form crashed heavily into the earth, with Wander safely atop.

The colossus shuddered.

Wander climbed down upon the emerald grass. He walked slowly around to see the creature's eyes, and saw them turn from red-gold to blue, flickering like a dying ember.

Without thought to the safety or wisdom of the action, Wander placed his hands upon the stone muzzle of Phaedra, confused by his feelings of sympathy to this creature of magical artifice.

There was a very small, sharp and questioning whine from behind him, and Wander looked past his shoulder to see that Agro had taken refuge within the entrance to one of the stone tools.

Agro's expression was hesitant, as if looking for reassurance from Wander that it was safe to emerge.

This Wander did not know, and turned back toward Phaedra. "... I am sorry," said he. "May your spirit find peace for your sacrifice."

Phaedra stopped shuddering, the light in its eyes fading to dull stone.

Wander collapsed then, from exhaustion and strange emotion, against the stone head of Phaedra.

Agro took it upon herself to determine that the threat was past, walking close to Wander and nudging his shoulder. Instead of clinging to the fallen idol, Wander shifted his embrace to the neck of his living horse companion.

But the corpse of the equine colossus was not through with him yet: black tendrils of shadow issued out of Phaedra's death-wound.

The shadow-tendrils, which at first waved about like a sea-creature's tentacles, flew of a sudden like arrows. Agro reared and kicked to fend them off, but it availed her not, for the tendrils flew past and into her rider.

Wander cried out in pain and terror, as the shadow plunged into his body, piercing his heart and turning his veins to burning ice.

The shadow consumed him, sending him reeling into the abyss.

XXXXXXXXXX

A white light, streaking through the darkness in gleaming rays. Symbols.

Shielding his eyes with an incorporeal, ghostly hand, Wander saw that some of the intense light was blocked by an indistinct pale form, crowned by a familiar mass of raven hair.

“Mono...” he murmured. “I found you...”

He could dimly make out her features as she struggled to see him in the abyss of shifting and writhing darkness, just as he struggled to see her in the blinding light.

“I am right here, Mono... come with me and live...” but his efforts to speak were in vain, for no sound existed in this plane. “Why can I not call out to you, that you may know I have come to save you?”

Wander reached out to her.

He took a step, and then another.

But with each step, he seemed to be getting further away from her, not closer.

The light shone brighter, and overtook his vision.

Everything became a void of white.

-6-

“Inside”

If one were to sojourn into the waters of the boy’s reminiscence, they would find there a dark-haired maiden, clad in a simple white robe for bathing.

Her feet were submerged in the shallow cool water, in the reflection of a lakeside hut.

Mono. Alive.

A shadow in the water, writhing, caught his eye.

‘Twas a snake, swimming toward her.

Wander let go of Agro’s halter, and made haste into the water to waylay the snake.

Yet still he was too late; for ere he was able to lay hold of the serpent’s tail, a hawk descended.

The hawk took the snake in the grasp of its talons and spirited it away, crying out in triumph of the feast to come.

Mono turned then, and saw Wander standing behind her in the lake shallows.

“What are you doing?” she asked sharply, for in her mind the answer was clear: she was a maiden bathing alone, and he a young scoundrel.

“Trying to save you from a snake,” was his defensive answer.

The bow-curve of Mono’s brow lifted in amusement. “Oh really?” mocked she, lowering her eyes from his face to his nether region. “And who is winning?”

Wander looked shamefacedly at the water’s surface; it was always thus between them, the one prodding at the other’s pride.

He gestured at the black mare, left to stand idle on the dirt path. “...I brought you this horse,” said he.

Mono stepped out of the water, wringing out her hair. “You mean your horse, do you not?”

She neared the muscular steed, assessing it with a knowing eye. “One that you shall ride into battle?”

“No. She does not like me.”

Mono stroked Agro’s glossy black coat. “She has good sense.”

Wander strode out of the water. “I am not going to battle, Mono. I will not become a cleric.”

Mono’s doe-brown eyes widened. “Why not?” cried she. “It has been your dream since childhood!”

“Lord Emon will not accept me as an initiate, though he needs the men.”

Mono’s face sobered. “You are young, Wander. Too young for the initiation.” She sighed, and cast her gaze away. “And here I thought you had chosen me instead.”

“...I have,” he insisted. “Every day my initiation was delayed tested my resolve. Had I been allowed to devote myself to matters of spirit and war, I might have been content to let you find happiness with another...”

Mono’s protest was stifled when Wander took her hand in both of his. “...But I can wait no longer. This horse was to be my war-horse, but now I wish it to be my gift to you... for your hand in marriage.”

Mono withdrew her hand, and her eyes became as daggers. “I am to be the reason for giving up your life’s purpose? Some paltry consolation for your ‘weakness of resolve’?”

“Not at all,” he said, with a voice as soft as feather-down, and drew close to kiss her.

The girl brought swift end to this ambition, shoving aside his face with her hand.

She climbed astride Agro’s saddle, seating herself man-style upon it, and peered down at Wander narrowly. “Until you prove yourself worthy, do not expect to mount either of us.”

Mono spurred Agro with her bare heels, riding off and disappearing beyond an obscuring hillside.

Frustration gave way to a fond smile and a lovelorn sigh; it was always thus between them.

Mono, thinking to have achieved a suitable distance away, reigned in Agro with a smile of her own: silly boy, that Wander! thought she.

But lo! Wander appeared upon the crest of a bluff before her, overlooking her by a good measure; he jumped from this height, and sat the horse behind her.

Agro responded with a quivering of her hide and an indignant swish of her tail, as if a bothersome gnat had landed upon her hindquarters.

“And just what do you think you are doing?” demanded Mono, voice full of contempt.

“You thought you could escape me that easily?” Wander chided. “I am a very fast runner.”

“You have not proved anything yet.”

“I mounted the horse.”

“Only because I was already on her! You cheated!”

“So be it,” accepted Wander. “I shall not care, as long as I have you.”

“Hmph,” derided Mono. “And you fancied yourself a priest, of all things. Well, have me you shall not!”

Mono spurred the horse once more, this time into a full and headlong gallop.

She guided Agro through treacherous terrain, pulling the mare into sharp turns, and urging her to leap over fallen trees and tricky gullies.

But the wily maiden could not unseat the man who rode with her, for he had his arms secured tightly about her.

He leaned in close to her ear. “...I am not going anywhere,” he whispered.

They now traveled over more gentle, open slopes.

The motion of their hips against one another as they rode was hard for both of them to ignore.

Mono was glad that he could not see the blush she was sure lighted her cheeks; but Wander did not need to see her face to know it was there.

Of her own accord, the tiring horse slowed to a halt, breathing hard; her riders were breathing hard also.

“You are not paltry,” said Wander raggedly, refuting her earlier accusation.

“...And I,” said Mono, between panting breaths, “am glad for your weakness.”

Mono twisted most of the way around to face him; and in almost the same moment as their eyes met, so too did their lips.

Agro’s dark eyes glanced back at them, and she turned away to snort and paw at the ground in annoyance. She did not ask to be party to this; had she the ability to speak, she would have told them so.

Mono and Wander’s limbs disentangled, regaining the distance necessary to gaze at the bright and blissful future dancing in each other’s eyes.

Forcefully were they brought back to the present, by the panicked cry of Agro.

The horse alerted them to the presence of a large Warrior, who watched them from astride an equally hulking bull.

His massive thews were painted with lines of red and were unobscured, save for his ornaments of beast-teeth and war.

A thick strap of animal hide ran across his breast, and from this strap a gigantic broadsword hung.

The Warrior possessed a menacing countenance, and the bull did also; the bull had rust fur and sharp horns, and the man did also, albeit his horns were affixed to the sides of his helm.

“He is one of our people,” Wander observed; he reasoned it would not profit him to assume the worst. He swung his leg over, dismounting. “Stay here.”

“Wander, no,” Mono quietly protested, but Wander’s feet were already on the ground; gone was he to approach the warrior.

“Greetings, friend,” he said to yonder mounted warrior with all the ease he could muster. “What brings you out here, so far from the village?”

The Warrior spurred his mount to walk slowly forward, drawing his sword of dull iron from its sheath.

Wander, wising to the danger, halted short; reluctant to turn his back to a man who was now plainly an enemy, he stepped back apace, before abandoning caution in favor of reckless haste to return to horse and girl.

He climbed upon Agro, and this time the mare followed his direction without resistance, racing back to the lakeside hut.

The warrior, bent upon pursuit, spurred his bull-mount into a charge. The animal’s bulk denied it Ago’s speed, but momentum alone was quickly gained.

Nearing the lake hut, both Mono and Wander dismounted. “Go inside!” yelled Wander, readying his bow.

“Come with me!” she pleaded.

Wander drew an arrow from his quiver, nocking it to the bow, and took aim: not at the human rider, but at his charging mount.

The boy loosed the one arrow, and quickly let fly another: they pierced and buried their sharp heads within the animal's thick hide, but did not cause the creature any pause.

Wander rolled out of the way, to avoid being trampled or gored by the rampaging bull.

The Warrior dismounted the bull, and strode toward Wander.

Wander recovered his footing, tossed aside his bow and drew his sword in almost the same motion.

Yet still was he nearly too late to preserve his life, staying a mighty swing from the warrior's blade that would have surely felled him, had he not raised his own blade in time.

The sight of Wander and Warrior in brutal combat, and hearing the clanging sound of metal answering metal, awakened a fire within the war-horse Agro.

Her gaze dead-set upon the warrior's bull, she regained her head from Mono and charged at the devilish creature.

Agro kicked at the bull with sharp hoofs; the bull, in turn, tore into Agro's side with its even sharper horn.

With his heavier blade, the Warrior easily freed Wander's sword from his grasp; Wander could do little as he was seized by the throat, lifted up, and thrown bodily upon the cruel ground.

The Warrior poised over Wander, sword-point aimed at the boy's heart.

But Wander turned aside; the blade plunged not into his flesh, but buried into the earth beside his head.

The Warrior, denied a killing blow, resigned himself to a strike of his fist against the boy's face.

Blood dripped from Wander's nose and fell between sword and ground, making it seem as though the soil's wound was bleeding also.

Wander lifted his head, and with blurring vision saw Mono, kneeling next to the injured Agro, as the towering warrior hulked toward her.

The warrior bent down and grabbed hold of her with his monstrous hands, unclean with Wander's blood; Mono struggled against him, seeking to frustrate his vile aims.

Lowered thus to deal with the woman, the Warrior found Wander upon his back.

The Warrior roared, unhanding Mono to grasp at Wander. He did not succeed in throwing the boy off before Wander's lean arms tightened around the Warrior's thick neck.

The Warrior clawed at Wander's strangling grip; but after a few moments of dangerous struggle, the Warrior fell, unconscious.

The bull made one final charge at Agro, but Wander cleaved at its neck as it passed, the blade biting deep.

The bull bellowed, weaved from the sudden blood loss, and collapsed in a heap.

Wander helped Mono back to her feet, embracing her trembling form as she gasped for air between sobs.

Somewhat calmed, she cautiously neared the unconscious warrior, and placed a finger to the vein of his purpled neck.

“..You will live,” she said. “Bastard.”

Mono took off her robe-sash and tied the Warrior’s hands behind his back, for the time when he would awaken.

She then inspected the wound at Agro’s side. Wander followed, and knelt down beside her. The wound was terrible.

“Find me bandages, in the hut,” commanded Mono. “Spirit of grain should help as well, and a threaded needle. There will be pain: you shall have to help me hold her, or else she will struggle.”

Wander nodded, and rushed into the door of the lakeside hut to do as he was bid; but once inside, he stood at a loss.

Mono impatiently entered, opened a drawer and removed the bandages from within; the two went to tend to the horse.

Before sunset, the warrior awoke and roared out many vile oaths. Wander and Mono listened to him rage for many an hour.

As night drew near, men from the village came to the door of the lakeside hut.

They questioned Mono and Wander about the Warrior tied up and raging outside the hut; Mono answered that the Warrior had attacked them, and the men did not inquire further.

From the door, Mono could see the men haul the warrior to his feet and lead him away; she noticed they did not release him from the sash she had bound him with. The warrior was still frothing with rage, as one drunken.

She shook her head at the sorry sight, and closed the door.

“You had no idea where the bandages were, did you?” she asked of Wander, who was sitting on the edge of her bed.

“No. You have never invited me inside.”

Mono drew close, wiping the blood from his nose with the edge of her sleeve.

“Well. We should remedy that.”

Mono opened her robe.

It never been thus between them; but now it was to be so, from this night onward.

What came to pass that night, in the private sanctity of the lakeside hut, is not a story that is mine to tell.

-7-

“Lake”

In the white void, a human-like shadow stood over him.

The dark, faceless blur became the snout of Agro.

Wander slowly came to, taking note of the horse lying beside him, keeping watch. He patted the loyal animal with appreciation.

One colossus had been felled by his blade. Nine creatures yet remained.

Nine. He nearly lost his life a dozen times over to the equine colossus alone: one slip of his grasp while astride its earthen back would have spelt his doom.

Its cries and lifeless gaze still haunted him; though it appeared to be made of stone, its presence felt alive, full of pain and sorrow.

In Wander’s estimation, it did not seem overly cruel or evil; no more so than Agro, and certainly less so than the Warrior that attacked Mono.

No matter; he could ill-afford pity when the stakes were this high, and when he was tasked with the defeat of stone monsters more than ten times his size.

How would he contend with nine more such fiends?

And where in this accursed land would he find them all?

The ancient sword. It would show him where next he would be bound.

He drew the sword and lifted it to the light: it shimmered and sent forth a beam that raced outward to a distant lake.

Dormin's voice spoke again, seemingly emanating from within himself: "*A colossal shadow soars through the sky across a ruin, hidden in the misty lake... a ripple of thunder lurks underwater... the anger of the mounted giant shatters the earth...*"

What are these colossi, asked Wander in the form of thought. And why do you desire their destruction? What kind of game are you playing, Dormin?

There was no response, from within or otherwise. He sighed, painfully getting to his feet.

"...I suppose it does not matter. When my task is done, if you do as you promised, I care not. I do not want to know. It would be too great a burden, to know the price of a soul.

Wander urges Agro up as well. "Come Agro. We have more to do."

XXXXXXXXXX

Lord Emon reigned in his grey horse, staring at the Green Hills burial mounds aghast.

The chief-shaman dismounted, as did his men, and he made his way into the midst of the ruin.

A terrible battle had been fought here; the evidence was spewn all about.

Debris. Rubble. Scarred earth. The tunnels that once led into the earthen tombs were caved in, and inaccessible to the living.

A desecration.

Lord Emon shivered. His forebearers were laid to rest in those tombs: kings and chiefs, shamans and heroes. Their souls were formidable, and he could feel their anger quaking in his aged bones.

A pillar of light stretched from the battlefield to the heavens above, its source obscured by what remains of the mounds.

Apprehensive, Lord Emon went 'round, and saw the prostrate body of the colossus Phaedra, sprawled out motionless upon the grass.

The pillar of light sprang forth from it, the base rooted in its form where its living heart would be.

Phaedra's eyes were without glow.

"He has made the first sacrifice," rasped Lord Emon, winded from the sheer audacity of the deed.

"Where will he go next?" asked one of his acolyte companions.

"I do not know. Wherever Dormin sends him. He is a puppet... and now he harbors a piece of Dormin's malignant soul."

Wander, he thought, his inner voice howling the name with grief; for how could the boy he loved as dearly as kin commit such heinous sacrilege?

How could the boy, to whom he taught the Ways, make such a vile pact with a demon-god?

He knew he loved the girl; and indeed she had been a good soul, as lovely as a dove.

But this... this was madness.

No one mortal soul was worth this.

Wander was too young to understand that he would love again; there were other girls in the world, other reasons to continue living.

Surely the boy did not understand how cheaply he had sold his soul; how little benefit he would enjoy from the bargain he had made, nor of how dire the cost would be to others.

Wander, his heart cried out again; Wander, what have you done?

XXXXXXXXXX

Wander rode toward rocky cliffs, encircling a fog-shrouded lake.

Stone masonry, marred by the ravages of time, pierced the tranquil lake surface with jagged peaks; once the towers of a fortress, if not a city, submerged over the ages and given a burial of water.

At the cliff-edge Wander dismounted; Agro could go no further.

He made his descent by way of shimmying down stone pillars, and climbing down rusted gates, until at last he dropped into the lake itself.

The water was cold and slick with brine; it was greenish-grey, murky, its cloudy depths an enigma difficult to fathom.

A strange sense tickled the back of Wander's skull, prompting him to turn his gaze upward.

Perched atop one of the ruined towers was the ominous silhouette of a giant bird-like colossus, whose name in ancient days was Avion.

Its unblinking gaze of blue was fixed upon Wander, its body unnervingly still.

Wander knew not how to proceed: he had neither the element of surprise as an ally, nor was he in good position to assail the great stone bird while submerged in the water of the lake.

Fixated by Avion, he did not immediately notice a twisting shadow in the water's murky depths beneath him.

Sensing an ominous presence from below, Wander looked down in time to see glowing eyes and glowing spikes rising up to meet him.

He flailed aside to avoid the head of Hydrus as it broke the water's surface.

Wander swam to a stone platform, and pulled himself upon it to attain refuge.

The eel-like sea-serpent colossus arced back in the water, letting the spikes that protruded from its spine slice the air and crackle with captured lightning.

The serpent disappeared into the depths, but the great carrion-bird still watched and waited with an eerie patience.

Why do you watch, you vulture? thought Wander, anger rising within him. You think you can let the serpent do the work? Do you think yourself safe up there on your perch?

Impetuously he drew his bow, nocked an arrow, and let it fly into the breast of Avion.

The bird colossus looked down upon the arrow, and then again at Wander with eyes of flaming red-gold.

It screeched and spread its stone and moss wings wide, and glided down at Wander who stood on the platform below.

Having acted out of thoughtless anger, unprepared was Wander for the creature to counter his attack.

The shoulder of the great bird struck him full, knocking the bow from his hands, and freeing his grip to take hold of the bird's earthen wing.

The bow sunk into the dark water, and Wander clung to the edge of Avion's wing as it soared.

Wind buffeted him with great force; only with great difficulty did he climb from the shoulder of Avion, finding purchase for his fingers in the brown turf hide.

Once upon the creature's back, Wander drew the ancient sword so that its light could reveal to him the sigil he thought existed on the head or at the base of the neck; yet none there appeared.

Instead, the refracted light converged in the opposite direction, leading to a sigil glowing at the end of Avion's long, flat brush tail.

Wander inwardly groaned, wondering how he would reach that far-flung destination from his current point, with the beating of the mighty wings threatening to unbalance him, giving him up to the howling wind.

Wander crouched low, and crawled toward the tail, picking his way along by gripping the brown grass fur.

Allow this Avion would not: it tossed itself about in mid-air.

Wander sunk his fingers into the turf, and staked his life upon the strength of the entwisted roots.

When after the sickening tumble Avion once again righted, Wander released his hold and made a desperate run for the tail.

The tail swerved to and fro, forging a moving path.

Wander's balance nearly failed him; he resorted to crouching every few paces, waiting, moving only when the tail was sufficiently level; slow was his progress.

As he reached the long-sought sigil, Avion foresaw the danger and flew sharply upwards... but not before Wander drove his sword-point into the sigil, with a resultant spurt of black blood.

Avion sounded a piercing, screeching cry.

The tail was now a rod aligned perfectly between heaven and earth; Wander clung to the ancient sword lodged deep in that tail, as something which hangs from an iron nail hammered into a wall.

His feet dangled over the clouds below; what little he could see of the lake made it seem as a salivating mouth ringed with tower-teeth of sharp and jagged grey stone.

Avion's form froze into a posture of pain, then fell into a headlong dive.

Whereas before the tail hung below the great body of the bird colossus, now were their positions reversed; tail rode at high angle toward the sky, while beak flew as an arrow aimed toward the waiting lake.

Wander, pinioned to the tail by way of the sword, flew along with Avion, his sandaled feet streaming directly behind him.

A moment before making contact with the water Avion recovered, flapping his wings.

Wander was aghast; sure was he that the creature was felled, and had been destined for a watery grave or to be dashed upon the stone masonry. Why did the colossus yet live?

The answer to his mental query presented itself, as two new twin sigils appeared in unison at the tips of the birds' wings.

Wander's mind was boggled by the prospect of traversing along Avion's moving, beating wings, yet he knew full well he had no choice in the matter.

Back whence he came along the tail he ran, though now the tail was petrified, immovable and straight; thankful was he for having accomplished that much, with the wounding of the first sigil.

As Wander crawled along a flexing wing, his body was stretched, lifted, turned and plunged with every flap.

The motion set his brain and stomach at odds, making him nauseous; he wretched and heaved, expelling only the burning, vivid-yellow bile from his gut.

The angles and extremity worsened as he neared the wing-tip where the sigil lay. He readied his sword, but the blow was not to come: for Avion renewed its strategem of rolling about in the air.

Wander's sense of up and down, and where he himself existed in the directional plane, was shaken all to ruin.

He stabbed at the sigil, but his aim proved false; the sword uselessly pricked the turf outside the sigil.

Desperate, he tried once more; this time the sword pierced well enough within the bounds of the sigil that it spurt black blood and disappeared.

The wing turned stiff, at once rendered immobile by the destruction of the sigil that erstwhile served as its source of power.

The body of Avion listed; the injured wing dipped into the water, while the other tilted upward.

Wander climbed up the steep incline of the moving wing, to reach what he hoped would be the last sigil.

Waiting for the tip to curl toward him, he stabbed with his sword, and missed utterly his mark; on the second attempt he made a shallow wound, but it was enough to break the sigil.

The newly-paralyzed second wing came toward him; Avion's body turned over mid-air as it died, taking Wander with it.

Wander was plunged into the water, underneath the shadow of its lifeless form.

He removed his sword from Avion's hide and swam through the darkness, to get out from underneath the colossal body before it took him to the bottom of the lake and pinned him there to drown.

Once free of it, he watched the winged colossus fall into the depths, the light in its eyes flickering and going out.

But past the curtain of bubbles, none other than the serpent Hydrus waited, eyes still glowing with living blue light and fixed upon Wander.

Wander swam toward the light of the surface; Hydrus pursued.

Wander broke through the surface, gasping, and not a moment later the head of Hydrus emerged with him.

The serpentine stone head dove at him like a striking viper; Wander swam aside, letting Hydrus dive into the water at the spot where he once was.

Before the colossus could submerge, Wander lifted the sword and revealed the sigil on the creature's back, located between two lightning infused spikes; fortuitously, his bow was hooked around one of these spikes as well.

Wander sprang forth and seized upon the serpent's tail, pulled along with it under the water.

Hydrus knew he carried a passenger, one that could not exist for long without air; it dove down deep to drown Wander, or else force him to make for the surface.

It was not for lack of air that Wander lost his hold upon the tail, but rather that his overtaxed sinews gave way when faced with the pull of the water, and the relentlessly twisting motions of Hydrus.

Wander lost both his grip upon Hydrus' tail, and sight of Hydrus itself, in nearly the same moment.

He was left alone and lost, suspended in the dark water.

Wander cast his gaze about frantically; he knew not how deep he was, nor how far from the surface and its life-giving air.

And where was that serpentine monster? All was too murky and indistinct in that underwater world.

Something struck him from behind, and filled his body with burning pain; it was the spike of the creature.

Beyond the blinding pain, there was something else he felt upon his back: the bow. He grabbed hold of its wooden shaft, using as one would a handle, to prevent the serpent from diving away without him.

The tendrils of darkness from fallen Avion reached out with force toward Wander; they ran straight through the lightning-imbued spike around which the bow was hooked, to enter Wander's body.

Hydrus arched violently, reacting to the loss of its spike, thus halting its dive.

Wander hooked the bow around the spike remaining, and so anchored he pushed the ancient sword into the glowing sigil along the spine of Hydrus.

Hydrus' dull bellow reverberated through the lake.

Black blood clouded the water, and enveloped Wander in darkness.

-8-

“Cursed”

In the dark corner of Wander’s haunted dreams, features outlined in the red-gold glow of torchlight, the Warrior watched.

Nearer the light, villagers gathered with hearts full of merriment, rejoicing in the sacred union of two who were in love.

Wander and Mono knelt together on the dais, shielded from the night’s wind with festive drapery dyed an expensive crimson.

They were garbed as they would be in the Forbidden Lands: he in his vestment, and she in her pale dress.

The vestment held the swirling sigil pattern engraven in stone since time immemorial, though here in fabric woven light and dark, and represented constancy.

The dress held the faint colors of spring bloom within its fibers, pure and clean with the hopes of renewal.

Wedding garb, later to become burial shroud.

Behind them stood Lord Emon, officiator of the ceremony, in his finest robes; ringed about the dais were the masked clerics under his command; and facing them sat an old Shamaness.

The Shamaness wore a robe also, longer and more akin to a dress, the deep creases of her wise face and coarse straight hair shadowed by the crest of her hood.

Arrayed before her were bones, beads, precious stones, herbs, and smoking incense balanced upon a small altar-stand.

These were the tools that would allow her faded eyes, which saw the world not clearly, to see into the future, hazy to all but her.

Took she Wander's hand in her aged leathery one, and traced his lines with a dry fingertip.

"Great love, and great sorrow do I see," quoth she in ominous tones. "On the field of combat, you shall fell great foes."

Wander and Mono's faces clouded.

Strange tidings were these for a couple newly wedded; more so since Wander vowed to set aside the warrior's blade, and no longer walked the path to martial glory.

Mono searched Wander's face for some hint of betrayal, of secretly-held ambitions, but she found there none; Wander was as confused as she.

It was thus with trepidation that Mono gave her own hand to the Shamaness; for Wander's reading spoke of sorrow, yet he had no one in the world but she.

The Shamaness frowned with much confusion, tracing the lines of Mono's hand; but then the Shamaness dropped the girl's hand with a sharp intake of air, as if the small pale hand had burned her.

"What is it, Shamaness?" Wander dared ask.

“You...” rasped the Shamaness, leaning back as if to flee, half-blind eyes staring with terror at the equally terrified ones of Mono.

Pointed she a gnarled treebranch-finger at the girl. “You will be the mother of a demon!”

A chorus of horrified gasps from the once-merry villagers.

Lord Emon stood forth, moving between the gaping and fear-stricken lovers. “Explain,” he commanded of the Shamaness.

The Shamaness rose trembling to her feet, standing back apace, and endeavoring to rediscover her well-known composure. “The one who profanes the sanctity of life and death has marked her for its own: Dormin.”

‘Twas as if a shadow fell over all, darker than the curtain of night, when that ill-favoured name breathed out from her lips; the torches appeared to shudder at the sound of the word, as if it held within it the power of a curse.

Lord Emon scowled, displeased: what would possess the venerable old woman to speak of such frightening things, on such a joyous occasion?

“That old Shadow of which you speak was locked in the Forbidden Lands, untold ages ago,” challenged Lord Emon.

He was not as old nor as wise as the Shamaness, and felt like a young pup betraying the dignity of his grey hairs by speaking thus to her; yet speak he would, for he would not worry his charges unduly.

‘Shadow’ he had called it, for he would not say its name; well he could remember the stories of his youth, which warned against invoking the power of entities thus.

The Shamaness was equally resolved. “Lord Emon, I saw what I saw. I know not how, but it shall come to pass.”

Lord Emon considered the matter gravely, staring at the uncomprehending faces of young bride and groom.

“...The Shadow is cunning,” he said at last, his tongue and voice weighted with thick reluctance. “We cannot allow it to escape its prison.”

He turned his back upon them, shoulders heavy with the burden of regret. “...I am sorry,” spake he softly.

Lord Emon beckoned at the Warrior, and the Warrior came forth.

“Lord Emon...?!” questioned Wander, the panic within him rising. The masked clerics surrounded Wander, pulling him forcefully from the dais ere he had time to foment opposition.

Mono began to stand, uncertain, but Lord Emon and the Shamaness each took hold of one of her wrists, and pulled her down to the altar.

Wander broke free of the clerics with his animal thrashing, wresting a sword from the grasp of one.

The Warrior poised above Mono with sword drawn, and leveled over her head; he was to be her executioner.

Wander climbed the dais, and blocked the Warrior’s sword with his own; Mono’s dear neck was spared.

Thought he that Mono’s life was spared also, but then he heard a sickening sound behind him.

Turning, Wander saw an ashen-faced Mono: a ceremonial knife, used to make sacrifices of bulls and sheep, was lodged deep in her back, the hilt held within the grasp of Lord Emon.

He pulled out the knife, and let Mono slump forward upon the altar.

Wander knelt down, distraught, and gathered Mono into his arms; Lord Emon and the Shamaness offered no resistance, for the girl's fate was sealed.

Wander cradled her dying form against him. "Mono... no please... I do not have your skill..."

He looked askance at the Shamaness. "Please, help her!"

The face of the Shamaness was pained, but resolute. "...It is done," she said simply.

Wander looked from Shamaness to Shaman, blanched with shock and horror. "Why...? Why would you do this? No trial, no deliberation of the council?!"

"You are not on the council," said Lord Emon, stern. "And you are not the leader of this tribe. If I sent you to war, as you once wished, you would kill upon my orders without question - for you would trust my judgement that their deaths are for the good of all."

"You would lecture me, even now as she dies?!!"

Lord Emon's jaw clenched grimly, as he waxed full wroth at the defiant youth. "...You have no right to question me on matters that are not yours to understand nor contend with," he said, voice dangerously restrained.

“I have every right! You would murder an innocent woman on her own wedding night, in front of the entire village!”

The villagers of the assembled crowd made sounds of incredulity; Wander’s accusation was audacious.

“Careful, boy,” warned Lord Emon, whose patience was coming to an end. He would be forced to act against Wander, if his seditious behavior continued.

Mono choked on blood, shuddered, and then her body went still.

“She has passed on to the light,” said the Shamaness, closing her eyes solemnly. “This world troubles her no more.”

“YOU MURDERED MY WIFE!” cried Wander, shrill with uncontained rage.

“He saved your wife!” refuted the Shamaness. “Can you not understand, boy, that it is worse to live as a demon’s pawn than to pass, pure and sinless, into the great beyond?!”

“As you said, all have borne witness,” Lord Emon said, gesturing to the guests assembled. “This deed was not done in shadow. Who here believes I have done wrong?”

Wander, through tears, looked out over the crowd; most avoided his gaze. All were silent, and made no motion toward Wander.

“He murdered her,” said Wander, choked with delirious grief. “You saw... why do you say and do nothing, you cowards?”

The warrior knocked him upon the head with the pommel of his sword.

Wander slumped into unconsciousness; as he did so he saw the Warrior, silhouetted in the torchlight, looming over the fallen forms of both he and his slain bride.

-9-

“Warrior”

Wander felt himself lifted from the water.

The water fell away, fleeing from his prostrate body and from the grass upon which he lay.

Grass? Indeed: green sward and moss cushioned his back.

Grey light there was, beyond his eyelids.

In the twilight between wakefulness and dream, his lids lifted, and he beheld his dear Mono.

She was sitting upon a dimly-glowing stone the shape of a human molar-tooth, which stood close beside others of its like, and thus increased the resemblance further.

He could not see her translucent contours clearly, as ephemeral as a sunbeam or a rainbow.

Nor could he hear her exclamation of joy as he woke and saw her; her smiling mouth was parted, forming words, yet nothing but deafening silence reached his ears.

She alighted her bare feet upon the green moss; she came toward him but then stopped short with intimidation: for three human-shaped shadows stepped between Wander and herself.

The near-unconsciousness that consumed him gave way to wakefulness, and both Mono and shadows faded away from view.

XXXXXXX

He coughed, expelling a lung's worth of brackish lake water. As he rose, his understanding expanded: he rode upon a circular island of moss, and that island was moving.

It was moving in steady undulations, far above the lake.

Reaching a standing position, he was able to take full account of his surroundings.

He discovered that he stood upon the crown of an enormous stone quadruped lumbering through the shallows: a colossus that most resembled a bull.

It had no eyes, as if its skull had been cleaved in twain, leaving only its gaping lower jaw and glowing horns spared.

Little could Wander have known or cared, but the beast's ancient designation was Pelagia.

The colossus tossed its horned head, in an effort to shake Wander loose and cast him down upon the sandy shore of the lake.

Wander held fast to the moss to prevent this. He took note of the glowing ring of blue molar-stones: a weak point, perhaps.

He swung the ancient sword at the stone, but to his amazement it was made of no such material; indeed, he had never seen its like.

The tooth did not split apart, nor did it answer the metal blade with equal hardness, but rather repelled it with a wobble; it shook with reverberation, and made a sound much like the village warning-gong when struck.

This took strange effect upon the bovine creature: the colossal head turned the way of the tooth-stone he hit, and altered its path in that direction as it stumbled away from shore.

Wander made the same assault upon another stone, to test his theory of how the colossus might be manipulated.

When Pelagia swayed in the direction of the newly-hit tooth-stone, his theory was proven sound: by way of striking at its teeth, the colossus could in this manner be steered.

But where to steer it? The answer came in the form of a disc of earth, which Wander espied from across the breadth of the lake.

Suspended it was over the water, atop a single stone spindle-tower pillar.

Far larger was the platform than the creature's sheared palate, and about level with it in height.

If he could but disembark this accursed creature onto the table of stone, Wander reasoned he would be in better position to assess and fight the beast.

Toward this disc Wander steered the creature; as it neared this obstacle, the dizzy and rattled stone bull decided to employ its power to destroy it.

Pelagia's horns lighted with an angry red-gold, and from the tips shot bolts of fire at the base of the stone pedestal.

The support pillar cracked, and the earthen tabletop pedestal tilted dangerously: one more strike and the pillar would not stand, letting the pedestal slide entirely into the lake.

It was only then that the ancient sword caught the light at perfect angle, to reveal a faint blue glow escaping the moss on Pelagia's mossy tongue.

Wander fell upon his knees and tore away the moss, revealing the sigil beneath.

Pelagia was turning away from the platform; with no time to lose, Wander stabbed the heart of the sigil.

The colossus bellowed, and fell into the shallows; before it did, Wander made his leap onto the listing earthen pedestal.

The tendrils of darkness that emerged from the body of fallen Pelagia in the lake entered Wander, and stole away his consciousness for a time too short for visions or dreams.

XXXXXX

Atop this platform was what appeared to be the rubble of fallen pillars, perhaps the remnant ruins that once supported yet another level of an ancient tower.

But nay: this pillar had carven eyes that lit with blue when Wander woke.

The eyes were bored into the stone mask of a stone man, which now arose from its slumber to contend with the small intruder made of flesh.

It propped itself up on pillar-arms, one long and shaped like a stone blade, the other shorter and shaped in the manner of a sword's pommel.

The man-like colossus rose upon stone pillar legs, and it was the tallest of the colossi that Wander had yet seen, a full fifteen measures taller than his tribe's tallest man.

The thick and weighty sword-arm alone could have swept aside any of his village watchtowers with ease.

Gaius, the warrior colossus, was he.

Wander held his ancient sword aloft, catching the sun's light.

The beam which formed from its edge led directly to the creatures' face, but there was no sign of the sigil.

Gaius pulled back his sword-arm, prepared for a mighty strike at his human challenger.

Wander ran, and the sword crashed down, shaking the earthen platform; for sure the colossus was slow to strike, but when its blows landed it was with great and terrible power.

Wander found himself at the center of the round arena, where he espied a circle of hard stone in noticeable contrast to the brown earth that surrounded it.

Like was it to the reinforced metal center of a buckler shield, used in lands far away from Wander's; indeed, this was how the very arena itself was shaped.

Wander faced the colossus with the defiant gaze of his sharp and keen eyes; he would flee no more from this monster.

He stood upon this central stone, and awaited another swing from the stone giant.

Waited, even as its shadow fell over him...

Even as it neared to crushing him.

The moment before it ended its downward arc atop him, Wander threw himself into a roll upon the ground and out of its way; the sword hit the stone.

The impact sent a shockwave of tremors through the colossal sword-arm, travelling even to his stone mask, which crumbled to reveal the hidden sigil.

While the stone giant rested stunned upon his stone sword-arm, Wander scrambled up its incline.

When the colossus lifted the sword it was too late, for Wander ran its flat length, and then leapt from it onto his fur-covered stomach.

Gripping pieces of stone armor, Wander made his ascent.

The giant colossus beat its chest with a pommel-hand, missing Wander only by a small margin; bits of the stone armor cracked and crumbled away, falling past Wander to the giant's feet below.

Wander quickly climbed to the creature's broad shoulders, and then 'round the neck to the thing's rather narrow head, where at the very top the sigil glowed blue.

The giant leaned forth to toss him from his furry scalp, so that Wander dangled by a handful of fur.

The blunt stone arm made its way to scrape him off, which surely would have spelled Wander's doom: but ere the arm reached him, Wander stabbed upward into the sigil.

The creature's head rained black blood.

Wander pulled the sword out of what would have been a fleshly creature's brain, and hastened to climb upon Gaius' head.

Gaius fell faceward into the earth, dead.

Wander laid back upon the furry hide of the creature's back, eyes closed and arms spread wide to embrace the hard-won moment of brief respite.

The tendrils of darkness from the sigil of Gaius' crown plunged into Wander's breast.

XXXXX

Darkness, and the tunnel of white light.

A soft, feminine murmuring, but 'twas distant and muffled, unintelligible.

Wander yelled desperately, but no sound from his throat emerged.

The form of Mono emerged from the light, her hair whipping her face.

Wander reached out to her, with grime-blackened fingers.

Mono reached out to him, with fingers pale.

She stepped out, a bare foot into the darkness.

But the arms of the shadows grasped Wander and held him fast, imprisoning him in their dark void abode.

Mono cried out, and one barely-audible word managed to push past the distortion of that limbo-world:

“..Wander!!”

The shadows pulled him into the darkness.

-10-

“Reflection”

The wind softly blew across Mono’s pale face, rustling her raven locks.

Lord Emon gazed upon the still-lovely corpse, a mixture of feelings within him; he had not seen her since the night he sacrificed her.

Sacrifice, mercy-killing... the words did not ultimately matter; it was his hand that had held the knife, his hand that pushed the blade into her flesh, and prematurely ended her life.

Poor girl, thought he. So few years upon the earth, and those spent entirely in maiden childhood; never would she know of marital or maternal joy.

The timing could not have been worse; for a child to be cut down on her wedding night was an unthinkable and unfortunate travesty.

Yet he had been given no choice: fate had dealt the cruel blow, not he.

The responsibility of the tribe’s protection had been his to bear: it was a grim and thankless task, the cutting of a limb gone rotten to preserve the body whole, and he liked it not.

He felt pity for her, and for the boy who was to be her husband, and for the children that would never be born to them; but he harbored no guilt.

It needed to be done. The loss of one flower was better than the loss of many.

'Tis what made it sacrifice, and not unjust murder.

Indeed, had it been otherwise, perhaps he could have better sympathized with Wander's desperate and blasphemous deeds.

But the child of a great hunter should have had a better grasp of understanding, as to the nature of life and death.

Many an innocent beast was felled by hunter's bow, to keep the hunter's fellows fed and warm; to protect and preserve mankind by killing was no sin.

To disobey one's elders...

To steal that which is sacred and thus beyond price...

To seize power that does not belong to you, and to blacken your soul by trading it for selfish gain...

These were the true sins, according to the beliefs of Lord Emon.

A flurry of white feathers drifted down from the cathedral ceiling like snow, and snow-white doves five in number flocked to alight upon the dead girl's altar.

In the land beyond the Shrine of Worship, the five white pillars of light which marked the colossi's graves could be seen to connect the earth and sky.

"...That foolish apostate," the wroth Lord Emon growled. "He will doom us all."

He turned to his men, who stood behind him in the hall... a hall once lined with statues of colossi numbering ten.

Now half that number remained standing, with the rest reduced to five piles of formless and broken stone.

“We are too late to stop him from unsealing the vessels,” said he to the men, “It has already begun. But he has not unsealed them all, not yet. He may yet fall to the remaining guardians, but we cannot leave it to chance. Make haste, and ready my horse.”

“But where shall he go next, so that we may overtake him in time?” asked one cleric from behind his carved wooden mask.

Lord Emon considered, looking out past the pillars of the Shrine at the land beyond, and at a dark storm brewing over the mountains.

“I know where he will be at the very last, if he should prevail,” said Lord Emon. “And that is all that matters.”

The light dimmed upon the grasses.

It dimmed upon the stone steps of the Shrine.

A shadow passed even over the pale and lifeless face of Mono.

Though none heard the sound of her voice, Mono’s shade in the Great Beyond whispered the name of Wander.

XXXXXX

She had been left atop the cliffs, when first Wander descended into the lake.

When the sun began to fall near the horizon and still he did not come back for her, Agro began to worry.

The horse circled for miles along the water's edge in search of him, until at last she came within earshot of his calling whistle.

A broken pathway spiraled from shore to stone table, and this is the path Agro walked to find her rider.

The boy she found was pale, and exhausted; he had done battle with four titan monsters since she had seen him last.

This fact the horse can hardly be expected to have comprehended, even had she seen it with her own dark eyes.

All she knew was that he needed her, and she would oblige to render aid.

Wander reached out weakly to the diamond-shaped patch of white upon her brow as she nuzzled him, kneeling so that he could better pull himself upon her saddle.

Pelagia's bolts of energy had done considerable damage to the shore ramp; Agro was to jump over a gap in the masonry.

Wander, slumped forward in the saddle, thought he saw Mono, standing in the shallows of the placid lake.

She turned to him, sadly. "Wander... hurry..." she said in a ghostly whisper, carried to his ears upon the wind. It was the first time he had heard her speak since she passed.

The jump of Agro nearly caused him to fall from the saddle, though he caught himself in time to avoid mishap.

Mono's ghostly apparition was gone.

Dormin's voice returned; its male voice had grown in strength, with the female one receding:

"Thy next foe is... deep within the forest... a shadow that crawls upon the walls..."

Old shade, have you no pity? Thought Wander. I am mortal only. Give me but a moment's peace...

He tried to lift the sword to the light, fails. He has almost no strength left, and sunset approaches.

He saw an umbral glade, trusted that this was where he was meant to go, and weakly spurred Agro on with his heel.

-11-

“Guardians”

The sun hung low in the sky, but it mattered not: precious few of its golden rays pierced the net of intertwined branches over Wander’s head, and fewer still reached the autumnal carpet of leaves strewn in the path of his mount.

Through umbral glade, frolicking streams, and gloomy tunnel caves did Wander journey, upon the back of the dark horse Agro.

Fruit trees did grow there in the quiet nook of the lonely region, from seeds planted long ago, in the grounds surrounding the minor replica of the Shrine of Worship; else, if not planted, perhaps during brief sojourn the seeds fell from ancient pilgrims’ lips.

They existed for hungry Wander to partake, their flesh red-gold and enticing; the lowest-hanging of this harlot fruit all but gifted themselves to his outstretched hand, stained though it was with the black blood of the Colossi.

Wander bit into the fruit’s flesh and devoured it, closing his eyes and savoring its sweet juices.

The fruit was not enough, however; nay, it merely whet his appetite after so much exertion.

The son of a hunter needed meat to keep the thews of his limbs strong; but where was such game to be found in this vast and desolate land?

He had not seen hide nor hair of living beast since he had come to the Forbidden Lands, at least none that roamed the earth; he wondered if he should try for the hawk that constantly circled overhead.

By chance he found a creature spying down at him from a ledge of the pilgrim's shrine: a black lizard, like an elongated frog, with dark wet eyes and a tail of glowing white.

Wander seized the creature with his hand; it wriggled away from him, detaching from its tail and leaving the appendage still twitching within Wander's grasp.

Without a moment's hesitation, Wander brought the tail to his lips and sank his teeth into the flesh like a ravenous wolf; however Wander was man, not beast, and he was unaccustomed to the taste of raw meat.

Despite the gnawing of his stomach, he resolved to take respite in the glow of that most basic, founding element of civilization: a bounded cooking-fire, ringed with stones.

He speared the lizard's tail with a simple wooden cooking-spit, and held it over the flames to cook; the juices hissed, but did not brown or change color.

Wander ate it with all the more pleasure, as he had to wait longer for it; it invigorated him at once, giving him the stamina to continue his quest.

Anon they came upon a shadowed lagoon; in the middle of this lagoon was an island, and upon the island, against the rock cliff, was a temple in the style of a pagoda.

Wander set sandaled feet in the shallow, clear water, and marveled at its crystalline beauty; however, the mud and grime from those feet and sandals blackened the waters with smoke-like plumes with every step.

He looked into the darkness of the temple entrance; in his mind, Wander thought back to that night, so many nights ago, when he entered a temple of a different sort...

XXXXXX

The temple of his village had been guarded by two sentries, day and night, their torches blazing.

'Tis why he had to go around, and climb.

A sky of countless glittering stars and a full moon bore witness witness to his trespass, as he scaled the stone walls of the stone tower.

There were few good handholds to grip in the masonry, but there was enough; the foliage that had been let to grow across the stones aided him as well. It would later occur to Wander that this was a most fortuitous practice for the battles to come.

Wander climbed in through the window skylight, the one that aligned at auspicious times with the heavenly bodies, and made his way within.

The tower was too tall for him to let himself fall; thus was he forced to scale the interior wall, impeded by the relics which hung there.

Fearsome images there were, both woven and engraven and marked with paint: all about were the depictions of a great horned shadow, flanked by an army of pale humans risen from their tombs.

Masks there were also, the carved faces of spirits and demons, which the clerics wore to disguise themselves and to hide their human terror, lest the true creatures should perchance come upon them.

Wander could see the glow of the torches held by the tower sentries flicker across the temple floor; so preoccupied was he in watching them that he was less careful in his descent, and with a misplaced hand made contact with a wooden mask.

The jostled mask made a hollow sound against the stone wall upon which it hung; sure Wander was that he was now to be caught by the sentries, and dragged from the tower temple in shame.

But a yawn from one of the guards set his mind at ease: these lowest-level initiates were half asleep, and not been alerted to the sound of his mishap.

His feet reached the flagstone floor with nary a sound, only the soft scraping of sandal leather against the dust; no movement did he see from the guards. With exhilaration he dared to hope that he might yet accomplish his goal and slip away, unnoticed.

The object of his desire was a sword: yea, the very same ancient sword that would grant passage through the front gate of the Forbidden Lands, the very weapon he would plunge into the magical hearts of the Colossi to slay them.

The sword lay in repose upon a pedestal, gleaming coldly in the moonlight that it was too far in shadow to reflect; yet it reflected the nearer red-gold torchlight not at all.

With trembling fingers he lifted the blade, and in the unsullied sheen stared at his own mirrored face; it was full of pale and wide-eyed terror.

The blade hummed with a coursing power: it was no simple object crafted for the crude designs of man, but a living thing, with a spirit all its own.

It seemed to Wander a sacrilege to place the celestial blade inside the rough and rudimentary sheathe he wore for the purposes of keeping it close, but it

could not be helped; he needed both his hands to climb out the way he had come.

And so he did, and without incident; though Wander's blood pumped within his chest and ears hard and loud, enough to shake him with every beating, and surely loud enough to alert any who were awake at this hour, Wander went unhindered.

The gods had seen, and they had done not but to turn their backs; perhaps they did not care so much about the relics falling into mortal hands as did Lord Emon.

Or so the boy fervently hoped, as he stole away into the night.

That was many moons ago.

XXXXXX

Now, in the present, Wander let the horse Agro return to the campfire, for Agro would not go into the earth willingly; and thus, alone, Wander entered the temple of the Forbidden Lands.

The village temple had been built upon the ground, reaching toward the sky with piled stones; this temple, on the contrary, descended many tiers into the earth.

The village temple had been small in circumference: a ring of men could have stood around the central pedestal of the sword, and no more; this temple's stepped and level pathways were several men wide.

Enormous braziers, set upon stone pedestals that stood in hollow recesses, lit and lined the hallway walls.

Wander gazed at the braziers with wonderment: who was keeping the braziers lit? Who was supplying them with the wooden kindling they required as fuel?

His query was answered when he approached a dying brazier; a stick of wood fell from above, and landed within the flame of the metal basin.

Looking up he saw eyes, already glowing red-gold with Colossi anger at Wander's trespass, in the darkness of a balcony.

The silhouetted foe leapt down to Wander's level.

'Twas smaller than the previous five of its kin, but larger still than any creature encountered by Wander before he set foot in the Forbidden Lands, and shook the floor of the temple with its weight.

It prowled about on fibrous paws, ever facing Wander, with a low and rumbling growl of menace.

It was a bestial thing, shaped in the likeness of a great lion with the curving tusks of a wild boar, yet larger than either creature; stone plates of armor were fastened across the hide of its back.

Celosia its name was, and it was the keeper of the fire.

With terrifying agility the Colossus charged at Wander, who could do naught but to lie prone on the ground and let the monster rampage over him; the beast's coarse underbelly scraped him as it passed.

Momentum carried it directly into a brazier, knocking loose from the iron basin the bit of wood kindling that it, itself, had most recently placed within.

The stick flamed upon the floor; Celosia startled and leapt, fearful of its scorching heat.

Verily did Wander seize upon the opportunity to grasp up this ready torch, aiming the burning thing at the quaking, affrighted cat.

Celosia backed away from the fiery glow, into the shadows; its instinctual duty was to feed the flames, but not with its own body.

Wander slowly marched upon Celosia, forcing it to retreat further still into the dark; joyous was he at having found a way to keep the beast at bay.

But lo, the torch's flame was not everlasting, sputtering and smoldering out; in the darkness, Wander was overcome with dread.

A low rumble; rocks scraping together in an earthen throat.

And within the next moment, he was overcome with Celosia's renewed and snarling onslaught.

Fast did Wander run for the nearest lit brazier; yea, as fast as his strong and nimble legs could carry him.

The four stone paws pounded the floor behind him; he did not believe he would survive a successful charge, nor would his ruse of lying down work a second time.

Wander dove past the pedestal, upon which sat the brazier that was his aim; but ere he was able to attain full safety betwixt pedestal and wall, Celosia with stone claws tore bloody gashes into his leg.

Sharply did Wander suck in air, pulling his wounded limb into the recess behind the pedestal stone.

Into the fiery brazier he dipped his stick, lighting the torch anew, and struck the Colossus full upon its offending paw; the flame singed the fur with sizzling fury, and the great cat withdrew with a cry of pain.

Armed again with the torch Wander emerged, and no time did he waste: he ran at Celosia full force, brandishing the torch in wide and glowing arcs.

Back, back he forced Celosia, to the balcony of their current temple tier, where no railing prevented a long and lethal fall to the next.

With its clawed hindlegs Celosia found the sheer edge, and discovered it could retreat no more.

The temple guardian looked between the fall of doom, the flame, and Wander, desperate... but if it desired mercy, in Wander it would find none.

Wander cried out and charged at Celosia, with the torch held out before him; yet the beast beheld his eyes, more full of fire than the flame held in his hand.

Celosia recoiled back, and its hind-paws slipped; it tumbled off the balcony ledge.

Hard did Celosia fall upon the stone floor below, enough to crack and cleave its armor in twain; the pieces fell asunder, revealing a brightly glowing sigil.

Wander tossed aside the torch and drew the sword; he leapt down upon the prone creature's sigil, plunging his sword within.

Black blood gushed forth; Wander sat down and closed his eyes, as if in prayer, waiting for the tendrils to come.

The tendrils of darkness he absorbed, but they did not bring unconsciousness as before; slowly, he opened his eyes.

Nothing had changed; it seemed he was building an immunity to the darkness.

“Wander...” whispered Mono’s voice, from the plane unseen and unknowable to mortals. *“Wander, where have you gone?”*

“I am here, Mono,” he intoned in a murmur. He gazed upward, and lo he saw her, standing as a flickering mirage in the light of the abandoned torch. “You are the one who is gone. But not for much longer.”

XXXX

On this new lower level he found a wide pillar-shaft, lit with moonlight from a skylight aperture above; it had gaps that served as doorways, and was ringed with windows.

Peering past a doorway gap, he found that the grounds of a courtyard lay still further below, fashioned circular in the way of an arena: and in the grass of the courtyard, the giant lizard Colossus waited, its legs glowing with sigil-marks.

Kuromori was its name. It stared with blue eyes at the green sward, unaware of Wander’s presence.

Like shooting a lizard in a pail, thought Wander grimly, as he drew his bow. He maneuvered behind a window, nocked an arrow, and let it fly.

His aim was true; but ere the arrow reached the lizard’s targeted back leg, Kuromori’s prodigious tail swatted it easily from the air.

Kuromori stared at him with red-gold eyes; with frightening speed it turned and ran up the wall of the courtyard.

It spat projectiles of burning fire at Wander, and Kuromori's aim rivalled Wander's own: it shot directly through the window, missing Wander only just due to his timely sidestep, and melting stone where he once stood.

Wander ran.

Kuromori shot its projectiles through every window; such was the speed and dexterity of Kuromori that Wander kept ahead of it by only a pace.

Wander found a doorway, and used it to climb to the tier below.

Kuromori searched: it thought him still on the upper tier, hiding from its sight.

Wander let loose another arrow, hitting one of Kuromori's glowing legs.

The leg spewed black blood, and the veins of the sigil ceased to glow; the clawed foot detached.

Kuromori's response was instant, a blast of fire aimed at Wander.

Wander dodged and ran... toward Kuromori.

Kuromori had not expected this, nor did it expect a sword thrust between the bars of a window to stab its hind foot.

The blade sank deep.

The magic, emanating from the sigil, which allowed the creature's leg to adhere to the stone wall was gone; two out of four legs now hung limp.

The remaining two legs were not enough for Kuromori to retain its hold, and it tumbled backward.

Wander was pulled, by means of the sword lodged deep in Kuromori's leg, through the window.

Kuromori landed upon its back in the courtyard grass, with Wander atop its belly.

In one fell, arcing sweep of the ancient blade the sigils of the remaining legs were slashed, and black blood was released from the wounds.

Wander, standing upon the fallen colossus, was drenched in that blood.

Black tendrils rose up from all four legs, and cocooned a stoically emotionless Wander in darkness.

The blue eye-lights of the lizard-like Colossus dimmed.

XXX

When Wander emerged from the bowels of the pagoda temple, he saw that it was night.

He returned to Agro, who rested in the warmth of the abandoned campfire as it strove valiantly against the chill night air.

Agro startled when she saw him, for at first she knew him not: his once-reddish hair was now dark, his skin was pale as death, and his eyes had become a cold grey-blue.

"Agro. Come." His force was hard-edged, and brooked no argument.

Agro obeyed, rising; as she did, she noticed that Wander now had seven distinct shadows trailing him in the flickering firelight.

As the shadows crossed the path of the fire, it was snuffed out.

-12-

“Sky-Burial”

Wander remembered the night he stole the sword, and what transpired after.

He traversed the steps that led up to a mountain plateau, overlooking the village. The cold night wind stung him, and made him shiver.

On the plateau, wrapped bodies were held aloft, placed in the scaffold branches of leafless trees. Sky-Burial.

Agro, without bridle or saddle, stood forlorn at the bottom of the tree which held the newest body: that of Wander’s dearly-departed Mono.

Dark birds convened upon the body, unwrapping the shroud from her face with their beaks.

The horse watched as Wander climbed the tree. He waved away the eager carrion-birds, and gazed upon the exposed face of his dead beloved, with a painful yearning to see life bloom once more within it.

Tenderly did he cover her with the shroud once more, as he lifted her in his arms, and slowly carried her down from the tree.

As he neared the steps to make his descent, he heard a plaintive whinny: Agro would not be so ignored.

Wander’s gaze went directly to the scar upon Agro’s side, an arcing line where dark fur would not grow.

'Twas the indelible mark of the gash inflicted by the horn of the warrior's bull, in the midst of pitched battle; healed due to Mono's skill, it would never truly be gone, nor would it ever be forgotten by horse or man.

Agro knelt down, and thus was Wander able to place the body gently upon the horse's bare back; the noble beast would help to carry the burden of her erstwhile mistress' body, the maiden who had, in life, helped to heal her.

Wander caressed the grieving horse's muzzle, and with his fingertips traced the scar that linked Agro also to Mono.

The tears, which until now Wander had held back deep behind his eyes, fell forth unhindered; he no longer had the strength needed to restrain them.

Agro appeared to be waiting: she had not yet arisen.

Unsure, for never had he ridden her without Mono alive and riding also, Wander climbed atop her back: unlike before, Agro made no attempt to shake him off.

Agro rose; with one last look upon Wander, who held his beloved's body close to his heart, Agro began her solemn march down the plateau steps, toward the village below.

Though the horse could not know of, or indeed understand, Wander's plans to cheat death and rescue Mono from its clutches, man and horse were inexplicably bound and united in this shared purpose.

The village slumbered: all lights had been doused hours past, and not a sound emanated from their dwellings.

The finest of these dwellings belongs to none other than Lord Emon.

Inside Lord Emon's home were the shells of tortoises: larger ones to be worn on the arm as carapace shields, smaller ones filled with beads to be used as ritual-rattles.

For that was the animal that Lord Emon's soul was most affiliated with: the tortoise, with its hard and defensive exterior and rounded back, slow-moving and wise.

Lord Emon was experiencing a sleepless night, tossing and turning on his bedding. He was without his ritual mask, without his robes of office, and without his inscrutable air of authority.

No... this night he was only a man, an old and careworn man, the lines of his face deepened and made haggard from anxiety-riddled insomnia.

The words of the Shamaness haunted him: the girl had been marked as the future mother of a demon.

What would that have meant? Could a child she bore to Wander have been tainted by evil? Would she have been otherwise impregnated? In either event, how would this have come to be?

Dormin was sealed away, sealed far, far away, in a land where none in the village would dare to venture, least of all the good-hearted and obedient Mono.

What most preyed upon Lord Emon's mind was a niggling thought, a creeping insecurity, a whispering, taunting voice inside his skull warning that his sacrifice of the girl's life might have been in vain.

Perhaps he was a fool to think he, a mere mortal man, could confound an ancient power, and prevent such impossible things from coming to pass, be they miracles or disasters.

What power had he, to force the hand of fate from its path?

He heard soft hoofbeats outside the tent, and looked out of his doorway: Wander rode slowly upon Agro, carrying Mono's body in his arms.

Lord Emon emerged from the darkness of his dwelling, and spoke Wander's name.

Wander was deep in the turmoil of his thoughts, but Lord Emon's voice brought him out of his reverie: he tugged gently on the hair of Agro's mane, causing her to halt.

He did not look back at Lord Emon.

"Why disturb your beloved's rest?" asked Lord Emon.

Wander made no attempt to answer.

"You do her a dishonor," admonished the scowling Lord Emon. "Her body is nothing; her soul is ready to depart. To ascend to the skies, and be at peace with her ancestors. If you cling to her mortal shell, her soul will linger on the earth for your sake."

"..Good," the boy rumbled, darkly.

"I understand the pain you must feel. The bitterness. Hatred, even. I do not blame you for these feelings."

"Your sympathy is wasted upon me."

"I do not ask for your forgiveness. If I suffer a heavy heart for what has been taken from you, it is a price I pay willingly, and would do so again."

At that the boy bristled, taking grave offense. “You paid no price. She did.”

Wander met his gaze at last, eyes ablaze. “To quell your fears of an ancient monster.

Was leaving the Forbidden Land to live here for untold ages, amongst the mud and stone, not enough?

Must you cower like a child, fearful of the dark after a nightmare?”

Lord Emon’s face hardened. “...You are grieving. You know not of what you speak. Tomorrow, I pray, you will see the light of reason.”

“I see clearer now than ever before. I do not ask for your forgiveness either, old man. If you desired me to blindly follow your ‘wisdom’, you made a grave error in refusing my service.”

“It was blindness I saw,” Lord Emon countered. “That is why I did not want you to become a cleric. You do not understand what it is to sacrifice.”

“No. You did the sacrificing for me. Had I done the deed, I would have looked her in the eyes.”

Lord Emon watched as a turtle slowly crossed the dirt path, making its way between them, and heeding them not.

“An individual life is fleeting; our happiness even more so,” spake Lord Emon. “The tribe, the land, the world, these can be eternal... so long as we protect them. No single man or woman is worth endangering the eternal.”

“If you would destroy that which is worth living for and protecting, then I want not your ‘eternity,’” asserted Wander with vehement disgust, “for you speak of hell.”

Wander issued a commanding cry, and spurred Agro forward. She galloped away, leaving a trail of dust... but through the cloud was a glint of blue light.

Lord Emon squinted, glanced at the moon above, sensing there was something odd in that reflection.

The old chieftain nearly returned to the inside of his dwelling, but then stopped short.

He knew what that light was.

Donning his mask and robes, he went at once to the temple, startling the guards with his sudden presence.

His intention to enter was clear, and one of the guards forfeited his torch for Lord Emon to use, neither one daring to question the chieftain as to his purpose.

At first glance, nothing to Lord Emon appeared to be amiss: everything was in place, and as it should be.

But the sword, upon the pedestal, seemed wrong. Shabby.

Lord Emon lifted the sword and inspected it: it was a crude sword, Wander’s practice weapon, left in the place of the ancient relic.

He turned upon the guards. “Who has entered?”

The guards exchange glances. “None but you, Lord Emon,” came the meek and worried answer from one of the two, behind their ceremonial mask.

Lord Emon strode out of the temple. “Come with me. You will remedy this mistake by helping me catch the thief.”

“But who shall guard the temple?” one guard asked.

“Naught remains worth guarding,” was Lord Emon’s curt reply. “Naught may remain at all, if we do not return the sacred sword.”

-13-

“Blasted”

In the present time, Wander listlessly walked across a dusty field as one dead.

He reasoned that he surely carried the shades of all the slain Colossi within him, yet he felt their presence not.

Indeed he felt nothing, as though he had been hollowed out, and left a numb and empty shell of a man.

The soles of his sandals were worn thin from travel, from scampering about and climbing upon the hides of earthen Colossi; now the sandals scraped against the cracked and gritty scales of the ground, for with every step he barely mustered the will to lift his foot.

The blisters on his feet and hands had torn, hardened, and callused over many times.

The air about him was dark, grey... the ground and the sky was choked ash, and scattered here and there were the burnt and blackened remains of trees.

And yet, this place was not dry.

The field was, perhaps, the remnant bed of a long-since evaporated watering hole: and though it appeared, at first glance, to be a patchwork of parched earth, the dust was somewhat damp.

There were humid droplets of moisture in the air too fine to clearly see, sticking to Wander's skin much like the mist of the Green Hills barrows, though not quite as cool.

'Twas too late to save his cracked lips, which looked much like the ground beneath his feet.

Wander had not taken much heed to the holes pitted throughout the field; if he had, he would have assumed them to be the homes of some small burrowing creature.

The earth rumbled; many, though not all, of the holes began to fill with bubbling water.

Geysers of vaporous water blasted upward with great force from the burrows, reaching an astonishing height.

Agro was spooked, and would have bolted away had Wander not kept a firm hand upon her reins.

The two were drenched with a coat of grimy wetness, as the water mixed with the dirt and sweat that was already upon them; they were now trapped in what seemed like a bank of clouds, formed from a forest of inverted waterfalls.

It was some moments before the geysers calmed, and retreated back into the ground from whence they came.

Wander drew and lifted the ancient sword: but far too much dark vapor and dust existed in that valley for any light to catch upon the blade, and provide a guiding beam.

Wander lowered and let hang the sword, glumly.

He knew not what path to take through this wretched and accursed land, other than to avoid the mouths of the geysers, lest they should, of a sudden, blow him halfway to the sky.

There was another mouth nearby, that of a cave; within that cave was the maw of a monster with glowing eyes, and this maw opened to emit a bolt of searing light.

The burning bolt landed on the ground near Wander, creating another geyser-hole.

A warning shot; the next one would not miss the human trespasser, if he chose to remain standing within that spot.

Wander jumped astride Agro's back, and spurred her with his heels; he would not turn tail and flee, as the Colossus known as Basaran desired.

Nay, he rode Agro straight and true toward the colossal eyes, glowing within the shadow of the mountain cave.

As he neared the cave, Wander pulled on the leather reins and steered Agro sharply away, to lure the secretive Colossus out into the open.

Basaran took the bait.

Its crab-like legs stretched underneath an enormous armored shell, emerging from its place of protection.

Bubbling water reappeared in some of the holes.

Wander rode hard, veering to and fro, narrowly avoiding blasts from the Colossus and the geysers alike.

He scanned the field, to locate which geyser spouts would be next to blow.

There was a rumbling beneath Agro's hooves, a shaking that was not caused by Colossus or horse.

Wander could feel the tremors running in a consistent direction; he followed it with his gaze, finding the source to be one of the larger holes, and the geyser that emerged from it was larger, taller, and more powerful than the others.

The geysers subsided. More rumbling, aimed toward a different large spout; Wander turned Agro, racing toward that spout.

Basaran lumbered after him, and Wander fervently prayed the timing for his plan would be correct.

They halted near an impending king-geyser, and waited for a blast from Basaran to be forthcoming.

As Basaran's mouth opened and began to glow with collected energy, Wander spurred Agro onward.

The blast did not hit Wander or his mount, and Basaran gave chase in its slow and heavy fashion.

With Basaran positioned over the geyser, abruptly did Wander wheel Agro about.

They rode to one side, avoiding the pillar-like legs as the Colossus attempted to turn, and ran directly underneath the shadow of its colossal underbelly.

Wander reined in Agro, though the horse was much affrighted.

"Quiet, Agro," he told her sternly. "Trust me."

Basaran stopped its forward motion; its legs began to fold, and its underbelly lowered.

Its intention was to crush them with the weight of its own body.

And well it would have done - but lo! The king of geysers blasted skyward, sending the crab-tortoise Colossus reeling back on its hind legs, its body pushed away from Wander and Agro by the force of the geyser's water.

The limbs which flailed in the air were tipped with vulnerable glowing magic.

Wander took up his bow, and as he rode from underneath Basaran he fired arrows at the Colossus' exposed feet.

The glow faded, and the legs seized, immoveable.

The geyser died away, and Basaran fell hard to the earth, no longer able to support its weight on its injured and useless forelegs.

Lifting the sword, Wander caught one single beam of light to reflect upon the creature, revealing and setting aglow the sigil that existed on its head.

Wander rode close, and jumped from Agro onto the creature's head, where he stabbed the glowing blue sigil.

The black blood gushed forth, and the tendrils swirled through the air and entered Wander, though this was not like times previous: Wander did not only brace for the impact, he heartily welcomed it.

He felt the shadow's essence invigorate him, intoxicate him, coursing through his veins and filling him with a power ancient and dark.

He descended from the felled creature's carcass triumphant, feeling more god than man.

Who else but he could have so cleverly outwitted the careful Basaran? What mortal man, before him, slew eight such mighty beasts?

He had no army, no other sword but his to deliver the killing blow.

"Come, Agro," he commanded to his mount, his spirits rising cheerfully. "We are almost there."

But Agro recoiled and backed away: she sensed the darkness growing within him, and she liked it not.

As Wander neared her, Agro reared and whinnied as if threatened; he grasped her reins, and pulled her down.

"Agro, please!" he cried. "Stop this. I am not your enemy."

He held her firm as she fidgeted with fear; when her struggles subsided, Wander spoke thus to her:

"They were wrong," said he quietly, "She was not the one with the cursed fate. I was. Now I embrace damnation so she may live again." He looked then with seriousness into his horse's face. "You may abandon me then, Agro. Not before."

Agro snorted, and reluctantly followed her determined master, as he resumed walking upon his path of doom.

-14-

“Tribalism”

There was another time, not too long gone before the time of his battles with the Colossi, when Wander was riding, parched, through desert sands, with Mono’s cold, still, stolen body held in his lap.

Agro had nothing of tack: no saddle, no reins, nothing. Wander had brought with him nothing when he fled his village and made for the Forbidden Lands, save the sacred sword and his deceased beloved.

He traveled warily; for this was the land of his tribe’s enemies, those that lived in the sand.

He knew not how any people could long tolerate this infernal heat and dryness. He had spent three days in this place, and already misery was his; he could not fathom spending a sojourn of generations more.

Wander took no pause to eat or drink or rest, for fear of his pursuers from the village; he dared not let them gain upon him, and send his soul to hell.

He saw a line of tan-colored objects arcing its way, snake-like, across the dunes of the horizon; obscured were they by the heat-haze, so that he knew not what they were,

He wiped away the stinging sweat from his eyes, and gazed again.

Nothing. A mirage?

He spurred the weary horse Agro onward with his heels.

But lo, the horse's hooves met over-soft sand and sank into it, deeply and abrupt.

Wander was somewhat startled, and his grip on Mono loosened; she slipped from his grasp and onto the sand below.

He dismounted in a hurry, cursing himself: how could he have let her fall?

His heart despaired; for if he had not the strength to carry her hence to the Forbidden Lands, how could he expect to parley for her soul with an ancient god?

Would such a being not laugh at him for his foolishness?

Was her shade not laughing at him now? Or worse, admonishing him for being such a poor champion?

Nay, it was likely worse still: Mono may not think well of his course at all, for she may deem it a gross sacrilege. Perhaps, if he brought her back to life, she would be harsh, and say that he had not done rightly.

He scooped her dear body in his arms, and cradled her tightly, realizing he cared not what she might say; he would give all to hear her voice again, even were it used to scold him.

So preoccupied was he with his thoughts of her that he took no notice of the mounted warriors' approach, and indeed only took heed of them once they already surrounded him; their forms blocked out the unrelenting sun, and their shadows fell upon him.

These warriors rode camels with pale gold hides, and were wrapped with sand-protecting scarves and capes and robes the same color as the dunes. Armed they were, with swords of curved blades.

They were, without doubt, members of the rival sand-tribe.

The rider foremost amongst them, a man of stature with keen jewel-like eyes in a dark face, addressed him thus:

“You are from the village,” spake he, in tones strange to Wander. “The one made of mud and sticks.”

Wander, in the secrecy of his heart, gave himself up for dead; but he would surely make a bid for his life, so important was his quest. “...No longer,” was his reply to the rider of the sands.

“What are you doing out here alone?” questioned the rider. “And on such a big horse, when you are such a small young boy, unfit to ride her? And what of the girl? Is she sick?”

“She is dead.”

The sand-riders exchanged looks of confusion and wonder; their inquisitive leader pressed on with his questioning:

“Your horse is about to die. You are about to die. If you wished so badly to join her, you could have died closer to home, and all had a proper burial together. Why bring her out here?”

Wander closed his eyes; he would have to explain himself, and there seemed no better answer than the truth. But what if they had the very same superstitions possessed by his village?

His neck might not be spared either way, but at least this way he had a fighting chance.

He took a short, sharp breath. "...What do you know of the Forbidden Lands?"

Again the Sand-Tribe riders looked uncertain. "Only what its name suggests: it is forbidden," said the leader, reasonably. "Is that not enough?"

"Not if that place is your destination."

The Sand-Tribe leader dismounted. He knelt, and removed his face scarf so that Wander could see his expression of frowning puzzlement. "The girl is special to you?"

Wander nodded. "She was to be my wife."

"Is this Lord Emon's doing?"

"The girl, yes. My journey to the Forbidden Lands, no."

The Sand-Tribe leader smiled, with teeth white and perfect shining from within his dark face. "And Lord Emon would be frightful upset if you made it to the Forbidden Lands, I gather?"

"He already is. He pursues me as we speak. And he will not be alone."

The Sand-Tribe leader sobered. "We will not fight your battle for you," he said with seriousness. "We will let them pass, as we shall do for you. But we will give them nothing."

The Sand-Tribe motioned to a rider, whose mount was well-stocked with the group's supplies; a drinking-skin was passed to him, and this he tossed to Wander.

Wander caught it, and drank from it with gratitude.

And then the Sand-Tribe leader proffered to him a roll of vellum parchment. “We do not intend to escort you all the way there,” explained the Sand-Tribe leader. “You will need to know where you are going.”

Wander unrolled the parchment, and saw drawn in ink his first glimpse of the Forbidden Lands.

A horse-saddle, for they had some amongst their hoard, and reins landed heavily in the sand beside him.

“And this is so neither of you fall off that big horse of yours,” the Sand-Tribe leader teased, with good humor.

Wander gaped at him with amazement. “Why are you doing this? Does your hate of Lord Emon truly run so deep, that you would give such valuable gifts to an enemy?”

“We are not your enemy,” countered he. “You have not taken up the sword against us, and never shall. And yea, while it does give me joy to thwart the old tortoise, the reason is not hate.”

“And what is?”

The leader mounted his camel. “The same as what drives you. Yours is a love story, and that is my favorite kind. I may never know its ending, but I want to believe it will be a happy one. May you find what you seek.”

The riders galloped off into the dunes.

Clouds of fine sand, kicked up by wind and hooves, obscured the path between them and Wander; their forms melted into the desert, and disappeared from sight.

-15-

“Sand”

“Thy next foe is...” rumbled Dormin. *“The vast desert lands... A giant trail drifts through the sky... Thou art not alone...”*

Wander’s sandaled feet stopped at the very edge of the geyser-field, where cracked earth gave way to golden, glittering sand.

The experience of his trek through the desert to reach the Forbidden Lands was fresh in his mind, replete with its unpleasant recollections:

Of grit in his eyes and betwixt his toes; of the burning heat upon his skin; of thirst roughening his tongue within his own mouth; and of being hopelessly, miserably lost.

He made a vow that day, when he was saved from certain death by the desert tribesmen: never again would he set foot upon sand, lest it were to make the crossing with a living Mono.

Yet here he stood, gazing upon different but all-too-similar ground.

Neither he nor Mono would ever be able to show their faces in the village again, thought he.

‘Twas was a sobering thought, and presented a worrisome problem: if he should succeed in his quest, to where would he and Mono go?

Wander pondered. The sand-dwellers had been surprisingly generous to him, a stranger and a trespasser, on his journey... perhaps they would be kind enough to let himself, as well as Mono, live amongst them.

Encouraged by the thought, he braved to take a step, and broke his vow.

His sandal sank into the fine, shifting grains of sand, which quickly grew too hot and scorched the flesh of his toes, and caused him to dance about quite foolishly with pain.

The familiar sensation brought him back to his senses: nay, most assuredly, the sands were no place for people such as he to live.

He ambled through the sand, past islands of red rock and limestone; some formed walls and arches of half-buried temples, so old and weather-worn they seemed one with the natural terrain, unmarred by the hands of man.

Was he, too, to become one with this land?

Grimly, he resigned himself to the possibility that the Forbidden Lands - the habitable parts, where the ground was solid and trustworthy - would become their home forever.

“I will ask Mono what she thinks, once she wakes,” resolved Wander; for Mono, like most persons of female-kind, could be far more sensible about matters of habitation than he, as a man, could ever hope to be.

But as was often the case when thinking of Mono, one of his thoughts led to another.

He stopped, and looked behind him. “Agro...” he asked of the mare, “do you think she will understand? Will she forgive my sins, all of which I committed for her sake?”

Agro blinked at him dubiously; had she been able to talk, she might have reminded him she was but a horse, and therefore had no such insight to give.

But Wander misunderstood. “Yes, you are right,” agreed Wander, to a sentiment that she had not actually tried to express. “It is no use trying to predict what she will do. But she will be angry; that much is for certain.”

A shadow passed over him; something in motion blocked the scorching sun.

Wander looked to the sky, and there spied the great Colossus known as Phalanx.

Phalanx appeared to be a giant sandstone snake, held aloft by an underbelly of gas trapped in pumping membrane sacs that functioned as lungs or hearts.

A similar membrane was fanned and stretched along its many ridges, like the wings of a bat, or the dorsal-fins of a fish.

The broadest of its stone appendages were four in number, and functioned as wings; the smaller ones were its legs, and numbered six, three to a side.

Were it not for the extreme length of its body or the twisting, coiling movements that invoked the image of the snake, the Colossus could be said to most resemble a dragonfly.

The wings beat gloriously up and down, as it arced through the sky in aimless serpentine fashion.

Yea, aimless: for it came not for Wander, and indeed disregarded him completely, as if it saw him not.

The head of the Colossus was long and curved, like a sand tribesman's scimitar blade; but the Colossus' nature was not the least bit warlike.

Phalanx's eyes glowed a contented blue as it sailed through the air... graceful, silent, serene.

Wander felt no pity; he had hunted beautiful and docile creatures before, in his previous life before the Forbidden Lands, though always for food and pelts, rather than to fulfill a mysterious contract with a god.

But no matter the reason for pursuit, a hunter could ill-afford pity for his prey.

'It needs must die, so she may live,' was his only thought, as he drew his bow and took careful aim at the creature dancing in the cloudless sky above him.

In particular, he focused his attentions upon the gas lung-hearts, as he loosed an unrelenting volley of arrows at the Colossus in rapid succession.

Yet so tired was Wander that he performed this superhuman task with distant eyes, as one sleepwalking.

One after another the lung-hearts burst, and the vital gas within escaped, yellow wisps of cloud against a sapphire sky; a faint, wailing cry from the stone mouth of the Colossus.

Bereft of the power of the gas sacs, the wings alone could not keep the creature aloft; Phalanx drifted downward, and glided into the sand.

Now 'twas like a ship that parted the sand with its wings and prow-like beak as if it were upon an ocean.

The dorsal fins maneuvered still to gain the aid of the wind; the legs rowed against the sand as oars.

The displaced sand arced outward in great waves which nearly crashed down upon and buried Wander.

He ran to escape from the sand snake's path, and got no more than a few grains in his eyes.

The Colossus turned sharply away from him and made for the open desert; its intention was clearly not to fight, but to flee.

Agro had run from the intimidating Colossus' path as well, but much further than Wander had done; Wander whistled, and she came as she was bid in a full gallop.

Wander seized her saddle with his iron grip, and threw himself upon her back without breaking her stride.

The man upon his mare raced alongside the fleeing Colossus.

The horse was small and fast, and the Colossus large and slowed by the force of the resisting sand, yet still the Colossus would not be an easy catch.

To make the challenge all the harder, Phalanx raised and beat its mighty wings.

It could do little more than hover; the legs scuttled furiously to support its middle, and still its tail dragged across and through the dunes.

Even so, it was able to escape much of the sand's resistance and increase its speed.

Wander waited until a wing ahead of him reached its lowest point, and leapt from Agro's back upon it; at its zenith he rolled upon the back of the Colossus.

He drew his sword, and the glare shining forth from the blade revealed a glowing blue sigil, located in the shadow of a dorsal fin.

The dorsal fin retracted, closing over the sigil and blocking its light.

Wander pried at the dorsal fin-flap to gain access to the sigil, but to no avail: 'twas shut tight.

Just as the dorsal fin had retracted, now so too did the wings, pulling in tight to the sides of its body; the legs curled under tightly as well, and Phalanx's head plunged into the sand, twisting violently as it burrowed.

Wander ran along its tail, leaping off as the very last of it disappeared deep into the sand.

The boy was now alone save for Agro, who rejoined him, mistakenly believing the coast to be clear.

Wander could still feel the vibrations in the sand underneath him, but could not ascertain the sand snake's location, nor where it might next emerge.

Scanning the area, he spied a nearby cave; deciding quickly that it would be best to achieve some refuge while he planned his next move, Wander mounted Agro and spurred her onward toward the cave.

The ground began to shake and rumble behind them.

Looking over his shoulder, Wander saw the head of the great sand snake pierce through the sand with an angry shriek.

At last its rage against Wander had been kindled; it would no longer be satisfied to flee from him and nurse its wounds in peace.

Lids of stone, shielding the Colossus' eyes from the sand while it burrowed, lifted to reveal blazing eyes of red-gold.

Phalanx pursued the horse and rider with a ferocious speed that reflected its bloodlust, its scimitar-like beak racing to get underneath the horse's belly.

It surely intended now to impale them both, and then perhaps fling them off, sending them sky-high with a toss of its mighty head.

Phalanx was gaining on them, its beak nearly touching Agro's back hooves.

They rode into the mouth of the cave, the aperture of which was far narrower than Phalanx's girth; yet the sand snake Colossus heedlessly broke through to follow Wander and Agro within.

This was no small cave: it was as if the entire length of the mighty mountain ridge was hollowed, and indeed it had been, in order to quarry stone for the outside temples.

The floor of this mountainous dwelling was filled with sand, of unknown depth.

Realizing that this cave had proven not to be the refuge he had hoped for, Wander fired arrows rapidly at each of the Colossus' red-gold eyes.

There was a terrible squealing sound, as the stone eyelids closed protectively. Phalanx burrowed once more into the sand.

Wander was not afforded much time to be relieved, for right in front of him and his mount did the sand snake re-emerge.

Its gaping, stone-toothed maw was lit with fire, and ready to swallow the both of them whole.

Wander reigned in Agro sharply, to prevent her running straight into the demon's mouth.

He pulled once more at the reins, to avoid the Colossus' blade-like head as it struck at them in the manner of an angry viper.

Wander rode Agro tightly around a pillar, and the head of the snake Colossus struck the pillar rather than horse and rider.

Cracks ran up the pillar like veins, and sharp stalactites hanging from the cave ceiling came loose.

The sharp rocks rained down upon Wander and Agro like a volley of arrows; they dodged madly, knowing 'twould take only one to end their lives.

Phalanx writhed about; the pierced membranes of its underbelly sacs, once exposed to air, healed rapidly.

Wander rode Agro through the widened cave aperture, moments before a ruptured sheet of rock thundered down in an avalanche to seal off the cave entrance forever.

As soon as they returned to the open dunes, the ground directly underneath them shifted, and became Phalanx.

For the first time, Agro found herself atop a Colossus along with Wander; she did not much enjoy this fact.

The distressed horse kept legs splayed wide to keep her footing, even as Wander carefully dismounted.

The sacs of the Colossus' underbelly filled anew with buoyant gases, and Phalanx ascended ever higher into the air.

The Colossus had no choice but to keep its dorsal-fins raised high, so crucial were they for steering through the air; in their shadow, the blue sigils were glowing.

Wander fell to stabbing the sigil at the end of the tail with the full force of his weight, receiving the first dousing of black blood, the first wail, the first shudder of agony.

Agro whinnied, terrified as the creature's hide trembled, but then became abruptly still: as the wounded sigil's glow faded, the section of spine upon which she stood became paralyzed.

He stabbed the middle sigil, and then ran for the final sigil which lay before the fin at the crown of Phalanx's head.

Wander made ready to destroy the third and final sigil, but then stopped himself:

The light from his sword was split in twain: one beam shone upon the final sigil, and the other shone outward toward a storm gathering upon the distant mountain peaks.

That second beam, surely, marked the location of his final foe.

Anxious was he to reach those mountains, and make a true end of his quest.

The mountains were a day's ride away.

He had begun to feel powerful lately, but at the same time weary beyond measure.

He figured that his body might no longer be informing him of the bad shape it was truly in, or how near it was to brokenness.

He could not shake the feeling that he was running out of time.

Thus, paradoxically, he waited.

He waited until Phalanx's head was aimed in the direction of the second beam - because, indeed, it turned to look upon and follow it - and then plunged the Ancient Sword downward to make the killing blow.

Phalanx's eyes dulled, and its life ebbed away; a beam of light rose from the final sigil, ascending into the heavens to mark its passing.

Yet its body, still held aloft by its sacs of buoyant gases, continued on its locked course.

It slowly, silently and somberly carried upon its back a boy and his horse in the direction of the stormy mountaintops, like a funeral barge in the sky.

X

Wander leaned upon the fin-crown, as the tendrils entered him; he knew well that they would no longer provide him even a moment's respite.

But lo, he saw something in the tendrils: they were no longer darkness itself, but rather like tears in the barrier between worlds.

Where the tendrils were, he could see Mono sitting there on the other side, watching him.

He locked gazes with her eyes; even as the tendrils writhed and moved, sometimes obscuring her form, it was as if their eyes never parted.

Mono reached out a hand of pale fingers, attempting to pass it through the tendril-tears, through the barrier and into the world of the living where Wander still resided.

But such a thing was not to be: her hand could not pass through, stopped as though by an invisible wall of energy.

One cannot reach out and touch that which they see in a reflection; they may only touch the surface that reflects.

Similarly, the dead and the living cannot touch, though at times they may look upon each other.

Wander placed his hand upon this mirror which showed not himself, nor any reflections, but his beloved; his hand overlapped where her hand rested upon the other side.

Truly they were not touching, but the vibrations of the force separating them was a sensation they shared; they could not only see, but feel each other's presence, just out of reach.

There was an impact: Phalanx's lifeless nose was impeded from drifting any further by the mountainside.

The jolt seemed to have made the tendrils disappear from Wander's sight, along with the ghostly Mono.

He had reached his destination.

Wander took up the Ancient Sword.

He reached down over the side of the colossal underbelly, and punctured the front sac; there was a soft hiss as the gas escaped, in fleeting wisps of yellow cloud.

The head of Phalanx bowed, low enough for Wander to disembark upon a nearby mountain ledge.

Agro was frozen in place, so terrified was she; Wander whistled, and she tremblingly moved forth along the spine.

The mare paused at the creature's head, ears flat against her head, nervously judging the distance to the ledge.

Wander backed up, and beckoned: at last she found her courage, and made the leap.

She was relieved to have done so successfully; there was a note of triumph in her whinny, a hint of exhilarated pride in the tossing of her head, and dance in her step as she tested the solid earth with her hooves.

They followed the mountain path, leaving the Colossus's body to sway back and forth mournfully in the breeze.

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“Malus”

Wander and Agro came to a ravine, across which lay a stone bridge.

The bridge was large, though not as long or as majestic as the one which first granted them passage into the Forbidden Lands.

Before they could set foot or hoof upon the bridge to begin their crossing, a familiar voice spoke Wander’s name.

‘Twas not Dormin, nay: when Wander turned about, he saw the carved mask of Lord Emon, flanked by acolytes who were both masked and armed with crossbows.

Now assured of Wander’s full attention, Lord Emon said his piece. “Not only did you steal the sword,” said he, sternly, “and trespass upon this cursed land...”

“Do not speak of sin and trespass,” Wander growled, anger overriding his fear. “For surely murder and betrayal are the greatest trespasses of all.”

“I would have hoped that some time and distance away from the village would allow you to reflect on that tragedy with more clarity,” the grim Lord Emon said. “I see now that I was sorely mistaken.”

“You were our respected elder and our leader. We trusted you-”

“Enough,” said Lord Emon, with a peremptory wave of his hand. “You performed the forbidden ritual.”

“If you mean the sacrifice of the Colossi, then yea,” said Wander, proudly.

“Should you not be thankful, and offer me praise for slaying such demons? Are you not pleased by the destruction of their idols?”

He could not see Lord Emon’s face, but he knew it to be aghast. “It must be the fell shades dwelling within you which have emboldened you thus,” whispered the breathless Lord Emon.

It provided discomfort to Wander that Lord Emon knew of the shades; could he see them, or feel their presence?

“But it is not too late,” assured Lord Emon desperately, extending a beseeching and shaking hand. “Dormin cannot manifest if even one seal remains.”

Manifest. The word echoed in Wander’s mind, which then raced to interpret its full meaning.

The shaman-chief seized upon Wander’s hesitation.

“Yes. Do you see now?” he pressed. “Do not let that foul fiend enter the world of human mortals again, after so much was sacrificed to banish and contain it.”

Lord Emon came closer; he removed his mask, offering Wander a fragile, heartbroken smile.

“We are but playthings in its eyes,” he said, in gentle tones, as if to an unruly child. “Atone now, my son, and you will be forgiven.”

“And if I do not atone?”

The masked acolytes raised their crossbows, bolts aimed menacingly in Wander’s direction.

“Then, I shall do as I must,” said Lord Emon, replacing his mask. “As ever.”

Wander reflected for a moment, eyes downcast, and then resignedly mounted Agro.

Lord Emon motioned for the acolytes to lower their weapons: Wander had surrendered at last, and would be returning home with them.

“You have made a wise choice, my son,” said Lord Emon.

Wander raised his eyes, blazing like the blue of a fire. “I am not your son,” he said, and with a shout he spurred his horse with his heel.

“Do not let him get away!” cried Lord Emon. “HURRY! BRING HIM DOWN!!”

Crossbow bolts rattled harmlessly upon the bridge, as Agro outpaced their shots.

Before Agro could reach the bridge’s end, stones on its far side began to loosen, and cracks in the weakened masonry snaked toward them.

The bridge, which had stood for hundreds of years until that point, was going to fall.

It had granted safe passage across the ravine to processions of priests and royal retinues; to marching soldiers, and to the many beasts of burden which served them all.

But now, in its frail and weatherbeaten old age, the venerable bridge of the ancient ravine crumbled under the weight of but a single horse and rider.

Time for Wander slowed to an agonizing pace, as the reality of the situation took hold.

Wander foresaw the doom ahead, and looked back at the doom behind.

They would not reach the end of the bridge before it fell.

It was unlikely that they could turn about and return from whence they came in time to escape the collapse.

Even should they succeed, their victory would last mere moments: for Wander's life would be speedily ended by the crossbows of the clerics.

Wander stared at the path before him, and at the storm which marked the location of the last Colossus.

One more. He had but one more Colossus left to defeat, and then it would be done.

He would have fulfilled his part of the bargain with Dormin, and then it would have been Dormin's turn to fulfill his.

Mono's resurrection was nearly secured; he would have been able to see her, hold her once again, plan for their future together...

But now in Wander's future, only death and failure loomed.

He was paralyzed; the reins were slack in his hands.

Yet Agro persisted.

She pushed on, running faster than a speeding arrow, without any input from the fear and despair-stricken Wander.

Agro had come with him thus far; she would not simply give up now.

The stones gave way; Agro could go no further.

And then Agro performed the very same action she did when Wander first tried to ride her, though this time for a very different reason:

She bucked him off.

Wander was thrown forth, over Agro's head.

The boy landed, inelegantly and painfully, on the ground beyond the bridge.

Agro went down with the bridge, in a hailstorm of collapsing stones.

Wander watched at first, in horror and disbelief.

Once able, he moved to the edge of the cliff to yell out the brave horse's name.

But all evidence of her, and the bridge which ended her life, had fallen into the blue river below, carried away beyond Wander's sight.

Lord Emon's acolytes reloaded, for Wander remained within their range.

Wander turned and ran; in his state of mind every movement was an effort, a great force of will; as though he fought against the very air around him.

His fight brought him behind the cover of the mountainside, safe from crossbow bolts.

He slumped down the ground, silently mourning the loss of his sole companion and friend.

Thunder, from the storm clouds overhead. Rain drops; first a few, then many.

Those many raindrops came down hard and fast upon Wander, drenching him.

The mud and the grime dried onto his flesh from days of travel and battle became dark rivulets, like the blood of free-flowing wounds.

Lightning flashed, accompanying the thunder; the flashes illuminated a passageway, built into mountain stone.

Wander rose to his feet, his expression blank and hopeless, and walked listlessly into the darkness.

The passageway led him to a balcony, surrounded by misty, white nothingness.

A level existed above him, with no obvious way to reach it.

But there was a stone pillar with odd carvings: perfect hand-holds for climbing.

Wander made his ascent up the pillar.

At its pinnacle, Wander faced a gigantic stone door locked with a crystalline disc.

He looked out, over and past the clouds, and saw the Forbidden Lands.

Nine pillar-like beams of light connected earth and heaven, spread out across the land, each one marking the final resting spot of a fallen Colossus.

The rolling green hills... the lake... the forest pagoda...

Though he knew not the reason for his action, Wander felt compelled to raise the Ancient Sword.

The nine pillars of light bent toward him; no longer did they reach the sky, instead refocused brilliantly upon the sword in Wander's hand.

The light became one, and that single beam refracted upon the crystalline seal.

It reacted to the light, triggering the magical mechanism controlling the door.

The door unlocked, and opened with a groan.

Wander passed within, and found himself standing upon a vast mountain mesa.

At the end of the plateau, beyond which lay the wine-dark sea, the towering silhouette of Malus awaited.

He seemed as a demon, rising from the caldera of a dark step-pyramid ziggurat.

At first his back was turned to Wander, a silent sentry keeping vigil in the rain, as he looked out over the frothing and storm-tossed sea.

Then, with great difficulty, he rotated within his restrictive base, to set eyes upon the one who had come to kill him.

Baleful, red-gold eyes in the darkness... glinting gold bracelets encircled his wrists.

Malus raised a sizable arm, and pointed a clawed finger.

The bracelet of that arm blazed with fiery light, which spread up his hand and shot forth from his extended fingertip.

The bolt of energy flew across the mesa, aimed directly at Wander.

Wander dodged, fortuitously throwing himself into a trench that he had not known was there.

In fact, this web of trenches snaked all the way across the mesa plateau, leading to Malus.

It was the only way to reach him; the trenches were built precisely to shield those who desired to approach from his gaze and fiery blasts.

They were not perfect, however.

Wander peered past a corner of his trench wall, the only way forward, when another shot from Malus exploded the trench tunnel floor of that path.

Going forward meant exposing himself.

There was no other choice: Wander made a mad dash through the tunnel maze, splashing through muddy pools, hoping against hope to outrun Malus' fire.

He succeeded.

Wander climbed up and out of the maze, and into cover, for here was set a row of stone artillery-shield mantlets.

Blasts against the artillery shields; Wander could feel their heat through the stone, and by the sparks and tongues of flame flying past him on either side.

Malus took pause, understanding that his barrage was doing little good.

Wander took this brief opportunity to run out from behind his shielding stone, and make for the ziggurat base.

Malus had no time to charge his magical golden bracelets; he reached down and grasped at Wander with his clawed hands.

Wander avoided them, and climbed 'round to the back of the Colossus.

The fiend could not turn about fast enough within his base to face Wander, as the small human kept to his back.

The dark fur of Malus' back was slick with rain; Wander's fingers were raw, and there was no strength left in his arms nor his hands.

Try as he might, he could not maintain his grip enough to climb.

Thinking quickly, Wander drew two arrows from his quiver, placing them in each of his hands.

He stabbed the arrow into the fur.

Malus roared, with pain and indignation.

Wander pulled himself up on the arrow, plunged the second further up, drew another arrow... and in this way, he climbed the Colossus.

Before long, his quiver ran out of arrows; he began to remove the arrows he previously stabbed into the Colossus, and reuse them in order to progress.

He reached the summit of the giant shoulder, and within an instant was seized by a clawed hand.

Wander struggled in vain as he was brought before the blazing eyes of Malus, and inspected.

The glow of Malus' eyes turned blue.

Wander was at first puzzled by this sudden change of mood.

But then Malus dangled him upside-down, poking gently at him as Wander swung his sword about, wildly and uselessly.

Malus opened his mouth and let out from it a dry, dusty, rumbling laugh, the sound of which was like unto Dormin's own.

After centuries of loneliness and boredom, Malus had caught a tiny creature to toy with, and was greatly amused by its impotent flailing.

Wander, upside-down though he was, could see the sigil glowing within the mouth of Malus.

The boy swung his body to and fro, gaining momentum as a pendulum, as an uncomprehending Malus watched with open-mouthed delight.

The swinging brought him close enough to grasp the stone ledge of Malus' lip.

With his body stretched outward thus, Wander was able to strike his sword against Malus' gripping claws; Malus, with pain and surprise, let go.

Wander thrust the sword into Malus' mouth, and deep into the glowing sigil.

The wound gushed black blood and tendrils, both falling upon Wander.

Malus swayed woozily, and fell backward as far as he could, for his legs remained firmly secured within the ziggurat.

The bracelets fell from the arms of Malus as he spread wide, gladly accepting the release of death.

His eyes were blue until the very last flicker.

As the head of the Colossus went slack, Wander climbed out of the mouth, and stood upon Malus' face, between the dead and glow-less eyes.

"It is done," Wander murmured.

The rain still pelted Wander, providing the only sound along with the wind, the thunder, and the crashing of the waves.

He looked to the sky. Nothing. Silence.

"I have done as you asked," he said, his heart racing: was this the betrayal Lord Emon warned him of? "What now, Dormin?"

"*The ritual's demise...*" came the thunderous voice of Dormin.

This time Wander could detect no trace of the feminine in Dormin's voice; neither could Wander find any clue as to how Dormin felt about this victory.

Was the god pleased? Surprised? Relieved? Was he angered, having assumed the task would be impossible for a human, only to be proven wrong?

"*Thy wish is granted...*" rumbled Dormin; and once again, Wander had no way of knowing whether the god was glad to say this, or simply resigned.

But there was no doubt what was felt by Wander in hearing these words; he let out his breath, unaware that he had been holding it.

He could scarcely believe it: at last, he had accomplished his quest.

His tears of joy mingled with the rain; he was glad of this, for he wished not to embarrass himself before the god in this moment of ultimate triumph.

“Is she really alive?!” he asked, with desperate zeal. “Can I see her?”

“I will hasten thee to the Shrine,” said Dormin, *“for time is short... and someone now stands to get in thy way...”*

A beam of light broke through the clouds over Wander, engulfing him.

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“Resurrection”

In the very next moment of Wander’s awareness, he was standing within the light pouring down from the circular aperture in the Shrine of Worship.

How precisely he came to be there, he knew not; only that it was Dormin’s power that had brought him hence.

His mind was a blur, confused: he only vaguely remembered this place. How long had it been since last he stood within these walls?

And... for what reason had he come, both then and now?

He was tired. So very tired was he that, for the moment, he could not recall his quest, and had quite forgotten Mono.

Wander weaved, and collapsed to the hard stone floor.

He wanted nothing more than to stay there, and to rest forever in peace.

But this was not to be.

For Lord Emon and his men, after the confrontation at the bridge, had given up preserving the final seal.

They had hastened for the Shrine, pushing their exhausted mounts nearly to the point of joining Agro in the Great Beyond to arrive there before Wander.

They did not succeed; but Wander lay unconscious on the Shrine floor for many an hour.

By the time he awoke, they were standing over him.

“Have you any idea what you have done?!” roared the rageful Lord Emon from behind his carved mask, his voice echoing through the cathedral-like hall.

Wander could not speak; he could even form the thoughts with which to answer.

But the shadows within him seemed to rise up, eager to answer for him.

As they rose, so did he, though not without struggle.

His limbs twitched and convulsed, as they propped and puppeteered them.

The shadows felt strange; always before they had seemed distinct, individual entities.

Now they swirled and weaved about one another, like different parts of a whole working in harmonious accord.

Wander’s head throbbed with painful pressure; particularly in two concentrated spots on either side.

It was as though his skull was in the midst of a slow explosion, breaking apart, and expanding outward in opposite directions.

But ‘twas Lord Emon and his men that witnessed the truth:

Wander’s eyes were a glowing blue; his skin was a ghastly white, paler than a corpse fresh from the grave.

And dark horns were growing forth, from both sides of his head, curving wickedly.

“To be reduced to such a sight...” said Lord Emon in disgust.

He pointed to Mono, lying upon the stone altar. “And look: Dormin has lied. He did not give you back your beloved. You were only being used.”

Wander did not look toward Mono, and made no sign that he understood Lord Emon’s words; for indeed, he did not.

He shambled listlessly toward them, hunched over and slow, like a walking corpse.

The Ancient Sword scraped against the floor with a sharp, high-pitched hiss, for he had not the power left in his arm to lift it.

The acolytes did not know this, and were unnerved; one fired his crossbow, the bolt flying hard into the flesh of Wander’s leg.

He roared in bestial pain and fell to the ground, black blood oozing from the wound.

“It is better to put him out of his misery than to let him exist, cursed as he is,” spake Lord Emon. “Hurry up and do it.”

An acolyte drew a sword: he hesitated greatly to approach the fiendish-looking Wander, though Wander did not but to writhe about on the floor and whimper.

Yet at last the acolyte’s courage was summoned, and he stabbed the blade into Wander’s gut.

Black blood gushed, and ten black tendrils emerged wriggling from the wound.

The acolyte startled, and scuttled backward with panicked breathing.

“He is possessed!” Lord Emon cried.

The black tendrils formed human-like shadows surrounding Wander, shielding him, protecting him.

Wander grabbed the hilt of the sword buried in his middle; slowly, he drew it out.

He dropped the blade carelessly; it clattered upon the stone floor, blackened with his blood.

Wander moved upon them once more, with shuffling and halting steps, and wide, staring, glowing blue eyes that failed to ever blink.

The shadows began, one by one, to copy his stance; they moved together, converging as one.

The last shadow melded with Wander.

Wander grew bigger, taller ... and as he did, his flesh became as shadow.

He grew until his form took on the very likeness of a Colossus, his horns thick and curving nearly to the ceiling of the Shrine.

“Begone, foul beast!” Lord Emon bellowed, commanding and resonant. “How dare you steal the body of this boy, who you tricked into releasing you?!”

‘Twas then that Dormin spoke, in tones only male, through the mouth of the shadowy new Colossus:

“We hath borrowed the body of this warrior... so that We may live again,” spake Dormin plain; forsooth, Wander had become he.

“Thy kin, in ages past, stole Our life...” Dormin went on to say. *“Severed they Our body into segments ten, to seal away Our power for eternity...”*

We, Dormin, have arisen anew... resurrected... now it is you who must pay the price of your misdeeds.”

Dormin struck Lord Emon with a massive claw, flinging the man against a pillar; Lord Emon’s wooden mask cracked, and broke in twain.

Then did Dormin set upon the acolytes, attempting to beat and crush them into the floor beneath his fists.

The acolyte clerics fought back with their swords and the bolts of their crossbows, but Dormin made quick work of them, knocking them about.

They were not dead, but merely battered and bruised; they got to their feet, and continued to fight.

What little of Wander’s consciousness remained inside the body of Dormin marveled at the tiny, agile human warriors scurrying below.

Mere hours ago, it was he who was the warrior; now he saw, with the eyes of a Colossus, how truly difficult it must have been for the powerful giants to contend with him.

One who yet remained standing saw Lord Emon reach out in vain toward the Ancient Sword, cast aside during the transformation of boy to beast.

Took he, the acolyte, the sword to Lord Emon, asking the chieftain what next to do.

“Put a seal upon the Shrine,” rasped Lord Emon to the subordinate cleric.
“Help me.”

Lord Emon’s body, already frail with age, was broken.

The younger acolyte cleric pulled him to his feet, shouldering the burden of his weight as they made their way to the back of the Shrine.

Their destination was the Shrine’s mysterious dark pool, which reflected not.

Lord Emon plunged the Ancient Sword into the water, which lit with a glowing sigil and a beam of pale light.

Dormin roared; he continued to roar, as his shadowy form began to shrink.

He shrunk to human size, and regained the flesh that belonged to Wander.

So too did Wander’s mind and memory return, and he thought at once of Mono.

Saw he his beloved stir upon her altar-bed, and draw breath.

He ran to her, tears in his eyes, arms ready for her embrace-

-but a sudden gale blew against him, halting his approach and pushing him back with much force.

Nay: ‘twas not a push, but a pull; Wander was pulled off his feet, and dragged toward the back of the Shrine.

This was no wind, racing across the hills of the Forbidden Lands and past the stone altar; instead, it was as if the pool, too, had drawn in its mighty breath.

The pool had become a vortex of swirling, churning light and power, and all were caught in its inescapable grip.

Lord Emon was the first to be drawn in, and he went willingly, falling into the mouth of the vortex.

The acolytes came next, and then Wander came tumbling after.

He grasped at the empty air and flailed in vain, for there was nothing to hold onto; nothing he could do to prevent himself from being devoured.

Wander reached out to Mono, and cried out her name, as he was drawn into the glowing, watery abyss.

He saw the silhouette of Mono, as she sat up upon the altar.

And that was the end of his sight.

-18-

“Queen”

Mono turned toward the sound of her name; but it was merely an echo, and then it was gone.

Perhaps she dreamed it.

Underneath her was a hard stone slab, hardly a worthy bed for her to comfortably sleep.

Sleep? Nay, dead: she remembered the knife entering her flesh.

She remembered the limbo-realm to which her soul fled, entrapped; she knew not for how long, only that it was broken by mere glimpses of Wander.

But she was not dead now. Or was she?

Her eyes were bleary, and she rubbed at them to make them clear before she took in her new surroundings.

She was in a temple of some sort: her ‘bed’ was a stone altar within the open face of it, where the light poured in from the lands beyond.

Mono was comforted; perhaps this was heaven.

Then there was a cry that chilled her to the bone.

An infant child's cry, thin and weak, from somewhere deep within the shadowed belly of the temple Shrine.

She noticed, then, that rubble lined the enormous hall in great piles.

Mono slid off the altar, hesitant, for the words of the Shamaness still haunted her mind: "*You will be the mother of a demon...*"

'Twas the reason she had to be killed, as Lord Emon had said, before he plunged the sacrificial knife within her.

Had they failed?

She walked toward the sound of the child crying, taking care with her bare feet as she stepped over broken stone, still wet and sticky with splotches of blood.

Something had happened, but moments before she awoke; but there did not seem to be anyone there now, save for the child.

Approaching a pile of rubble-stones, she found a large piece roughly intact: turning it over from the broken side to the carved, she saw it was a face, with large baleful eyes and horns.

The image of a demon; of Dormin, perhaps, or one of its servants.

Mono let the mask-piece fall, flinching away from it as though it were hot or full of poison.

There was a pool at the far end of the Shrine, in the deepest shadows, and the cry was emanating from it.

The cry was much louder now that she was closer to its source.

Mono looked within the pool, and cradled in its very shallow water was a small babe.

A baby boy, with horns.

She stepped back, sickened and aghast. It was as she feared: a demon child had come to be, as foretold by the Shamaness.

Her hand went to her stomach, instinctively; she did not feel as though she had given birth, recently or ever.

Though, thought she quickly, the manner by which demons spawned was unknown to her; she also knew not what the prophecy meant by 'mother'.

If she were only meant to care for this infant as a mother would her child, then there was a chance it was not born of her body, nor was it of her blood.

Near the child, in the pool, and lying just beneath the water's surface, was the Ancient Sword.

Mono lifted up the sword from the water to look at it; even here in the darkness it faintly gleamed, and hummed with the vibrations of power.

She looked between it and the infant; save for the horns, the babe was like any other: small, vulnerable, defenseless, and crying out for someone to tend to it.

This she would not, could not do: she would not be nursemaid to a demon.

Yea, a demon: she would simply have to remember that it was not really a human at all, but some foul fiend who needs must die.

For, after all, was that not why she was sacrificed by Lord Emon, who was nothing but wise and kind to her? To prevent the calamity of a demon's birth?

She positioned the sword, point aimed down over the baby's middle: she would end its life quickly, and rid the world of any wickedness it would have wrought.

The baby opened its eyes: they were blue, wide and innocent, pleading with her to render aid and succor, to save it from its discomfort and fear.

The maid squeezed shut her own eyes, unable to bear those of the imploring child.

The swordpoint was still directly over the babe; all she needed to do was to bring it downward, and the deed would be done.

But the matter was not so simple: she felt every inhibition rise up to arms within her, incensed that she would dare even think to harm a child.

I must, she told the forces mustering against her; it is not a babe but a demon, spawned for some foul purpose; let me do what needs to be done.

Her human nature would hear none of it, and froze her hands in place, mid-air, as firm as someone grasping her by the wrists.

She pulled and strained against its grip, and the sword in her trembling grasp came ever nearer to its mark.

Mono drew in breath, lifted the sword up and prepared for the final plunge.

But then the slow clip-clop sound of hooves on stone reached her ears, and took her attention away.

Behind her, from the direction of the front altar and the open plains, a dark horse moved toward her.

It was a large war-mount, riderless but still saddled, with a white mark upon its brow.

“Agro?” she asked in a small voice, bewildered. She lowered the sword, the strange horned babe forgotten, pushed out of her mind by the sight of one who was familiar.

Mono ran to Agro, clasping her free arm about the horse’s neck.

“Agro!” cried the girl, convinced at last that it was she. “What are you doing here? Where is Wander?”

But something was amiss: as she pulled away, Mono saw the horse’s eyes glow an unnatural blue.

Dark, swirling tendrils of smoke drifted from the horse’s nostrils.

Agro opened her mouth, and more solid limbs of darkness issued forth, reaching out toward Mono.

Mono startled back, instinctively raising the ancient sword to shield herself, and this it accomplished most ably: the tendrils of darkness recoiled, repelled by the light gleaming from the sword, and became as dark mist once more.

This dark mist pooled upon the granite tile floor and grew, rising and reforming into a dark humanoid shape like a free-standing shadow.

But whereas those encountered by Wander had been bald, featureless and naked, without adornment or distinct gender, this form was no doubt feminine.

The misty dark shadow-woman had long flowing hair and a long flowing gown; and once her outline was complete, from her bosom a cloud-white neck rose into a beautiful face.

The face gave the impression of a cat, haughty and mischievous.

No crown did she wear, but regal yet was she verily: she could be none other than the Forbidden Lands' Queen.

When she spoke, her voice seemed distorted and far away, echoing and booming with mysterious power:

“Lower thy sword, child... We are not thy enemy,” spake she.

“Who and what may you be, then?” questioned Mono of her, defiantly.

“We are the reason you now live again...”

Mono was mystified; yet a memory flashed before her, of that fateful Shamaness, who told her that the profaner of life had marked her for its own.

“You are... Dormin?” the recently-dead maiden ventured.

“That is correct,” said the great lady mildly, “We are Dormin.”

“I did not know Dormin was a woman.”

“We are not a woman, nor are We a man... We are both, and yet we are neither. This form is female...”

The Queen's gaze fell upon the horned babe. “...The other is male. Once long ago We ruled these lands, as King and Queen...”

“These lands,” echoed Mono. “The Forbidden Lands.”

“That is what thou callest them. They are not forbidden to us... to us, thine own lands are forbidden...”

“And to us, you are a demon.”

Dark laughter rippled like rolling thunder from the pale parted lips of The Queen, out and through the cathedral Shrine.

The Queen drew near the horse Agro, and petted her with the dainty strokes of her long, graceful hand.

“Mortals are fickle,” The Queen idly commented. “Once, they thought Us kind... a giver of life, a protector... their great Mother and Father...”

“What do you want of me, female aspect of Dormin?”

“Simply to ride you,” purred the Queen, with an amused sidelong glance of her catlike eyes. “As thou would ride Agro... but inside.”

Mono said nothing, but was taken aback: to what was The Queen referring?

The Queen noted her confusion and offense.

“Our presence would not be a hindrance, or a burden... an addition to its contents need not change a vessel.

We merely require the sight of thine eyes, to hear with thine ears... to touch and to taste the world of the living once more, as an idle passenger.

Surely this is the least We can ask of thee, as payment for thy resurrection...”

Mono lifted the sword at The Queen. “Then you were unwise to resurrect me: I did not request it of you, nor did I consent to any bargain for my life, let alone one that would defile the sanctity of life.”

The Queen’s face hardened, but she lowered her eyes with a resigned nod. “This is true. Very well... but another did such a bargain make, on your behalf.”

She stepped toward the Shrine pool, overlooking the horned babe within. The Queen lifted the babe into her arms. “...And thus, his vessel is Ours.”

Mono’s heart leapt into her chest with alarm: this female Dormin meant to steal this helpless babe, and use it for her dark purposes.

“Why do you start so?” chided The Queen, as she turned about to face her. “Do you fear We shall harm him, as thou wert thyself prepared to do?”

“I will not suffer a demon to live.”

“Worry not... thou art released from the terrible prophecy foretold by the old shamaness,” The Queen assured.

She played with the baby’s lips, as they sought vainly for something to suck. “The child needs a mother, but We shall suffice... you are free to go.”

A gust of air swept through the Shrine, as a large winged creature alighted on the plains outside.

With bird-like taloned claws it climbed the Shrine steps, lithe as a cat, and ducked its short-horned head to enter through the towering archways.

Its eyes, much like Agro’s under her new enchantment, glowed blue.

Though Mono was never to learn it, the beast’s name was Trico.

The Queen moved rapidly, like a puff of smoke on a sharp wind, toward Trico; she alighted upon the creature's back in the manner of a rider upon her mount.

“Fare thee well in the outside world,” boomed she at Mono. “We are sure thou shalt receive a kindly welcome from those who let thy life be ended...”

A last dark chuckle descended from The Queen, combined with a cry from the affrighted babe, before the creature Trico beat its wings and took to the air; afterward all sound died away, leaving an eerie silence in its wake.

-19-

“Castle”

Agro’s eyes glowed no longer; they were naught but a dull pale blue, clouded with a corpse-like milkiness that belonged to an animal many days deceased.

Mono shivered at the sight, as she led the horse down the stone steps of the Shrine. What had that woman done to poor Agro?

For that matter, what had the woman done to her? Must she credit the mysterious woman with her resurrection? Her head swam with questions.

I died once to prevent a cursed fate, thought she, that was not my choice; perhaps it would have been, had it been mine to make.

This was what most rankled: these persons of authority and power were all too quick to take action which deprived her of both choice and voice.

Heaven forbid they give her a say in her own fate!

Or, failing that, merely spare her a moment to meet it.

Nay, they would not suffer such a risk, lest their judgements not be met with amiable acceptance as was pleasing from a maiden, but with grudging submission or protest.

Reaching the grass with bare feet beside horse’s hooves, Mono mounted; she spurred Agro with her heel, and the horse galloped across the plains.

Mono's dark eyes scanned the horizon; whither would she go?

All she could see was unfamiliar.

She knew not the great bridge, nor the green burial mounds, the misty lake and its tilted arena, the umbral forest, the geyser fields, or the desert beyond.

Her only thought and desire was to find a way, safe and not overly difficult, out of the Forbidden Lands; but in which direction did such an exit lay?

Mono pulled back on the reins with one hand, halting Agro, her brows knit close together in a frown as she considered her next move.

Now I do have a choice, thought Mono anew, Do I wander aimlessly, not knowing whether my path will deliver me out of the Forbidden Lands, or further in?

If I do leave, what then? she asked herself. To where and to whom do I go? I am dead to the village, doubly so, for my second life is an unnatural abomination.

Yea, they would surely kill me; I would die a second time, two lives wasted, for still the demon lives.

Her hand not grasping the reins still grasped the Ancient Sword, and she let her eyes rest a moment upon it.

The sword oddly glinted in the cold sunlight, reflecting it into a beam aimed skyward.

Following the pale beam, Mono discovered its aim: the flying creature, upon which rode Queen and babe, though neither could she see.

It was well that she lifted her gaze at that time: for a moment later the visage of that creature, already small with distance, disappeared within the clouds.

Yet still, the beam of refracted light followed them.

Mono's resolve hardened; she knew then what she was meant to do.

My lives, and deaths, must not be in vain, thought she.

She spurred onward the horse with a small signal cry, and lifted the sword aloft, letting the light guide her in pursuit of the horned child.

It came to be she was forced to take pause, so exhausted from riding was she; the maiden bade the horse lay down, to rest beneath a tree.

A white-tailed lizard scampered onto her lap, and from a near-sleep she startled; it froze in fright, and slowly she reached for it, stroking its petrified head.

The lizard waited til her hand withdrew, to make his escape in a flash.

She smiled; it must be scary to be so small, and to encounter beings much larger than oneself; she wished to assure it there was nothing to fear, for she would be hard-pressed to eat a lizard.

As if in answer, a piece of fruit from an overhanging branch of the tree did fall into the grass beside her: an apple in appearance, flesh a bright red-gold and tantalizingly ripe.

Mono's stomach growled in randy desire; she lifted it from the grass and looked it over, then scowled and tossed it aside; she would eat nothing in this cursed place, even if the lack of food should kill her.

She resettled her head against Agro's hide, ignoring what her stomach had to say on the matter and surrendering herself to sleep.

The morn's journey brought her to a rocky shore, where at last she again dismounted; the sword's light now pointed to an island, an atoll spiraled and crowned with towering stone walls and fortifications.

Mono searched along the barren shore; the ruins spoke of an ancient harbor, long ago lost to the sands and lapping waves.

She spied something buried in the rocks, a carved bit of wood sticking out; she pulled upon it, and the rocks fell away, to reveal a small wooden boat.

There was no oar; elsewhere ashore she found a long and narrow strip of driftwood, and threw it within along with the sword.

She pushed the boat into the waves, and placed herself within as well.

Agro watched forlornly from the shore.

Mono felt a pang of regret at leaving her behind, but pushed aside such sentiment; she could ill afford to worry about the horse, when she could expire within days herself, without ever realizing her goal.

She turned away to face the island and its looming castle, making strokes into the water with the driftwood beam to push her vessel faster and further along.

There was no shore or harbor upon the island's edge for her to land and disembark; all about the perimeter were naught but stone walls, tall and sheer.

But there was a sea-cave, and she paddled the boat into its mouth, down a long, dark tunnel.

At the end she found a landing, where she stepped out, and entered a carved stone entryway.

On the other side was a gloomy, cavernous chamber, built of multiple tiers of shelves.

Lining these shelves were recesses, and in these recesses were large upright stones, bigger than a man, carved with intricate patterns and symbols.

Guarding the place were statues depicting armored, horned men; they reminded Mono of the statues within the Shrine, and she passed them by with little notice in order to inspect the upright stones.

At her approach, the nearest stone's carvings glowed bright blue; fascinated, she touched the blue carvings to see what she could discover.

The stone opened, unfolding into sections on the sides and top to show a hollow interior; a sarcophagus.

She startled backward, hitting something solid: an armored stature, horns and eyes glowing malevolently.

It reached out to her.

Mono struck it with the sword, but made only harmless sparks against the stone body; the living statue did not so much as flinch.

It grabbed her.

Mono struggled and fought, but could not escape its stone grip.

It placed her within the sarcophagus, which began to close its sections inward.

Mono cried out and pleaded, but the statue showed no pity; it held her there, until the stone partitions closed in enough that it could withdraw its hand.

The last thing Mono could see was the statue's glowing eyes, before everything became pitch-black darkness.

She could feel and hear her panicked breathing for a few moments, but then even that ceased.

There was silence.

-20-

“Boy”

Loud, rumbling footsteps shook and rocked the sarcophagus from without, like small earthquakes.

But ‘twas not the footsteps, but the impact of some other body, which lost the stone coffin its place on the shelf, and made it violently pitched forth.

Mono cried out as it took her with it, for there is nothing so frightening as a sudden fall in the dark.

The fall was not long, ending with a thunderous crack of stone against stone.

This jolt must have in some way unlocked the mysterious sarcophagus, for it opened; Mono could see the masonry ceiling of the castle far above.

She sat upright; this was the same room she had been in moments ago.

Still could be heard rumbling footsteps, but further away.

Trico, the Queen’s monstrous pet, was sauntering down the hallway, shaking the castle with every step, enormous tail swinging side to side in wide arcs.

The tail heedlessly knocked over objects and statuary, and was the last part of the beast visible when Trico turned a corner, disappearing within the castle.

So that explained the fall of the sarcophagus: the beast must have knocked it over with its tail.

How fortuitous, thought Mono, that this should happen mere moments after she ran out of air.

Quietly and cautiously, Mono crept from the coffin, and followed the path of Trico.

What a sight it would have been, if any had been there to spy it: a frail, pale, bare-footed girl in simple dress, climbing out of a sarcophagus with sword in hand, and following an enormous creature through a castle damp and dreary.

The beast traveled through a tower, and down another hallway; but here in the tower Mono halted, for an ominous sight in the tower drew her attention:

Suspended from the tower ceiling by a long length of chain was a large cage, wrought of blackened iron and spiked with rings of menacing blades.

A staircase spiraled up the tower wall, around the cage; trepid Mono placed a bare foot upon the first stone step, and then another.

She ascended to a height where she might look inside, though she did not know if she truly wished to.

But, alas, she had to know what lay within.

Was it a fearsome creature?

Nay: 'twas a small and scrawny boy.

He was curled up and sleeping like a babe in the womb, facing away from her; his garb was reminiscent of what the boys in Mono's village wore.

A mere adolescent was he; barely set upon the path of manhood, and no older than fifteen years of age.

What a shameful way to imprison a child, no matter what his offense might have been, thought Mono.

This thought was accompanied with a fierce and sudden anger that demanded action.

She resolved to free him; but how?

There was no way that she could reach the cage, or pull it closer; the sword was not long enough, and the gap far too wide.

A bit less timorously, Mono climbed the stairs higher, so that she was above where the cage hung suspended in the air.

In fact she was nearly at the ceiling where the chain began, though it was still well out of her reach.

Now could she see the flat top of the cylindrical cage, though she could no longer see aught within.

From this height, she would be able to jump upon it; this was her plan, but the thought of those wrought-iron spikes raking into her, or the long, injurious, and possibly deadly fall that would result from a miss gave her pause.

She gauged the distance, took a deep breath, and jumped.

Mono landed atop the cage, rattling it sore; the boy within was awakened, and she could see his smallish hands grab the bars.

“Hello?” the boy called out. He had in his voice the innocence of youth, bright-sounding and clear. “Is anybody there?”

So far everything about him spoke of harmlessness; but Mono knew not to trust that anything in this place was as it seemed, and thus she kept her silence in response.

Clinging to the chain, she crouched down, and crept forth to look down over the edge of the cage: there was no way for her to reach down to find an opening, due to the prevalence of spikes.

Moreover, there appeared to be some sort of lock upon the cage door.

How, then, would she get the boy out?

As she cast her gaze about, her eyes landed upon the chain, keeping the cage in suspense. The ancient sword gleamed cold in her hand.

If with a blow of the ancient sword’s edge she were to break the chain, the cage would plummet, with her riding atop it.

It was not so very far in terms of the cage: about twice its length was it suspended off the castle floor below; but for her, it was still a rather long way to fall.

Yet, her choice now were few: she no longer trusted a leap to reach the stairs from where she was; the angle was disastrous, and there was nothing to grab onto save the smooth steps of the stairs themselves.

There was no going back now: the only way to go was straight down.

She thrust the sword betwixt a link of chain, leveraging her weight to pull with all her might; half the chain-link bent forth, and then broke with a snap.

That still left the other half of the chain-link: though the rusted metal groaned with strain, stretched and lengthened, still it remained hooked to its fellows.

The prying method would work no longer: she would now have to strike with the sword directly.

Mono readied the sword, but qualified; braced was she to sever the chain and fall the first time 'round, but now it proved a greater challenge to summon her courage a second time.

Swung she the sword, and hit the chain in force full; the chain unhooked, and broke in twain, and the plummet to the ground began.

Mono screamed, for how could she not? The cage was in free-fall, and she along with it. The startled boy within the cage cried out as well.

The cage impacted the floor and then toppled upon its side, sending Mono sprawling.

Her own impact with the floor hurt greatly, and she was sure to get bruises from it; stars and colored spots briefly occluded her eyes.

But she was awake, and she was alive.

Before her view completely cleared, she heard the sound and vaguely saw the sight of the boy within the cage taking hold of the lock, and turning it 'round the bars from the outside so that it faced him.

Something was being placed inside the lock mechanism.

Mono painfully rose to her feet, and limping slightly - she feared she had her ankle twisted - she made her way to peer inside the cage.

The boy was picking the lock... with the use of his horn.

Indeed, he possessed two sharp, broadly-curved horns, which rose directly out of his skull, very much like as to the horned babe.

He sensed her approach, turning his head just enough to look at her and smile. "Hello," he said, pleasantly.

The lock released; he tossed it aside, and stood. "Who are you?"

Mono did not answer; her mind was afire with panic and alarm.

How many horned children were there? She had set out to kill but one horned babe, but now she was faced with another, and she was uncertain what to do.

He decided being in the cage and speaking to her from the other side of bars was bothersome, and so he kicked out the hinged door and climbed out.

"Did you bring the cage down?" he asked.

Patiently he awaited a response, but received none: she simply stared at him, horrified and speechless.

"Do you talk?" inquired he, offering reason for her baffling silence. "Maybe you speak a different language...?"

Mono looked down at the sword in her hand, contemplating whether or not to use it on the boy. Surely, if the horned babe was under the evil influence of Dormin, then this child was no different.

"That is a neat sword," the boy chirped, still attempting to make conversation. "Have you ever killed anyone with it?"

Mono raised the ancient sword, leveling it at the boy's throat. "Not yet," quoth she.

The smile on the boy's face fell, replaced with the wide eyes of shock; but then even this faded, and his countenance took on the sting of hurt: it spoke of hopes for companionship, long-harbored, and now cruelly dashed.

"...Are you here to kill me?" he asked, in a squeak of quiet anguish.

The boy's manner was rending Mono's heart in two.

She suddenly felt as though she were the monster, the villain, no better than the cold and callous Queen, with her dark magicks and ominous threats.

Mono lowered the sword; she would gather more information first, before reaching a decision.

This gesture was of great relief to the boy, who sighed deeply.

"Have you always had those horns?" she asked.

The boy seemed to forget the moment of danger that had just passed, or dismissed it as being other than what he feared, for his answer was friendly and calm:

"Yes. Why, what is wrong with them?" he stepped forth to inspect her. "Hey, where are yours?"

He seemed to think the having of horns growing out of one's head was normal, while her lack of horns was not, and he was bold in telling her so.

"I do not have any," she responded, defensive. "Most people do not."

“I did not know that,” he said, not bothered by the correction. “The stone-men and Trico have horns too. The only one who does not is The Queen.”

“The Queen...” she breathed.

While hithertofore in this telling she has been called ‘The Queen’, this was for mere simplicity of your understanding: until now, Mono had no name or title for the woman of dark enchantment.

Yet Mono had very much sensed the regal air of authority about the woman, and did not doubt she and The Queen were one and the same.

The boy frowned. “Actually, I do not know that for sure,” he admitted. “She might have horns, hidden underneath that dark cloud around her head.”

He smiled once more at Mono. “But I do not think you are weird or anything, not having horns. You look fine without them.”

Mono was at a loss how to respond; it was hard not to like this cheery young boy.

He lowered and inclined the crown of his head toward her. “No need to be scared of them,” he assured her. “They will not hurt you. You can touch them if you want.”

She backed away. “No, no thank you.”

“All right,” the boy said, unaffronted. “So where do we go now?”

“We?”

“Sure,” he said, nodding enthusiastically. “Wherever you go, I want to go, and help with whatever you are doing. I do not know the place very well, because I have been mostly in that cage... but I want to see and do things, and I can protect you.”

“Protect me?” repeated she, incredulous; the boy’s bold overconfidence was becoming a trifle amusing.

Shadows, each in the form of man, rose from the floor.

Familiar they would have been to Wander, but to Mono they were strange; she gasped at the sight of them, affrighted.

One of the shadow-men laid hold of Mono by the waist; startled, she let go the sword, and it clattered upon the stone.

The shadow-humanoid began walking into the floor, as if descending stairs that passed through the stone; a ripple of shadow swirled about him as he entered, as a pebble tossed into a pool.

Into this void was the shadow-humanoid taking her, and she could enter it as well as he.

She flailed with her arms, scrambling to grab hold of something like the sword; but the blade was just out of reach.

The boy grabbed her by the hand with one of his, and in the same moment took up the sword with his other hand that was free.

He pulled her out of the void in the floor, and out of the shadow-man’s grasp, and then stabbed the creature through the chest with the ancient sword.

The creature of shadow dispersed into smoke-like vapor.

Still holding her hand, the boy swung the sword at the other shadowlings.

They lunged at him, but he cut their limbs from them, and stabbed them in the very heart as he did with the first.

The very last was dispersed; the tower-room was empty, and all that could be heard was the exhausted breathing of boy and girl.

The boy looked at her most earnestly. "Yes," he said, picking up the conversation where it had left off. "Protect you."

Mono gazed at him in wonder: he was so young and small, yet undeniably brave and strong as well. "Do you have a name, boy?" she asked.

The boy shrugged. "No. The Queen always called me 'boy' too." He pulled her toward the hallway. "Come, let's go!"

He did not seem overly worried about running into more dangers, but Mono kept close watch on their surroundings.

They came to the end of the hallway, capped by a big stone door with the same glowing carvings as the sarcophagus.

The boy touched it, hit it with the sword; no response. He then put his full weight into pushing against it; he alternated between pushing forward and turning around to press into it with his back.

He gave sounds of effort with every push: "EEE!" he would cry out at first, followed by 'kh, kh' sounds of breathing and strain.

Mono listened to the combination, and had an idea. "...How about 'Ico'.

The boy stopped his efforts to blink at her. “What?”

Mono came closer. “A name. You should have one.”

Idly did she rest a hand upon the stone door, and to her touch did it react: a zap of power, and the door opened.

“Whoa,” the boy breathed in awe. “How did you do that?!”

Mono looked down at her hands. “I... I do not know...”

Exchanging glances, they went through the doorway.

On the other side they found themselves in an overgrown courtyard, bathed in moonlight.

There was a bench, and the boy threw himself onto it immediately. He slumped, tired. Mono made to sit beside him.

The boy rested his head upon her shoulder, one of his horns curled dangerously in front of her and aimed at her heart.

Uneasy was Mono made by this, and very nearly pushed him aside; however, she did not, for he let out a snore. He was asleep.

Mono rested her cheek upon the crown of his head, and closed her eyes as well.

X

Morning light streamed upon Mono’s face as she awoke.

The boy was no longer beside her; where had he gotten to?

Peered she into the bright light, and then she spied her answer:

The boy was in a standoff with the Trico beast.

“Ico!” cried she, but he did not respond; so she tried again. “BOY!!”

At that, he turned to look over his shoulder at her. “Stay back!”

Mono did not listen, and made a dash for him.

The boy charged at Trico, stabbing it with the ancient sword.

Mono reached the boy and yanked him back, as Trico clawed at him in retaliation; Trico’s claws missed their mark, but barely.

The sword was still lodged deep within the breast of the beast; the boy grasped toward it in vain.

Mono pulled him away, toward a door on the other side of the courtyard, exactly like as to the one she previously opened; at her touch, this door fell away as well.

They made their way though the outer castle ramparts, until they found their path crumbled in, just before a turning windmill.

The boy did not hesitate: he grabbed hold of one of the windmill blades, and let it take him up and over to the other side, where he dropped down.

He stood at the very edge of the broken path’s counterpart, and held out his hand to Mono.

A shadow fell upon Mono: looking back, she saw that Trico had leapt over the stone walls, in ardent pursuit.

The sight of the furious creature spurred Mono to take a chance, and leap.

She fell, and it seemed to her as if she would not make it across the gap; but then she felt his hand clasp hers.

He had nearly thrown himself off the edge to catch her, and was dangerously overhanging it.

Looking downward, she saw below her dangling feet the jagged rocks of the island's perimeter protruding from the mist, with waves crashing violently against them.

Certain death.

Looking upward did not inspire much confidence: she was dragging the boy down with her, and she doubted he had the strength to pull her up.

Yet just as she thought this, the veins in the boy's arms turned of a sudden black, and the thews surrounding swelled with vigor.

He pulled her up with almost too much force, and she landed atop him in his arms.

The boy grinned, pleased by this result; but then he spied Trico, and threw her off him.

It was well he did this, for in the next moment Trico landed before him, and swatted him off the rampart's edge.

Mono cried out helplessly, as the boy fell to the rocks below.

-21-

“Trico”

Mono felt her presence, like a cold mist at her back.

She turned about to see The Queen, standing over her.

And though The Queen appeared as a cloud of darkness with a mask of pale flesh, it was Mono who felt as though she were the shadow.

“What is the matter, child?” asked The Queen, in a voice low and lovely; were the speaker less menacing, ‘twould be soothing, like a mother to a babe.

Tears flowed free from Mono’s eyes; she no longer cared what The Queen might do, for the one she dubbed ‘Ico’ was lost.

Yet The Queen’s patronizing tone was nigh too much to bear. “Why dost thou grieve for the horned boy?” asked she of Mono.

“Only one such as you would ask,” was Mono’s curt reply.

“We asketh only why thy mind hast changed,” mused The Queen. “Tis little more than a decade past, when thou wished his death by thine own hand.”

“A decade?”

“Thou hast slept in Our catacombs for many years, by thy mortal reckoning,” answered The Queen, as simple fact which could brook no argument.

Years.

The word echoed through Mono's mind, hauntingly.

She could not believe what her ears were hearing.

Nay, it could not be so: 'twas but a few hours she spent in the sarcophagus, a single full day at most. The Queen must surely be lying.

"For Us, 'tis no time at all..." The Queen went on to say, "and in that stasis, 'twould seem to thee as nothing more than a long night's slumber..."

Mono bristled, as the rage within her swelled. "How dare you!" she cried, incensed that The Queen would work such magicks against her.

The Queen stared back at her, unfazed. "It is Our home. We darest."

Mono's anger gave way to realization. "Then, the baby..."

"Yes... horned babe grew into horned boy. Thy plan in coming was to kill him, was it not? He is dead, and thy hands are clean. Why dost thou not rejoice?"

Mono could bear looking at her no longer. "I hate you!" she cried, tearing her gaze away. "Leave me be!"

"If thou wouldst only consider Our offer, whatsoever thou wishest may be thine," spake The Queen. "Perhaps though wishest the boy to live once more?"

Mono stood up to face her. "Better he die than to be used as your pawn."

"Interesting..." purred The Queen, "he did not feel the same."

"What do you mean?"

“He stole thy body from its burial-scaffold... spirited it away to the Forbidden Lands, to attain thy resurrection...”

“I do not understand.”

“Thy beloved came to Us, and placed thy lifeless on Our altar, beseeching Us to give thee back to him, restored.”

With a graceful gesture of her corpse-pale hands, The Queen summoned shadows from the stones beneath their feet.

Up rose the shadows: but rather than each taking a man-like shape, they became as small colossi, which Mono had seen naught of.

The Queen to them referred, indicating them with a wave of her arm.

“He killed the animal-minded, earthen creatures wrought from the fragments of Our soul, and thus released Us...”

The shadows converged to form a shape Mono knew all too well as Wander.

Mono’s heart ached to see him; she came forth to touch him, but the Wander-shadow shifted to become a horned, monstrous creature: Dormin.

Mono shrank back with a gasp, affrighted.

“He took Our masculine side into himself...” explained The Queen.

“Where is he now?” demanded Mono.

The Queen looked at her then with what could have been pity. “Lord Emon and his priests dealt him a mortal blow.”

The Dormin-shadow became as Wander once more, and then diminished in size, to become a little horned babe floating between The Queen's hands.

"Our essence spared him, but reverted him to infant form..."

Mono's mind was afire. "The boy was Wander?"

The Queen dismissed the shadows. "That is correct. Thus, We ask once more: what is it thy heart truly desires?"

Mono looked out over the cliffs and sea, her heart deeply troubled.

X

In the meantime, the boy awoke with a start.

He was in the cavernous tunnel, where Mono first rowed in from the sea; but he could hardly be expected to know of this. The small boat was still there.

The boy looked all about himself for injuries taken from his fall, and found but one: the loss of one of his horns.

Warm, moist air; breath.

Startled was he to find the great chimera-beast Trico in the shadow of the cavern.

The beast was curled up in the water, sword still lodged in its breast, bleeding onto its feathers. It stared at the boy resentfully.

The boy stood; he'd seen and had dealings minor with The Queen's pet, and so was unafraid.

Trico roared, and he was nearly knocked back over.

After Trico ceased, the boy faced it boldly. "I do not blame you for being angry," said he. "I did stab you with a sword."

Trico snorted.

"But you are bigger than me and attacked first," the boy argued. He tilted forth his head. "And look, see? My horn broke off. That make us even. Right?"

One large ear twitched atop the creature's head; the boy, called by Mono 'Ico', took this as a sign of agreement.

Ico did not like the name he had been given, for it sounded like merely a shortened version of 'Trico'.

Nonetheless, 'tis the name he shall be called; for indeed, though he liked it not, both boy and beast served as pets to The Queen, and she for her part saw little difference between them.

Ico's eyes scanned the cavern, til he espied several barrels stacked; butterflies of blue flitted joyously about them, attracted to something contained within.

The boy ran to the stack and lifted the lid of a barrel, full of hope to find a morsel he might eat...

But alas, to his dismay, the barrel was filled with naught but blue goop.

'Twere thick as honey to his touch, but without appetizing appeal; the smell was passing strange, and a quick lick with the tip of his tongue made him spit.

The boy was disappointed sore, for nothing had he eaten for some time; but Trico was watching with keen interest, ears perked upward.

“Hey Trico, do you want this?” he asked, glad to be making headway at last. “Is it your food?”

Trico seemed excited; the boy turned the barrel over on its side, and rolled it in the direction of Trico.

Trico caught it, pinning it with a bird-like front claw. The goop oozed out, and Trico lapped it up happily like a cat with a bowl of cream.

Ico approached Trico cautiously, making his way toward the sword lodged within the beast’s breast.

He laid hand on the sword, and pulled it forth, stumbling backward.

A fortuitous loss of footing: for Trico began to rear and shriek with fury, clawing and biting at nothing, for the boy was not there to receive the blows.

“Stop that,” the boy reprimanded. “You would not want the sword to stay in there, would you?”

Trico whimpered, and licked at the wound.

“I did not think so,” huffed Ico, vindicated. “You are welcome.”

The boy took the ancient sword to the water’s edge, and washed it clean of Trico’s blood.

Tendrils of dark blood, curling about in the water.

His reflection; the sight of his own face was new to him, and disturbing.

But why should he be disturbed? It was only he; yet, though he could not recall ever having seen his reflection before, it seemed hauntingly familiar.

The boy rose and turned to face Trico, who recoiled at the sight of the sword.

“Do not worry,” assured Ico, hiding the sword under his loose and patterned poncho. “I will not hurt you.”

Trico gave him a look of deep ambivalence, but let the boy approach.

The boy sighed, sitting next to Trico. “I do not know what to do, Trico,” he said. Ico looked at the boat, and at the entryway to the catacombs.

“I do not think The Queen will make her a stone-man,” he reasoned aloud, “since she is a girl, and does not have horns. But I think she will still be hurt somehow. I cannot just leave her.”

Trico lowered his mighty head and stared at the boy with inky, glistening black eyes, which saw the world only in greyish blues and greens.

The beast listened; to him the words were gibberish, but he could see the boy was distressed, and for some reason addressing his concerns to Trico.

“How would I get to her in time?” Ico asked, getting to his feet and pacing about. “The castle is very large, and full of doors I cannot open without her.”

By Trico’s snout was the boy gently nudged; Ico turned and petted him, a gesture the creature had but rarely received from The Queen, and now from the boy gladly accepted.

“Say...” began the boy, hesitant, “I do not know if you can understand me, but... would you do me a favor, Trico?”

Trico cocked its head to one side; he understood not, but noticed the boy's tonal shift of questioning.

'Round to Trico's flank went the boy, and climbed he up, onto the beast's feathery hide.

Trico did not object to this, for well it understood its role as a mount; it rose to his feet, as the boy placed himself on the scruff of the creature's neck to ride.

Trico squeezed himself bodily through the entryway, into the catacombs... through the hall... and out into the courtyard.

From there, Trico took flight.

The boy rode the creature over the ramparts, past windmills, under bridges, and through archways.

The creature walked great bridges like a cat on a thin line of fencing, leaping from tower to tower, ascending to the very highest.

When Trico could go no further or higher, it stopped and licked its paws.

It had brought the boy as near to the very doorstep of his mistress as it could; there was but one last bridge, leading directly to the tallest tower of the island's keep.

"This is it," said the boy, dismounting.

He gave a last look of fond appreciation at Trico. "Thank you, he said.

Trico shook its head, and sat down to wait as the boy took his leave.

As the boy crossed the last bridge, he found himself troubled; why did this, too, seem so familiar? Never had he ventured this far, of that he was certain.

Climbing upon a great beast...

Riding a mount to a place he knew not...

Traversing across a great bridge... into the dark entrance of a foreboding, ancient pile, rising tall into the heavens...

...like a shrine built to honor some long-forgotten god...

The boy shook his his head. Must be nothing.

-22-

“Light”

Into the tower keep strode the boy; and within moments his eyes were rewarded with the sight of the one whom he sought:

Mono, surrounded by dark shadowlings, on a pedestal raised.

Mono saw him, the boy saved from certain death by her infernal bargain with The Queen; her breath caught in her throat.

Images flashed through her mind: memories of Wander, of being with him.

Wander.

Could this boy she named Ico really be him?

A boy so short and scrawny, with feet too big and head too large, and a manner sweet and clumsy?

Well, thought she, that was not too far off the mark for Wander, even as she knew him.

His hair was the right dark-red color, his eyes the familiar shade of grey; there was in this regard a strong resemblance, as between a father and a son.

But his voice boomed and cracked not like Wander at all, occasionally becoming a squeak; and gone were the attempts at grave seriousness and grim self-importance that she had come to know Wander by.

But then... could that not have first manifested early in his youth, as the foolhardy bravery the boy Ico now displayed?

As if in answer to her musings, the boy puffed forth his chest high, and called out to Mono in a voice which readily pierced though the air between them:

“I am here, strange magical girl without horns!”

“..Wander,” she tried to call out, to see if he would in any way respond to the name, but the sound came out thin and weak; her throat was still too tight.

As such, the boy could not hear her; he was too far away.

Lifted he the ancient sword, wrested from Trico’s wounded chest. “And look, I have brought your sword! Worry not, I will save you!”

The shadowing guards, some bestial and others winged like bats, rose to his challenge; they sped forth at him in a flurry of claws and wings.

With ancient sword held at the ready behind him, the boy that was at once Ico and Wander charged at the shadows with a battle cry, loud and fierce.

He swung at them: wild, desperate, artless, as would befit a young boy untrained in the ways of the sword.

But then, a change in his demeanor... a maturity, subtle... but growing.

The resulting prowess of many lessons; experiences spanning weeks, months, maybe even years, condensed within mere moments.

It was as if he were becoming older, before Mono’s very eyes.

His feet shifted into more expert stances, grounded and purposeful...

The thews of his scrawny arms tensed and enlarged, veins blackening as before...

Steely and keen his gaze became, taking keen note of all the numerous enemies which surrounded him... the irises of his eyes glowed faintly blue.

Emotions churned deep within her like a storm as she watched him transform thus: his movements were familiar, as if by Wander he had been taught.

Well she could imagine her beloved's form before her, driving away some vermin threat.

And then, to Mono's eyes, the boy was not merely a well-trained disciple; he had become Wander himself.

The reincarnated Wander dispersed his shadowy enemies, and ran toward Mono.

Tears pooled in her eyes, as Mono felt the boy throwing his arms around her tightly; slowly, she returned his embrace.

"Wander," she choked, "you are alive..."

The boy pulled back, looking at her blankly. "Wander...?"

"It is me," she insisted. "Mono."

The blank stare remained, and showed not a glimmer of understanding; the boy was mystified.

Mono fumbled in both body and mind, desperate not to lose the Wander she knew to forgetfulness now that she had at last found him again.

“Is there any chance that somehow, deep down... even just a little bit... you remember me?”

“Uh...” he began, eyes darting about. “Well, sure, of course I remember you.”

Hope leapt up within her chest, painful in its force; so he was not lost to her!

“You rescued me from the cage,” he continued. “So, your name is Mono?”

Her hopes sank heavily; he had no memory of her, his mind wiped clean by his rebirth.

She nodded in response to his question. “...Yes. That is my name. And yours is Wander.”

Mono vowed inwardly to make him understand who he was, and hold onto the faint hope that perhaps one day his memories he would retrieve.

The boy felt the determination behind her words; she could see the clunky workings of his mind, as he attempted to understand.

But alas, he could not; he shrugged. “...Okay,” said he, giving up and giving in.

He took her hand in his and tugged at her to come away with him. “Those shadows are gone now, but they will be back before long,” he explained. “Let’s go!”

Claps of applause; they turned to see The Queen was formed where before, in but mere moments past, she was not, sitting gracefully upon the throne at the back of the keep’s large chamber-hall.

“Praise to thee, boy...” she purred. “Thy skills in battle are impressive... I commend thee for making it thus far, alive and well...”

The boy stepped toward her, grimly set to deal with her as he had the other foes.

“Wait-” said Mono, but Ico-Wander listened not.

“What are you going to do with Mono?!” he demanded of The Queen.

“No matter now... thou art too late,” replied The Queen. “This ‘body’, if one may call it such, will soon perish... Mono will be revived as Our successor.

That is her fate... she will be the receptacle for Our soul.

When she awakes, her memories of thee will have vanished, just as thine own of her.

Now cast the sword aside and leave this place...”

The boy pulled away from Mono’s grasp, and raised the sword.

“Tsk, tsk,” clucked the disapproving Queen, “not a good little boy at all... dost thou really want to die so badly?”

The Queen rose from her throne, eyes aflame in red-gold blaze.

The boy yelled, and charged at her full-tilt with sword drawn and gleaming.

A blast of dark energy, an explosion of shadow, was tossed at him with a flick of her pale hand; this he evaded deftly, and with the sword deflected.

Up the steps to the throne dais he ran.

To be without weapon while challenged by a well-armed foe The Queen would suffer not: a blade she formed of dark tendrils, a smoky blade of darkness.

His aggressive blows she parried calmly, effortlessly, until at last she grabbed him by his remaining horn.

Using only his horn, she flung him away from her as if he weighed naught.

Into a stone wall did he land; the horn hit the stone, and at the base broke in twain.

Laughter from The Queen. “...A horned boy no longer!”

Slumped against the wall, the boy growled: it began in his own tones, then became a deep and rumbling roar like that of the male Dormin.

He rose to his feet and stalked toward her, like an angry beast.

The Queen was not affrighted or concerned, but rather exhilarated; with heightened force did the fight begin anew.

Agonized Mono looked on, as Boy and Queen spun one about the other; a duel, a dance; a courting ritual not of love, but of death.

Their blades locked; the taller queen pressed down upon him, and summoned dark energy within a free hand to deliver into a punch to his gut.

But the boy was faster; pushed he against her, with sharp and unexpected strength.

Her guard faltered as she stumbled back apace, dazed; he lunged forth, reaching, and seized her by the throat.

He pulled her toward him, but this was like as to drawing a nocked arrow: it was preparation for him to shove her forward.

With the inhuman power of Dormin coursing through his veins, the shove blasted her backward many lengths, directly into the arms of her throne.

The Queen did not attempt to rise; nay, as he stalked toward her again like a hunter after his prey, she sat slumped bonelessly in the stone chair, and made no move to defend herself.

The boy who was Dormin stabbed her through the chest.

Lines of glowing blue curled outward from the wound, creating the same sigil as the ones borne by the Colossi.

“Thou canst not be rid of Us, ever... not even if... thou takest Our lives...”

The Queen’s eyes turned a glowing blue, filling with tears.

She smiled.

“..We thank you,” she whispered, in a voice sincere.

Dark tendrils arose from her wound, and entered the boy.

Mono cried out, running forth; caught she the boy in her arms, as he lost consciousness.

The Queen sighed, her shadowy form dispersing into naught but smoke and then clean air.

Mono stroked the boy's dark-reddish hair.

“Wander, come back,” pled she in trembling voice. “You cannot die... please do not leave me... not after all we have sacrificed...”

A kiss she gave to him upon his brow.

Of a sudden, she felt the strength within her ebb; it was replaced with a force far greater, rising and crashing over her as a tidal wave.

Her skin lost what little color it possessed, turning a marble-white; her dark hair billowed around her, in a wind which whipped around her alone.

Mono's gaze was overtaken with a glowing blue.

Cracks formed in the ceiling.

Fissures opened in the floor beneath Mono's bare feet.

With her newfound strength, easily could she carry the boy's limp body in her arms.

Slowly, solemnly, and with great purpose walked she, as chips from ceiling fell down around her, and the keep of the castle from quaking earth shuddered.

Marched she through the chamber-hall, and out the great doorway of the castle keep.

Her dress turned from whitish-pale to the darkest tint of black as the keep crumbled, and she entered into the grim pale light.

Across the bridge did Mono make her way.

Though the tower turned to rubble and the bridge fell away behind her with every step as she walked, she made no effort to hurry; time meant little to Mono.

Well could she feel the vibrations of the earth, as it reclaimed all The Queen had wrought.

She approached the great beast Trico, waiting patiently upon the top of the second-tallest tower.

Well could Trico see that she carried the boy in her arms, and that she intended him no harm.

Though never had they properly met, in the lock of their gazes an understanding passed between them.

In that instant she knew Trico, and Trico knew her, and the creature accepted the girl as its rightful master.

With a gentle hand she touched the sword-wound blighting Trico's breast; the flesh underneath her hand knitted together, healing itself forthwith.

Trico lowers its head, allowing her to climb more easily onto his scruff.

The boy Wander's head rested upon Mono's shoulder, the remnant bases of his horns no longer a threat; she inclined her own head, resting her cheek upon his crown..

She closed her eyes.

Trico took flight, a moment before its tower perch crumbled beneath it.

And Mono saw nothing, and knew nothing, and remembered nothing.

XX

The boy awoke to a creature licking his face; 'twas a dark black mare, with a patch of white gracing her brow.

Satisfied he was awake, the mare returned to her meal: a large watermelon, split in twain; on the outside bright green, exposed inner flesh juicy and red.

The cries of seagulls, the lapping of waves, sand beneath him; he was lying on the sandy shore, but upon what coast he knew not.

Moreover, he could not recall who he might be.

A girl was standing over him.

Her hair was straight and dark; her eyes were large and dark, like those of the horse; her skin a soft and lively shade, like as to the faint cherry-blossom embroidery of her gown.

The boy stood. "Hello," he greeted her, full of cheer. "What is your name?"

The girl's brows slightly knit, and her lashes fluttered in rapid blinks. "I... do not know," she admitted, perplexed.

"That's okay. Neither do I," he returned, his spirits undampened.

"I cannot seem to remember anything," she went on. "How we came here, who we are... nor do I remember these creatures intent on following us... perhaps they belong to us in some way?"

In this she referred not only to the horse, but to the large winged beast sitting tamely behind her; a beast that was not quite a bird, and not quite a cat.

Though the boy searched his mind for a proper term by which to call it, he strangely could think of none.

The boy shook his head. "Let's go wander around. We shall think of something."

The girl smiled. "All right."

And wander they did, into the shadow of a fruit tree. A white-tailed lizard climbed its trunk.

The girl picked a piece of fruit, accidentally causing the branch bearing it to break; it fell to the grass below.

The boy grabbed the lizard, pinning it against the tree; the lizard wriggled and abandoned its tail in order to escape him.

With fascination did the boy regard the discarded tail, picking it up to closer inspect it; but a hawk swooped down, and with its talons snatched the tail from the boy's hand.

"Hey!!" he cried out, in protest.

The boy lifted up the broken branch-stick. He took the girl's hand in his. "Come, let's go after it!"

He pulled, running in the direction of the hawk's flight.

To the girl's misfortune, she was jerked forth just as she took a bite of the red-gold fruit; the piece of fruit fell into the back of her throat and she made a choking noise, sounding very much like...

"Yorda!" he exclaimed.

She swallowed. "Huh?" asked she.

"That should be your name," he explained. "Yorda."

"Uh... all right."

The two of them raced across the grassy fields of the Forbidden Lands, after the hawk.

The horse, whose name of Agro was now known only to her and would never be spoken again, galloped up to the running pair.

Without hesitation or thought, the boy expertly mounted astride the mare, pulling the newly-named Yorda up to sit with him.

The cat-bird beast, whose name of Trico would suffer the same fate as Agro, bounded after them, fast outpacing Agro with the length of its strides.

Trico gained upon the hawk, and opened its wide-gaping maw; the hawk disappeared within, and Trico's jaws snapped shut.

The sound of laughter rumbled over and through them, male and female voices mingled.

Dormin was together once more, feeling their every joy in the golden light of the sun, and would dwell within their blissful hearts forever.

'Twas the ending We always dreamt of.