

Excerpts from *Pearseus: Rise of the Prince*

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Styx and Whisper

Styx

Lying in the darkness of her private chambers, sunk in the large chair, Styx paid no attention to the sparsely decorated room. Justice Barrett had always frowned upon extravagant displays of wealth and most of the following Justices had tried to emulate her. The only ornament in the room, a beautiful floral pattern painted around the walls, had been a gift from the Technical Chamber to Justice Dar, one of Styx's predecessors, when they had finished construction of the new building. It now looked faded and chipped at places, but still pleasant enough. Not that Styx ever noticed it anymore. She had no time for aesthetics, as attested by the sparse furniture. An ornate desk with an e-lib and a paper bundle sat at one of the far corners and a large bed with a curved side table at the other. Two comfortable leather armchairs surrounded a small, simple table next to the door.

Her attention was fixed on a statuette of a blind-folded woman, the sword and scales of justice in her hands. On the small pedestal on which the statuette stood, the words "*The wheels of justice grind slow but grind fine*" were inscribed.

With the corner of her eye, she noticed a small movement next to a window. She spoke without turning. "Do you know it was Justice Dar who first worshipped Themis? She was faced with rising criminality and religious friction. Making a goddess out of Divine Justice seemed like a good idea. But the people didn't buy it. So, she gave promotions to anyone converting to the new religion. That convinced them. In no time, Themis was as popular as the Old Religions."

She continued without expecting an answer. "Do you know Justice Dar's other lasting contribution? In the past, Justices were elected for ten years at the most. Dar was the first to renew her term – more than twice, in fact. It was a troubled time. People were so afraid of living without her, they even let her choose her successor.

This ensured the stability the Capital needed. But nowadays everyone's complaining. *We should have elections, like the Democracies*, they say. Nonsense."

In truth, no-one dared complain too loudly. Anyone doing so risked exile or worse, and people preferred the Capital's security and comforts to the constant warfare of the West, the savagery of the North or the oppression of the South.

Styx absent-mindedly fiddled with the statue of Themis, thinking of Parad. His reaction had surprised her. Perhaps Parad was loyal enough to be trusted after all. She scowled as she thought of his words. Was her judgment always just? She liked to think so, and knew that people loved her for that, but still had her doubts. Her head throbbed again.

"Draw the curtains, will you?" she said and a slender, barefoot boy stepped out of the shadows. He drew the thick, dark red curtains around a bright sliver of sunlight, ensuring that no light snuck into the room.

"Wine," she called, and he rushed to pour her some into a sculpted silver beaker.

It was a great honour to serve her and only the scions of the most prominent families were permitted to do so. What was this one's name again? Ah, yes, David Rivera. David, last of Lucas' descendants, the rest of his family all but extinct by now. He would have to be replaced soon; tradition required that no-one older than sixteen served as a household servant. He was almost naked. Styx had decreed that it was safer that way, as that way servants would have no place to hide any weapons. As the boy stood next to her and poured the wine into the beaker, Styx caressed the hairless chest. The boy's heart beat faster, and she drank in some of that vitality.

"All I want is to be safe," she told David, the words scratching her throat. "Is that too much to ask for?" She put the statuette back on the table. "I have been harsh today."

David stood still as an ice sculpture, frozen next to the chair. Styx took the filled cup from the boy's hand and emptied it in one large sip. "Justice needs to be harsh, or people won't learn to obey, you know. We're far away from Earth, surrounded by savages. *It is in chaos that wolves thrive*, as the saying goes. How are we to keep our civilization alive, if I should be gone? *We need order. We need justice. I am justice.* If I fail, we're all doomed!"

Her voice sounded shrill even to her, and she slammed the beaker on the table. The boy jumped under her hand. His heart thumped, annoying the Justice. She knew what she had to do next, and hated it.

“Go away,” she said in a gruff voice. David rushed out, the door making no sound as he closed it behind him.

She knew her advisor would arrive soon and made herself comfortable on the soft, weathered leather of her chair. He always seemed to know when he was needed. For a split second she felt more than heard a low-pitched hum and any remaining light in the room seemed to disappear altogether. An even darker shadow emerged from the shadows in the far corner of the room, emanating a strange mixture of dread and comfort. No face could be seen, and the proportions were all wrong for a human. The arms were thin and so long they almost touched the ground, much like a tree’s branches. Shadowy, ethereal fingers formed and disappeared at the end of its arms. It was impossible to determine how many they were, as old ones vanished and new ones appeared in their place. The featureless head, bigger than it should be, had two huge, bright red eyes; the rest of the creature could be more felt than seen, almost as if it were part real, part imagined.

No mouth opened, but still a whisper filled the room, like wind rustling leaves. “That boy...”

“What boy? David? He’s nobody,” she replied with a dismissive motion.

The whisper made no comment for a while.

“Where is it?” it asked in the end.

The Justice waved towards a bundle on her desk, trying not to look in that direction. She had needed the creature all her life, but even after all these years she had no desire to tolerate it any longer than she had to. It had first appeared in her bedroom when she was but a child, hiding under her bed to avoid the screams of an abusive, drunken mother. She had never known her father and the fact that she, a nobody, had risen to a position coveted by the most powerful families on Pearseus spoke volumes about the creature’s uncanny ability to sniff out opportunities and steer her towards her destiny. When opportunities were absent, it had even taught her how to create them, as when she had slipped that little pill into her predecessor’s wine. She was

right to be afraid, she reminded herself: who knew who might be holding the pill next time. Having followed its instructions all her life, she had learnt only too well the cost of disobeying it. This time, however, it had gone too far. Had it not assured her that Parad's son would someday slay her unless she did *exactly* as it told her, she assured herself for the hundredth time, she would never have followed its terrible instructions.

The creature made no sound as it glided across the room on invisible legs. It stood close to the desk and newly formed, elongated, black fingers with sharp edges reached for the bundle. Inside the parcel lay a bloody piece of meat, and the creature left a satisfied sigh as it ran its fingers through it. The meat somehow seemed redder than before, pulsing as if alive.

"And the father?" came the voice, soft as a feather, yet cold as a tomb.

Her voice sounded hoarse, like the words were choking her. "The father was fed his son. I did everything you asked for. As always. That's the boy's heart. Now I'm safe, right? The prophecy ..." she said.

"You are a wise queen, yes" whispered the creature.

"I've told you before; I'm no queen, I'm a Justice," she snapped at it. *How it annoyed her!*

"A queen in all but a name," replied the whisper in an absent-minded manner. "But this heart..."

"...is my end of the deal, and now I want you gone," she said in a menacing voice. The creature stood still over the heart. The bloody meat somehow seemed deader now than before. Styx had no idea what had happened to it and realised she did not care either; she had had enough of this and all she wanted now was to sleep, for once without worrying about dark prophecies.

"But *your Honour* –" started the creature.

It had never called her that before, and she was unsure whether it was meant in a mocking way. It infuriated her. "Are you refusing to obey me?" she asked in a voice that matched the creature's in malice and she touched the still crystal on her neck with trembling fingers, as if to turn it on.

After a brief pause, came the reply in a soft whisper: "So be it." Was that resignation or bemusement she heard?

Before she had a chance to say anything, the creature melted back into the room's shadows. The little light in the room immediately seemed to shine brighter; it was like every time the creature appeared, it drank all illumination in its dark, shadowy branches. It left Styx with a strange mixture of relief and longing, as if one part of her fed off the creature, and another loathed it. She felt weak, exhausted, and got up with a loud groan. She only had enough strength to move to the bed, sinking heavily into it. Perhaps tonight she would be able to sleep at last.

David and Orb

David

After leaving the Justice, David rushed to his room. He lay on his bed, waiting for Styx to call him. A good servant never slept heavily, he knew, but he felt exhausted and soon dozed off. He dreamt that a ball of light fell from the sky and landed in front of him. He tried to pick it up, but it burned hot and he dropped it into a bowl filled with water. The water sizzled and evaporated, so he placed it into a larger bowl of water. Once again the water vanished, and then the ball jumped into his mouth and entered his body, bursting into flames.

He woke up with a jolt and brought his hand to his mouth to make sure it was not burned. A light buzzing sound echoed in his head, like a bee hive, or an orchestra's tuning before the show. He fell back on the bed, then a crystalline voice broke through the noise, like a sole high note.

“Help me!”

He jumped up, banging his head on the bedpost. He swore and his eyes darted around the small room, while he rubbed the rapidly expanding bump on his head. The room stood empty. Naturally. Since losing his parents, he had kept to himself. He wondered for a second if maybe that was the problem: talking to so few people, perhaps he had gone crazy. Did anyone in his family suffer from mental illness? He had no idea; his parents were the last of their line, with no other relatives. When they had died, a friend of his parents, a cook in the Justice's household, had taken him in and taught him how to serve food and help in the kitchen. His natural shyness had served him well. Not talking to anyone meant that he never spread any rumours or gossip. In recognition of this, he had been selected to serve the Justice herself.

He pulled a chair next to the window, peering out. Perhaps it had been a dream. He had always had exceptionally lucid dreams, so maybe this was one of them. Then, the voice spoke again: “Please, I need your help!”

He jumped to his feet, sending the chair to crash on the floor and banging his leg.

If this keeps up, I'll soon be covered in bruises, he thought with dismay, rubbing his aching shin. The voice was starting to annoy him.

“Who is this? What do you want?” he shouted to the empty room. Were the other children playing games with him? He knew he was not all that popular, but most other children feared him because of his daily contact with Styx.

The voice sounded gentler this time. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to frighten you. You’re the only possible host I can find.”

He had no idea what that meant, or whether the voice was a sign of his madness or not. *Does it mean you’re not crazy if you wonder whether you’re crazy?*

“So what do you want from me?”

“I need you to let me in. I can’t enter a host without his permission.”

He had been reading about worms and parasites that lived in people back on Earth. He loved reading, to the point of stealing an e-lib from the Justice’s library; a crime punishable by death. It was his most valued possession, his treasure. Was a worm talking to him? *Well, if I’m crazy, at least my illusion has good manners.*

“I don’t know about this,” he muttered. He mulled it for a while. “What happens if I refuse?”

“I’ll die.” The voice sounded scared, but somehow dignified.

“Can’t I think it over?”

“Of course. But this place is dangerous; they could find me if I’m outside a host.”

This surprised him. “How? You’re invisible!”

The voice said nothing for a while. “I can explain if you let me in.”

He leaned back and scratched his head. Although he had no idea how saying yes might change his life, this was the most exciting thing that had ever happened to him. He reflected back on his life, the life of a servant. Soon, he would be too old to serve Styx. What fate awaited him next? Possibly a lifetime scrubbing pots and dishes in the kitchen. This, on the other hand...

Reaching a sudden decision, he raised his head. “OK, I’ll do it,” he said to the empty air around him.

A form made of light materialized slowly before his eyes. Rainbow hues chased each other within, and he watched in awe, mesmerized by the most beautiful sight he had ever seen. The form shrunk to a ball half the size of his fist, a gentle pulse running through it. Parts of it seemed to rotate, forming smaller disks, gyrating at different speeds. Then, with a sudden jerk, it dashed and burst onto his chest. A sudden numbness spread from his solar plexus to his whole body, as though every cell pulsed and vibrated, resonating to some unheard tune. It moved from one part of his body to the next, as if the invader tried to make itself comfortable. *If this is a dream, I'll probably wake up at this point*, David thought.

He did not. The whole experience lasted but a few seconds, then an immense sense of relief filled him. He guessed it came from the creature and a melodic laughter sounded in his head. "Thank you!"

"What happened?"

"I needed a host, you accepted me. That's all." He felt a flutter in his chest, as if the creature was happily bouncing around in there.

"That's all?" he asked incredulously the empty room. "This happens every day, you think?"

"I guess not. You must have some questions." How can a voice in his head sound like it's frowning?

"Some questions! Let's start with what you are, shall we?"

The voice remained silent for a moment, as if trying to frame the answer in as good a way as possible.

"The First often refer to us as Orbs. I am mostly what you'd call energy, although that's not exactly right, as I consist of matter, too. It's just, erm... *thinner* than yours."

Right. That answered his question. He tried a different approach. "So, what're you doing here?"

"We've been around for millions of years, but on Pearseus since the old war. You've probably heard of us; your kind calls us ghosts, fairies, will o' the wisps, angels..."

He took out his e-lib from its hiding hole in the wall and tapped on its screen, bringing it to life. A quick search revealed many images of the creatures she had mentioned, and he spent a moment flicking through them. His insides felt like the Orb was still trying to make itself at home, and parts of his innards twitched every now and then.

“Why ain’t you with your kind?” he asked, still browsing urgently the e-lib.

“You don’t understand. We need hosts, living organisms, to reproduce. We are not many, but we do share life with you: we are born, we procreate and eventually we, too, will perish. Of course, I’m but a toddler for my kind, although I’m much older than you. “

A sudden thought made him pause startled. “Are you a boy or a girl?”

The voice seemed to giggle. “We don’t really have a sex; not like you. But I currently have some characteristics better suited to females.”

“Like what?”

The voice seemed to blush, as if that were possible. “I’m pregnant,” she said. David lifted the chair back up, and sank on it. He knew about girls, but was uncomfortable around them. The idea of a pregnant ball of light in him was going to take some getting used to, and even the e-lib offered no help on this.

“So, what did you do before you came to me?”

“My last host was killed a few days ago.”

“How?”

“Styx killed him. He was but a boy. He is terribly missed; I felt his father mourn him even as I looked for someone to replace him.”

He brought his hand to his mouth, her grief filling him. “Then what?”

“I searched for a suitable host, but couldn’t find anyone.”

“How do you know who’s a suitable host?”

“You do too. When a host is suitable, they’ll sense us. It could be a smell, or a sudden flash at the corner of one’s eye. Sometimes you can even hear us. When I realised you did, I tried out different frequencies, as you’d call them, until we communicated. You then had the choice to either help me or not.”

“Right. As if I had a choice.”

“You did.”

“Come on, you’d die if I hadn’t helped you.”

“Probably.”

“And you don’t mind?”

“Of course! But there are worse things than death. Forcing you would’ve made me no better than the Whispers.”

“The what?”

“The ancient ones. The shadows in the dark. Those here before us.”

What, there’s more weird things? David had no idea what she was talking about, but felt her discomfort talking about that subject. He decided to leave it for now, since he had so many other questions anyway.

“Couldn’t you have entered an animal?”

“Our host must have free will to accept or reject us, and a developed enough consciousness to sustain us during our pregnancy.”

She sounds like she’s reading from an e-lib. She giggled and he blushed, realising she heard all his thoughts. This would take some getting used to. He tried to change the subject. “You mean you *feed* off your host?”

“Off their consciousness. Our ancestors were able to feed off lesser creatures, but as life evolves on a planet, so do we. It would be impossible now to survive off an animal; it’s simply not conscious enough. That’s why there’s so few of us left.”

Feeding on him was more than he’d bargained for. He ran a frantic hand through his hair, browsing the e-lib for any clues as to the risks his generosity might have brought him. And yet, it felt so right. He put the e-lib down, deciding in favour of the direct approach. “Isn’t that dangerous for us?”

“On the contrary, we help you grow your consciousness. Becoming more conscious is to our mutual benefit.”

Let’s hope so!

They kept talking, until at some point he realised he had stopped listening. As absorbing as the conversation was, he had never been as serene and happy and that made him too relaxed to listen closely. All he sensed was the presence of a being grateful for his very existence. Her love for his offering filled him, like a sweet glow warming every cell in his body. No criticism or negativity came from her; he had never before experienced this and already found it hard to return to a life without her. Still, another voice in the back of his head told him that she was holding something back; something very important.

A mission to the Haunted Forest

David

The old shaman chanted in a hoarse voice, swaying gently his gaunt body. David sat on the dusty floor of the dark tent. He fed some incense into the fire, breathing in the aromatic smoke.

“What’re you doing?” David whispered.

“Feel the planet,” the old man murmured. “Good and evil, wherever they are.”

“But how?”

The shaman ignored him for a while, then opened his eyes, deep in trance. His piercing eyes shone with intensity. “I’m on a beach”, he said. He examined the floor with his hand, shifting the dust like sand. “A dark stain. Blood.” He twisted his head abruptly. “An Orb. Someone’s been murdered here.” He gaped around him.

“What?” David asked.

The old man recoiled. “The beach. Stains. They grow... No more sand, just blood.” He, nodded, listening to the Orb.

David leaned forward, staring at the old man. “What’s she saying?”

“Where man slays man, the blood can never be washed away.”

He stayed silent for a time, then yawned deeply and stretched his limbs as he came out of his trance. David twisted in impatience while the shaman regained his consciousness. “What did you see?” he asked when he could no longer contain his curiosity.

The old man shook his head. “So much blood... A sign of things to come. But she said we’ll find the evil we seek in the Haunted Forest. That’s where the ancient enemy lies. Take the fight to him before it’s too late.”

David had never heard of such a place, but the name told him all he needed to know. His shoulders dropped. “What should we look for?” he asked. “Is it Fallen?”

The old man tilted his head. “The Fallen are symptom, not disease. To cure the symptom, you fight the disease.”

“But where?”

“She showed me. Northeast, the edge of the Marshes. Now go! Prepare your friends for the journey. I’ll talk to the Elders.”

David got up and stepped out of the tent, blinking repeatedly as his eyes got used to the soft afternoon light. A group of blacksmiths on their way to the tavern motioned an invitation for a drink. He smiled, but waved a polite refusal. The blacksmiths left, disappointed. *They’ll have to make do without their patron saint*, he thought bemused.

One of David’s set of skills that had proven notably popular with the First came straight from the knowledge crystal: metallurgy. David proved a worthy descendant of Lucas, although most of the materials described in the crystal either required components he had never heard of, or were too complicated to make outside a laboratory. He had, however, managed to construct a metal lighter yet more durable than anything used so far by the First. The weapons and armour built with it had given the Wind Warriors and the Fire clan a distinct advantage over everyone else, and the two tribes now effectively ruled all First.

As an unexpected side benefit, the two clans’ blacksmiths enjoyed an unprecedented popularity among women. So, they considered him something between patron saint and blacksmith genius and competed for the privilege of his friendship, probably in the hope he would reveal some new knowledge while drinking out with them. As a result, David had not paid for a single drink in ages, despite his continuous efforts to make it clear that he would not show anyone preferential treatment.

He saw his friends in the distance and headed in their direction. In the past few years, Cyrus had grown into a tall, handsome young man, trim and sinewy. He had a rich beard, in the fashion of the First, and could easily be mistaken for one of them, if not for his eloquence and cultivated manners. He had long since stopped his awkward advances on Moirah and had been known to break the heart of quite a few First girls.

Moirah, lovely and graceful as ever, stood next to Lehmor. His old wound had never fully healed. He could no longer hold a shield or use a bow, but his skill with

the *Sheimlekh* had grown legendary. Even Cyrus could not defeat him. The four of them had grown close, not because the Old Woman had asked them to do so, but because of mutual respect. The initial apprehension had faded away, and David now considered them his best friends – apart from the Voice, of course.

Both he and Cyrus had earned the respect of the clans' leaders and regularly attended their meetings. He found he enjoyed their trust, often marvelling about his rise from servant to the inner circle that ruled the First. Cyrus seemed more at ease with that role, having been groomed since birth to wield authority, slipping with little effort into the role of the group's leader. David often admired the self-confidence his friend exuded, as well as the easy manner in which he commanded men. He suspected Lehmor must have been like that once, but since losing his arm he had been more reserved and tended to fall in line behind Cyrus. As for Moirah, her gracefulness was only surpassed by her skill in battle, but the Wind Warriors were not eager to follow women into battle. Perhaps this was why she, too, accepted Cyrus as their leader, although she often challenged him.

“Were you with the old man again?” Cyrus teased him. He had been teaching them a Capital game called baseball, and held a makeshift bat.

David knew his skills made his friends uncomfortable, so he smiled awkwardly and ignored the question. “Have you ever heard of a place called the Haunted Forest?”

Cyrus shook his head. “Nice name. We should have a party there sometime.”

Lehmor and Moirah exchanged an uneasy look. “It's where the spirits go”, said Lehmor.

“Spirits?” laughed Cyrus. He took a swing with the bat, nearly missing a hen. He chuckled as she clucked away.

A dark cloud shadowed Moirah's umber eyes. “Fallen live there, with the spirits of their victims.” Their eyes betrayed their confusion. “If a Fallen kills someone, they corrupt his spirit,” she explained. “It can't cross over and has to spend eternity in places like the Haunted Forest. It's a dark place. I'm lucky Lehmor didn't die that day.” She squeezed Lehmor's hand, making him blush.

“Why do you ask?” Cyrus enquired.

David scratched his head. "Looks like we're headed that way."

Cyrus' eyes sparkled. "Can I lead?" he asked them.

David pondered the question. The First valued Cyrus for his fighting skill and prowess, but still considered him a Newcomer. Lehmor's handicap had cost him the leadership; they would never trust him to lead a large expedition against the First. Moirah had to fight a different prejudice; unlike the Fire Clan, the Wind Warriors preferred their women as wives instead of soldiers. David had also noticed she tended to avoid positions of leadership over Lehmor. He suspected this was done in order to spare her husband's feelings, and respected her for that. Still, it meant that someone else would have to lead them.

"I doubt any of us will lead," was all he said in the end.

Cyrus sulked for a moment. "Why not you?" he asked.

"Me what?"

"Lead us, dumbass."

David's eyes opened wide. He knew the First held him in high esteem, partly because of the Voice, but also because of his other skills. Quite often he got certain feelings while meeting people, and he just seemed to *know* things about them. Simple things at first, like that they had just had a fight, or that they fancied a certain girl. More complex things later, like whether they had lost someone important to them, and who that was.

As a result of his abilities, people around him often treated him like a minor oracle and asked him to tell their future, heal their ailments or give them his blessing. At first this annoyed him, but then he realised he could use their superstitions to help them. They laughed at Newcomer medicine, but would follow religiously his advice. So, he spent hours studying the knowledge contained within the knowledge crystal. To his surprise, even the Voice knew only a small part of it, whereas her engineering skills were remarkable. He learned a lot about medicine from the crystal, and this knowledge, coupled with their faith in him, did produce wonderful results. Soon, he gained a reputation as an accomplished healer.

Still, his skills as a healer or a blacksmith were one thing; leading people to their death another. He was not ready to lead a military expedition into the heart of Fallen territory. “A hand’s five fingers are not equal,” he murmured.

Cyrus rubbed his chin and cocked his head. “What?”

David pointed at the men talking in front of the tribal meeting hall. “Thanks, but I’ll sit this one out. Perhaps Two-horns is a better choice?”

The group included the shaman, the two leaders and an Elder called Two-horns. The tribes held him in great esteem because of his battle experience, often asking him to lead their forces. David liked both him and his son, Satsi; a bright-eyed boy who always seemed to follow him around.

“He’s a good choice” Cyrus admitted grudgingly, before perking up again. “We should volunteer, or they might leave without us!”

He rushed towards the men. David did not share Cyrus’ anxiety. It made sense that the Elders would ask them to join the expedition. Fighting the Fallen would be much easier with *Sheimleks*, and his medicinal skills could always come in handy.

He had a bad feeling about the expedition and wondered if he could predict its outcome. It was one of his new abilities, although he had no idea how it worked.

“Can you show me what’s gonna happen?” he asked the Voice.

Her crystal laughter rang in his head.

“No-one can predict the future.”

“But I do!”

“No, you don’t. Not really, anyway. Life is full of patterns. Watch the skies and you’ll learn of the land; watch the land and you’ll learn of the seasons. As above, so below. When you live long enough, you learn to recognise the signs. In your case, it’s your growing consciousness that’s giving you the insight. No-one, however, can tell the future, for it’s not predetermined. People often think of the future as something static. It’s not; it depends on your decisions. I can see possible futures, and some of them are more likely than others. However, there’s no way for me – or anyone else – to tell you the final outcome with any certainty.”

“How is it then that I see things before they happen?”

“It’s not. Humans always make the same mistake. They need to dissect life, label it and put it into neat little containers. They think they can control it that way. Even gods are worshiped in careful choreographies. But life’s not like that. It’s full of decisions, from tiny to grand, leading to any possibility.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Think about it this way: a man’s walking on a street, about to turn a corner. As he hasn’t turned the corner yet, he can’t see a woman walking towards him from the other side. You, on the other hand, are standing on a balcony above them. You can see them both as they approach the corner and surmise that they’ll meet. Does this mean you can predict the future? No, it simply means you have a better viewpoint. Now suppose the woman remembers something and turns back. These two never meet after all, but you can’t know that beforehand. It’s a matter of perspective, not precognition. It’s our decisions in the present that shape our future; never forget that.”

He felt like she did not want to help him, and kicked a helpless stone. *Why can’t evil ever be on a nice, sandy beach? Maybe like the one in the old man’s dream – only with a bit less blood?*

First encounter with an Iota

David

David and the First sat around a long table in a hall that could house more than twice their numbers. Two-horns had posted guards outside, at the tower gate and with the horses. David felt grateful for their leader's obvious distrust of the old man. His eyes darted around the cavernous hall, open wide despite his tiredness. The table was covered with roasted pigs, pheasants, cheese, bread and rich red wine, although they had seen no servants or cooks. Between cracking jokes, the old man insisted to feed them all, and took personal care of the guards outside as well.

Despite his hunger and the rich banquet thrown in their honour, David found it hard to eat. His head pounded, as if split in two by an ice dagger. He examined their surroundings, trying to get his mind off the throbbing pain. Long tapestries adorned with sigils covered the dark walls. Some displayed the sun, some the twin moons and others had creatures he had never seen before. One caught his eye; a forlorn man's face, long grey hair flowing around his head. Somehow it reminded him of their host.

He pointed at it. "What's that sigil? I don't believe I've seen it before."

The old man turned his head, then laughed. "Oh, that. Nothing my dear, nothing at all. Just some old stuff no-one cares about any more. Here, have something to eat! You've hardly touched your food!"

David smiled politely. No food would go down. He noticed the amulet the old man was wearing; a silver pillar penetrating a circle above it, and the old man caught his eye.

"It's the Iota, a symbol of the whole and the one," he said.

"One what?"

"Never heard of it, is it your god?"

"In a sense, I suppose... What do you believe in, son?"

David shrugged. "I'm not sure. Tie – a priestess I know – believes in Themis."

"Themis is one-sided, for what good is justice without love? The Iota's a symbol of balance. *That's* what we believe in; the unity of all things; past, present, future. Everything that exists, be it in our memories, hopes, or lives. Good and evil, day and night, all pairs of opposites in eternal struggle and perfect balance. Should one upset the balance, we servants of the Iota must redress it." He paused to fill David's cup with an aromatic wine that made his head spin. "What do *you* think of as a god?"

David had to think. "I guess something good and just?"

The old man smirked. "The world's not good and just, why should its god be? Unless god and world are two separate things, that is."

"What do *you* believe in then?"

"I believe your way of thinking's wrong. You think of god as an entity including only itself, standing separate from the world, gazing down upon us. We play our little parts for god's amusement, like actors on a stage. Iotas on the other hand believe that the world and everything in it is divine. Everything is god. The universe includes both good and evil, positive and negative. How can its creator not?"

David remembered something he had read a long time ago in his stolen e-lib.

"Christians believe in a good Creator that's left us the freedom to accept or reject him. Evil is the rejection of his goodness, that He tolerates in order for the choice to be real."

"Intriguing, but we'd consider that unbalanced. The Whole's neither weak, nor strong; it's both and neither; the balance of all things. Do you understand?"

"Not really..."

"It's simple. Think of our symbol, the Iota. A pillar with a circle on top." He traced the amulet with a gnarled finger. "The pillar represents the unit, each and every one of us. We stand within the Whole, but also across it. The circle is the Whole; the endless; the limitless. We believe the Whole created us in order to comprehend itself. To understand something, one needs to stand apart, or they can't examine it. It's the same with the Whole. We're part of it, since the Whole contains all. Yet,

we're unaware of it, or we'd never fulfil our purpose to serve as the Whole's mirror. That's why the pillar's both part of the circle and outside it."

"It reminds me of an eye. A crying eye."

The old man smiled and broke his bread, then dunked it into his wine before taking a large bite. "You should study the Iota more" he said with his mouth full. "You're special, you know, and soon you'll have to choose."

"Choose what?"

"A side. Will you side with those who preserve balance, or with those who upset it?"

David did know how to answer, so he decided to change the subject. "I haven't seen any servants. Do you live alone?"

The old man laughed and waved his hand. "Oh no, I could never take care of such a grand place on my own. I have my brothers to help me."

"I haven't seen anyone."

"They're away at the moment, but don't worry, you'll meet them soon enough. But now, it's time for you people to rest for a while."

He rose to his feet, and David noticed that everyone looked as exhausted as he felt. He needed to lie down. A good night's sleep would make them all feel better in the morning.

David asked for the room next to Cyrus'. He fell asleep the moment his head hit the pillow and had a lucid dream. Buddha walked among the people, giving them the amount of success they merited. Deserving people became highly successful, but unworthy ones lost any success they had.

Buddha approached him now, a sweet smile on his lips, greeting him like an old friend. "David. What are you willing to do for success?" he asked, as if continuing a forgotten conversation.

David shook his head. "Nothing. There's no greater failure than success through wrong means."

Buddha's smile widened. "In that case, I'll give you all success."

David woke up with a start. He tried to go back to sleep, but his head throbbed and his stomach was queasy. He let his legs dangle from the bed for a while, then rose to his feet and paced the room. His discomfort only grew stronger. In the end, he decided to visit Cyrus. Perhaps talking to his friend would relax him.

He slowly opened Cyrus' door, not wanting to disturb him. "Are you..." he started to say, then froze at the strangest sight. A creature lay down prone, hovering above the cold, stone floor, as if hanging from invisible threads. Its face was human-like, but its wavy, long grey hair flowed on its back and dropped towards the floor, almost touching it. It had a hard, light brown skin that seemed to be made of hair and feathers stuck together. The oval body had human shoulders, but ended in an appendix resembling a vertical tail fin. David stared into its eyes and was surprised that they were animal-like, with no sign of intelligence or self-awareness.

"What's this?" he asked the Voice, but there was no reply. Of course. She had all but disappeared since they entered the Forest. A terrible feeling of loneliness filled his heart as he realised he had to deal with the creature on his own.

It glided towards Cyrus' bed and David stepped in front of it waving wildly, trying to stop it. A girl's voice behind him startled him.

"Are you here to take the soul? What a good boy!"

He spun around. A thin arm emerged under the bed. The creature stood still for a second, then yelped and quivered, like a puppy happy to see its owner. A blond, slim girl crawled out from under the bed. Her pale, pretty face bore an eerie calm. She looked no older than ten years old. She caressed the creature with a tender hand. It nudged its head against her, and David half-expected it to purr like a kitten. Then her eyes met David's, and he gaped at the deepest eyes he had ever seen, the colour of a dead sea.

"Hurry up," she whispered. "If you want to save your friend, you must break the scissors."

He frowned. "What scissors?" he asked, then noticed a large pair of golden scissors in the creature's folded hands. He jumped under the creature while the girl stalled it for his benefit, and swiftly pried the scissors away. The creature glided towards him, as if noticing him for the first time. Surprisingly, its movement was neither fast nor

threatening. David stepped back and tried in vain to break the hard metal. He threw the scissors onto the floor and jumped on them in a desperate attempt to break them.

“Hurry up!” the girl whispered again, this time her voice urgent. The creature edged closer. David reached for his sword, remembering he had left it in his room. *No time to fetch it now!* He picked up the scissors again and threw them at the creature, trying to scare it away. The scissors seemed to freeze in mid-air, and the creature reached up and grabbed them. It then turned around in a slow circle and glided back towards Cyrus’ bed. Once there, it plunged the scissors into his chest in one swift move.

David watched Cyrus’ mouth gape in a deep sigh and a thin blue mist slithered out. He lunged at the creature, pushing it away. It let a soft whimper before gliding back again. David grabbed the scissors and yanked them out. Cyrus took a deep breath and the mist dissolved. As the creature approached, still expressionless, David searched in panic for something that could break the scissors, finding nothing. He rubbed his bracelet nervously. It pulsed softly under his fingers and he glanced at his wrist in awe. The decorative lines now shone with a throbbing light blue glow that accentuated its elegant simplicity. The gem at its centre sparkled with life.

The creature had almost reached him by now, and he held up his hand without thinking. The metal twisted and turned and the bracelet morphed into a glove that circled his palm. The blue gem climbed to the top of his hand, held there by a two-throged claw that encircled it. As the creature reached for the scissors, David pointed his hand at its head.

The gem shone briefly, and a blue line travelled along the grooves, ending at the claw. It hovered there for an endless moment, undecided, then turned into a crackling ball of light that hit the creature with a loud crack that sent it crashing against the wall. It cried in pain, an inhuman shriek of agony that made him cover his ears. Tiny jolts of energy travelled along its body, as it gathered its strength. David threw the scissors on the ground and pointed the glove at them. A second pulse struck them. The creature let an unearthly scream as they broke into a million pieces. David thought he heard a second wail far away, and both creature and little girl disappeared. He lowered his gaze at his hand, but it was empty again. The warm silver bracelet with a pretty, if dull, blue gem at its centre rested on his wrist.

He stood still for a while wondering if this had been a dream, watching Cyrus sleep. David poked him to make sure he was still alive, then sat on the bed, exhausted yet relieved. Both his headache and unease had finally disappeared. After a while he returned to his room and fell into an uneventful sleep.

The soft orange morning light streaming into the room from the window woke him up. At first he could not remember where he was, then last night's events rushed back to him. He hurried to Cyrus' room. Cyrus was not there, but voices came from further up. He climbed some stairs and found two guards outside a bedroom. He pushed them aside and walked into the old man's bedroom. Two-horns stood in front of the bed, questioning a third guard.

The old man was lying dead in his bed, mouth opened in a silent gasp. In death there was something unreal about him, as if he were but an old sigil on a wall. He noticed a small ornate silver frame standing on the nightstand. It contained a picture of a young girl with a pretty, expressive face, around ten, with beautiful wavy hair and sadness in her eyes.

"What happened here?" he asked. "Where's Cyrus?"

Two-horns shook his head. "We only know that our host is no more. It seems he died in his sleep. As for your friend, I sent him down to tend the horses. We're leaving here as soon as we've buried the old man."

He examined David. "You alright? You look tired."

David placed the picture back on the nightstand. "I didn't sleep much last night."

"Me neither. I kept dreaming of my boy. I could swear I heard a wraith." The old man shuddered at the memory. "Not much scares me, but this did. I asked in the morning. Everyone heard it, too." He frowned at David. "You wouldn't know anything about it, would you?"

Before David could answer, a sound coming from outside made them both prick their ears, startled. Recognising the sound of the horn, they uttered a single word, unconsciously reaching for the weapons in their belts: "Fallen."

Isil ceremony

David

The old shaman arrived at Malekshei a couple of days later, along with a large group of villagers. He was heading towards the stables with a pack of mules when David spotted him and rushed to greet him. He gave the shaman a warm hug as soon as they met, surprising him.

“Is all well?” he asked alarmed, and David told him of the incident with the boy.

The old man gasped and shook his head. “The poor man... I feared something like this might happen; I must see him at once. But first, we need to perform the *Isil* before the Whispers take more.”

“What do the Whispers have to do with this?”

“They drive man crazy. They corrupt all that’s good. The man who killed the boy? He may love children. Whispers corrupt this love. They turn it into death. They make the man destroy what he loves.”

“So how can we stop them?”

“The *Isil* – the Silence ceremony. The *Isil* keeps Whispers away.”

“But we killed all the Whispers.”

“You killed servants, Fallen and Iota. This place, this *Malekshei* of yours... The *Shei-ka-zuul* have lived here for many ages. You think to kill them all in one day?”

A sad smile crept on the old man’s face and David cursed himself for his naivety.

“So, what’s this *Isil*?” he asked.

The old man nodded towards one of the mules. “Old magic,” was all he said, then left in his characteristic slow movement to unpack. David rushed to help and buckled under the weight of the large pack carried by the mule.

“Careful now,” said the shaman.

David placed it on the ground and opened it to reveal its contents. A small, gold chest with beautiful carvings stood out amidst dried herbs and various vials and flasks. The shaman motioned him to open it, and David did so with eager fingers, finding inside three shiny, silvery cylinders resembling *Sheimleks*. Thin blue veins shone through them, throbbing softly with an almost imperceptible luminance.

“*Argikar*,” said the shaman.

David took a cylinder in his hands and the fine hair on his neck stood up. Its weight surprised him. “Is that what you call them? Where did you find these?”

“The Old Woman. *Argikar* are a tribe’s most precious possession. If a tribe loses one...”

David chuckled. “How can anyone lose them? They seem pretty hard to miss!”

The shaman lowered his voice. “The Bears did. Now, they’re no more.”

David remained silent for a moment, the Voice offering him intuitive knowledge of a tribe long gone and a tale of betrayal and loss. He examined the object. “So, how does it work?”

The shaman motioned downwards, towards the hard soil. “We return the children to the mother.”

“You plant them in the ground?”

The man nodded, then pried with gentle fingers the cylinder from David’s hands and placed it back into the box. “Now, we must hurry.”

He climbed the stairs to the top of the gate house overlooking the courtyard and cleared his throat.

“It’s time for the *Isil*,” he shouted to the First helping the newcomers unload their belongings in the quadrangle. “Come.”

At the command, everyone dropped everything and gathered around the portcullis. The old man jumped back down, surprising David once again with his swiftness. He motioned two young First to help carry the chest with the *Argikar*. They placed it outside the thick wall, the swelling crowd following them. Once outside, the shaman threw his arms into the air. Everyone bowed their heads in reverence. A pretty,

young girl with blue eyes dressed in a long white dress with a garland of silver vines around her black hair rushed to his side with a spade and awaited his instructions. He bellowed a few sharp words in the old language, then continued.

“The *Isil* has started, gather around me. The *Shei-ka-zuul* drove us from our homes. They killed our brothers and sisters; mothers and fathers; sons and daughters. Today we renew our vow to fight the old war. To take our revenge on the slayers of our people. To remember.”

“To remember,” murmured the crowd. Every single member of the tribe had gathered around them by then, overflowing the gate and spreading onto the walls.

“Let our tribes’ *Argikar* chase away the whispering shadows. Let our people cleanse and purify this ground. Like music drowns whisper, like light dispels darkness, like faith overcomes fear, let us now wipe out the old enemy from this ground. We have a duty to endure. Let us today fulfil that duty by consecrating this ground in unison.”

He motioned to the girl and she dug three small holes.

“He’s more eloquent than I expected,” marvelled David inside his head.

“Not his words,” replied the Voice. “Hush now, here comes the best part.”

Once the girl finished digging up the hole, the shaman placed three *Argikar* inside in the shape of a triangle, apex pointing at the gate. The girl covered the hole again with the moist soil and everyone stepped back as the shaman raised his hands and turned towards the onlookers. The little girl sang an incantation in the ancient language, while the shaman rocked gently and hummed the words. With the Voice’s assistance, David understood the words.

“If I command the moon, it will come down; and if I wish to withhold the day, night will linger over my head; and if I wish to embark on the sea, I will walk upon the waves; and if I wish to fly, I’ll be free from my weight. Let my worship be within the heart that rejoices, for all acts of love and pleasure are my rituals. Let there be beauty and strength, power and compassion, honour and humility, mirth and reverence within you.”

“So shall it be,” murmured the crowd.

“Let the Whispers leave this place. Let the light guide our path and the Lady show us the way,” the shaman cried.

“So shall it be,” repeated the onlookers, louder now, and David took an uncertain step back as the soil over the triangle shook and pulsed with a pale blue light. A sudden column of bright light shot into the darkening sky, almost touching the twin moons above it. It hovered there for a moment, as if undecided what to do next, then bent towards the tower in a slow movement, reaching its far side. The light split in two to form a dome over the entire compound and a loud screech sounded from within, followed by numerous others. The shaman had his eyes closed, lost in his trance. David threw nervous glances around him as the wails died from deep within the walls. Everyone stared at the ground and a few children wailed in terror, their mothers gently shushing them.

After a few minutes, the shaman opened his eyes, raised his head and burst into loud singing, followed by the entire tribe. David did not need the Voice to translate; this was a happy song, a song of remembrance and joy and victory.