

Hector Reborn

Volume I: Death & Life

By
Ian Thompson

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Dedications:

For Aidan, who is already a mighty hero and may read this when he's older.

*For the other closest members of my beloved family:
my Mother; Christopher and Rosie; and Louise and Simon.*

And for my Dad, absent but always with me.

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Prologue

The Bronze Age – Circa 1250 BC

What is happening?

The question burns through my consciousness like a rampaging fire – but even while the question impacts and my thoughts erupt into utter panic and terror, more questions roar...

Who am I? Where have I come from?

These questions are slowly answered as I relive a lifetime at unbelievable speed...

Early memories fly past... My first glimpse of the world when my eyes open after birth. The faces of my mother and father – faces that age through my childhood and manhood. I am still confused, for I do not know my parents' names... I see recognisable places and events, yet I cannot name these either. Great, austere buildings. Illustrious encampments. Villages, towns and cities, the most spectacular being a mammoth walled metropolis... I experience being taught to ride; to hunt and fight with the finest bronze weapons; to read, sketch and make calculations... I feel the rise and fall of ship's decks and the biting saline freshness of sea breezes. My body suffers the wrath of howling rainstorms and crashing waves... A conflict occurs – some attempt on my life – in which I and my bodyguards fight until the would-be assassins are slain and hot blood drips from my sword. This, I realise, was my first sight of death, my first killing... Next, there is the beauty of a girl, who grows from a childhood friend to a woman to my wife... Crowds bellow my name as I demonstrate my strength and weapon-prowess in feats of skill and combat...

But what is the name they are calling? Who are these people..?

I have sisters and brothers. My youngest brother is foolish. He takes risks and makes mistakes. He threatens his own life and the safety of everyone in the Kingdom...

Kingdom?

Like an arrowhead being drawn from a deep wound, the facts gradually come to the surface. My father is a King, master of one of the greatest empires of the known world. But he has enemies – who seek to war against him, conquer his lands and take his wealth. All they need is an excuse to unite them...

And I recall now, that the excuse was given to these vermin by my foolhardy youngest brother. He fell in love with one of their women and stole her from her husband. Worse still, he brought the woman to the walled city of our father...

To Troy.

Almost ten years ago.

Within months of my brother Paris bringing Helen to Troy, the Greeks arrived in a vast armada of warships. Their leader Agamemnon began to assault the city with tens of thousands of warriors. More armies spread out into our country – annihilating every township and village they encountered. Siege weapons were brought in pieces to be reassembled to target Troy's great walls. Greek fire – hideous, burning liquid death – was also carried over the sea to our shores to be unleashed... But the worst weapon of all those which Agamemnon brought was a *monster*...

Achilles. A warrior the Greeks revered as much as their fabled Herakles. The most deadly, most brutal, most sadistic creature ever to tread the earth in the form of a man. Some say he was born of the Greek Gods themselves and that his skin was invulnerable to attack – I know this to be a lie, for I made the bastard *bleed*...

My memories swirl and slow, until I am somehow reliving them at normal speed. I can feel each breath I took as if I were taking it again. The sweat on my skin, the ache of my muscles, the weight of my armour and of the sword in my hand, all this feels too real to be a memory. The stench of burning wood and flesh, of blood and gore, are stinging my nostrils. The clamour of battle – weapons clashing, armour cratering or splitting, flesh being cleaved, bones breaking, and the awful chaos of screams from the dying and wounded – is deafening my ears *now*.

I am back in Troy, except I have no control over my actions because this truly is a memory. I relive the horror and can do nothing to change it.

And oddly, I remember it all now, though the re-living goes on regardless.

I know who I am. I am Hector, eldest son of King Priam of Troy. I am the Champion of my father, the leader of his armies and, without boasting, I know myself to be his greatest warrior.

And I am about to die.

For nine years the Greeks have ravaged the lands of the Trojans, consuming my father's empire voraciously. Yet their efforts to sack Troy and obliterate King Priam's dynasty have met with utter failure thus far.

The one vulnerable part of our city had been the harbour region, situated outside Troy's great walls. When the Greek vessels arrived and tried to close-in for a landing, we assaulted them from the docks using catapults. Stripping off their armour, hundreds of enemy swordsmen swam from their craft and attempted to overrun the docks – after an hour, their arrow-riddled bodies formed a huge, grim blanket across the azure water. A war of attrition by catapult and bow raged between the ships and harbour for weeks. Finally, upon learning that Greek warriors had landed in an inlet several miles away and were seeking to outflank the harbour, we fled the shore in apparent disarray... Like flies drawn to a rotten corpse, Greek soldiers swarmed onto the docks and into the surrounding streets. Some of them may have seen or smelled the spilled oil, and attempted to warn their leaders – nevertheless, most of them perished when we turned the harbour into an inferno.

Having 'conquered' the outer city, the Greeks sought to assault the walls of Troy. They had destroyed walled cities before and thought their war-machines would reduce the metropolis to rubble and ash. Hurling rocks shattered harmlessly against the city-walls. Blazing masses which flew over the parapets were doused quickly once they landed. Their archers sent waves of bronze-headed death at our warriors, who sheltered behind walls and shields, taking minimum casualties. The Greeks soon realised that the only way to defeat us was by sheer overwhelming numbers: to scale Troy's walls by ladders or siege-towers and beat down the defenders, man by man.

Month after month, year after year, immense attacks crashed against the walls of Troy like great waves against a cliff. Hundreds of men died each time just trying to approach the inner city – cut down by arrows, catapult-fire, boiling oil and showers of rubble hurled from parapets. Those who managed to reach the crests of the walls faced merciless slaughter at the hands of our swordsmen, and the tops of the walls, right around the city, became stained crimson. At night, Greek wounded were treated in the camps around the harbour and their warriors prayed for victory the next day. Under the same cover of darkness, we used hooks on rope to haul their armoured dead into our city; metal was stripped from their carcasses to be melted and used; their clothing was gathered, in order to be set alight and dropped on attackers the next day; the naked bodies were cast back outside – and, over years, these formed ghastly, putrid mounds that the Greeks had to clamber across.

The gates of Troy were breached briefly on a number of occasions. Always the invading force would meet a far greater number of defenders and be slaughtered or driven back.

It was insane for the Greeks to keep fighting. Their losses rose ever higher, our losses were negligible by comparison. Agamemnon was forced to maintain an iron grip on his armies as their morale plummeted; it was common to glimpse the executions of deserters or dissenters. His savage personal determination was one of the two factors which maintained the war...

The other was the Greek monster. The hell-spawned thing named Achilles, who fought at the head of every major assault, and whose stature and dark nature chilled every Trojan's heart.

He stood almost eight feet tall – dwarfing all his own comrades – and the hardened, muscular mass of his form was almost twice the width of any normal man. He wore heavy armour across his torso, arms and legs, emblazoned with the crest of a bull's head. His huge helmet was also formed in the design of a bull, the points of its great horns reaching over nine feet above the ground. Before a battle, two Trojan captives would be brought out and have their throats slit – so that Greek servants could paint Achilles' armour in fresh Trojan blood. Then this crimsoned giant, stinking like an abattoir, would bellow at his comrades until he stirred them into a frenzy and would lead them into battle like possessed beasts.

My first encounter with Achilles came at the breach of a city gate. I saw him, head, shoulders and chest above all who surrounded him, wielding a broadsword in one hand and a war-axe in the other. Two arrows had penetrated through gaps in his armour to pierce his flesh – the pain of these wounds went ignored. His weapons flew around him in huge sweeps. Men were sheared apart akin to wheat under scythes. Immense gory splashes were cast through the air every time his blades reached the end of a swing and changed direction. He laughed whilst he fought – his voice a booming, maniacal sound – and his eyes, visible through a horizontal slit in his helmet, blazed wide, tears of joy spilling from them.

Such incredible strength and deadly destruction was a potent drug to the Greeks near Achilles. They believed him to be indestructible and hoped their closeness to him might make them invincible too.

On that day, the pressure of our defending force drove the Greeks back out of the gateway and we sealed the monster and his comrades outside.

A year later, on a parapet, I met Achilles as he swarmed up to the top of a ladder.

A crashing blow from his axe sliced the head and right arm from a Trojan soldier to my right. I met the swing of Achilles' sword with my own blade, held double-handed, and the muscles of my shoulders almost tore under the impact. Somehow I recoiled from the assault and was able to act even as the giant drew his weapons back to lash out again. Lunging forwards, I thrust out my sword and rammed its tip beneath the bottom of Achilles' helmet. My bronze blade sank a finger's length into his throat and he let out a garbled scream... before plummeting backwards off the ladder towards the Greek warriors below.

For two weeks, we believed Achilles had been killed by my sword-blow. But we weren't so fortunate. He returned, somehow nursed back to health, blood-armoured, bellowing his warriors into a fury and leading another doomed assault...

* * *

The last day of my life.

My father and his advisers had been observing the Greeks throughout the war. After over nine years, they were exhausted in spite of new reinforcements, demoralised despite Agamemnon's iron rule, stricken with sickness – spies reported that dozens died of dysentery each week – and ready to be crushed. It was time to take the war to *them*.

We had waited until the next major assault upon the walls. This began at dawn and ran on into late afternoon. Finally, the Greek officers signalled a retreat and the weary survivors began to head back towards their encampment. Even the giant form of Achilles somehow looked a little smaller – the set of his shoulders those of a man who has met defeat... Our reserve armies had been waiting behind every gateway for this moment. Now the gates of Troy were thrown open and we launched ourselves upon the Greeks as if they were cattle and we, ravenous predators.

The fleeing Greeks had been fighting for ten hours – we had sat resting, drinking and eating. Their strength was gone – ours was at its peak. Moreover, we were fuelled by almost a decade of growing hatred.

Dozens of Greeks died before they truly understood what was happening. Of the remainder, half turned to fight, the rest fled... And our spirits soared when we glimpsed one of the runaways to be Achilles himself.

I hacked into the Greeks at the head of a legion of my personal elite warriors. My first slash batted aside the sword of an enemy – he simply didn't have the strength left to resist – and my second ripped his throat. A Greek's sword clanged against the shield fastened over my left elbow, creasing it but causing no injury. I twisted about and thrust my long-blade under the pommel of this opponent's rising blade. His breastplate was pierced by my weapon and his skewered heart stopped beating forever.

The brisk efficiency with which we slew the Greek defenders shocked even us. So little time seemed to pass before they were all underfoot and we were speeding for the invaders' camp. Alarm horns were sounding ahead. From the long tents surged the rest of the Greek warriors – most were unarmoured, literally roused from their beds...

Behind our legions of swordsmen, thousands of Trojan archers lit arrows on braziers carried from the city, and fired their ammunition towards the enemy camp. Greek soldiers panicked at the sight of the descending clouds of arrows. Calls of fear were quickly followed by screams of pain when deadly burning shafts found homes in living flesh. Hundreds of enemy soldiers fell, to squirm and thrash or convulse and die. Tents around the Greeks ignited and began to collapse, dropping fiery fragments on anyone still inside. I saw one man run out of a tent, ablaze from head to toe...

Even as the second volley of arrows hit the Greeks, our swordsmen were reaching the outskirts of the nearest encampment. The warriors there were in such confusion, we didn't have to slow our charging speed – we ran through them, and brought them down by brutal slashes of our weapons.

Once inside the Greek camp, the priority was simple. Not to kill every enemy, rather to destroy their supply tents first. Without food, medicine and other essentials, the enemy would become further weakened and vulnerable to a second assault, if this one failed to finish them entirely. Our spies had detailed exactly where the Greeks' supplies were kept, and our forces split into units to eradicate each one in turn.

We had full advantage of the Greeks for over half an hour. Sheer disbelief at the audacity of our

strike seemed to shake them to their very souls...

Until Achilles returned, having gathered a force to repel our attack – and the conflict changed from slaughter to a true battle.

Achilles emerged through a drifting pall of black smoke, his roaring cries urging his warriors forward. He met a Trojan captain and slew him with a single left-to-right sweep of his broadsword – the man was split in half at the waist... A group of archers targeted the crimsoned devil and a dozen arrows struck him. Ten shattered on Achilles' heavy armour; one pierced his right shoulder, another sank in above his right hip. He ran at the archers, cutting aside swordsmen in his rampaging path, and started to hew the bowmen to pieces using axe and broadsword...

I screamed at him, certain that my destruction of this one adversary could herald the end of the siege.

“Achilles! Achilles – you bastard offspring of a Greek whore! Come meet the man who will send you to Hades!”

Across the distance of a hundred yards, his eyes met mine, and I instantly knew his thoughts. *To slay the Champion of Troy, son of the King, would demoralise the attackers completely.*

We ran at each other, oblivious to the combats raging around us, focussed solely upon our anticipated prey. Our cries were screams, deep and guttural, and although wordless they resonated with our deadly intentions.

I saw him raise his weapons when we came within thirty feet of each other. At the same time, I discarded my shield to clutch my sword double-handed. I recalled the crashing impact of his sword against mine so long ago, and knew I would need all my might to repel one of his blows. Better still, I decided, I must seek to avoid his swings completely. My only advantage was that his huge, immensely strong bulk could not move as quickly as my slender, more athletic form...

Then we were face-to-face and his razor-edged weapons were raging down through the air to tear me apart—

I kept running and dodged sideways under his high right elbow. In an instant, I was behind him—
“Trojan—”

My broadsword was arced sideways to crash across Achilles' lower back. His call became a grunting snarl of pain...

The impact sent him staggering forward. His armour split and I felt my blade thud into muscular flesh.

He turned, his voice now an enraged growl. I ripped my sword free – its edge ran with fresh blood.

The axe swept for my head and I ducked. Off to my left, Achilles' weapon struck the side of another man's helmet and sheared the top off his head. From my crouching position, I swung my sword for his right knee. His own sword came down and swatted at my blade, knocking my attack totally off-course and spinning me half around. The strength of that action stunned me – I was like a child duelling a mountain lion.

Instinct prevented me from dying in the next second. I had my back to him and so I lunged forwards, further away, whilst turning around at the same time. My next sight of the Greek monster was of the edge of his swung axe hurtling past my face, close enough to chill my sweat-sodden skin. He followed the axe-swing with a downward hack of his sword. I raised my long-blade as if to parry the slash, then shifted the angle of my weapon at the last moment...

The tip of my sword was aligned to Achilles' arcing wrist. His own awesome strength went against him – he impaled his own forearm on my blade. My sword-tip burst from the upper side of his wrist and suddenly a foot-length of bloody bronze seemed to have grown from his limb. Achilles' broadsword flew out of his pain-shocked fingers and spun over my shoulder...

He screamed in agony – a sound that was music to my ears, fuel to my molten hatred.

I heaved back on my weapon to tear it free—

But he clenched his empty sword-hand with all his strength and trapped my blade in a vice of muscle.

I wasted a second drawing back on the blade again. It was the last mistake of my life.

His axe struck me in the chest before I could attempt to do anything else. Initially, it felt like a severe punch – staggering me, making air explode from my lungs, blurring my vision. Pain pursued this confusion, seething out from where the axe-head was now implanted through my ribcage into my lungs, heart and spine. Every nerve in my body shook from the overwhelming agony; muscles spasmed uncontrollably; my brain, drowned by pain, could only respond by having my mouth emit an awful cry. Blood erupted up my throat and my scream evolved into a ghastly, drowning gurgle. My

consciousness collapsed into blackness.

I did not surrender to death's embrace – I was flung into its arms by my monstrous nemesis.

1: Awakening

For his entire adult life, Hector of Troy had snapped awake after sleeping. Through a developed instinct for survival, he would become instantly ready to act, his senses sharp, his body freed of fatigue, his mind not clouded by the remnants of dreams. Once this ability had saved his life – when he awoke to find a dagger at his throat, snatched the assassin’s wrist, snapped the arm and plunged the blade into the man’s chest...

This time, Hector’s mind had to drag itself from slumber. His body, his brain, his senses – all these were utterly lethargic...

Why? The question echoed dully in his thoughts.

Because you are dead. You are not waking from sleep, but entering the Afterlife...

With his eyes closed, he wondered what to expect. Greek beliefs, adopted by many Trojans, suggested a journey across the River Styx, followed by the judgement of his soul and then either torment in Tartarus or the pleasures of Elysium. Prince Hector had always doubted the Grecian tales, and had never given much time to considering what really might follow his death.

He could feel a gentle pressure against his back, and realised he was lying down. But the dead man was not on a boat travelling across the Styx, for he felt no sense of motion.

Hector’s eyes flickered open briefly and glimpsed soft white light.

The Trojan shifted his position and was pleased to discover that his injuries were gone. There was no pain whatsoever.

Wherever he was, in whatever Afterlife this was, at least it wasn’t Tartarus. Yet.

More information ebbed into his brain. The surface underneath him was soft, like fur bedding. He was naked, though what might be a silken sheet had been draped over him.

If he was about to be judged, Hector thought, *what would be outcome be? He had lived a life of unfailing loyalty to his father, wife and the people of Troy. He had never slain unnecessarily, stolen from an ally or unfairly punished a subordinate. Yet there was the endless siege of Troy to consider. Now his woozy mind swirled with thoughts and counter-thoughts, confusing him further... Could Hector have acted faster and saved his people from war? What if he had taken Helen and forced her to return to her husband Menelaus? It would have been an act of disobedience against his father the King, but would it have saved countless Trojan lives? Or would returning Helen have in itself been a dark act? How could he have done so, after hearing her tales of being beaten and abused by Menelaus, and of being given as a plaything to his brother Agamemnon? Besides which, Helen was just an excuse – the Greek factions had been trying to unite against Troy for many years... No, there was nothing he could have done to prevent the war, and little to even delay it...*

But what would the Gods judge?

“Fears be damned,” he rasped, then sat up and forced his eyes to open fully.

The room was unlike anything he had ever seen before. In its materials, its construction and in its simplistic splendour. Almost everything appeared to be made from some kind of crystal: the walls, floor, ceiling, and most objects in the chamber. And nothing looked ‘built’ – there were no signs of craftsmanship. The room appeared to have grown.

Cool grey in colour, opaque and only slightly lustrous, the crystalline surfaces of the room were gently uneven – akin to the walls of an underground cavern. However, the room could be no mere cave. It was twenty feet wide and twenty long – a square – and ten feet in height, possessing distinct corners that natural erosion could never have caused. There was no window to let in sunlight, no candle or brazier to provide illumination. The crystal surfaces of the room emitted a subtle light which Hector could not fathom.

His bed resembled a plinth, but around its base were vein-like ridges, suggesting the mass had grown up out of the floor. There was no fur bedding beneath him – instead, the crystal surface was strangely soft and pliable. The ‘sheet’ covering Hector’s dignity was not silk, rather it too was of crystalline form. It was an uncanny clinging fluid spread over him, that he could rip with a slight motion of his body, and could knit together magically when the torn edges met again. Why the fluid did not feel wet and how it worked, Hector did not even attempt to comprehend. For this was the Afterlife – surely a realm of the unexpected.

He rolled sideways, tore a long gash in the liquid fabric and placed his feet on the soft floor. The sheet flowed underneath him and reformed to cover the bed perfectly.

A smile crossed Hector’s lips, despite his unease. This world fascinated him. Every aspect of it was wondrous.

Directly opposite him, some ten feet distant, there was an inset section of wall. The tall rectangle was about the size and shape of a door, and there was a faint imprint in its centre: the mark of a

hand. To Hector's left, beyond the head of the bed, the wall there was similarly inset with what might have been window-markings. The Trojan looked to his right and studied the other two pieces of furniture in the sparse apartment. On top of a narrow column that had grown from the floor was a wash-bowl; a bent pipe protruded up from the back of it and pointed down into the basin. Hector could see the bowl was empty – he would have to wait for someone to bring water. On the wall behind the basin was a mirror, an area of crystal surface which was completely flat and perfectly reflective. The irregular shape of the mirror suggested a hand had quickly rubbed at the wall and brought it into existence. Beside the wash-bowl was a long, grown seat. Someone had placed a set of clothing across the seat.

Hector stood and, after one curious glance back at the bed, paced over to retrieve the clothes. He found the material to be of woven fabric. It was of high quality and beige in colour, a subtle contrast to the greys of the chamber. The Trojan donned the shirt first, then the loose breeches and finally a pair of leather-like boots.

Standing again, Hector approached the mirror. The upper half of his tall, lean form appeared in front of him – the image far sharper than on any mirror he had previously encountered. The short sleeves and deep cut front of his shirt exposed the Trojan's tanned skin and tight, powerful muscles. His was the form of an athlete, not a brawler. Above a long, regal neck, his face was square-jawed and handsome in a brutal way. His lips formed a narrow slit; his nose, though reset carefully, showed evidence of having been broken; his eyes were darkest grey, almost black – they revealed a sharp intellect and a hint of the violence he was capable of. Hector's blonde hair was cut short in the Trojan military fashion and he was clean-shaven; no jewellery adorned his neck or ears.

In his reflection, Hector noticed the bareness of his wrist. The one item of jewellery he always wore was missing. His wedding band.

Why would the Gods take the bracelet?

Hector shrugged and approached the inset 'doorway'. His mind and senses had cleared now, and his curiosity was raging. He placed his hand against the left-hand edge of the doorway and pushed...

Nothing happened.

He tried the right-hand edge – with the same result.

Hector stepped back, perplexed.

If this was the Afterlife, why was he locked in this chamber? Was this a cell?

"A test of patience?" he muttered to himself.

Again, he smiled. Possibly the Gods would assess his character by watching how he reacted to the sealed barrier. It might be the first of many tests.

He was wrong – the door opened a heartbeat later.

Beyond the door stood a woman of such beauty, Hector felt certain she had to be a Goddess.

* * *

The hand-shaped impression in the door suddenly became a hole, which expanded incredibly fast. Somehow the material of the door flowed away from the hand-shaped opening, to vanish at the edges of the entrance. In a matter of seconds, the barrier was gone.

Outside the bed-chamber was a woman approximately twenty years of age. She regarded Hector with sapphire-blue eyes and offered him a smile so warm and welcoming, it was practically intoxicating. Her face was slender and finely shaped, the cheekbones high, her chin a gentle curve; her eyebrows and lips could have been formed by the soft caresses of an artist's brush, and were capable of marvellous expression at just the slightest movement. Velvet-black, lustrous hair had been meticulously combed away from her face, to flow over her shoulders and upper arms and down her back. A gown of shimmering green material accented the woman's beautiful form – though it covered her from neck to wrists and ankles, it tightened around her shapely body in an alluring fashion. Pale green sandals completed the woman's apparel.

Hector saw that this Goddess – for he grew ever more certain she must be that – had chosen not to wear decorations of gold, silver or sparkling gems. It was simply unnecessary, because she was naturally adorned, and this aspect of her appearance was the most mysterious and attractive. Her face sparkled with the lustre of perfect green crystals – emeralds? – which had grown out of her skin. There was a cluster of five small gems across her right cheekbone; two more on her chin; an 'emerald' larger than Hector had ever seen protruded from her left cheekbone; a zigzag of tiny gems arced across the beauty's forehead. Unusual though this grown decoration was, it looked perfectly natural... Yet these crystals were not emeralds, for when the woman breathed in, they were flushed

momentarily by a living green fire.

“You are intact,” said the woman. Her voice was soft and musical, the motion of her lips mesmerising. “And you have dressed.”

Hector averted his gaze from the woman and spoke softly. “Yes, my lady. I am ready for whatever judgement you deem fit for me.”

Her eyebrows raised and she smiled again.

“You believe I am a Goddess?”

“What else could you be?” he replied honestly.

“A woman.” She answered him with a tone of equal sincerity. “Just a woman of a race other than your own... A woman who has very good news for you.”

He couldn't think of a reply, so stayed his tongue.

“You're not in some Afterlife, my dear Hector. Through our magics, you are in our world now. You are alive once more. Free of injury. Free of pain. Free of the everlasting war of Troy.”

His first thoughts were not for himself. “But my wife and child? My father and the people of Troy..?”

She stepped forward, her short sensual paces as close to gliding as a person could get. A floral scent accompanied her approach – rich and luxurious to inhale. Her left hand touched his right arm, comforting him with its softness and warmth.

“I am sorry. You died at Troy. In your world, you are gone. We cannot return you... However, we can offer you a life here.”

“But how will Troy—”

“Once you died, you were beyond ever aiding them. Whether you went to your Afterlife or were brought here by us, it made no difference to your people. They will go on without you. Your loss will dishearten some, I am sure, but will instil others with a desire to succeed in your name... I know you cannot forget them, but you must look to yourself now. You have the opportunity for a new and wonderful life alongside us – after which, you will join your loved ones in the Afterlife and be able to tell them of your adventures here. Living on will not betray those you have love and loyalty for. If they knew you could find happiness here, they would surely rejoice in the fact.”

Hector bowed his head. He found it hard to believe that such wisdom and compassion could come from anyone other than a Goddess.

She gently touched his face.

“Please, Hector, take our gift of life and have no guilt or regret.”

The warrior looked into her sapphire eyes and found himself nodding in acceptance.

“Good.” Her radiant smile formed again. “I am Elsha. I have volunteered to be your guide and your friend in our land. It will be my greatest pleasure to help you to find new happiness.”

“Thank you.” Hector barely managed the words. The revelation of his rebirth, if it was true, was stunning. He was still awed by his surroundings and his companion. And though he heard and understood Elsha's explanations, it would be incredibly easy to remain convinced that this was the Afterlife: for wasn't it as mysterious and fantastic as one would expect from a realm of the Gods?

Elsha took his hand in hers and led him out of the chamber. Enraptured by her beauty, her perfume and her lovely voice, and swathed by her rich pheromones, Hector was content to follow.

2: Elysium

They stepped into a hallway which was an empty square no bigger than the bedchamber. To the right, a wall bore the markings of another doorway. On the left and ahead, there were impressions that might signify windows. The colour of the crystal was different here – more a bluish green, but its inner light still provided ample illumination.

Elsha turned to face the bedroom entrance again. She raised her free hand to a position near where the hand-mark on the missing door would have been, and a flicker of concentration crossed her exquisite face. From the edges of the doorway, liquid crystal flowed without sound to reform the barrier perfectly.

“Amazing,” Hector admitted. He tried not to sound like a bemused child.

His companion smiled again and replied. “Once a person is properly trained, it becomes as natural and easy as taking breath. In time, you will be able to do the same and much more.”

“Can I ask... how?”

“Of course. I am here to answer all your questions and to show you the wonders of this world... We train our minds to focus upon the crystal and upon what we want it to do. Let me demonstrate.”

She released his hand and moved closer to the wall beside the doorway. Her hands were placed against it.

“I can change its colour...” The patch of wall-crystal surrounding her spread fingers shifted in hue, like water being clouded by paint. It went to pale green, then yellow, then red. “Or change its shape.” When her hands drew back, the surface of the wall-section oozed forward as if stuck to her palms. Elsha twisted her hands about gracefully and the raised lump became a primitive face.

“There,” she said, “that’s more attractive. This hallway is far too drab – but, after all, the tower is new and hasn’t been decorated yet.”

“Was the tower made in a similar way?”

Elsha was pleased by his leap of logic. “Yes. The bigger the task, the more of us are required to focus together. It took a hundred Nemalites to grow this tower for you... We wanted you to have a place of your own where you could rest. We also hoped it might help you adjust easier to your new surroundings.”

Hector asked. “I take it the Nemalites are your people?”

“Yes. And our home – your new home – is Vir.”

He reached out and ran his right hand over the crystal face. Physical contact was the only way to confirm this wasn’t all a dream.

“Vir...” he went on “...is a city?”

Elsha’s brow furrowed. “‘City’? I don’t understand that term.”

“‘City’ – a group of dwelling places for many thousands of people. Smaller groups are called towns or villages... How can you—”

“Ah. I see. I suppose you would call Vir a city, but we do not. Unlike on your world, we do not split our people and live in different groups. We have always lived together in this place and always will. To us, it is simply our home, our Vir.”

“There are no other settlements? What about when your numbers grow..?”

She shrugged. “We grow Vir larger to accommodate.”

He thought again. “You didn’t understand the word ‘city’, but you speak my language clearly...”

The ‘Goddess’ placed a hand on his shoulder. “No, I don’t. I’m not speaking Trojan – and neither are you. One of the gifts you received during your rebirth was the ability to understand the dialects of our world. You are speaking our language now. Since ‘city’ is not one of our words, I could not understand it.”

Hector was stunned, so much that he wanted to deny the fact. Elsha saw his frustration.

“Hold your questions a while longer and give yourself time to come to terms with what you have learnt so far. Instead, let me show you the glory of your new world.”

A few gliding strides took her to the window-markings on Hector’s left. Elsha touched the centre of the window-area and, like the door earlier, the window melted away.

Fresh air breezed across Hector’s face as he stepped forward to come alongside his host. The pungent scent of Elsha’s perfume was suddenly mixed with natural aromas from outside. He breathed deep, for it had been years since he enjoyed such freshness: the smells of lush vegetation and moist cool air, unsoiled by the stench of battle and slaughter. *This may not be an Afterlife*, Hector thought, *but it is a true heaven to me.*

Guilt burned at him and he closed his eyes to see the tragedy of Troy’s war in his mind... *Conflict*

raging across the miles of the city's walls... His wife Andromache and his baby son Astyanax, their expressions sorrowful and lonely... His father and mother... Paris and his other siblings... And the apparition of Achilles The Monster. Who would destroy Achilles now Hector was gone?

Elsha took his hand again. She was extremely perceptive to his pain.

"It's not your fault, Hector. You aren't betraying them."

He opened his eyes and looked at her rather than outside. "Your people brought me here. Could you do the same for others? Could you at least bring my wife and child?"

Sadness filled her reply. "We can no longer... we cannot bring the living to this world. We took your soul in the instant it was freed from its earthly body and gave you a new, identical form here. Since your family live, we could not reach them. And your rebirth was a mammoth feat for us, one we could not repeat for many decades. Our High Priest Sallos will explain much better... In short, the answer is no. I am sorry."

Hector swallowed hard and buried his feelings deep inside him. It was not in the nature of a Trojan Royal or a warrior to display his weaker emotions to others. Somehow, he managed a smile.

"I had to ask."

"I would have expected nothing less."

Glancing away from Elsha, Hector looked outside.

Vir was sited on a mountain slope and the summit of the mountain was visible in the middle of Hector's sight, about a mile away. It was a narrow cone of slate-grey rock, rising to a roughly circular depression at the top. A deep v-shaped line had been cut in the mountainside, running from the top towards Vir, and in this flowed glimmering clear water. Wispy, ethereal coils of mist wrapped the higher areas of the mountain. More mysterious was the rain falling into the depression – for it fell in a continuous downpour into the hollow, without touching the slopes at all. It was a waterfall from the heavens. Looking up, Hector saw there were dark grey clouds above the mountain. Further away, the clouds changed to pale white strands and diminished to allow the cobalt-blue sky to be seen in all its glory.

To the right of the mountain, an expanse of lush, varied vegetation existed. Regions of forest were interspersed with fields of long grass, bushes and larger foliage; red, blue and yellow dots festooning the greenery had to be either fruit or flowers. A large, dark animal was glimpsed speeding from one area of heavy undergrowth to another – as it reached its destination, a flock of birds exploded into view, scrambled into a wedge-shaped formation and flew off to safety. On the left of the mountain was what appeared to be another, enormous forest. This, however, was utterly different from the others. It was a realm of tall, glassy shapes that shimmered through the full spectrum of colours and reflected beautifully like millions of mirror-fragments. *Crystalline trees*. Over the treetops – which Hector estimated to be at least a hundred feet high – came a flock of huge flapping creatures. These birds were crimson in colour and were evidently hunters; their great pairs of wings were each the size of the sail of a large ship. Instead of feet, the creatures possessed long flexible hooks under their bodies, perfect for impaling and capturing prey. One of the airborne giants let out a resounding call and dove into the crystal forest to claim a victim.

"What do you call this world of yours?" Hector said quietly.

"Your race has a desire to give names to everything they see, don't they? Your world, your regions, even areas of your 'cities'. We have never needed a name for this place. It is here, it allows us to thrive and live wonderful lives. Why give it a name?"

"To me," Hector replied, "it will be Elysium. The heaven some of my people believed in."

"If it pleases you, the name is perfect." She paused and pointed to the mountain, preparing to answer some of his imminent questions before he asked them. "The mountain is the source of both the liquid crystal – our 'Nectar'—"

"So you do name certain things?"

"Something as important as Nectar has to have a name. It seethes up from below, through the mountain, in constant supply. On your world, you might call the mountain a volcano. Except our 'lava' is cool to the touch, not molten-hot, and it is a source of creation not destruction. In the rock of the mountain itself, we mine Shards of hard crystal. It is by combining the two elements and using our willpower that we can construct... The Nectar also has other qualities which make it essential to us. You will see and hear of these later."

"That rain?" Hector asked. "This mountain seems to attract the clouds. Is this because of its height?"

"No, it is our doing. Harnessing some of the powers of the Nectar, we have been able to draw the clouds to the mountain, ensuring Vir a constant source of water."

“Magic?”

Elsha replied: “On your world, magic is a thing of soothsayers’ tales. Here, on your Elysium, magic is real.”

“This city is made of crystal, the volcano is its source. I see a crystal forest... What about the crystals in your flesh?”

“It is simply the way we are. We are born with them.” She gave a soft laugh and the crystals across her face flushed crimson for an instant. “Actually, to me, you look quite naked with your unbroken skin.”

Stepping away from the window, Elsha headed toward the new door-marking.

“One last question before we go on,” Hector added. “Why was I brought here?”

Elsha pondered. “You would be best to ask Sallos. All I can say for now is that you were very carefully selected.”

“Selected... for what?” Hector’s curiosity was rising. “What is it I am expected to do?”

“To live a full, happy life. Not to do anything other than what you wish.” Her sapphire eyes offered warm reassurance. “There is no bargain here, Hector. You do not have to do anything in exchange for your new life. To the Nermalites, the greatest happiness is helping another.”

“I apologise,” he said as her hand was raised to melt-away the next door. “I’m not used to such generosity. On my world, nothing is given freely.”

* * *

When the new door vanished, what appeared to be a small chamber lay beyond. Eight feet wide by eight deep – and filled with more of the mystical crystal-liquid, this time transparent and colourless. Somehow, the fluid didn’t gush out into hallway. It remained in its own area, its open surface rippling. The right-hand half of the liquid surged upwards at a gentle speed – something comparable to a walking pace – and the left-hand half poured down at the same velocity. At the top of the ‘chamber’, the rising liquor could be seen to flow into a rounded ceiling, which it curved across before descending on the left. Hector looked at the floor of the new area and discovered there wasn’t one in sight.

“This is how we travel from one level to another,” Elsha explained. “It’s easy and painless. You can still breathe when you enter the Nectar – it isn’t like water, you can never drown.”

The Trojan said nothing. Enemy warriors he could deal with, however ferocious. This magic, though, was totally alien to him and chilled his soul.

“Follow me,” said Elsha, “The journey will take only seconds.”

She stepped into the left-hand side of the moving fluid. Hector marvelled for a split-second that even though she was submerged, her hair and clothing did not appear wet... Then she sank slowly from sight.

Hector hesitated. He raised a hand and touched the vertical surface of the liquid. His fingers sank in and could be withdrawn at will.

“Shit,” he muttered to himself under his breath, “Am I to be as timid as a gelded slave?”

Gritting his teeth, he stepped into the fluid just as Elsha had done. The Nectar washed over him and consumed him whole, but Elsha was right: it wasn’t at all like being in water. There was no pressure on his body. The Nectar barely touched his skin – it didn’t flow into his eyes or nostrils. Hector felt himself start to sink and refused to struggle. Against his natural instinct, he took a breath. The Nectar released air into his mouth and nose, and his lungs swelled. When the Trojan exhaled, a flurry of tiny bubbles streamed into the fluid and were absorbed.

Seconds passed and a doorway appeared in front of him. Through the clear Nectar, he could see Elsha waiting patiently.

Two paces brought Hector back to her side. A rapid patting of his face, hair and clothing found that he was completely dry.

“I’ve never...” He couldn’t help being lost for words. “...Never experienced anything like that.”

“Do you enjoy swimming under water?” she asked.

The abrupt question made him frown. “Yes, of course.”

“The only bad thing about swimming deep in water is having to return to the surface for air...” She gestured to the shaft filled with fluid behind him. “You could swim in Nectar for a day, breathing freely. Imagine it.”

He shook his head in wonder whilst Elsha sealed the shaft entrance.

“Come on,” she prompted afterwards. “There is much more to see.”

* * *

They had emerged into a corridor of blue-grey crystal. Elsha led the way, past numerous offshoots into other tunnels. Hector studied his surroundings constantly. He could tell that all the corridors had been constructed as solid tubes; through the semi-transparent curved walls, he could glimpse the vague outlines of more passages and possible chambers.

“You could call these corridors the arteries of Vir,” Elsha told him. “They lead to all the outer areas of our homeplace. The structure of Vir is for the individual homes to be on the outside... whilst our places of meeting and recreation are at the centre. We are going to The Hub – the very centre of Vir, which lies nestled in the mountainside itself.”

“What about the city’s defences?” Hector asked. It was the most natural question for a Trojan to offer.

“There are none. We have no soldiers, no weapons—”

“So Vir is impregnable from outside attack?”

“I doubt it,” she answered. “Fighting just isn’t part of our way of life. We wouldn’t know how to if we needed to... Nor do we have any laws, officials to enforce them or punishments for offenders.”

“That I cannot believe. You just allow crime to go unpunished?”

“No. We have no criminals. Ours is a way of cooperation and peace.”

He ground his teeth for a moment. “And you brought me here? All I know is war and the administration of justice.”

Elsha looked at him hard. “Sallos says our Gods, the Viron, believe you have the capacity to be much more than you have been. I cannot comprehend that the Viron could be in error.”

In his mind, Hector connected two of the new words he had learned. The city: *Vir*. The Nemalite Gods: the *Viron*. Vir then was their *City of the Gods..?*

His companion broke his train of thought: “When you meet Sallos, things will become clearer. You may even be able to speak to the Viron yourself if you are fortunate.”

Hector gave her a quizzical look: “Pray to them?”

“No,” she replied. “Our Gods come among us when they see fit. They allow us to talk to them directly.”

The magnitude of her answer, combined with Elsha’s matter-of-fact tone, put the Trojan deep in silent thought for many minutes.

* * *

Elsha left Hector to his contemplation as she guided him through passages and two further travel-tubes in order to reach the outskirts of The Hub. They finally stepped from the end of one sloping corridor onto a great expanse of perfectly-flat crystalline floor.

In a whisper, she said: “So, what do you think?”

Hector looked long and hard, absorbing every detail. In design, The Hub was a dome of about a half-mile across and five hundred feet high at the centre. Thousands of corridor-tubes and chamber-shapes could be seen across the dome’s wall, as compact as the tunnels in an ant hill and interspersed with vertical Nectar-shafts. Light cast by this vast collection of crystal shapes was in hundreds of different hues and strengths, making the entire scene surreal, almost ghostly. Some corridors which ended at the perimeter of The Hub let out at floor level, others onto wide walkways that encircled the vast chamber and interconnected with the different levels of structures inside The Hub itself. There were eight storeys of walkways and too many bridges to count; all had protective safety railings.

The nearest buildings inside The Hub were of diverse shapes and sizes, from basic two-level cubes to artistic structures – one in the image of a woman’s head and another mimicking a huge, thick-limbed oak. Further into the mini-metropolis, the buildings became uniform tubular towers. These were predominantly eight stories tall and each in excess of a hundred and twenty feet wide. Adjacent towers, set to the north, east, south and west, were linked at every level by bridgeways. The resulting three-dimensional grid-work of dozens of buildings initially reminded Hector of the ‘skeleton’ of a palace under construction – columns and beams awaiting the addition of floors and walls. He next thought again of an ant-hill, for there was an incredible amount of functionality in the layout. Purposefulness and beauty merged in the carving and colouration of The Hub’s towers. Walls, walkways and bridges – even the undersides – all demonstrated extraordinary skill. Amidst the spectacle, Hector’s eyes were drawn to landscape images created on the sides of several towers. Not

only were these depictions gorgeous, but cycling changes of colour had been used in the giant 'paintings' to create illusions of motion and life: meadow-grass swaying in a breeze, flocks of birds in flight, snow falling...

Scattered between the buildings of The Hub were sources of nourishment and refreshment. Water for drinking was supplied to the area from underground and surfaced in numerous fountain-adorned pools. Much larger pools existed, covered by heavy multicoloured vegetable growths. Food was cultivated in these man-made lakes of Nectar as though it were the highest quality soil. The growing lakes were fed via gullies meandering through The Hub. Tracing the channels back, Hector found the source of the Nectar was an immense fountain at the very centre of The Hub. It flowed slowly, almost in slow-motion, to a height of four hundred feet and then plunged into the pool around it without making a ripple on the shimmering surface.

Beyond the central Nectar fountain, in an opening between the towers, lay the largest Hub structure of all – a three hundred feet tall pyramid of crimson crystal, gleaming like a mammoth cut ruby. From the outskirts of The Hub, Hector could discern no details of the building, but its stature and dominating presence suggested great importance.

Hector had passed a few Nermalites on his way here. They had regarded him with smiles, all obviously curious at his unadorned skin. In The Hub, there were many hundreds of people. The garments of the women varied from long, flowing dresses to attire so short that the wearer was almost naked. Men tended to wear shirts and breeches of the kind Hector had been given. Clothing was in a wide range of colours and the array of designs seemed endless. All Nermalites were adorned with their natural, emerald-green crystal décor – some slightly, just a few 'gems' in their faces, others had their faces so encrusted their appearance was near-monstrous. Hector noticed the Nermalite race was a mixture of all the skin-hues he had encountered in his previous life, from the palest white to the darkest black. Activities here were as varied as the people themselves. Dozens were swimming in the central pool and fountain: diving into the depths of the Nectar, playing on the surface or daring to ride the fountain high into the air. Groups sat talking and laughing; some were entertained by what appeared to be actors, comedians or speakers. People casually trod into the growing pools and plucked pieces of fruit to eat. And it was clear that the sense of wonder Hector felt at this huge expanse was not lost on many of its citizens – for larger numbers were simply walking and looking around, absorbing the spectacle.

Three things were noticeably absent from the population on view here, however. Firstly, there were no overweight people – despite the luxury which he believed the Nermalites lived in. Everyone seemed fit and healthy, lean in physique. *Did no one over-indulge?* Secondly, there were no obviously elderly people. Not a sign of grey or white hair; no one moved slowly because of the age of their limbs. Thirdly, no children could be seen.

"What do you think?" the Trojan's companion repeated.

Elsha clearly took Hector's lack of answer to her question as a reply itself, for she looped her slender right arm around his left and led him to the edge of the closest growing pool. She separated from him, jumped into the waist-deep Nectar and searched among the chaos of green and amber leaves until she found some fruit. A red ball the size of her small fist was tossed to Hector and he caught it.

Incredibly, he recognised the fruit.

"It's a tomato," he said, while she climbed nimbly back to his side.

"Yes."

"From my world?"

She nodded, eyeing the tomato in her own hands. "Over the centuries, we have been able to take things from your world and bring them to ours, to enrich us. We have tomatoes, apples, many of your other vegetables... A number of animals..." Elsha took a tiny bite out of her fruit and grinned: "And now we have you."

"Why—"

Elsha cut him off as expertly as a diplomat. "I've answered a lot of your questions, but you haven't answered my last one: what do you think of The Hub?"

He resigned himself to the new subject, knowing time would ultimately resolve his curiosities. "There aren't words to truly describe what I think. Fabulous is a vast understatement. I do have questions about it..."

Her grin enlarged. "I'm not surprised."

"Where are the older people? The children? Why does everyone appear so healthy?"

"Where are the gluttons?" she added with a laugh. "Those are easy questions. Everyone looks so

healthy because they are. We respect these bodies which the Viron have given us, so do not mistreat them. We do not overeat and we exercise well – not as a regime, but purely for the joy of doing so... Old people? Look around you. They are here – some are two hundred of your years old. Fortunately, we Nemalites age very slowly... And our children? We have special areas for them where they learn and play, safe and attended to.”

Hector frowned: “Are children forbidden to come here? I see couples, but they have not brought their children... It seems odd.”

“If you knew of the wonders of the schools and playgrounds we have for our children, Hector, you would not be surprised. The children are not here because they do not desire to be. We have created for them such lovely environments that they spend all the time they possibly can there – enraptured with joy. Parents play with them there, reliving their own childhood pleasures. Here, adults enjoy companionship, entertainments and sports. And all the vital functions exist at The Hub too. There are healers, scribes, advisors and – in the pyramid – the ministers of our Gods.”

The Trojan could still not understand the lack of children. It was normal for a father to want to show his son or daughter the world – he had even taken Astyanax up onto Troy’s walls once so he could glimpse outside the city. Here, clearly, parenting was done differently. The oddity didn’t truly concern him. His only real concern about this place right now was personal, a hidden embarrassment: Elsha was absorbingly attractive and although his love for his wife was undying, the nearness of this Nemalite woman made his heartbeat rage. Her touch had an effect stronger still than her pheromones and perfume, one which Hector fought against resolutely.

Deep in thought, he missed most of what she said next: “—our playground.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Just as the children have their playground, this is ours. Most people come here every day.”

“What about the workers?” he asked. “Who runs everything so these people can enjoy such luxuries?”

“We all do,” Elsha replied plainly. “Take your tower, for example. I needed help to construct it for you. I came here and asked, and people followed me. Similarly, if a person asks for help to go gathering food outside, people will go with him to ensure there is plenty collected and that he is safe.”

Hector chewed at his lip. “You’re saying no one gives orders? No one runs Vir? It’s all done by the cooperation of groups of friends?”

“Not necessarily friends. Most of the people who helped with your tower were unknown to me. They just helped because it is our way. To aid another to achieve something is a wonderful thing.”

“What about your religious order? Don’t they give instruction?”

“No. Some of us – like Sallos – have decided to serve the Viron because they wish to. Whenever one of us wants to join them in prayer, we do. Just as the rest of us help each other physically, Sallos and his brethren help people spiritually.”

The Trojan bit half of his tomato and ate it while he considered. After he swallowed, he went on: “I can’t see how it works. Are you saying there is no ambition here? No one desires to be better than another?”

The response was another of Elsha’s soul-warming smiles. “Since we have everything we want, why should we want more? If you are talking about... ‘greed’ ... it doesn’t exist in Vir.”

He shook his head. “Well, I sincerely hope it never does. The last nine years of my life have been spent at war because of the darker sides of people.”

“Forget darkness. Be enriched by the light of your new life.”

* * *

The first tower building they passed was as transparent as purest glass. Within, on each floor, dozens of Nemalites were playing ball games. The second structure seemed to be a market complex – except that no one paid for what they took, they just asked for goods and were given them freely. Hector half-smiled, thinking how such a society would totally baffle the economist advisors of his old world... The mental phrase *‘old world’* surprised him. Was he already accepting Elysium to be his *‘new world’*?

“Elsha,” came a soft, feminine voice from Hector’s left, “how are you?”

The source of the call was a short, slender woman who appeared to be Elsha’s age. Her hair was blonde, streaked with strands of pale blue which made the hair seem to glow; her face was fuller than Elsha’s and more heavily crystal-decorated. The girl’s clothing seemed to be composed of a single

narrow, feathery strand, wrapped loosely around her torso, arms and upper thighs. Hector thought a single hard sneeze might render her totally naked.

“Dirama,” Elsha replied in her musical tone. “Your new dress is beautiful.”

“I made it myself,” Dirama said, and gave a chirpy laugh. She eyed Hector: “Good morning, newcomer.”

He bowed slightly and nodded. “Good day, my lady.”

“Very formal,” Dirama smirked. There was playful suggestiveness in her tone.

“Hector has only just joined us,” Elsha scolded gently, “you can’t expect him to adapt to our ways immediately. He’s doing wonderfully.”

“Good.” Dirama patted his arm briefly. “I hope to see you again.”

Elsha and Hector offered a brief goodbye and Dirama was off, quickly lost in a throng of ambling Nermalites.

“A friend?” Hector questioned.

“One of many.” She resumed nibbling at her tomato. “Let’s go and meet Sallos. He’ll be expecting us.”

They resumed their journey towards the ruby pyramid. Hector continued to gaze around, trying to appear casual and not to stare at the gem-adorned people who passed. Inwardly, he also prayed:

Andromache, if you can hear me, please know that I am safe but far from you. I would give anything – everything – to return to Troy, to be beside you, to resume fighting our enemies. I know I cannot. And I know, as Elsha has told me, that you would wish me happiness in my new life. I will seek such happiness, though every day I will think of you and look forward to resuming our love in the Afterlife. I will never betray you by loving another, but I will have a life in this good place with these good people.

May the Gods keep you and our son safe, and bring a swift defeat to the foes beyond Troy’s sturdy walls. You will always be at the heart of my prayers.

3: Sallos

Closing-in upon the great pyramid, it became clear that the area around it was a meeting place for the most artistic members of the Nemalite society. There were hundreds of life-sized sculptures of men and women, worked in crystal by Nemalites. Hector watched one of the artists use her right forefinger to caress the face of her work and enhance its beautiful features. Groups of three to ten jugglers threw masses of liquid crystal between them – as the fluid balls passed into the air, they momentarily became *something*, a bird, a geometric shape, a flower... And some artists simply worked with lumps of crystal growing from the floor, by changing the colours alone. This art-form was strangely attractive, the rhythmic shifts of intense hues like silent music.

The pyramid itself was opaque and its outer surface was stepped, rising to a small flat area at the summit – perhaps the designated location for Viron rituals. Faint crimson light emitting from the ruby-crystal produced a weird halo over the structure. A large, doorless arch at the front of the building offered free access inside.

“Are there any customs I need to follow?” Hector asked his companion upon reaching the opening.

“Just to show respect for others, as we all do everywhere in Vir,” she answered. “Our Gods do not expect us to give offerings or humble ourselves, just to care for each other.”

They crossed the threshold, their soft footsteps causing low echoes.

The inside of the pyramid was more amazing than the exterior. Red light swathed everything – rising out of the ruby walls, floor and ceiling – akin to some strange incense. No other colour seemed to exist here. Whereas Hector had expected a wide flat floor and a temple decorated with altars and sculptures, the place was largely empty and the floor consisted of steps leading down towards the centre of the building. An effect similar to that of an amphitheatre was created, which would allow thousands of Nemalites to sit upon the steps and watch ceremonies – or whatever services Sallos and his brethren gave – two hundred feet beneath the level of the entrance. A plain plinth, perhaps four feet high, at the very centre of what Hector deemed the ‘ceremonial area’ below, was the only adornment here. There were not even pillars to hold up the huge mass of the pyramid; apparently, the gigantic hollow shape was constructed so securely, its high peaked ceiling needed no support.

Elsha led him slowly down the steps towards a group of Nemalites near the plinth. From the resonance of the sounds of their own steps, it was easy to imagine how a booming voice could fill this structure. That, combined with the awe-inspiring scale of the pyramid and the surreal crimson aura everywhere, would surely captivate everyone gathered here.

Sallos and his companions were dressed in full-length vestments of deep purple, tied at the waist by heavy belts. This was the first sign of a ‘uniform’ Hector had encountered at Vir. Elsha explained in a whisper before he even thought to ask the question.

“They wear Virael robes in order to be easily recognised by those who need them. People in our religious order spend a lot of time amongst us, making them approachable to anyone who requires their help.” She sighed: “Their kindness is immeasurable.”

Once Hector and Elsha were within thirty paces of the priests, Sallos dismissed his colleagues with a gentle word. The four other robed Nemalites dispersed: a single priest towards the entrance, three into one of numerous openings amongst the steps which led to subterranean passages.

“Hector,” Sallos called, his voice rich and full of friendship. “May I greet you on behalf of myself, my fellow priests and our Gods. Welcome to Vir.”

The Trojan appraised the priest swiftly. Sallos was as tall as himself and had a similar lean physique. In terms of age, he looked in his late forties to early fifties and was thus the oldest-appearing Nemalite Hector had seen so far. Sallos possessed the air of a guide or helper, there was nothing authoritarian about his demeanour at all. Narrow-faced almost to the point of being gaunt, the priest had sincere eyes – partially hidden by long black hair that covered his eyebrows and also hung unkempt below the level of his shoulders. A bushy growth of beard obscured Hector’s sight of most of Sallos’ face-crystals; a few large emerald-like stones could be glimpsed across his cheekbones.

Hector offered his hand, unsure if the priest would understand. Sallos gave him a firm handshake.

“I...” The otherworlder pondered what to say next. “I am grateful to be here...”

“And your questions are almost infinite?” Sallos added, a touch of humour in his tone. “Mine certainly would be in your situation.”

“There is so much I would like to know. The most important questions being: Why me? And, of

course, how?”

“Please sit.” Sallos gestured to the nearest steps as he sat down himself. Once Hector and Elsha were more comfortable, he continued. “Our Gods do not interfere in our ways. They gently guide us, with ideas and criticisms. Your presence is a suggestion of theirs. They feel that the experience of welcoming a new person into our fold will enrich us... For to give to kin and comrades is easy, but to give to a stranger is always harder.”

Hector considered. “So I was selected... because of the moment of my death?”

“No. Far from it. The Viron use their power to look out across the cosmos and observe other people. This temple is used to tell stories of what they have seen. Often, I pass on tales that have been related to me by the Gods, or others of my brethren do, or sometimes a Viron will come to speak directly. Each parable gives us a glimpse into the lives of others and allows us to learn from the actions – or inactions – of those people. From your world, we have learnt of the Greeks, the Egyptians and, of course, the Trojans. Stories of the siege of Troy have filled this temple for many years.

“In particular, the Viron had been watching you. They believed you were fated to perish and felt there was still enormous potential left in you. They felt you were deserving of a new chance of life – and that although a warrior, you were not naturally hostile. They believed you could learn to live without the sword, in harmony with us... And, finally, it was thought your experiences, retold first-hand to us, would prevent us ever from making the same mistakes as the people of your world.”

“The best advocate of peace,” the Trojan admitted, “is a man who has survived the horrors of war.”

“Or better still,” Sallos amended, “a man who didn’t survive.”

Hector was silent for a full minute, deep in thought. When he spoke again, he changed the subject.

“How far away from Troy is Vir? Are we across an entire sea?”

“You mean, could you try to return to Troy by ship?” Sallos said. “No, you could not...”

“Hector,” Elsha offered, “when I called this place another world, I meant just that. Not another country on your world...”

Sallos took over: “When you were at Troy and looked into the sky, you saw thousands of stars. Amid the light of those stars are entire worlds, some with continents and seas like the one you came from... When we look up at our sky, somewhere amongst our stars will be your world. The distance is beyond our calculation. It is a void we cannot cross.”

Not all of what Sallos said made sense to Hector, but he asked his next question based on what he could fathom. “So how did the Viron find me and take me?”

“My only answer is that they are Gods. They channelled all the magical energy of the Nemalites and used the power to bring you to us. You arrived on this very plinth, reborn and in a deep slumber. That was three months ago. Since then we have cared for you and sought to return your consciousness.”

“Three months...” Hector repeated. “And what of Troy? My people...”

“The Viron have blessed us with two stories, revealing that the war still goes on...”

Hector’s head sagged and he rubbed at his neck with both hands. “My people have been fighting for three months without me... My wife and son mourning my loss for three months...”

Elsha reached out to comfort him, but decided against it. He appeared too vulnerable right now for her to help.

“I can speak to the Viron about your family...” Sallos began.

Hector’s head rose and his eyes locked Sallos in a steely gaze. “I’m told you could not bring my family here to be with me... Elsha said nothing can be brought here which is not already dead. How then have you brought through plants and animals from my world?”

“The Viron guided us to bring through the spirits of dead beasts and lifeless seeds. The animals were reborn like yourself, and later mated. The seeds grew in our Nectar... But the last time this happened was when I was merely a child – three hundred of your years ago. There isn’t enough magic in our people to make an attempt more often, and it would be impossible without the focus and strength of the Viron.”

“If they are so all-powerful,” Hector rasped, his tone growing more irritable, “why must my family remain across the void? Surely their power could transport the living here?”

Sallos lowered his head and placed a hand over his chest. “Hector, if ripping out my own heart could bring your family to you and end your sadness, I would gladly do it. I do not pretend to understand the full nature of the Viron, their limitations or the means by which they could set about

your rebirth. All I know is that if it were possible to bring Andromache and Astyanax to your side, they would. Some things are seemingly beyond even the control of Gods.”

Hector nodded and took a deep breath, filling his lungs to capacity. He released the air slowly and evenly, forcing himself to calm down.

“The cause is not you, friend Sallos,” he said softly, “nor your Gods. It was not you but those thrice-cursed Greeks who slew me... Instead of criticising, I should be thanking you for my new life.”

“I understand how difficult this new life is going to be without your loved ones,” replied Sallos. “We will help you to adapt, to find new happiness. All we ask is for you to try.”

“I will... It would help if you could ask the Viron about Troy and my family. It would be a comfort to know my kin are safe and well... Also, I will need a purpose. Something to occupy me. I am a man of action – to have no objective, no direction, will tear apart my sanity.”

“Your first request, I will naturally endeavour to pursue.” The priest smiled beneath his overgrown beard. “As to the second, it reveals we are more alike, you and I, than you might think. For that same reason, I have given up the greater luxuries of Vir for a far more tasking life in the service of the Viron. Many Nemalites are content to live, eat, play, work and reproduce. I needed something more. A ‘purpose’ as you called it.” He looked across to Elsha for a suggestion.

“What about the foraging party tomorrow?” she offered. “I plan on going. I could show Hector the crystal forest and he could take the role of one of our protectors against the wild animals.”

Sallos shook his head. “I don’t think—”

Hector interrupted. “It sounds perfect. If I’m to live in this community, I should start contributing to it. I’ll help to guard Elsha and the others, and I’ll learn how to forage.”

“Are you sure you are fit enough?” the priest said. “You have only just re-awakened.”

“I haven’t felt so fit and healthy for years.”

Sallos was delighted at Hector’s determination. “Excellent. That, at least, is settled. What more can I do for you?”

Thoughts, ideas and questions were flooding Hector’s brain. He tried to focus on the most pertinent. “I need to be taught your ‘magic’ – or else I won’t even be able to open a door on my own. I don’t want to have to rely upon others.”

“Crystal magic – or *Krustakin* as we call it – requires attunement of the mind, before it can even be attempted. You will need to begin by learning to meditate and concentrate your thoughts. I am sure Elsha will teach you this... However, do not expect to be able to perform *Krustakin* for many weeks.”

“The sooner I start to learn, the sooner my dependency ends.”

“I agree.”

“What more can you tell me about this place – Vir and the lands outside? Elsha has told me much, but—”

Sallos shrugged and added: “But you would know everything. And you would also explore it for yourself.”

“He has named our land Elysium,” Elsha input, “after the heaven many of his people believe in.”

The priest eyed Hector. “The heaven your people believe in... but not you?”

“I have always been uncertain, unable to appreciate what I cannot see or touch. Besides, I’ve had no time for worship and the Gods have certainly not intervened in my life.” He paused and said: “At least not any of the Gods of my own world.”

“With the Viron, you will find acceptance easy,” Sallos promised. “For you will see, hear and experience them. Your senses will verify their existence, your mind will understand their wonder... Anyway, enough of our beloved Gods for now. You wish to know more of your new home.”

Hector nodded. “I understand – rather I have been told about – the magics you use to grow and run this city, how you live without leadership and how you have a gentle way of life. How long have the Nemalites lived here, though? How did you first encounter the Viron?”

“I honestly can’t answer either of those questions, my friend. All I know is that through the known generations, we Nemalites have lived here, in harmony alongside the Viron and each other. There are history tomes in our libraries, but these tell nothing of events prior to our being here with the Viron. I can only imagine we once lived in a more primitive way. No one kept records then, so such times are now lost to us.”

“Are you the only people on Elysium? Are there no other tribes or races?”

“Beyond the great mountain and the forests, there is a desert. Folklore suggests other races living in large numbers on the far side of it. More locally, there are other people...” He hesitated and Hector detected some uneasiness in his voice, “...but we tend not to interact with them.”

The statement posed the obvious question ‘*why*’. Hector decided not to ask it, out of respect for

his host. No doubt he would discover the answer eventually.

“And the land itself?” he prompted. “Is Vir based upon a large island, a continent? Are we near a sea..?”

Sallos frowned. “I understand what a sea is from the stories of your world told by the Viron, but I have never seen one. Vir is surrounded by forests and open land for as far as we can see and as far as we have ever travelled. None of us have ventured into the southern desert – or even journeyed for more than a day’s walk away, in fact.”

“Why bother?” Elsha chimed, “We have everything here and we are at the home of our Gods.”

Hector smiled. The simplicity of Nemalite existence was so different from Trojan life, where power, trade, expansion and military strength had been at the heart of everything.

“You, of course,” Sallos went on, “are free to do whatever you would. Journey out into the distant lands, explore, meet other people... Return to us in years to come and tell us of your adventures. You have no boundaries.”

No boundaries, Hector thought, *and no price for my rebirth. How can this be?*

Another thought piqued his interest. He turned to Elsha: “You said your Gods can move amongst you. Does this mean they live nearby? Inside the mountain?”

Elsha glanced at Sallos, uncertain whether to answer. The priest replied for her.

“Yes, the Viron live inside the mountain. Nectar flows from their holy realm.”

“Have you been there?”

“No, though my spirit will join the Viron when I eventually die.”

The conversation was far less relaxed than earlier and Hector felt he was beginning to pry into his companions’ religious beliefs. Following his training as a statesman, he subtly diverted the course of their discussion.

“The Nectar is amazing. Like nothing I’d ever seen before. I even breathed in it.”

“When you awake tomorrow,” Sallos said, “you should bathe in it too, rather than water. It enriches and invigorates in a way water never can.”

“It is the ‘secret’,” Elsha continued, “to both the youthfulness of our race and our health. It keeps flesh younger and it can heal.” She drew up the arm of her right sleeve to expose a forearm of flawless soft skin. “Three days ago, my wrist was badly scratched when I was in the forest. Returning to Vir, I applied Nectar and the bleeding stopped in seconds. After another day, the wounds had healed without leaving any trace.”

Hector smiled in answer. “Miraculous.”

“May I ask a favour of you,” said Sallos, “before we go on.”

“Of course.”

“Would you tell us something of Troy. Not of the war, but of the years earlier. We would enjoy hearing just a little of your world...”

Hector found the eyes of his two new friends focussed upon him now, like children about to listen to wisdom from an old relative. A sense of happiness filled him: he realised it was an opportunity to give something back to the people he owed so much to.

“I would be honoured,” he replied. “Perhaps I can tell you something of my youth. I travelled a great deal and saw more of my world than many other people could dream of...”

One tale was followed by silent pleas for another. Sallos then brought food and wine so that he, Elsha and a number of the other priests could hear Hector talk while he ate and drank. Captured by their attention, the Trojan saw the remainder of the day devoured by stories from his own life. His audience listened with such sincere interest, it bordered on worship.

The meeting only ended when tiredness finally overcame everyone. Elsha returned the newcomer to his room, bade him goodnight and left him.

Hector was asleep minutes later.

End Of Sample

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